

Was Veer Savarkar a Nazi?

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In secularist publications, it is often alleged that Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, also known as (Swatantrya) Veer, “hero (of independence)”, was a Nazi. Let us examine the two main aspects of this allegation: his view on race, and his actual record in World War 2.

Savarkar on race

It is undeniable that Hindu Maha Sabha ideologue Savarkar spoke of reviving the “race spirit” of the Hindus. So did Golwalkar. Sri Aurobindo even used the term “Aryan race”, which to him meant exactly the same thing as “Hindu nation”, — and Sri Aurobindo was one of the most outspoken enemies of Hitler in India, supporting all-out involvement in the British war effort. But their reading of the term “race” was radically different from Hitler’s. Not that it was in any way exceptional: Savarkar’s interpretation of the term was the standard usage in the English-speaking world, while Hitler’s usage was innovative.

It is not sufficiently realized today that before Auschwitz gave a bad name to the term “race”, forcing it back into the strictest use as a biological term, it used to have a broader and hazier meaning, roughly as a synonym of “nation”, but sometimes ranging from “species” to “family”, — exactly like the Sanskrit word *jati*. In actual usage, “race” implied an element of identitarian continuity, but not necessarily biological continuity. As late as 1947, British sources spoke of Hindus and Muslims not as contending religions but as “the two races of India”, though they knew fully well that these were not separate biological races, most Indian Muslims being the progeny of converts from Hinduism.

After 1945, the English language gradually lost the usage of the term “race” for the concept of “nation”; the Hindu nationalists followed suit. This was only natural: they had never cared for “race” in the biological sense so dear to the Nazis. The very concept of race, having been narrowed down to its biological meaning, has simply disappeared from their horizon. It is plainly untrue that Hindu ideologues at any time have shared Hitler’s racism.

The point is made in the most straightforward terms by Savarkar himself: “After all there is throughout this world so far as man is concerned but a single race — the human race, kept alive by one common blood, the human blood. All other talk is at best provisional, a makeshift and only relatively true. Nature is constantly trying to overthrow the artificial barriers you raise between race and race. To try to prevent the commingling of blood is to build on sand. Sexual attraction has proved more powerful than all the commands of all the prophets put together. Even as it is, not even the aborigines of the Andamans are without some sprinkling of the so-called Aryan blood in their veins and vice-versa. Truly speaking all that one can claim is that one has the blood of all mankind in one’s veins. The fundamental unity of man from pole to pole is true, all else only relatively so.” (*Hindutva*, p.90) This is the diametrically opposite of any “pure race” theory.

Most secularists pretend not to know this unambiguous position of Savarkar’s (in many cases, they really don’t know, for Hindu-baiting is usually done without reference to

primary sources). Likewise, Savarkar's plea for caste intermarriage to promote the oneness of Hindu society is usually ignored in order to keep up the pretence that he was a reactionary on caste, an "upper-caste racist" (as Gyan Pandey puts it), and what not. There are no limits to secularist dishonesty, and so we are glad to find at least one voice in their crowd which does acknowledge these positions of Savarkar's.

An Indo-Australian philosophy professor, Purushottam Bilimoria ("Hindu perception of Muslims in India: from Savarkar's ascendancy genealogy to the Bhavishya Hindujativad", *International Conference on New Perspectives on Vedic & Ancient Indian Civilization*, LA 7-9 August 1998), has given a hostile but undeniably original and thoughtful interpretation of Savarkar's views. He comments on Savarkar's *Hindutva*: "Two things stand out oddly in this proclamation:

(i). the difficulty of linking the modern Hindu with the erstwhile Aryan stock — so a theory of descentance does not hold firm;

(ii). if all people (other than the tribal and indigenous peoples) are immigrants to the provinces of the subcontinent, then how can they claim to be the authentic inheritors of the mantle of the civil nation?"

The first point rightly acknowledges that Savarkar, not being a historian, accepted the Aryan invasion theory promoted by prestigious seats of Western learning; and that he saw modern Hindus as a biological and cultural mixture of Aryan invaders and indigenous non-Aryans. He shared this view with Indian authors across the political spectrum, e.g. with Jawaharlal Nehru. Like Nehru, he saw no reason why people of diverse biological origins would be unable to form a united nation; the difference being that Nehru saw this unification as a project just started ("India, a nation in the making"), while Savarkar believed that this unification had come about in the distant past already. At any rate, this is an excellent non-racist position, contrasting sharply with the then-common view that upper castes were Aryan invaders, a nation separate on biological grounds from the lower castes who were native. Savarkar's was an eminently reasonable interpretation of the Aryan invasion theory, viz. that in spite of divergent biological origins, people who live together end up mixing both culturally and biologically, and that this was not a problematic phenomenon as the Nazi race-purifiers thought, but a natural process and one which had happened to generate the Hindu nation.

