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# Introduction

ON JULY 20, 1910, *The* (London) *Times* reported a daring escape by a young Indian law student being extradited to India to stand trial on charges of treason and abetment to murder. When the SS *Morea* docked near the port of Marseilles, the student squeezed himself out of a porthole in the ship's bathroom and swam to shore. He requested asylum as a political prisoner but was returned to the British detectives in charge of him. The *New York Times* reported that French socialists agitated on his behalf, claiming that he had been improperly returned to British authority; the case eventually went to the Hague Tribunal for arbitration.<sup>1</sup> Much to the relief of the British Secretary of State for India, Sir John Morley, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled that France could not hold him. The twenty-seven-year-old student was then brought to India, where he was tried and sentenced to an unprecedented two life terms of banishment to a penal colony. Indian students frequently ran into trouble with British police without it being covered by British and American national newspapers, but this was no ordinary student. His name was Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966), an Indian revolutionary nationalist who believed uncompromisingly that armed struggle was the only way for India to free herself from British colonial rule, and he would become one of the most important figures associated with right-wing Hindu nationalism.<sup>2</sup>

Savarkar was born in Bhagura—a village in Bombay Presidency—into a lower middle-class Marathi Chitpavan Brahmin family on May 27, 1883, and

1. “Hindu Case at Hague: Question between France and England over Extradition of Student,” *New York Times*.

2. The Marathi transliteration of Savarkar's full name, with the accent marks, is Vināyaka Dāmōdara Sāvarakara. However, since Savarkar wrote his name in English as “Savarkar,” I am using the same.

his early life seemed to lead naturally to revolutionary nationalism. His childhood and adulthood were filled with tragedy: the death of his mother from cholera when he was nine years old, the subsequent death of his father and uncle from the plague, and the experience of bumbling and insensitive colonial efforts to alleviate a catastrophic plague that devastated the population of rural western India. During his adulthood, his four-year-old son died; just before Savarkar was released from prison, his beloved sister-in-law died; and while under house arrest in Ratnagiri, he lost another child.<sup>3</sup> During his adolescence, the plague became the proximate cause for anticolonial sentiment across western India, resulting in political assassinations, the glorification of revolutionary nationalists and anarchists from far away—particularly Italians and Russians—and tactics that the colonial government would quickly categorize as “terrorist.”

In 1899, a teenage Savarkar and some friends founded a secret revolutionary society called *Rāshtrabhakta Samuha* (Devotees of the Nation Society), which in 1901 became the *Mitra Mela* (Friends Society).<sup>4</sup> In 1902 he entered Fergusson College in Pune, where he organized anticolonial protests. Like many other young educated Indian men, he went to London for postgraduate study, arriving in 1906, but spent most of his time engaged in political activities, some benign and some less so, including procuring Browning pistols to smuggle into India for political assassinations. He was a classic example of the early twentieth-century revolutionary Indian nationalist, enamored with guns and bombs. He went to London to study law only to have the Metropolitan Police decide he was breaking it.

His companions during the five years he spent there were a motley group of like-minded revolutionary Indian students—the British authorities labeled them all extremists—who idolized Irish nationalists, Russian bomb makers,

3. Karandikar, *Savarkar Charitra*, 105, 290, 468. Savarkar’s son, Prabhakar, was born in 1905 but died of smallpox in 1909.

4. *Samagra Savarkar Vangmaya*, Svatantryaveer Savarkar Rashtriya Smarak Prakashan [SSRSP] 1: 122–25. I have used two major collections of Savarkar’s Marathi works: *Samagra Savarkar Vangmaya*, vols. 1–8, published by the Maharashtra Prantik Hindusabha Samiti (hereafter identified as SSV, MPHS) and *Samagra Savarkar Vangmaya*, vols. 1–9, published by Svatantryaveer Savarkar Rashtriya Smarak Prakashan (hereafter identified as SSV, SSRSP). While the material collected in both is the same, the editor of the first was S. R. Date—a close associate of Savarkar’s who consulted with him about the compilation. The second one was compiled by a committee put together by Savarkar’s family members with a different set of prefatory remarks than the ones written by Date, so I found it worthwhile to use both.

and Italian thinkers. Within six months of his arrival, Savarkar translated Giuseppe Mazzini's biography into Marathi; by the end of the year, he started another secret revolutionary society called the Free India Society that was clearly modeled after Mazzini's Young Italy. In 1909 a housemate of his, Madanlal Dhingra, shot Sir William Hutt Curzon Wyllie—the political aide-de-camp to Sir John Morley—and in 1910 Savarkar was arrested in connection with not just that shooting but also for having supplied pistols for political assassinations back in India, after which he was repatriated to India to stand trial.<sup>5</sup>

The notoriety surrounding his trial made him a world-famous “terrorist” and captured the interest of the international press as well as figures like Maxim Gorky.<sup>6</sup> Savarkar was sentenced to two life terms in the notorious Cellular Jail on the Andaman Islands<sup>7</sup> but was brought back to India in May 1921.<sup>8</sup> He was placed under house arrest from 1924 to 1937 during which time he promised to cease all political activities—but nonetheless wrote history, poems, plays, speeches, and editorials as he became known as a serious political figure even while under police watch. In 1937, after his release, he became the president of the Hindu political party, the Hindu Mahasabha. By the time he stepped down from that position in 1943, his rhetoric had taken on a particularly strident and virulent tone, denouncing Gandhi and the main

5. Singh, “Trial and Martyrdom of Dhingra,” 728–39.

6. There were interrelations and connections between Egyptian nationalists and Indian extremists that were strong enough to render Savarkar's early historical tome on the 1857 Rebellion as the chief source of Indian history for the Egyptian nationalist paper *al-Liwa*. Following the assassination of Curzon Wyllie by Madanlal Dhingra, what traveled was the image of an Indian nationalist martyr in Egypt, Ibrahim Nassif al-Wardani, who was well acquainted with the Dhingra case and shot the Egyptian prime minister Boutros Ghali, leading some British officials to focus on his connection to Indian extremism. See Khan, “The Enemy of My Enemy,” 74–78.

