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How Did Savarkar, a Staunch Supporter of British Colonialism, Come to Be Known as 'Veer'?

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Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966) – mythologised in popular imagination as ‘Veer Savarkar’ – not only refrained from participating in the freedom struggle after the British released him from prison on account of his relentless pleas for mercy, but also actively collaborated with the English rulers to whom he had declared his loyalty.

At the time when Subhas Chandra Bose was raising his Indian National Army to confront the British in India, Savarkar helped the colonial government recruit lakhs of Indians into its armed forces. He further destabilised the freedom movement by pushing his Hindutva ideology, which deepened the communal divide at a time when a united front against colonial rule was needed. Post independence, Savarkar was also implicated in Mahatma Gandhi's murder.

Such is the man who was declared by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to be “the true son of Mother India and inspiration for many people”, in his [Twitter salutation](#) to Savarkar on his birth anniversary on May 28 last year. In 2015, commemorating Savarkar on his 132nd birth anniversary, the prime minister bowed before a portrait of the Hindutva icon in remembrance of “his indomitable spirit and invaluable contribution to India's history”.

Finance minister Arun Jaitley was quick to follow up on the act. “Today, on birth anniversary of Veer Savarkar, let us remember & pay tribute to this great freedom fighter & social-political philosopher,” he tweeted. And somewhere in the stream of Twitter accolades from numerous BJP ministers that followed, the TV anchor Rajdeep Sardesai joined the chorus, albeit with a caveat. While he disagreed “with his ideology”, Sardesai said he honoured Savarkar's “spirit as freedom fighter”.

A freedom fighter he definitely was, for a certain period in the first decade of the previous century, long before he'd begun articulating the notion of Hindutva. Savarkar was then an atheist and a rationalist, who had started out on a revolutionary road to rid India of her colonial yoke, asserting:

“whenever the natural process of national and political evolution is violently suppressed by the force of wrong, the revolution must step in as a natural reaction and therefore ought to be welcomed as the only effective instrument to re-throne Truth and Right.”

On sailing to England to study law in 1906, Savarkar founded the Free India Society to organise Indian students studying in England to fight for independence. In a famous declaration before the society, he said:

“We must stop complaining about this British officer or that officer, this law or that law. There would be no end to that. Our movement must not be limited to being against any particular law, but it must be for acquiring the authority to make laws itself. In other words, we want absolute independence.”

However, when the time came to pay the price for being a revolutionary under an oppressive colonial government, Savarkar found himself converted and transformed into “the staunchest advocate of loyalty to the English government”, to use his own words. This was after he was arrested and sentenced to serve 50 years in the infamous Cellular Jail on the Andaman islands after he was found guilty of supplying the pistol that a member of the Abhinav Bharat Society used to assassinate the then collector of Nasik, A.M.T. Jackson, in 1909.

‘Veer’ Savarkar pleading with the British for mercy

Barely a month into the hardships of prison, Savarkar wrote his first mercy petition, which was rejected in 1911. The second mercy petition, which he wrote in 1913, starts with bitter complaints about other convicts from his party receiving better treatment than him:

“When I came here in 1911 June, I was along with the rest of the convicts of my party taken to the office of the Chief Commissioner. There I was classed as “D” meaning dangerous prisoner; the rest of the convicts were not classed as “D”. Then I had to pass full 6 months in solitary confinement. The other convicts had not... Although my conduct during all the time was exceptionally good still at the end of these six months I was not sent out of the jail; though the other convicts who came with me were.

...For those who are term convicts the thing is different, but Sir, I have 50 years staring me in the face! How can I pull up moral energy enough to pass them in close confinement when even those concessions which the vilest of convicts can claim to smoothen their life are denied to me?"

Then, after confessing that he was misguided into taking the revolutionary road because of the "excited and hopeless situation of India in 1906-1907", he concluded his November 14, 1913 petition by assuring the British of his conscientious conversion. "[I]f the government in their manifold beneficence and mercy release me," he wrote, "I for one cannot but be *the staunchest advocate of... loyalty to the English government* (emphasis added)".

"Moreover," he went on to say, making an offer which few freedom fighters could even think of making, "my conversion to the constitutional line would bring back all those misled young men in India and abroad who were once looking up to me as their guide. I am ready to serve the Government in any capacity they like, for as my conversion is conscientious.. The Mighty alone can afford to be merciful and therefore where else can the prodigal son return but to the paternal doors of the government?"

In his fourth mercy petition, dated March 30, 1920, Savarkar told the British that under the threat of an invasion from the north by the "fanatic hordes of Asia" who were posing as "friends", he was convinced that "every intelligent lover of India would heartily and loyally co-operate with the British people in the interests of India herself."