In the second point, Bilimoria loses sight of the first, and lapses into the racist and non-Savarkarite view of distinct biological identities of the "tribal and indigenous peoples" and the rest, presumably the upper castes. Savarkar did not think that Hindus or anyone for that matter would lose their entitledness to membership of the nation just because some (or even all) of their ancestors had immigrated four thousand years ago. Only the anti-Brahmin Dravidian racists and tribal-hunting Christian missionaries could have come up with such a ludicrous idea. Like so many Hindutva spokesmen, Savarkar often gave the example of the assimilation of the Shaka and Huna invaders into the Hindu nation; foreign geographical provenance was not his problem. The view which Bilimoria ascribes to Savarkar here is just a straw man, unrelated to Savarkar's actual position.

Bilimoria claims to have found a "tacit commitment to a racialization doctrine which underpins the further moves Savarkar and the religious-political movements that grow out of this ideology (which have come to power in recent days in India)". The term "tacit"

gives the game away: plenty of Hindutva-watching “analysis” consists in nothing but divining hidden motives and “tacit commitments” unrelated to the actual programmes and manifestoes which exist in cold print but remain unread by the supposed experts.

Nevertheless, let us read on: to Bilimoria, the Hindu nationalism ideology focused not on the inherited race, which is a mixed affair, but on “a future race-to-be, the spiritual blood once purified, rather than the racial lineage we can trace our blood directly to, which has all but been sullied and become impure through intermixing and mingling of disparate cultures. Now a race carved out along these lines can mean that others who do not fall within these descriptors have to be left out, and we can only speak of them as bearers of their own downward conditions, their victimhood, their otherness. This has been one reason why communalism has reached perilous dimensions in India, why the Hindu Right campaign for Uniform Civil Codes, and why there is global expression of fear and rivalry between the two groups across the ‘garami hawa’ borderzone.”

It is rank nonsense that the BJP position on a Common Civil Code (which is simply the implementation of the principle of equality before the law deemed essential to the very idea of a secular state) is based on a “racialization” doctrine: no BJP or related document even thinks of the Hindu-Muslim problem in terms of race, and if it did, its choice for a legal unification of Hindu and Muslim communities would obviously go against their “racial” separateness. And no Hindu wants to keep the Muslims out, the way racists want to keep members of other races out, on the contrary: every Hindu activist hopes that the Indian Muslims will return to the Hindu fold.

However, Bilimoria has a point when he implies that Savarkar’s policy of caste intermarriage would further the process of biological homogenization of the Hindu nation. But so what? Should he have opposed caste mixing instead? Then he would have been decried as a reactionary “upper-caste racist” and what not. But now that he takes the opposite position, it is still not good: now he is a “future-Hindu-racist”, a kind of mad scientist brewing a new race in his lab, the caste-mixed Hindu-race-to-be. This is just another case of secularist justice: Hindu are damned if they do, damned if they don’t.

Savarkar and Nazi collaboration

Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke has written a book on the strange case of a French-Greek lady who converted to Hinduism and later went on to work for the neo-Nazi cause, Maximiani Portas a.k.a. Savitri Devi. The book is generally of high scholarly quality and full of interesting detail, but when it comes to Indian politics, the author is woefully misinformed by his less than impartial sources. He squarely places himself outside the scholarly community and inside the Indian Marxist propaganda machine by asserting the following howler: “After the German invasion of Prague in March 1939, Indian opinion on Germany polarized sharply into two camps: those who would be loyal to Britain in the event of a war between Britain and Germany and those who would not. The Hindu Mahasabha adopted a particularly strong pro-German position, assuming a close congruence between the Aryan cult of Nazism and Hindu nationalism.” (*Hitler’s Priestess*, New York University Press 1998, p.66)

To say that, faced with the choice of being loyal to Britain in her war with Germany, the Hindu Mahasabha took “a particularly strong pro-German position”, is the diametrical opposite of the truth. It is quite simply a lie. I am not saying that it is Goodrick-Clarke’s

lie, he may naively have copied it from partisan sources, of which there is no dearth in Indian academe nor in the Indian Studies departments in the West. But if he had done his research well, he could not have failed to come across one of the central facts of World War 2 in India: that the Hindu Mahasabha actively campaigned to recruit Hindu young men into the British war effort. Congress activists used to scold HMS president V.D. Savarkar as a “recruiting officer”, for it was Congress which refused to stand by the British, at least until 1944.