7. The Andaman Islands are located in the Indian Ocean, about 600 km east of the southern coast of Myanmar, between the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, to the north of Sumatra. In the seventeenth century, Archibald Blair of the Royal Indian Navy founded a naval base, and soon after the 1857 Rebellion, the British Government of India started a penal colony named Port Blair. Construction of the Andaman Cellular Jail was completed by 1910. The jail was built in a circular pattern, with a total of 698 cells. Indian revolutionaries were sent from mainland India to Port Blair, and prisoners were used to clear the surrounding jungles until the settlement was abandoned.

8. Karandikar, *Savarkar Charitra*, 489–92. He was moved to a jail in Ratnagiri thereafter for a few years, where, according to Karandikar, he was despondent to the point of considering suicide.

voice of Indian nationalism, the Indian National Congress (INC), for taking too soft a line on Muslims.

In 1944, three years before independence, a veteran American war correspondent interviewed Savarkar. He was one of the very few political leaders not in jail because the Hindu Mahasabha had stayed aloof from the Quit India movement that had roiled most of British India in 1942. Tom Treanor describes Savarkar as unshaven and disheveled but intellectually engaged and eager to talk about how he perceived Indian Muslims. Asked by Treanor how he planned to treat the “Mohammedans,” Savarkar said he would regard them “as a minority in the position of your Negroes.” To Treanor’s follow-up question about what might happen “if the Mohammedans secede and set up their own country,” Savarkar, according to Treanor, “waggl[ed] a menacing finger” and promised that “as in your country there will be civil war.”<sup>9</sup>

When British India was partitioned in 1947, Savarkar’s promise of civil war seemed to come true in the paroxysm of Hindu-Muslim violence that midwifed the birth of Pakistan and India as two independent and mutually hostile new nations. At midnight, August 14, 1947, India’s first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru spoke to the new nation. “Long years ago,” he said, “we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge. . . . A moment comes . . . when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance.” While his lofty words and ideals captured the ebullient spirit of independence, they also evoked the horrific possibility that the violence of partition was also an expression of the nation’s soul, but of its dark side.

On January 30, 1948, Nathuram Godse, a former member of the right-wing cultural organization the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and a close associate of Savarkar, pushed his way through the crowd assembled to greet Gandhi for his usual prayer meeting. He made a short bow to Gandhi, then shot him dead. Later it was discovered that Godse had not only met Savarkar before setting out on his mission but had received his blessing. As a result, Savarkar was arrested in connection with yet another political assassination, this time of the “Father of the Nation.” Whether Savarkar was directly responsible or not, there is little doubt that his animus against Gandhi—indeed his complete rejection of Gandhi’s idea of India—was a dominant factor in Nathuram Godse’s decision to fire the gun. The police could not find concrete evidence of any complicity and released Savarkar. In an odd twist of fate, he

9. Treanor, *One Damn Thing after Another*, 84.

lived out the remainder of his life as if he were back in house arrest, in the Bombay neighborhood of Shivaji Park. He was disallowed by the newly independent Indian nation from participating in politics, though he remained influential in the Hindu Mahasabha and, in an echo of earlier colonial restrictions on him, remained under surveillance. He continued writing, publishing one tract after another until his death in 1966.<sup>10</sup>

One of the charges that landed Savarkar in jail in 1910 was sedition. Yet soon after his 1921 repatriation to an Indian prison, he wrote another potentially seditious work, even if it may not have been seditious in a legal sense since it made no critical mention of British rule in India, smuggling it out of his prison cell in Ratnagiri in 1923.<sup>11</sup> Titled *Essentials of Hindutva*, the tract was published the same year by a lawyer in Nagpur named Shri Vishwanathrao Kelkar. Savarkar wrote the work in English under the pseudonym “A Mahratta.”<sup>12</sup> The extended essay was a passionately lyrical celebration of the Indian territorial nation. Some five decades after it was written, it has become the de facto bible of militant and exclusionary Hindu nationalism, which sees as its foremost enemy India’s minority Muslim community.<sup>13</sup> The essay not only encapsulated this suspicion of Muslims—it also encapsulated Savarkar’s entire oeuvre, dramatically influencing the course of modern Indian history.

One word—an abstract noun—from the essay’s title, *Hindutva*, would come to stand as the exemplary expression of militant Hindu nationalism, while one couplet became the cornerstone of *Hindutva* ideology:

10. Savarkar’s death in the Marathi literature is usually termed *ātmārpaṇa* or self-sacrifice. Upon falling ill, he began eating less and less and eventually refused all food and water, taking his last breath on February 26, 1966. For a firsthand description of his last months and weeks, see Savarkar’s son’s recollections, *Athavani Angaracya*, 21–26.

11. Karandikar writes that, from 1908 onward, Savarkar was playing with the idea of *Hindutva*, and during the war, while unwell and practically bed-bound in the Andaman Islands, he worked on the concept between 1915 and 1918. However, in prison in Ratnagiri, according to Karandikar, he was already concerned about the discourse of unity that was spreading; he was particularly concerned about the Mappila Rebellion and was eager to publish his book. Karandikar, *Savarkar Charitra*, 465–66, 493.

12. Karandikar, *Savarkar Charitra*, 465–66, 493. Karandikar also tells us Savarkar was moved from Alipur Jail in Calcutta to a jail in Ratnagiri for a few years, and then to Yerawada Jail in Pune, where following a meeting with the governor of Bombay, Sir George Lloyd, he was released into house arrest in Ratnagiri. He was released from prison once and for all on June 1, 1924.

13. For ease of access, I have used *Essentials of Hindutva* as published in volume 4 of the (English) *Selected Works of Veer Savarkar*.

Asindhu sindhu paryanta yasya bharata bhumika  
Pitrabhu punyabhushchaiva sa vai hinduriti smritaha<sup>14</sup>

Translated literally, the couplet claims that India's geographical contours extend from the Sindhu River in the North (in present-day Pakistan) to the seas below in the South.<sup>15</sup> All people who claimed India as both *pitrabhumi* (the land of their ancestors) and *punyabhumi* (holy land) were its natural inhabitants. He clarified what he meant by *punyabhumi* ten years after publishing *Essentials* to ensure that he was not misunderstood.