After reassuring the colonial government that he was trying his "humble best to render the hands of the British dominion a bond of love and respect," Savarkar went on to exalt the English empire: "Such an Empire as is foreshadowed in the Proclamation, wins my hearty adherence". "But", he added:

"if the Government wants a further security from me then I and my brother are perfectly willing to give a pledge of not participating in politics for a definite and reasonable period that the Government would indicate... This or any pledge, e.g., of remaining in a particular province or reporting our movements to the police for a definite period after our release – any such reasonable conditions meant genuinely to ensure the safety of the State would be gladly accepted by me and my brother."

Finally, after spending ten years in the cellular jail and writing many mercy petitions, Savarkar, along with his brother, was shifted to a prison in Ratnagiri in 1921, before his subsequent release in 1924 on the condition of the

confinement of his movements to the Ratnagiri district and his non-participation in political activities. These restrictions were lifted only in 1937.



Savarkar. Credit: YouTube

Self-glorification of a defeated man

One might have argued in 1924 that the promises he made about his love and loyalty to the British, about his readiness to serve the government in any capacity required and so on were a part of a tactical ploy – perhaps one inspired by Shivaji – employed to make his way out of prison so that he could continue his freedom struggle. However, history has proven him to be a man of ‘honour’, who stood by the promise he made to the colonial government. How then, one might wonder, did Savarkar acquire the title ‘Veer’?

A book titled *Life of Barrister Savarkar* authored by Chitragupta was the first biography of Savarkar, published in 1926. Savarkar was glorified in this book for his courage and deemed a hero. And two decades after Savarkar’s death, when the second edition of this book was released in 1987 by the Veer Savarkar Prakashan, the official publisher of Savarkar’s writings, Ravindra Ramdas revealed in its preface that “Chitragupta is none other than Veer Savarkar”.

In this autobiography masquerading as a biography written by a different author, Savarkar assures the reader that:

“Savarkar is born hero, he could almost despise those who shirked duty for fear of consequences. If once he rightly or wrongly believed that a certain system

of Government was iniquitous, he felt no scruples in devising means to eradicate the evil.”

Without mincing words in the name of modesty or moderating the use of adjectives in the name of literary minimalism, Savarkar wrote that Savarkar “seemed to possess no few distinctive marks of character, such as an amazing presence of mind, indomitable courage, unconquerable confidence in his capability to achieve great things”. “Who,” he asked about himself, “could help admiring his courage and presence of mind?”

Perhaps in polite society, we ought to quietly look the other way with an embarrassed smile when an ex-revolutionist, after breaking down in prison, indulges in self-glorification under the cover of a pen name after his release. And, indeed, no one who did not suffer the conditions the inmates of that infamous prison on the Andaman islands had to endure, can claim the right to castigate Savarkar for refusing to contribute to the freedom movement after he was released from jail.

But his purporting of an ideology which destabilised the freedom movement by deepening the divisions along sectarian lines and his active rendering of support to the British government – which was determined to subdue the anti-colonial struggle – was a betrayal that must be hard to forgive, especially for a ‘patriot’ and a ‘nationalist’.

Derailing the freedom movement with his Hindutva ideology

The sectarian mindset, which eventually culminated into the articulation of Hindutva ideology, was evident – as Jyotirmaya Sharma has demonstrated in *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism* – in the early Savarkar, that too from a tender age. Only a boy of 12, Savarkar, leading a pack of his schoolmates, attacked a mosque in the aftermath of the Hindu-Muslim riots in Bombay and Pune in 1894-95. Holding back the Muslim boys of the village using “knives, pins and foot rulers”, Savarkar and his friends mounted their attack, “showering stones on the mosque, shattering its windows and tiles”. Recollecting the incident, [he later wrote](#), “We vandalised the mosque to our heart’s content and raised the flag of our bravery on it.” When the news of Hindus killing Muslims in the riots and its aftermath reached him, little Savarkar and his friends “would dance with joy”.

The sectarian nature of Savarkar’s social and political thinking not only bred in him a deep-rooted resentment against Muslims but also clouded his understanding of historical events, leading him to perceive the 1857 War of Indian Independence as retaliation by Hindus and Muslims against

Christianity, in response to Britain's efforts to Christianise India. In his 1909 book, The War of Independence of 1857, published during his revolutionary days, years before he had declared his loyalty to the British government, Savarkar wrote, quoting Justin McCarthy, "The Mahomedan and the Hindu forgot their old religious antipathies to join against the Christian."

