

## The strange case of Savitri Devi

By Koenraad Elst

Swami Vivekananda once told Christian missionaries that their vilification of Hinduism outweighed all the mud in the ocean. Since then, the stream of defamatory mud thrown at Hinduism has only increased. A new line employed by Evangelists, Communists and others is to associate Hinduism with Nazism. Doesn't the swastika tell it all? And the Sanskrit term "Aryan"? Aha!

Contrived and malafide as this rhetoric may be, it can hold one or two individuals up as examples of Hitlerian Hindus. In his new book, *Hitler's Priestess. Savitri Devi, the Hindu-Aryan Myth, and Neo-Nazism* (New York University Press 1998), Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke tells the story of Savitri Devi Mukherji, a French-Greek lady who made a synthesis of her admiration for Hitler with her own rather personal version of Hinduism. She was born on 30 September 1905 in Lyon, France, as Maximiani Portas, daughter of a Greek father and an English mother. Extremely gifted, she was to earn an MA in Science and a Ph.D. in Liberal Arts. Early on, she developed strong political sympathies and antipathies, and these would become the chief determinants of her strange itinerary, which included India.

### Ideological development

When Maximiani came of age, she opted for the Greek nationality, and spent several years in Greece. In 1929, she visited Palestine, where she witnessed the budding conflict between Palestinians and Jewish settlers; her sympathy was with the former. Anti-Semitism was a predominant attitude in pre-1940 France, both Left and Right, and she had imbibed it early on. Enamoured with ancient Greek culture, Maximiani repudiated Christianity, though retaining its anti-Semitic prejudice. Her main objection to Christianity was its anthropocentrism, its doctrine that God had entrusted man with the rulership over all other creatures. This critique of Biblical anthropocentrism has recently been revived by the ecological movement, whose radical fringe denies that mankind is worth more than other species. Maximiani rejected the love of mankind in favour of an ethical vitalism which she found in National-Socialism, with "its scale of values, centred not on 'man' but on life".

From her ideal of "Hellenism", she reoriented towards the "Aryan" doctrines propagated by the Nazis. Ever since Charles Darwin, culture was seen by many as but a side effect of a biological quality, and consequently, the Indo-European language family was identified with a hypothetical Aryan race. The linguistic "Aryanization" of India by white Aryan invaders from Europe formed a complete case study of all that the upcoming racist worldview stood for:

- first, whites had expressed their natural dynamism by trekking to distant horizons, unlike the indolent dark-skinned people who never left their shores;
- then, the whites had proven their superiority by subduing the dark-skinned natives;

- next, with their healthy race consciousness, they had tried to preserve their racial purity by imposing the caste system on themselves and the natives, preventing intermarriage between white conquerors and dark natives as much as possible;
- but unfortunately, some racial mixing did nonetheless take place and turned the white invaders into brown-skinned half-breeds, their intellectual and military qualities deteriorated, and they became an easy and legitimate prey for European colonizers who had preserved their racial purity.

This way, the Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT) was a cornerstone of the modern racist worldview. As Savitri Devi herself reported: "In the Third Reich, even school-children knew from their textbooks that the Aryan race had spread from the north to the south and east, and not the other way around." She also believed in the AIT annexe that caste is a racial Apartheid system, with the Aryan invaders as upper and the "aboriginals" as lower castes.

### **The Hindu connection**

Using the money her deceased father left her, Maximiani went to India and, with two brief interruptions, she was to stay there from 1932 until 1945, and again in 1957-60 and 1971-81. She studied Hindi and Bengali at Rabindranath Tagore's Shanti Niketan school and travelled around the country. Feeling ready to face Indian audiences, she offered her services as an anti-Christian preacher to Swami Satyananda's Hindu Mission in Calcutta. In 1937-39, under her given Hindu name Savitri Devi, she toured the tribal villages and had the chiefs organize public debates between herself and the local missionaries. Thoroughly familiar with the mentality and methods of her adversary, she could destroy the credit of the imported religion in the minds of the villagers, and prevent or undo many conversions. There was a sharp contradiction between her own racist and anti-egalitarian convictions and the reformist and egalitarian programme of the Hindu Mission. To the Hindu Mission, Hinduism was a value in itself; to Savitri Devi, it was but an instrument of her imagined Aryan race. In her years as a preacher, she kept her non-Hindu preoccupations to herself, but in her memoirs (*Souvenirs et Réflexions d'une Aryenne*, French: "Memories and Reflections of an Aryan Lady", Delhi 1976), she declared that she conceived of her reconversion mission as an exercise in deception: "From the racist Aryan view-point, it was necessary to give the most backward and degenerate aborigines a (false) Hindu consciousness."