The land in which the founder of a religion appeared as a Rishi, an Avatar, or Prophet, and in which he preached that religion, and by his living in the land it acquired sacredness, that land can be considered the *punyabhu* of a religion. Like Palestine for the Jews and Christians, and Arabia for the Muslims. . . . It is not to be understood simply as sacred land.<sup>16</sup>

The modern boundaries of India contain the oldest shrines and sacred sites of its Hindu, Sikh, Jain, and Buddhist communities; they also contain sacred shrines of India's Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities. But because Jerusalem, Mecca, and Medina were outside the territorial boundaries of modern India, by Savarkar's definition, Jews, Christians, and Muslims were neither natural nor national inhabitants of India. This territorial demarcation and its accompanying exclusionary ideology—the idea that India is primarily a Hindu country—are at the core of Hindutva. To call someone a Hindutvavadi in today's India is to either bestow upon her a great compliment or bruise her with a contemptuous insult, depending upon that person's ideological persuasion. For these and other reasons Savarkar's *Essentials* has received its share of attention from Indian historians and political commentators, as has Savarkar himself.

There is, in fact, a large body of literature on and by Savarkar, and no conversation about Hindutva or Hindu nationalism, whether by historians, sociologists, political scientists, or anthropologists, takes place without naming him as the father of Hindu fascism, Hindu fundamentalism, and/or Hindu right-wing nationalism. His supporters think of him as an extraordinary patriot and the champion of Hindus. There is also an enormous biographical

14. Savarkar, *Essentials*, 537. I have copied the verse exactly as it appears in the work cited without correcting it or marking it with the appropriate diacritical marks.

15. I am grateful to Sheldon Pollock for the precise translation.

16. See SSV, MPHS, 3: 6, for Savarkar's essay titled "Hindutvace Pancha Prana," published in the Marathi magazine *Sahyadri* in May 1936.



body of literature on Savarkar published in his native language, Marathi, and even some works in Sanskrit. A few of these biographies are scholarly, but most are not, and all are adulatory. There are, additionally, Sanskrit plays, Sanskrit *mahākāvya* (courtly poetry), *povāḍās* (bardic poems), Marathi plays, *bakhars* (chronicles), Hindi plays, Marathi musicals, children's comic books, and graphic novels. There is also a specific regional reading public devoted to him and his memorialization along with a varied reading practice. Such practices date to the period following Savarkar's return to India, even as the process of memorialization continues to this day.<sup>17</sup> In addition, there is Savarkar's own literary production, mostly in Marathi. He was first and foremost a poet, though he was also a prolific polemicist, occasional playwright, and nationalist historian. His collected works in Marathi span ten volumes. While English-language scholarship on him focuses on *Essentials*, he has a much larger corpus—from poetry to prose, from music dramas to speeches, from jeremiads to historical writings—that is read only by Marathi readers. His patriotic poems set to music and songs such as “Shatajanma Shodhitana” from his music drama (*San'yasta Khadga* [Forsaken sword]), are routinely performed at commemorative events and on television. Yet the works of his that tend to have the largest circulation and have been translated into English and Hindi (and, on occasion, Gujarati, Tamil, Bengali, and Malayalam) are his historical works and political tracts. His writings on *Bhāṣā Śud'dhi* (purification of the language) and *Lipisudhāraṇā* (reform of the script), his poetry, his essays on caste reform, his writings on the Manusmṛti, and, most importantly, the numerous articles he wrote in which he attacked the orthodox Hindu community and M. K Gandhi remain untranslated.<sup>18</sup> Savarkar has also had a very different afterlife in his home state of Maharashtra compared to the rest of India. To take just one example, in no part of Savarkar's writings do we see a recidivism, or a desire to return to the Vedas, or any support for Hindu ritual. Indeed, Savarkar is widely viewed in Maharashtra as a progressive and a caste reformer. But the Savarkar who is iconic all over India is not the progressive, let alone the caste reformer, but rather the

17. See most recently the two-volume biography of Savarkar by Vikram Sampath, *Savarkar: Echoes from a Forgotten Past, 1883–1924* and *Savarkar (Part 2): A Contested Legacy, 1924–1966*. See also my review of Sampath's biography in *India Today* and my statement about Sampath's plagiarism of my article, “Vikram Sampath Is Claiming My Ideas, Words as His Own.”

18. In 1982 Savarkar's writings were distributed across several small books and published in a format that did not require one to purchase his collected works. In the front matter of each of these small books, Savarkar's secretary Balarao Savarkar has published a list of Savarkar's works and the languages into which they have been translated. I get my information from this front matter.

revolutionary Hindu nationalist. In many current formulations, he has been severed from Maharashtra, and there are different afterlives of Savarkar in Maharashtra compared to all other regions of the country.

I am not writing a story of Savarkar's life, nor am I writing the first intellectual biography of Savarkar. I am, however, writing a book that brings both English and Marathi sources into conversation with one another to tell a story through Savarkar about the foundational political ideas that have become central in, and inexorably intertwined with, modern Indian political life. For the most part, the English and Marathi worlds have been completely bifurcated. *Essentials* and Savarkar's histories are frequently cited, not least because they link the present Hindu moment of Indian history to the pre-independence anticolonial period; not even Gandhi's texts from the 1920s can claim such an enduring influence. Savarkar's histories have the largest circulation of all his writings because, in them, he offers a history of the Hindu state. But the poetry upon which *Essentials* is based, with which Marathi writers are well acquainted, is rarely brought into the analytic frame. This bifurcation means that Savarkar, despite his iconic status, remains elusive; I argue here that his importance cannot be fully grasped until not just his writings but also his reception in English as well as Marathi are covered together in a single work. It is not possible to fully understand Savarkar in his own terms unless he is read in the language in which he couched those terms—a language deeply rooted in the regional formation of which he was so proud and over which he displayed an unmistakable mastery. To not read Savarkar in Marathi, in other words, is to reproduce a colonial dynamic in which the regional is assumed to be parochial, and only the national or international is taken to be of global significance.