If one is inclined towards fascism, and one has the good fortune to live at the very moment of fascism’s apogee, it seems logical that one would seize the opportunity and join hands with fascism while the time is right. Conversely, if one has the opportunity to join hands with fascism but refrains from doing so, this is a strong indication that one is not that “fascist” after all. Many Hindu leaders and thinkers were sufficiently aware of the world situation in the second quarter of the twentieth century; what was their position vis-a-vis the Axis powers?

For their own reasons, Hindu and Muslim masses were very enthusiastic about Hitler. The Muslim League frequently compared its own plan of Partition with the Partition which Germany imposed on Czechoslovakia (the ethnic reunification of the Sudeten Germans with the Reich Germans was in fact deemed logical and fair by most observers, including Savarkar, though in contrast with the League he did not support the imperialistic methods used by Germany). Congress leftist Subhash Chandra Bose formed Indian battalions in the German and later in the Japanese army. The Congress leadership was utterly confused and took just about every possible position in succession or even at the same time.

In these conditions, the foremost Hindu leader of the time, Swatantryaveer Savarkar, refused to support the Axis and advocated a massive enlistment of Hindus in the British army. The point is proven even by the very nadir of the Hindu Mahasabha’s history, viz. the murder of Mahatma Gandhi by its activist Nathuram Godse: of the seven conspirators, three had served in the British-Indian Army during the war. Savarkar calculated that massive Hindu enlistment in the war effort would provide a winning combination in the war. And indeed, in the successful retreat from Dunkirk and in the British victories in North Africa and Iraq, Indian troops played a decisive role. It would earn the Hindus the gratitude of the British, or at least their respect. And if not that, it would instill the beginnings of fear in the minds of the British rulers: it would offer military training and experience to the Hindus, on a scale where the British could not hope to contain an eventual rebellion in the ranks. After the war, even without having to organize an army of their own, they would find themselves in a position where the British could not refuse them their independence.

It is in this context that in 1940, Savarkar launched his slogan: “Hinduize all politics, militarize Hindudom.” This slogan is nowadays often quoted out of context to impute to Savarkar a fascist-like fascination with “war for war’s sake”. But it meant nothing of the kind. He wanted Hindus to get military experience for a specific purpose, viz. that after the war, England would find a vast number of combat-ready Indian troops before her. More than a preparation for war, this combat-readiness was the right preparation for a peaceful showdown, in which the British would be made to understand that fighting was useless, that the Indian march to independence had become unstoppable.

This much has to be said in favour of Savarkar's strategy: it worked. It is a matter of solid history that the new military equation of 1945 was one of the decisive considerations in Britain's decision to decolonize India. With the military experience and capability now possessed by vast numbers of Indians, a British reassertion of colonial authority would have required an immeasurable investment of troops and money of which a war-weary Britain was no longer capable.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that Savarkar's collaboration with the British against the Axis was opportunistic. He was not in favour of any foreign power, be it Britain, the US, the Soviet Union, Japan or Germany. He simply chose the course of action that seemed the most useful for the Hindu nation. But the point is: he could have opted for collaboration with the Axis, he could have calculated that a Hindu-Japanese combine would be unbeatable, he could even have given his ideological support to the Axis, but he did not. The foremost Hindutva ideologue, president of what was then the foremost political Hindu organization, supported the Allied war effort against the Axis.

It must also be noted that Savarkar never went as far in his cooperation with the British as the Communists who supported the British (after they became a Soviet ally in 1941) by betraying Congress "Quit India" activists to them. While the Communists were Soviet loyalists who saw Indian opponents to the war effort as simply their enemies, Savarkar was an Indian patriot who differed with the Gandhian patriots (as with Bose) regarding the means but agreed with them on the goal, viz. India's independence, and therefore left them to their own designs without interfering.

