

## Savarkar, Hinduness and the Aryan Homeland

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### 1. The Hindu monologue

Hindus have a problem with reality. As independent Hindu writer Siva Prasad Ray (*Turning of the Wheel*, A. Ghosh, Houston/Calcutta 1985) has observed, Hindu polemicists, especially Gandhians, are expert at interacting with a partner without the latter knowing about it. They merely impute feelings and opinions to the partner without checking what these are in reality. With that self-deception, it is easy to maintain fictions like the Gandhian mantra of "Hindu-Muslim unity", or likewise, the RSS characterization of Indian Muslims as "Mohammedi Hindus".

This tendency extends beyond the field of Hindu-Muslim conflict and beyond the Gandhian movement, affecting seemingly hard-nosed Left-secularists and Hindutvawadis as well. Thus, in the early days of debate on the Aryan invasion theory (AIT), and even now though to a lesser extent, many Hindu AIT critics claim that "Western scholarship has discarded the fantasy of an Aryan invasion long ago",-- a case of pure wishful thinking, for most Western scholars still stand by the AIT and many haven't even heard yet that it is being challenged. Or likewise in the demography debate, Hindus who could easily have made their point about Muslim demographic aggression using the true figures and trends, nonetheless resort to imaginative false claims involving third parties, e.g. "the WHO has predicted that Muslims will be a majority in India by 2010" or so.

This tendency is equally in evidence in secularist discourse. The secularists may be lacking in the virtues of Hinduism, but they certainly share in its vices. In their case, true to type, this tendency to deal with merely imagined attitudes of the Other is mostly in an adversarial mode: falsely attributing positions to the Hindus all the better to demolish them. However, contrary to the ordinary "straw man" technique of debate distortion, the point here is that most secularists really believe their own misconstruction of the Hindu position. The main reason for this is that from their comfortable power position they disdain to take the trouble of actually acquainting themselves with their opponents' views. They merely start from a very general summary of "the" Hindutva viewpoint, mostly already a caricature, and then "deduce" all the supposed Hindutva positions on specific topics.

A case in point is the secularist understanding of Veer Savarkar's views of Hinduism and of the AIT. According to Parsha Venkateshvara Rao jr. (April 6, 2003, "Lord Parekh, Savarkar and the idea of India", <http://www.newindpress.com/sunday/sundayitems>): "[Lord Bhikhu] Parekh has identified three clusters of people and their idea of India. In the first, which he has called the 'Hindu' or 'Hindutva' school, he has included Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Sri Aurobindo and Veer Savarkar. He admits that there are many differences among the individual thinkers, but he groups them together under a general rubric because of the dominant idea of each cluster. The 'Hindutva' cluster emphasises the pre-eminence of Hindu culture as a defining feature of India. (...) But there are problems with Parekh's thesis because of the 'clusters' he has established. (...) For example,

his inclusion of Savarkar along with Tilak and Sri Aurobindo poses acute problems. The idea of Hinduness as expounded by Tilak and Sri Aurobindo is philosophical and spiritual. Secondly, Tilak is one of the distinguished proponents of the original home of the Aryans being outside India, which is to be found in his two books, *Orion* and *The Arctic Home of the Vedas*. The Hindutva school, as we know it today, argues that the Aryans were the natives of the country.”

We shall see that this version of the facts stems from an eagerly cultivated secularist caricature of Hindutva, not of a genuine acquaintance with Hindutva doctrine as propounded by Savarkar and his successors. We will first take up the second point, viz. about the Aryan invasion theory (AIT), and then consider the general point about the “spiritual” definition of “Hinduness”.

## 2. A Hindu nation, regardless of its origins

PV Rao jr. (and possibly Bhikhu Parekh, that depends on how accurately his position was rendered here) clearly knows neither Savarkar nor the developments in the Hindutva position regarding the AIT. There is in fact nothing intrinsically anti-AIT about Hindutva, as will be clear from Shrikant Talageri's survey (the only one extant, in his book *The Rigveda, a Historical Analysis*, Aditya Prakashan, Delhi 2000) of various Hindu positions regarding the AIT: some of the wilder Hindutva proponents have actually elaborated upon the AIT and based far-flung territorial claims on it, while even some apparent AIT critics with Hindutva leanings turn out to have interiorized many of the implications of the AIT. In particular, V.D. Savarkar, the very propagator of the term *Hindutva* and author of the influential booklet of that title, has in that very booklet explicitly accepted the AIT.