There is an additional element to the bifurcation of historical treatments of Savarkar, related in fundamental ways as well to Savarkar's own sustained effort to reclaim and re-narrate the history of India. Savarkar fervently believed that the domination of historical literature by Muslims and the British had resulted in the denigration, if not downright suppression, of the glories of the Hindu past. Savarkar's reclamation project was nativist in the extreme, a part of his more general critique not just of earlier non-native historiography but even of what he saw as an accommodationist tendency on the part of nationalists such as Gandhi and Nehru. The English historical record, like the Muslim one before it, was contaminated by an outsider's perspective and was not engaged with so much as simply dismissed or ignored.

A similar nativism continues to dominate the writings of many of the Marathi historians writing about Savarkar, including Y. D. Phadke, S. N. Navalgundkar, Sheshrao More, Raja Dixit, and Sudhakar Bhalerao, among others,

even when (as is usually the case) they are fluent in English. The English sources referenced tend to be the occasional primary source, such as the colonial Sedition Committee Report or police files, and only a few secondary sources at most. It is not as if a broader conception of history and sources was unknown either in Savarkar's time or now. Savarkar himself studied the works of Spencer, Comte, Mill, Darwin, Bentham, and Macaulay (in addition to studying the Upaniṣads and Vedānta).<sup>19</sup> Savarkar's contemporary, T. S. Shejwalkar, found much to learn from the stalwarts of Anglo-European history and engaged seriously with canonical European historians: Toynbee, Gibbon, Macaulay, Weber, Marx, Kant, Hegel, Croce. Historians writing in Marathi on Savarkar rarely do the same. On occasion, references to historiography appear in the form of an allusion to a distant English historian such as Carlyle or Gibbon, sometimes to Nietzsche, or, even more surprisingly, Arthur Schlesinger.<sup>20</sup> But by and large, Marathi historians writing on Savarkar entirely avoid the extraordinarily large corpus of Indian history written in English.

Just as the respective literatures are split, so too is the English scholarly literature on Savarkar. Nationalist histories have dominated the field for generations, and only nationalists and political parties on the so-called "correct" side of Indian history—which is to say on the Gandhi/Nehru side of history—receive sustained and serious historical inquiry and examination.<sup>21</sup> With a few notable exceptions, the almost obsessive focus in scholarship on Gandhi has been

19. See Wolf "Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's 'Strategic Agnosticism'" for a fine-grained and detailed analysis of Savarkar as a philosopher, examining the possible influences of European liberal thinkers on him. See also Visana, "Savarkar before Hindutva," 1–24. In "Majhi Janmathep" ("My transportation for life"), Savarkar provides an extraordinary list of materials that he and other political prisoners requested for the library at Cellular Jail in the Andaman Islands. It includes journals such as *Modern Review* and *Indian Review*; biographies of Swami Vivekanda, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Tagore, and Vidyasagar in Bengali; Sanskrit copies of the Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata, and Yogvasiṣṭha; Marathi books such as the *Dnyaneshwari*, *Moropantanche Kavya*, and *Kramik Pustake* (textbooks). In English, the list includes the collected works of Spencer, Mill, Darwin, Huxley, Hegel, Emerson, Carlyle, Gibbon, Macaulay, Shakespeare, Milton, and Alexander Pope; biographies of Napoleon, Bismarck, and Garibaldi; the novels of Dickens and Tolstoy; the works of Kropotkin and Nietzsche on politics; Plato's *Republic*; the Qur'an in translation; Kalidas's plays; Hindi books on the 1857 Rebellion; and talks and lectures given by Tilak. For a full list, see <https://www.savarkarsmarak.com/activityimages/Marathi%20-%20Mazi%20Janmathep.pdf>, 163–73.

20. Y. D. Phadke, "Savarkaranchi Vicharsrushti," 156.

21. For instance, there is no good work on Madan Mohan Malaviya, the leader of the Hindu nationalist party, nor very much scholarship on the Hindu Mahasabha political party, or on nationalist figures like Tej Bahadur Sapru or K. M. Moonshi.

conspicuously absent for right-wing anticolonial nationalists such as Savarkar, who is written about almost exclusively by those who either see him as the founder of an Indian “fascism” and as a eugenicist interested in producing a master Hindu race, or by partisan apologists and eulogizers.<sup>22</sup> In the first instance, he is condemned as an extremist. In the second, he becomes the prescient oracle of all that has come to pass in modern India. Neither side subjects him to careful analysis, meaning that his role as a major (if not always original) contributor to modern Indian intellectual and political history has so far been little understood. This is true as well for the Marathi literature on Savarkar, with a few exceptions. Raosaheb Kasbe, Vasant Palshikar, and Ashok Chousalkar, all of whom are political scientists, have written works critical of Savarkar.<sup>23</sup> But for the most part, the literature both in Marathi and English takes partisan positions on him.<sup>24</sup>

In this book I will cite extensively from Savarkar’s own words, as I have directly translated them from the original Marathi. I do so not just as a scholarly method—to bring Savarkar to the reader as much as possible unmediated by my own historical judgment—but also to bypass the partisanship that otherwise marks previous scholarship on Savarkar. A word of warning is in order. Savarkar’s prose is often extraordinarily polemical. He seems to have intended to offend a good many people—whether those were liberal nationalists, Muslims, or orthodox (Sanātani) Hindus. The founding publisher of the leading Marathi publication, *Kirloskar*, recognized this both when editing Savarkar’s essays on caste reform and when recounting his actions in his autobiography.<sup>25</sup>

22. One notable exception is Pincince’s excellent dissertation “On the Verge of Hindutva.”

23. In particular, see Kasbe, *Hindurashtravada*. Kasbe addresses Savarkar’s social, political, and religious thought but does not see him as a serious thinker because he did not delve into philosophical questions. On the other hand, see Wolf’s “Vinayak Damodar Savarkar’s ‘Strategic Agnosticism’” and Visana, “Savarkar before Hindutva,” 1–24. Both of these scholars read Savarkar almost as an architectonic philosopher.