What was to stop the British government, which had passed a law against the practice of Sati (widow burning), from meddling further with Hindu customs by passing a law against idolatry, he asked. After all, "[t]he English hated idolatry as much as they did suttee." Describing a process he perceived to be the destruction of Hinduism and Islam in India, Savarkar wrote in his book::

"The Sirkar (government) had already begun to pass one law after another to destroy the foundations of the Hindu and Mahomedan religions. Railways had already been constructed, and carriages had been built in such a way as to offend the caste prejudices of the Hindus. The larger mission schools were being helped with huge grants from the Sirkar. Lord Canning himself distributed thousands of Rupees to every mission, and from this fact it is clear that the wish was strong in the heart of Lord Canning that all India should be Christian."

The sepoys, according to Savarkar, were the primary targets in this mission to spread Christianity in India. "[I]f any Sepoy accepted the Christian religion he was praised loudly and treated honourably; and this Sepoy was promoted in the ranks and his salary increased, in the face of the superior merits of the other Sepoys!"

"Everywhere", he argued, "there was a strong conviction that the Government had determined to destroy the religions of the country and make Christianity the paramount religion of the land". By thus giving religion an unwarranted centrality in his analysis of the causes of the rebellion, Savarkar, says Jyotirmaya Sharma, expressed jubilation in his accounts of the rebellion "at every instance of a church being felled, a cross being smashed and every Christian being 'sliced'."

While the seeds of communalism had been sown in his mind at a very young age, the poison fruit of Hindutva ideology was to blossom only in his late 20s, after Savarkar's will to fight the British (or the Christians, as he often referred to them in his book on the 1857 uprising) had been defeated during his imprisonment. It was during his last few years of imprisonment that Savarkar first articulated the concept of Hindutva in his book, Essentials of Hindutva, which was published in 1923 and reprinted as "*Hindutva: Who Is a*

Hindu?” in 1928. This ideology was a deeply divisive one which had the potential to distract attention from the British and cast it on Muslims instead.

While he was careful to specify that Hindutva, or ‘Hinduness’, was different from Hinduism and encompassed a wide range of cultures including, among others, the “Sanatanists, Satnamis, Sikhs, Aryas, Anaryas, Marathas and Madrasis, Brahmins and Panchamas”, he nonetheless made it a point to warn that it “would be straining the usage of words too much – we fear, to the point of breaking – if we call a Mohammedan a Hindu because of his being a resident of India.”

“Mohammedan or Christian communities”, he argued, “possess all the essential qualifications of Hindutva but one and that is that they do not look upon India as their Holyland”. A cohesive nation, according to Savarkar, can ideally be built only by those people who inhabit a country which is not only the land of their forefathers, but “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 love and loyalty of Muslims, he warned, “is, and must necessarily be divided between the land of their birth and the land of their Prophets... Mohammedans would naturally set the interests of their Holyland above those of their Motherland”. One might wonder whether this line of reasoning implies that Muslims cannot be nationals of Pakistan or Afghanistan either, because they would place the interests of Saudi Arabia, wherein lie Mecca and Madina, above the interests of their own country.

Back in the 1920s, the damage that could be done to the freedom movement by his ideology did not fail to come to the notice of the colonial government. Even though Savarkar was released on condition that he should not participate in political activities, he was allowed by the British to organise the Ratnagiri Mahasabha, which undertook what is in today’s lingo called “Ghar Wapsi” and played music in front of mosques while prayers were on.

He was also allowed to meet K.B. Hedgewar, a disillusioned Congressman, who, inspired by his ideology of Hindutva, intended to discuss with him a strategy for creating a Hindu Rashtra. A few months after this meeting, in September 1925, Hedgewar founded the RSS, a communal organisation which, like Savarkar, remained subservient to the British.

In spite of the blanket ban on political participation, Shamsul Islam pointed out:

“The British rulers naturally overlooked these political activities as the future of colonial rule in India rested on the communal divide and Savarkar was leaving no stone unturned in aggravating the Hindu-Muslim divide.”

Collaboration with the colonial government

Savarkar was elected as the president of Hindu Mahasabha in 1937, the year when the Indian National Congress won what we today call a landslide victory in the provincial elections, decimating both the Hindu Mahasabha and that other communal party, the Muslim League, which failed to form a government even in Muslim-majority regions. But just two years later, the Congress relinquished power in protest when, at the outbreak of the Second World War, the viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, declared India to be at war with Germany without any consultation.

In September 1939, the working committee of the Congress declared that it would render support to Britain's war efforts in her time of crisis only if the colonial government recognised India's independence and "the right of her people to frame their constitution through a constituent assembly". When dominion status was the last concession Linlithgow was willing to grant to India, the ministers of the Congress resigned in protest.