In contrast with the Hindu nationalists, but in tune with Indian Marxists and casteists, she believed that the concept "nation" and a programme of "nationalism" could not apply to India. In 1938, she used the slogan: "Make every Hindu an Indian nationalist, and every Indian nationalist a Hindu". In her autobiography, however, she rejected this slogan on the plea that a "nation" could only consist of racially similar individuals, not of racially distinct communities, as she thought the castes to be. To genuine Hindu activists, this position is scandalous. It expresses exactly the motives which anti-Hindu authors falsely attribute to Hindu nationalism, because these motives logically follow from the racist theory of caste which Indian casteists and Marxists share with Savitri Devi, but which is rejected by the Hindu vanguard. At any rate, she gave her assent to claims routinely made in anti-Hindu literature, e.g.:

- Islam and Christianity are religions of equality;
- converts from Hinduism to Islam or Christianity were attracted by these religions' caste-free egalitarianism;
- India is not and never has been a nation.

These are exactly the ideas propagated by Indian Communists and Christian missionaries. With friends like Savitri Devi, Hinduism didn't need enemies.

However, the positions quoted were uttered only in Savitri Devi's later writings, not in the pre-War period when she was in touch with Hindu leaders including Subhash Bose and G.D. Savarkar, brother of V.D. Savarkar and writer of a foreword to her booklet *A Warning to the Hindus* (Calcutta 1939). Her most consequential acquaintance was with Dr. Asit Krishna Mukherji, the only Indian who could honestly be described as a Nazi. Numerous Indians were enthusiastic about Hitler's challenge to Britain's world domination, but Mukherji was the only one with a comprehensive knowledge of Nazi doctrine. He had studied history in London and travelled in the Soviet Union, but his interest was drawn by the rising discourse of race, enthroned as state doctrine in Germany in 1933. In 1935-37, he published a pro-Nazi bimonthly, the *New Mercury*. Savitri Devi met him on 9 January 1938, and their conversation immediately turned to Nazi doctrine, especially its alleged esoteric roots. According to Goodrick-Clarke, Mukherji was an early believer in the popular claim that the Thule Society, one of many reactionary political clubs in Munich ca. 1920, was a "secret initiatory society behind the open political movement of National Socialism". In an earlier publication, *The Occult Roots of Nazism* (London 1992), Goodrick-Clarke himself has cut such myths to size and debunked the "wholly spurious 'facts' concerning the powerful Thule Society, the Nazi links with the East, and Hitler's occult initiation".

After the outbreak of the war, Savitri Devi risked being expelled from India, so Mukherji offered to marry her. She described it as a chaste marriage, concluded purely for passport reasons. Chastity in marriage may have suited Mukherji as a believer in the yogic powers conferred by sexual abstinence. His bride, by contrast, was very open-minded and easy-going about sexuality and had had affairs with men as well as women.

Mukherji played a key role in the contacts between Subhash Bose and Axis representatives. He also spied for the Japanese during the war, but there are indications that he was a double agent, which would explain why he was left untouched even though Calcutta was the nerve centre of the Anglo-American operations against Japan. Savitri spent the War years writing books on Pharaoh Akhenaton (r. 1383-66 BC), the first known prophet of monotheism. She chose him as her preferred deity in her Bhakti practice, after a jewel she bought in Delhi displayed a solar symbol known from Akhenaton's inscriptions; she took this as a divine hint. She had taken up devotional yoga when a yoga master judged that her nerves could not stand the discipline of more straightforward forms of meditation.

### **The Nazi connection**

After the war, Mukherji made a living as an astrologer, until he took ill and fasted unto death in March 1977. His wife returned to Europe for a "pilgrimage" in devastated

Germany. She started distributing pro-Nazi handbills and was arrested for this by British soldiers. Sentenced to three years in prison, she became friends with her fellow inmates: former guards of the women's sections of the concentration camps. The suffering of old Nazis under the Allied repression formed the material for her first openly Nazi book, *Gold in the Furnace* (1949): she saw the 1945 defeat as but a test for the true Hitlerians, who would come out of it strengthened and ultimately victorious.