24. The corpus of writing on Gandhi is too voluminous to be easily cited. A simple keyword search for works on “Mahatma+Gandhi” yields over 1,700 citations, and I will not attempt to be comprehensive. I offer a tiny sample of the journalistic and scholarly writings on Gandhi: David Arnold, *Gandhi: Profiles in Power* (2001); William L. Shirer, *Gandhi: A Memoir* (1979); Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (1950); David Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours: The Global Legacy of His Ideas* (2003). On Nehru, see Sarvepalli Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography* (1989); M. J. Akbar, *Nehru: The Making of India* (2002); *Indian Foreign Policy: The Nehru Years*, edited by B. R. Nanda (1976). On Subhas Chandra Bose, see Leonard Gordon, *Brothers against the Raj* (1990). On Maulana Azad, see *Islam and Indian Nationalism*, edited by Mushirul Hasan (1992).

25. Kirloskar, *Shanavakiya*, 268.

Unlike Kirloskar I have not edited or censored Savarkar's prose. I have translated long passages, with the original Marathi provided in the appendix, precisely to show its force, its polemical character, and the ways in which he confronted—by being provocative and sometimes offensive—orthodox Hindu sensibilities one hundred years ago. His prose may well be seen as no less offensive today. My intention, however, is not to offend. It is to contextualize why Savarkar was considered progressive, even a social radical, in his time, and to represent him and his thought through his own rhetoric and language.

As critical a figure as he was, however, he was largely derivative in his actual views. Reading through the Marathi scholarly literature on Savarkar and his contemporaries, predecessors, and mentors makes clear that he did not inaugurate many of the conversations in which he participated upon his return to India, whether on eradicating untouchability, the writing of history, or the so-called Muslim Question. Even his poetry was not unique, except insofar as it was overtly patriotic. Moreover, every single one of his agendas, from his determination to purify Marathi to his demonization of Muslims, was challenged by intellectuals and scholars within his home state of Maharashtra. How then did he not just insert himself into the major debates of his time but co-opt them and fashion himself so often as their major spokesperson?

When we move beyond Maharashtra, this question becomes even more puzzling. The 1920s featured figures—Gandhi, Lenin, Atatürk, Mao—who were at the center of major national movements, claiming the world's attention. It was a strange and unsettling time for the British Empire, which, even as it spanned a vast territory ranging from India at one end to the spoils of the Ottoman Empire at the other, faced threats inside and out. Britain's imperial project was gnawed at by the Russian Revolution (1917), Turkish Republicanism, rising Arab nationalism, Irish nationalists and Sinn Féin, British communists working to foster labor unrest in India, and Italian anarchists who influenced the Indian "terrorists" who set off bombs in Parliament and assassinated British officials in London.

Even more important, the twenties and thirties saw the germination of a series of ethnonationalist movements in numerous places around the globe—what we might call global localisms. In 1892, Bengali literary critic and writer Chandranath Basu coined the term *Hindutva*, describing it as the best expression of the fundamental characteristics of "Hindu-ness."<sup>26</sup> A few years later,

26. Sen, "A Hindu Conservative Negotiates Modernity," 178.

Rabindranath Tagore wrote an essay called “Hindutva.”<sup>27</sup> Around the same time, B. G. Tilak, Savarkar’s hero and inspiration, also wrote an essay in Marathi on Hindutva—a term he used to refer to the Hindu community.<sup>28</sup> Some twenty years later, when Savarkar took the same term and injected it with steroidal rage against a Muslim other, he was part of a larger movement. In different parts of the world, charismatic men were defining the boundaries, both physical and cultural, of their lands. In the wake of the First World War, extreme right-wing pan-European revivalist movements and organizations challenged the basic premises of liberal democracies in favor of a fascist-tinged conservatism that usually started by defining who was and was not genuinely part of the nation.

Such concepts and movements were present in India too.<sup>29</sup> There was a perceptible global zeitgeist and striking resemblances between Savarkar’s concept of Hindutva and the earlier German concept of *Volkisch*, the subsequent cult of Romanita in Italy, or even Ferenc Szalasi’s Hungaryism.<sup>30</sup> A little further afield, the academic Karelia Society advocated the purging of non-Finnish influences from Finnish life and culture, hoping to create a greater Finland whose boundaries went east as far as the Urals. All these groups romanticized a deep connection to native soil, privileged the country over the city, and advocated a palingenetic renewal of ethnic and, in some cases, racial purity alongside the removal of foreign influences.

From colonial India to Finland and beyond, in other words, the 1920s saw a global emergence of intense localisms.<sup>31</sup> Scholars have debated how to define

27. For an analysis of Tagore’s essay on Hindutva, see Chatterjee, “Tagore’s Non-Nation,” in *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy*.

28. Tilak, “Hindutva ani Sudharna,” 294–98. Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920) was the editor of *Kesari* (Marathi) and *Marhatta* (English). A Hindu nationalist politician and leader, he was known in his native Maharashtra as “Lokamanya” (“respected by the people”) Tilak and as an “extremist” politician by the colonial government. See Oak, *Political Ideas of B. G. Tilak*, and Rao, *Foundations of Tilak’s Nationalism*.

29. On fascism in Bengal, see Zachariah, “A Voluntary Gleichschaltung?” Zachariah documents the fascination with fascism in colonial Bengal and the active attempts to implement it in India. In particular, see 69–77.

30. Stanley Payne has argued that Hungary takes the prize for the single largest number of right-wing radical secret societies, all cultivating the spirit of national revival. See Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914–1945*, 267. The association called the Etelkoz Association (EKSZ) made new members swear unquestioning oaths of complete obedience and promise to court death before giving up on the idea of a racially pure and Christian Hungary. See Kallis, *The Fascism Reader*, 203.

31. See Hoffman, *The Fascist Effect*, on Shimoi Harukichi, who in the 1920s was the most aggressive promoter of the ideas of fascism as he had learned them from his association in Italy



and describe these movements and ideologies. Were they fascist or semi-fascist movements? Were they proto-fascist or fascist-tinged, or did they partake discriminately of a “fascist repertoire” of ideas?<sup>32</sup> Whatever the case, these movements and ideologies were bolstered by political and cultural organizations and cult-like secret societies.<sup>33</sup> In Romania in 1927, Corneliu Codreanu founded the Legion of the Archangel Michael, which aimed to regenerate Romania and create a new spirit—a cultural and religious revolution that would bring forth the *omul nou* (new man). India had the Tarun Hindu Sabha, founded in 1923 by Savarkar’s older brother, and the RSS, founded in 1925. The Hitler Youth, Italian Youth, Hungarian Youth, Austrian Youth, Romanian Youth, and the RSS *swayamsevak*s (volunteer members) all imagined a new man who was young, militant, energetic, and forward-looking. This new man also aimed to forge a noncosmopolitan sense of identity and enact an identitarian and exclusionary politics.