Quick to grab the opportunity, the very next month, Savarkar, in his capacity as president of the Hindu Mahasabha, met Linlithgow. In the report about the meeting sent to secretary of state, Linlithgow wrote:

"The situation, he [Savarkar] said, was that His Majesty's government must now turn to the Hindus and work with their support.... Our interests were now the same and we must therefore work together... Our interests are so closely bound together, the essential thing is for Hinduism and Great Britain to be friends and the old antagonism was no longer necessary. The Hindu Mahasabha he went on to say favoured an unambiguous undertaking of Dominion status at the end of the war."

Two months later, addressing the Mahasabha's Calcutta session, Savarkar urged all universities, colleges and schools to "secure entry into military forces for youths in any and every way." When Gandhi had launched his individual *satyagraha* the following year, Savarkar, at the Mahasabha session held in December 1940 in Madura, encouraged Hindu men to enlist in "various branches of British armed forces *en masse*."

In 1941, taking advantage of the World War, Bose had begun raising an army to fight the British by recruiting Indian prisoners of war from the British army held by the Axis powers – efforts which eventually culminated in his invasion of British India with the help of the Japanese military. During this period, addressing the Hindu Mahasabha session at Bhagalpur in 1941, Savarkar told his followers:

“..it must be noted that Japan’s entry into the war has exposed us directly and immediately to the attack by Britain’s enemies...Hindu Mahasabhaites must, therefore, rouse Hindus especially in the provinces of Bengal and Assam as effectively as possible to enter the military forces of all arms without losing a single minute.”

In reciprocation, the British commander-in-chief, “expressed his grateful appreciation of the lead given by Barrister Savarkar in exhorting the Hindus to join the forces of the land with a view to defend India from enemy attacks,” according to Hindu Mahasabha archives perused by Shamsul Islam.

In response to the Quit India Movement launched in August 1942, Savarkar instructed Hindu Sabhaites who were “members of municipalities, local bodies, legislatures *or those serving in the army...* to stick to their posts,” across the country. At that time, when Japan had conquered many Southeast Asian countries in India’s vicinity, Bose was making arrangements to go from Germany to Japan – from whose occupied territories the INA’s assault on British forces was launched in October the following year.

It was under these circumstances that Savarkar not only instructed those serving in the British army to ‘stick to their posts’, but had also been involved for years in “organising recruitment camps for the British armed forces which were to slaughter the cadres of INA in different parts of North-East later.” In one year alone, Savarkar had boasted in Madura, one lakh Hindus were recruited into the British armed forces as a result of the Mahasabha’s efforts.

Even though the British Army, with which Savarkar and the Hindu Mahasabha were collaborating, managed to defeat Bose’s INA, the subsequent public trials of INA officers at the Red Fort roused in the Indian soldiers of the British armed forces a political conscience, which played a crucial role in triggering the Royal Indian Naval Mutiny in 1946, after which the decision was made by the British to leave India.

In coalition with the Muslim League when Pakistan resolution was passed

That Savarkar and the Hindu Mahasabha actively collaborated with the British may not be difficult to comprehend, since it is widely known that the Hindutva groups regarded Muslims, and not the British, as their primary enemies. What is likely to raise more eyebrows today is the collaboration of the Hindu Mahasabha with the Muslim League.

When the Congress leaders were arrested during the Quit India movement, the Hindu Mahasabha, still presided over by Savarkar, entered into a coalition with the Muslim League to run the governments in Sindh and Bengal – a

move Savarkar justified as “practical politics” which calls for “advance through reasonable compromises”.

After all, in spite of the deeply-held conviction by Savarkar and his party that the Muslims – whose holy land lies in a foreign country – cannot be regarded as Indian nationals, the Hindu Mahasabha nevertheless had a great deal in common with the Muslim League. Both parties made no contribution to the struggle for independence from the colonising empire and both were communal parties whose ideologies antagonised the prospects of India remaining undivided after independence.

Even after the Sindh Assembly passed a resolution in 1943 demanding that Pakistan be carved out of India as a separate state for the Muslims, the Mahasabha ministers continued to hold their positions in the coalition government. Not entirely surprising, given that Savarkar had put forth his two-nation theory “a clear sixteen years before the Muslim League embraced the idea of the Hindus and the Muslims as two distinctive nations and demanded the division of India.” And when India was eventually partitioned, Savarkar blamed Gandhi for allowing Pakistan to break away from India, an accusation that stoked the fires of hatred against Gandhi among many of his close devotees, including his ‘lieutenant’ – Nathuram Godse.