Savitri Devi exalted Hitler as a "man against time" who tried to uphold "Aryan" virtues against the degeneracy of modern times. In her most important book, *The Lightning and the Sun* (1958), she saw him as the third member of a historic trinity: Akhenaton, the first monotheist, the "sun"; Chengiz Khan, the greatest conqueror, the "lightning"; and Hitler, who combined the Pharaoh's philosophical depth with the Khan's martial prowess... In 1960, after a decade of wandering, often using her maiden name to enter countries where "Savitri Devi" was blacklisted, she settled down in France, where she eked out a living as a schoolteacher, occasionally causing trouble for herself by voicing denials of the Holocaust in class. After 1969, she was entitled to a small pension, just enough for her to live in India. In 1982, already unable to read or to walk unaided, she prepared for a lecture tour as an invitee of the American Nazi Party. On her way to the US, she stayed in a friend's house outside London, where she took ill and died from heart failure during her sleep. Her ashes were transferred to Arlington, Virginia, where the Nazi Party gave them a place of honour in its shrine.

### **Views on religion**

One observation which emerges from Savitri Devi's ideological writings, is that she had a rather confused view of religion. If she opposed the Christian destruction of Pagan temples, why did she venerate Akhenaton, the first known temple-destroyer, the first known believer in a single god intolerant of others? Why did she extol Chengiz Khan? Why did she persist in the Christian hatred of the Jews, when the last Pagan Emperor of Rome, Julian the Apostate (to whom she dedicated her *A Warning to the Hindus*), preferred the Jews to the Christians and planned to rebuild the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem?

Savitri Devi's view of the religious dimension of Hitlerism was equally fanciful. She wrote that Nazism had the "capability of becoming very fast, once associated with rituals, a real religion." But Hitler himself opposed those among his fans who dreamed of a new religion. In *Mein Kampf*, he affirmed that the Nazi movement "is not a religious reform but a political reorganization of the German people", and that "it is criminal to try and destroy the accepted faith of the people as long as there is nothing to replace it". Hitler took a purely instrumental view of religion. He appreciated Christianity for inculcating family values (good for the birth rate), anti-Semitism and obedience to authority; for its historical role in uniting the Germanic tribes under Charlemagne; and for having extended Germany eastward under the Teutonic Knights. On the other hand, he was irritated by Christian opposition to his eugenic policies, e.g. forced euthanasia of the handicapped. For such reasons, and because of the destructive role which religion had played in German history (the religious Thirty Years' War in 1618-48 killed one third of the German population), Hitler followed the policy of German rulers like Frederick II and Otto von Bismarck who had wisely kept religion separate from politics. His commitment was not to any one religion, but to the German people. Early on in his reign, Hitler appeased but sidelined the Christian Churches with a Concordat, and dissolved all neo-

Pagan associations. After the bizarre flight of his deputy Rudolf Hess, a vegetarian dabbling in Buddhism, he had all unconventional religionists arrested, because the event confirmed his suspicion that spiritual seeker types were unreliable. Though nominally a Roman Catholic till the end of his life, one thing to remember about him is: Hitler was a secularist.

### **The Aryan theory**

Considering the tainted connotations of the Aryan Invasion Theory and its caste-racist annexe, it is remarkable that Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke entirely shares with Savitri Devi the belief in the Aryan invasion and the racial theory of caste. The AIT has been the dominant paradigm for over a century and still is, so a non-specialist can be forgiven for uncritically accepting it. By contrast, the racial theory of caste is now a marginalized doctrine, championed only by people with a political agenda. It is espoused by white racists in the West and by ethnic separatists in India, strongly patronized and tutored by Christian missionaries. Goodrick-Clarke never questions Savitri Devi's view of caste as a racial apartheid system resulting from the "Aryan invasion", actually a 19th-century projection of the colonial situation onto the past. But in 1948 already, the Marxist scholar O.C. Cox rejected the projection of modern race prejudice onto ancient cultures: "The early Indo-Aryans could no more have thought in modern terms of the race prejudice than they could have invented the airplane". In the same year, Dalit leader Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar recapitulated the findings of physical anthropology to conclude that "the Brahmins and the Untouchables belong to the same race". It seems Goodrick-Clarke isn't aware of this debunking job. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke doesn't see anything historically wrong in the romantic eulogy to the ancient Hindu hero Rama by the orientomaniac French poet Charles Leconte de Lisle (1818-94): "Thou whose blood is pure, thou whose skin is white, (...) resplendent subduer of the profane races". He quotes it from Savitri Devi's own frequent references to this sheet-anchor of her Aryan convictions, and seems to be sharing her belief that Rama was a white Aryan racist whose campaign against Ravana typifies the Aryan conquest of Dravidian South India. But in the Ramayana, Ravana's ancestry is traced to the Vedic sage Pulastya, Rama's to the pre-Vedic Aryan patriarch Ikshvaku. Their struggle was one between two Aryans, both of them dark-skinned.