In India during the same period, Gandhi began his slow but sure takeover of the anticolonial nationalist movement, though not without being challenged regarding his insistence on nonviolent noncooperation as a political strategy, his conservative and paternalistically reformist views on caste, his support for the Khilafat movement, or his idea that spinning was the best way to further the cause of Indian independence from colonial rule.

Savarkar entered all this political and social ferment from house arrest in Ratnagiri. Brought back to India in 1921, he set in motion in the Marathi language and milieu a starkly alternative process and set of assertions and ideas about Hindu primacy that a wide range of Hindu fundamentalists across India would later appropriate. This book is about that process, one that took place primarily in Maharashtra, in Marathi, in conversation with other Marathi intellectuals, nationalists, and poets, but also in the context of Savarkar’s chief

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with political figures such as Gabriel D’Annunzio. I am grateful to David Freedberg for his suggestion that what I was describing might more accurately be described as global localism.

32. Zachariah, “A Voluntary Gleichschaltung?”

33. See Griffin, *Fascism*, in particular part 3, “Abortive Fascisms 1922–1945” (213–14 on Finland, 219–21 on Romania, and 223–28 on Hungary). See also Kallis, *The Fascism Reader*, in particular part 2 for discussions about what Griffin has termed “the fascist minimum” and essays by Stanley Payne, Ernst Nolte, Zeev Sternhell. See 191–241 for variations on the fascist theme in Romania and Hungary. See also Payne’s magisterial *A History of Fascism: 1914–1945*, 245–328, for non-European variants of fascism; Paxton’s canonical *The Anatomy of Fascism*; and Blinkhorn, *Fascism and the Right in Europe: 1919–1945*. This is a tiny selection from the enormous body of literature on fascism.

nemesis, Gandhi, along with his other contemporary, B. R. Ambedkar, whom Savarkar admired even as they had major differences.

Savarkar never doubted that he was a legendary leader of global significance, and his hubris served him well in crafting for himself a near mythological persona for posterity. He did so through his writings, which ranged across the genres of history, biography, historical novels, and Marathi poetry. Always under surveillance, Savarkar threw himself into the political conversations about caste, minorities, and the nation with other nationalists inside and outside Maharashtra.

Savarkar is not especially well understood by modern Indians, who assume he was deeply devout and religious or a straightforward Hindu fundamentalist, neither of which is correct. Nor is he understandable outside of a colonial context, within which he was an adamant anticolonial nationalist even as his contempt for Muslims served colonial interests. He is even less understandable if we remove him from his native region of Maharashtra, where the reverence for his anticolonial revolutionary activities has been joined with admiration for him as a social reformer as well as a brilliant poet and writer. Savarkar the poet is also Savarkar the historian; Savarkar the caste reformer is Savarkar the anti-Muslim polemicist in a different guise. For all these reasons, along with the divided cultural and linguistic worlds already mentioned, it is difficult to produce a neat and tidy historical narrative about Savarkar because he either evades or escapes most of the hermeneutic boxes into which one might place him. As a consequence, I have envisioned this book as providing a kaleidoscopic view of Savarkar not just because he looks completely different depending on how the lens is turned but also because it is only by the constant turning of the lens that one can gain a more complete view of Savarkar.

Both his detractors and his fervent supporters see him narrowly, and selectively. Savarkar was a patriotic nationalist who in the eyes of the colonial (and subsequently Indian) police was also feared as a “terrorist.” He was admired in the larger international and underground world of revolutionaries for his extreme anticolonial views, and at home for standing up for the Hindu community. In one view he was a rationalist and progressive voice on caste, even as he seemed ever more radical in the ways he challenged the orthodox (Sanātani) community. He was a pandit/śāstri, a poet, historian, playwright, novelist, biographer, and political leader. But while he was famous in his region as a poet and a progressive leader, he was also extreme in his anti-Muslim rhetoric, viewed as dangerous not just by the British but by many Hindu nationalists who took a more cosmopolitan view. Each one of these Savarkars was



connected to the other. To understand how his ideas relate to each other, or are coherent, it is necessary, I believe, to look at a combination of contradictory ideas, none of which are clear without a kaleidoscopic gaze. One needs to keep turning the kaleidoscope to see how the pieces rearrange themselves and reveal new connections. No part of this can be accomplished without reading Savarkar both from within Maharashtra and from the outside.

I turn the kaleidoscope not just on Savarkar's work and life, but across three frames: regional, national, and global. The book's chapters do not move lock-step from region to nation to globe; rather, each examines the interplay among the three. Savarkar's poetry, for instance, was intensely nationalist and patriotic, but it was rooted in regional history. For all his travels, he maintained a deep and affective relationship with the language, people, poetry, politics, and landscape of the rural world of Bhagur and Nashik, where he grew up. Indeed, a large part of his reading audience—and his subsequent base—comes from places like Makhjan, Aamneshwar, Solapur, Kolhapur, Nagpur, Nashik, Amravati, Aurangabad, and Ratnagiri—the villages, towns, and small cities of Maharashtra. It is from here that his base reads Savarkar's works and the many commemorative books about him in Marathi. Beyond the hinterland, however, he is also revered in the two major cities of Maharashtra—Pune and Mumbai. He penned an homage poem to a Marathi poet named Moropant (also known as Mayurpandit) and to his village of Bhagur, in addition to praise poems to Generals Washington and Kruger.