Exactly like Nehru, Savarkar could live with the idea that his nation had a fragmented past but that out of divergent ethnic material a coherent nation could be made. Whereas Nehru placed the fusion of the different components into a single nation largely in the immediate future, with the Congressite programme of "nation-building", Savarkar placed it largely in the past. To him, the welding of the various components into a Hindu nation was an old accomplished fact. This fusion had reached down even to the biological level: "Not even the tribes of the Andamans are without a sprinkling of the so-called Aryan blood." (Notice hisshyness in embracing the then-prevalent notion of "Aryan blood", incidentally giving the lie to secularist claims about Savarkar being a racist ideologue, a claim very explicitly refuted in the booklet *Hindutva* itself, where Savarkar accepts racial intermarriage as normal and inevitable.) But more importantly, the linguistic aryanization of all Indian languages, with Malayalam or Telugu having up to 70% Sanskrit loans in their vocabularies, and especially the various levels of Hindu religion adopted by even remote and isolated communities, had fused the disparate continuum of ethnic groups into a self-conscious single nation. At least, that was Savarkar's view.

M.S. Golwalkar, the second RSS chief, though an accomplished biologist, was much less familiar than Savarkar (who had studied law in England) with modern ideas outside the narrow hard-sciences field, and was more rooted in traditional Sanskritic lore. Therefore, like many old-school pandits, he couldn't deal with the notion of an Aryan invasion, totally unattested in Vedic literature. Hence, he tried to save the indigenous origin of the Vedic Aryans all while accepting B.G. Tilak's

seemingly scientific and modern theory of an Arctic origin by postulating that the pole had shifted and that in PIE times, the North Pole had been in the lower Ganga basin. Often held up for ridicule, this passage was without relation to the main thrust of his (still immature) booklet *We, Our Nationhood Defined*, in which it appeared. It was not taken up again in Golwalkar's later writings, and to my knowledge remained without influence on later RSS thought, partly because after the Gandhi murder the booklet was never reprinted and was no longer a part of the RSS workers' education.

Hindutva could do without an Indigenous Homeland Theory for the same reasons that other nations can have their patriotic ideologies without having been the hoary inhabitants of their present countries. Note also that at Benares Hindu University, founded by Hindu Mahasabha leader Madan Mohan Malaviya, famous professors like VS Agarwal also taught the AIT even though their textbooks could for the most part be included in any propaganda campaign for the greatness of Hindu civilization. There is no necessary contradiction between nationalism and a history of settlement from abroad. Indeed, many nations cherish myths of invasion and settlement as founding moments of their nationhood, vide of course the USA, or vide e.g. Rumania's recent installation of a massive statue commemorating Emperor Traianus's incorporation of "Dacia"/Rumania into the Roman empire, thus creating the Romance-Dacian identity which was to become the Rumanian nation.

### 3. Why Hindutva turned against the AIT

Therefore, the Hindutva movement could function for decades without showing any concern for the Aryan question, and with some of its spokesmen explicitly accepting the invasion theory. If the Hindutva movement has come around to welcoming and highlighting any findings and writings that militate against the AIT, it is mainly for the following reasons:

(1) the vast and ever-increasing political use made of the AIT by anti-Hindu militants in tribal-separatist, Christian missionary, neo-Ambedkarite, Marxist and Islamist circles. Indeed, all those who show such concern for the politicization of history are severely lacking in credibility if they discovered their heartburn for the abused damsel History only when Hindutva authors started questioning the AIT, and not earlier, when all the others were already exploiting the AIT no end. The political interest which Hindutva circles started taking in the Aryan origins debate was a reaction against a long-standing politicization of that debate by their declared enemies.