### **Hitler vs. Hindu nationalism**

In his description of the Hindu nationalist movement in the 1930s and 40s, Goodrick-Clarke depends on secondary and hostile sources. That may well be why he fails to notice the profound estrangement between Savitri Devi and the Hindu nationalists after 1940. Though he admits that "the subsequent success of Hindu nationalism after the Second World War does not form part of Savitri Devi's story", he does generally pretend that Hindu nationalism is the present incarnation of Savitri Devi's ideology, "upper-caste racism" which seeks to "restore upper-caste authority".

Given Hindutva's reformism, Savitri Devi's love affair with the movement was understandably short-lived. In her memoirs, she laments that the reformist Arya Samaj doesn't share her enthusiasm for caste inequality: "The Arya Samaj is Aryan only in name, for it rejects the natural hierarchy of the races". What is at stake here is the arrogant policy of Westerners, first to steal the cultural term Arya and distort its meaning in a racist sense, then to protest when Hindus fail to respect this new and distorted

usage. Another telling lament: "How many Hindus were there among the Aryan castes who, like Sri A.K. Mukherji, fully understood the profound significance of Hitlerism, and supported it because of it? Very few, certainly!"

That many ordinary Hindus admired Hitler deserves an explanation. It is a serious defect in the Hindu character that all kinds of shady individuals are easily embraced in the bosom of Hindu pluralism. The mere sight of someone, anyone, worshipping an idol, any idol, is enough for them to also pay their respects to the same idol. When Hindus glorify Jesus or Mohammed, all Indian secularists and Western India-watchers applaud this exercise in mindless sentimentalism as "secular", as a "defeat of the communal forces". It is exactly the same psychology, eager to please non-Hindus and exult along with them in their adoration of non-Hindu idols, which tricked some gullible Hindus into glorifying Hitler.

At the same time, many Hindu nationalists opposed Hitler. Savitri Devi noted with indignation that Sri Aurobindo supported the British war effort against the Nazis on ideological grounds, as when he declared: "Hitlerism is the greatest menace the world has ever met -- if Hitler wins, do they think India has any chance of being free? It is for two reasons I support the British in this war: first in India's own interest and secondly for humanity's sake. Hitler stands for diabolical values". V.D. Savarkar, far from supporting the German war effort (as Goodrick-Clarke falsely alleges), called on Hindu young men to join the British Army and gain combat experience in the struggle against the Axis powers. In 1948, he was the only leader of India's freedom struggle to give a passionate welcome to the new state of Israel, which has since then always enjoyed the sympathy of the Hindutva movement, but which was evil incarnate to Savitri Devi. No wonder that in her 338-page memoirs, Savitri Devi refuses to mention the Hindutva leaders and organizations even once.

### **Savitri Devi's usefulness**

Goodrick-Clarke's book *Hitler's Priestess* will be used as a stick with which to beat Hindu nationalism. With him, many "secularists" will enthusiastically sustain the confusion embodied in his notion of a "Hindu-Aryan myth", viz. that the European racist notion "Aryan" was borrowed as such from Hinduism. Now that all the hysterical predictions of how a BJP government would enact Nazi policies have proven completely far-fetched and slanderous, this book will be employed in an effort to trump reality with a tragic woman's private Hitlerian fantasies.

Hindus ought to set up their own anti-defamation league. Such a body could sue neo-Nazi groups for misusing Hindu symbols like the swastika and the term Arya. It could also issue rebuttals to the misleading and defamatory message in publications like Goodrick-Clarke's latest.

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