There are two especially important moments in the history of nationalism, and around Gandhi's canonical role in that history, that offer a sharp portrait of Savarkar's developing nationalist thought and persona. The first has to do with Gandhi and his nonviolent movement. In March 1922, a group of angry villagers set fire to a police station, killing nineteen policemen while proclaiming "Gandhi Raj is here." Outraged by this violence, and without consulting anyone, Gandhi called off the noncooperation movement. Many noncooperators heard the news in jail and were incredulous that a relatively small act of violence made Gandhi call off a movement when success seemed within reach. But the Mahatma was resolute. India was not ready for independence, he argued, if her inhabitants resorted to violence—even in a good cause. This quixotic decision renewed the colonial regime's hold on power just when it had seemed most precarious. The colonial government rewarded Gandhi by arresting him in March 1922, rendering him absent from politics for the next six years. When Savarkar returned in 1921, his mentor and idol, B. G. Tilak—a fiery, charismatic, and immensely popular Hindu nationalist politician—had died,

leaving a leadership vacuum that needed an equally charismatic figure to fill it. At the same time, Gandhi was about to disappoint many of his followers and depart from the political scene, which would give Savarkar the opportunity to reenter the public sphere through his publication of *Essentials of Hindutva*, along with a historical work glorifying in purple Victorian prose the legacy of Chhatrapati Shivaji and the Peshwas titled *Hindu-Pad-Padashahi*. Written in English, these books were in part intended to reassure the larger Hindu community that, even if Gandhi was gone, a finer, better, more authentic man was ready to lead, from a region (Maharashtra) with prior experience of having struck the first blow against three different foreign invaders: Muslims, the Portuguese, and the British. Maharashtra's history, he wrote, offered a better model for an ongoing nationalist struggle than what Gandhi was offering.

The second moment, also irrevocably linked to Gandhi's political leadership, was the Khilafat movement (1920–24). Led by brothers Mohammad Ali Jauhar and Shaukat Ali, the movement aimed to put pressure on the British government to maintain the territorial sovereignty of the Turkish Sultan despite Turkey's defeat in the First World War on the grounds that he still had spiritual sovereignty as the Khalifa of the Sunni *umma*. Since the defeated Ottoman Empire contained within it the Holy Lands and the cities of Mecca and Medina, the leaders of the Khilafat movement argued that any breakup of the territory of the Ottoman Empire would diminish the Khalifa's authority. Gandhi supported the movement, and even though it failed and the Allied powers divided the Ottoman territories into mandates, the movement brought unprecedented unity to India's Muslims for a cause outside the boundaries of territorial British India. This rendered it an irritant for some nationalists, none more so than for Savarkar.

As the movement petered out, there was escalating tension and violence for the rest of the decade between the Hindu and Muslim communities, brought on by hot-button issues like cow slaughter and the playing of music outside mosques. Even before being confined to house arrest, Savarkar loudly opposed the Khilafat movement in a conspicuous break with Gandhi that he thought could build a new kind of political constituency which, frustrated with Gandhi's apparent accommodationism, might see Savarkar as a welcome alternative.

I start chapter 1 with a counterintuitive premise: Savarkar's ascent to political prominence might not have happened had the British not released him from prison when they did. The release is odd, given that they were fully aware of his views and their dissonant relationship to dominant nationalist views. The background for this story begins long before Savarkar was born, in

1857, when British concern about an international Islamic conspiracy first began to overtly surface in police documents. British surveillance of anticolonial agitators began soon after the suppression of the 1857 Rebellion, when the colonial government completely reorganized the Indian police force. Some decades later, the British established the Criminal Investigation Department. Initially, ordinary Muslims bore the brunt of surveillance, as police documents reveal—a process that continued through the Indian Khilafat movement and beyond. The Khilafat movement appeared to the British as something they had both feared and anticipated for so long—an international Islamic movement that might rise up against the British on a global scale. While the British police were especially worried about Muslims making extraterritorial alliances with Turkey or Afghanistan, they were also concerned that Hindu nationalists might join the Islamic conspiracy.

Savarkar and his two brothers were clearly identified as revolutionary “terrorists” and were surveilled from an early age. The British police in India knew a great deal about Savarkar, including the full extent of his anti-Muslim sentiments. They viewed him as dangerous, seditious, and violent and monitored him before and during his imprisonment. And yet they released him from prison at a time of extreme colonial vigilance about the nationalist movement. Indeed, they not only released him but refrained from arresting him again when he continually violated the terms on which his release was based. I argue that, at a time when fears of global Islam were enhanced, Savarkar became a useful mouthpiece for the colonial government. A known firebrand Hindu polemicist, he, if free, could be counted upon to attack Gandhi, the waning Khilafat movement, and Muslims. In effect, Savarkar ventriloquized the colonial British fear of Muslims and did so eloquently, passionately, and constantly, focusing over and again on Muslims and Gandhi.

In chapter 2, I probe the “Muslim question.” Savarkar’s biographers often claim that he had no problem with Muslims as a group, just with individual bad and unpatriotic Muslims. In this chapter, I show that, for Savarkar, there were few to no “good” Muslims—that he saw Muslims in the language of race as genetically and characterologically untrustworthy, incapable of being true patriots of India. The demands of the Khilafatists proved for him that all Muslims were part of an international conspiracy to steal Hindu sovereignty. In fact, as I show, Khilafat meant a great deal to the Muslim community in India in large part because it revealed the community’s deep feelings of insecurity about its place in the post-British India being imagined around them. While Gandhi recognized the affective hold of the idea of Khilafat and supported the

movement, Savarkar was not only aghast at the idea of Muslim loyalty to a political idea based outside India but also at the role Gandhi played in fanning what in his view were anti-nationalist flames.

Savarkar was not an episodic or occasional anti-Muslim but rather a systemic one. I show that his obsession with Khilafat long outlasted the movement itself, becoming the foundational example for him of a Muslim internationalism in fundamental conflict with Indian nationalism. At the same time, unafraid of contradicting himself, he wrote constantly about how, despite their reputation for bravery, Muslims were actually cowards. On the flip side, he savaged Hindu pusillanimity and emasculation and celebrated the new Hindu man, usually an RSS *swayamsevak*, who knew how to take violent action. In all of these cases, Savarkar cherry-picked gruesome events that usually took place outside Maharashtra to scare his readers and draw attention to his views.