(2) the publications since the early 1980s by non-political scholars, particularly archaeologists both Indian and Western, of findings which failed to support (or which actually threw doubt upon) the invasion theory. One important Indian contributor at this stage was K.D. Sethna, formerly the secretary of Sri Aurobindo, the sage accepted as a good spiritual Hindu by PV Rao jr. Aurobindo has been an AIT skeptic but only made a feeble attempt to argue against it, and actually made it more difficult to muster textual arguments against it by reducing (though less radically than the Arya Samaj had done) the Vedas to a vast metaphor, a purely spiritual text free of mundane historical data. Sethna, by contrast, drew attention to material information in the

Vedas contradicting the predominant theory, e.g. the unfamiliarity of the oldest Vedic authors with cotton, a tissue familiar to the mature-Harappans as well as the (supposedly early-Vedic) post-Harappans. Such findings and insights also set some non-Hindutva authors rethinking the common assumptions, e.g. the Marxist Bhagwan Singh; but somehow only the Hindutva input is being noticed.

A final point here concerns BG Tilak, sometimes depicted as a Hindu nationalist Hindutvawadi *avant la lettre* but better described as a Hindu traditionalist (e.g. pro child marriage, pro caste), this in contrast with the Hindu reformists of the Arya Samaj, and of the Hindu nationalist movement since then. PV Rao jr. calls him "one of the distinguished proponents of the original home of the Aryans being outside India". He is clearly unaware of the facts of the matter.

Tilak's arguments in favour of an Aryan homeland outside India are anything but "distinguished"; they are highly contrived and sometimes downright ridiculous. For a full treatment, I refer to Talageri's *The Rigveda, a Historical Analysis*. Even without going into the details, the idea of locating in the Arctic a people destined to colonize the European and Indian subcontinents is a priori very unlikely given that region's inability to support a sizable population. Tilak was under the spell of European superiority, a presupposition to which he adapted his knowledge of Vedic history; and he even accepted the then-common European view of the Aryans as a band of spectacularly unstoppable conquerors from the North.

The only part of Tilak's argumentation that seems to stand up to scrutiny, and that has been confirmed by more recent researchers, is the part which *contradicts* the AIT at least in its most common version: his astronomy-based chronology dating the Rig-Veda to the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC. This may be reconciled with an invasionist scenario but it would be a very different one from the now-dominant version: either you believe along with Tilak that the invasion took place ca. 1500 BC but that the Vedas describe an Arctic setting, against all the textual evidence; or you accept that the Vedas testify to an Indian setting so that the Vedic Aryans lived in India before and during the Harappan period, regardless of whether they immigrated at an earlier date.

#### 4. Savarkar's definition of Hinduness

Now to the second point, PV Rao jr.'s objection to the inclusion of Savarkar among the votaries of Hindu spirituality: "But there are problems with Parekh's thesis (...) For example, his inclusion of Savarkar along with Tilak and Sri Aurobindo poses acute problems. The idea of Hinduness as expounded by Tilak and Sri Aurobindo is philosophical and spiritual. (...) Secondly, Tilak's politics was never sectarian, even during his 'nationalist' phase, which ended with the split of Congress in Surat in 1907. And it was Tilak and Mohammed Ali Jinnah who crafted the Congress-Muslim League Pact in Lucknow in 1916. It is in contrast to the narrow-based, exclusivist national politics of Savarkar and the Hindutva brigade. And the major difference between Savarkar and the other two is that Savarkar rejected Hinduism as a religion. His Hindutva is a desiccated nationalism, devoid of spiritual, religious and cultural values. (...) Savarkar and the Hindutva brigade have nothing to say about the idea of India because they reject Hindu spirituality and religiosity. As a matter of fact, Savarkar represents a perverted secularism, an evil

spawned by the French Revolution of 1789. (...) It is not difficult to see that Savarkar's Hindutva is an alien concept."

First of all my compliments to Rao for his critical view of the French Revolution, which most Indian social science authors idealize after the Western-Leftist fashion. It is certainly true that a desiccated secular-nationalism was one of the planks in the French Revolutionary platform. But does this also apply to Savarkar's Hindutva? Most Indian secularists would be uncomfortable with the classification of Hindutva as secular and non-religious, given their own habit of denouncing it for "mixing religion with politics".