Savarkar's deputy on fascism

That HMS support to the anti-Nazi war effort was not merely tactical but to quite an extent also ideological, is shown by a series of statements by Nirmal Chandra Chatterjee, president of the Bengal Hindu Mahasabha and vice-president of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha. He declared in February 1941: "Our passionate adherence to democracy and freedom is based on the spiritual recognition of the Divinity of man. We are not only not communal but we are nationalists and democrats. The Anti-Fascist Front must extend from the English Channel to the Bay of Bengal." (*Hindu Politics*, Calcutta 1945, p.13)

He too had taken the habit of loosely labelling hostile forces as "fascist", e.g. in his opposition to a 1939 Muslim League proposal to communalize the municipal elections in Calcutta: "We must resist these reactionary measures which are founded on the principle of communal Fascism." (*Hindu Politics*, p.21; note how back then words hadn't lost their meaning yet, so that "communalism" was identified with Muslim League politics, not with its opponents). He also compared them to the Norwegian Nazi collaborator Quisling: "Political Misfits are as dangerous as Quislings." (*Hindu Politics*, p.25) More substantially, he called the threat of a Japanese conquest "the direct calamity that can befall Bengal". (*Hindu Politics*, p.25)

All this is hardly the language of a collaborator with the Axis powers. For anyone still in doubt on the Hindu Mahasabha's position, he declared in March 1942: "In the conflict of ideologies the Hindus have made their position perfectly clear. We hate Nazism and Fascism. We are the enemies of Hitler and Mussolini. We are longing and struggling for our own emancipation and we want to repel any dictator who would try to reduce

sections of humanity to slavery to serve the whims of his own megalomania.” (Hindu Politics, p.26) And in December 1943: “We are wholeheartedly anti-Fascist. Every anti-Imperialist must be anti-Fascist.” (*Hindu Politics*, p.68)

His problem with the British was not that they were defending democracy worldwide, but that they were compromising with anti-democratic tendencies within their own Indian domains, particularly with the Muslim League’s insatiable hunger for communal privileges. When the Cripps mission was announced (exploring an agreement with Congress to get India more actively into the war effort in exchange for promises of more autonomy), Chatterjee declared: “We shall suspend judgment unless we know what exactly he has to offer and we only wish that artificial minority problems will not be exploited to dilute democracy and to injure Hindu interests.” The Hindu Mahasabha was, after all, in favour of undiluted democracy: “Our main plank is Veer Savarkar’s message which he preached at the Calcutta session: ‘Equal rights for all citizens and protection of the culture and religion of every minority’.” (*Hindu Politics*, p.74)

Yet, the British accused the Freedom Movement, including the HMS but also the Congress, of Nazi sympathies. Already in the 1930s, they had sometimes equated no less a person than Mahatma Gandhi with Hitler (a comparison which made Gandhian Congress activists feel proud). That was the only way they could hope to lessen the sympathy of the increasingly influential American public opinion for the Indian anti-colonial struggle. Against this colonial propaganda, Nirmal Chandra Chatterjee replied in November 1943: “The Hindus in this supreme crisis of humanity never wanted to shirk the responsibility to fight the Axis powers. Our leaders took a realistic view of the political situation. Veer Savarkar’s clarion call to the Hindus had met with a ready response and the Hindu boys had rushed forward and joined up in thousands. On every front our boys have demonstrated their valour and discipline, and the African Campaign, if faithfully recorded, will put the Indian in the forefront of the noble heroes who decimated the Fascist [hordes].” (*Hindu Politics*, p.55-56)

And in November 1944: “It is the subtle scheme of political propaganda to describe the Hindu as pro-Fascist. It is a cruel calumny which has been spread in America and other countries. The Hindu Mahasabha stood for Savarkar’s policy of militarization and industrialization. We recognized that Fascism was a supreme menace to what is good and noble in our civilization. Due to Veer Savarkar’s call thousands of young men joined the Army and Navy and Air Force and shed their blood for resisting Nazi tyranny and for real friendship with China and Russia. But as the Hindus had the temerity to ask for National Independence and took the lead in rejecting the Cripps offer, they were maligned and the subtle forces of organized British propaganda were let loose to blackmail the Hindus.” (*Hindu Politics*, p.103) The current tendency to accuse the Hindu movement for cultural decolonization of India of “fascism” is nothing but a replay of an old colonial tactic.