Part of the problem is the difference between Christianity, against which genuine secularism was a reaction, and Hinduism. Most Indian secularists including Rao have no clear understanding of Hinduism and project onto it the notions of religion which they picked up from Western textbooks whose authors had Christianity in mind when discussing religion. "Hinduism" is not coterminous with a community of believers in a specific belief system, as most scholars of the subject would agree. Therefore, Savarkar very sensibly avoided the trap of trying to catch Hinduism in a doctrinal definition, and offered the pragmatic alternative of defining the Hindu as one to whom "India is both Fatherland and Holyland", i.e. any Indian who accepts any native Indian religion (hence one with its holy places inside India) as his own.

Far from being an idiosyncratic innovation, Savarkar's definition is in fact coterminous with the *original* understanding of the term "Hindu" by those who introduced it into India, viz. the Muslim invaders: "any Indian who is not a Parsi, Jew, Christian or Muslim". Moreover, this concept has been retained as the definition of "legal Hindu" (i.e. Indian citizen to whom the "Hindu law" concerning marriage and inheritance applies) in the Hindu Code of 1955 and approximately also in Art. 25 of the Constitution, which applies the term "Hindu" for its purposes to Sikhs, Jainas and Buddhists. So, Savarkar's definition is very sensible both historically and legally.

## 5. Hinduism and nationhood

At the same time, his definition does not seem to be lacking in respect for Hindu philosophy and spirituality. His criterion for including someone in the "Hindu" category is not biological (racial) nor purely territorial (native to India) but at least partly religious, viz. an attachment to at least one Indian religious tradition. It may be true that Savarkar personally was an atheist and that he refused religious rituals for his departed soul, but that doesn't put him outside the tradition of Hindu spirituality, which has room for many different philosophies. Nor was his secular outlook necessarily "desiccated", for India has generated a variety of atheistic or agnostic yet intensely spiritual traditions, best known among them Jainism and Buddhism. If anyone in this debate can be diagnosed as "desiccated" in their Weltanschauung, it is more likely the secularists of Rao's own variety.

Meanwhile, it can be argued that Savarkar's position was not too different from Tilak's nor even from that of the most spiritual of the three Hindu leaders mentioned, Sri Aurobindo. If Hindutva ideologues from Savarkar on down have "mixed religion with politics", that is certainly one element they have in common with

Tilak and Aurobindo. A negative instance is the one applauded by Rao, viz. Tilak's role in legitimizing Muslim separatism through his 1916 Lucknow Pact with Jinnah. I suppose one shouldn't hold it against a political leader that he sometimes feels compelled to make a compromise, but with hindsight we must admit that the Lucknow Pact was a tremendous boost to communalism, setting the stage for the communal conflagration which was to follow in the early 1920s, and ultimately for the Partition. A more widely acknowledged instance of Tilak's policy of mixing religion with politics was his incorporation of the Ganesh Chaturthi festival into his nationalistic propaganda.

But the strongest instance of "mixing religion with politics" and of identifying India with Hinduness was most certainly Sri Aurobindo's famous Uttarpara speech: "Other religions are preponderantly religions of faith and profession, but the Sanatana Dharma is life itself; it is a thing that has not so much to be believed as lived. This is the Dharma that for the salvation of humanity was cherished in the seclusion of this peninsula from of old. It is to give this religion that India is rising. (...) When therefore it is said that India shall rise, it is the Sanatana Dharma that shall rise. (...) It is for the Dharma and by the Dharma that India exists. To magnify the religion means to magnify the country. (...) When the Sanatana Dharma declines, then the nation declines (...) The Sanatana Dharma, that is nationalism."

In the desiccated and unsympathetic discourse of Indian secularism, anyone repeating Aurobindo's words as his own would be denounced as a "communal fascist". Yet, that fusion of Hindu spirituality and nationalist politics was the central message of the man whom Rao recognizes as a genuine Hindu sage. And sure enough, Aurobindo's Uttarpara speech is frequently invoked by the hated "Hindutva brigade". If Hindu nationalism is to exclude Savarkar from the spiritual aura of Hinduism, then Tilak and Aurobindo should be excluded as well. But if, more realistically, it is to include them, then it should also include Savarkar.

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