In this chapter, I have largely chosen to translate rather than paraphrase a good deal of Savarkar's anti-Muslim writings because doing so captures the passion of his language and the full force of his prejudice. To gain a complete view of Savarkar, it is critical to demonstrate that I have not taken his writings or opinions out of context. I also include the Marathi itself in the appendix to the chapter since Savarkar's Marathi—powered by sarcasm, mockery, puns, polemics, and alliteration—was powerful in large part because of its overwrought poetic form. Marathi readers who might be tempted to argue that my translations render him a disservice can encounter firsthand both his linguistic virtuosity and his arrogance; his wordplay and his vitriol; his deep well of knowledge and his willingness to invent history. Alternatively, readers—Marathi and non-Marathi alike—who might think I am making too much of his anti-Muslim sentiments are invited to read his words directly and decide for themselves. I have not transliterated with diacritics every word, proper name, place, book and article title, or phrase in Marathi, Hindi, Urdu, Turkish, Arabic, or Sanskrit. For ease of reading, I have only used transliterations with diacritics when I cite Savarkar's words, articles, essays, and poems and have left diacritical marks only where I thought they were useful or necessary (as in the chapter on Savarkar's poetry) and when I quote Savarkar's Sanskrit.

In chapter 3, I turn to how Savarkar viewed caste, and because of Savarkar's distinctive and strong views about caste, I quote him directly at some length. This too is deliberate on my part, knowing that such long quotations are not the norm, but I have deemed it particularly important for readers to encounter his actual words. Even by the standards of the 1920s, when India was rocked by what B. R. Ambedkar retrospectively called a civil war between Hindus and

Muslims, Savarkar's rhetoric was extreme. He did not hesitate to represent Muslim women as cannibals and Muslim men as rapists. But if he was reactionary and xenophobic about Muslims, on caste he articulated a progressive and at times aggressive reformist agenda. This allows his supporters to argue that, since his anticasteism was often couched in angry and deprecatory language, he criticized Hindu and Muslim communities equally, the former for its casteism, the latter for its fanaticism.

While it is true that Savarkar wrote as a rationalist and progressive (or *purōgāmi*), this equivalency is false. Savarkar's stance on caste was unquestionably radical. It was aimed, however, solely at the orthodox Hindu community and voiced from within it, using its own dearly held sacred literature (the Vedas, the purāṇas, the epics) to demonstrate the absurdity and illogicality of caste division. Savarkar was unwilling to concede leadership to anyone, so his caste reform was as much a Brahmin-led effort as it was securely anchored in his own upper-caste community. His critique was scathing to be sure, attacking as he did every part of Hindu ritual life, from the practice of cow worship to vegetarianism. Yet, for all that, his critique must be seen in relationship to his other political aims. Savarkar's challenge to caste and untouchability was primarily motivated by his desire to rebuild a lost Hindu sovereignty, while keeping Muslims—whom he imagined as always seeking to convert Hindus—from capitalizing on disaffected lower-caste Hindus or Dalits.

Savarkar fashioned himself first and foremost as a poet. For this reason, his poetry makes an appearance in virtually every chapter. Here again, the Marathi poetry is in the appendix, and transliterations and translations are in the main body of the chapter. To understand how Savarkar created such a large following, we must look especially carefully at his poetic writings. He wrote close to 100 poems, many of which are still performed at national events in Maharashtra, but, in another example of how the kaleidoscope's viewer is fixed in one place, his poetry is usually omitted in discussions of his influence in the English scholarship on him. Rooted in the Marathi literary tradition and the history of classical Sanskrit poetry, his poems were his first published works, and he turned to the genre at moments of crisis. Poetic language infused his most influential political essay—*Essentials of Hindutva*—and he insisted that history should be written like poetry.<sup>34</sup> As patriotic and ideological as his prose was, his poems directly addressed the political problems of his time such as child widowhood, the plague, or the need for an Indic civilizational malaise to be

34. Bakhle, "Country First?," 149–86.

enlivened with a hearty dose of modern medicine. Indeed, on every important issue, Savarkar wrote a poem.

Chapter 4 focuses on Savarkar's poetry in two parts. In the first, it surveys a small representative sample of his poetry, published and unpublished, translated and untranslated, well-known in his native Maharashtra and obscure. In the second, the focus shifts to Savarkar's recasting of one of the most beloved of Marathi ballads, from a genre called *povāḍā*. The genre itself is performative, didactic, historical, and elegiac, and the chapter examines how Savarkar nationalizes (and Brahminizes) one of the region's best-known and well-loved *povāḍās*, making it not just a local myth, but potentially a national one that resonates with the ideal Hindu nation he is building.

Savarkar was also a self-proclaimed historian, even as he used multiple genres for his historical narratives and arguments. In this fifth chapter I juxtapose four of Savarkar's representative historical works with those of the historical writings of one of his contemporaries, the eminent historian Tryambak Shankar Shejwalkar (1895–1963). I do so to show how Savarkar hijacked the writing of history as memory work, even as other historians in his native region—Shejwalkar most of all—were trying to ensure that historical writing was rooted in disciplinary rigor and the careful use of primary-source evidence.

Savarkar wrote as a popular historian, not an academic one. In other words, although his histories would not be recognized as such today by scholars in the discipline, they are widely read *as* histories, and he had a great deal to say about how history ought to be written and a good bit of contempt for how histories were being written. He wrote his four major works in 1909, 1922, 1925, and 1965–66, the last just before he died. The first, on the Rebellion of 1857, was written when he was a student in London; the second, *Essentials of Hindutva*, was published just after his return to India from the Andaman Islands; the third, *Hindu-Pad-Padashahi*, was written from Shirgaon; and the last, *Six Glorious Epochs*, from Mumbai. Despite consigning all of Indian history to memory (work), Savarkar repeatedly invoked the importance of history. The books were both calls for and examples of his argument that historical writing should serve the needs of agitprop; in each of them, he positioned himself as the model historian for others to follow.

I have picked Shejwalkar as a foil for two reasons. First, he was a contemporary of Savarkar's, a reader in Maratha history at Deccan College from 1939–55, and an eminent, if iconoclastic, scholar of Maratha history. Second, and more important, Savarkar and Shejwalkar represent two strands of history writing, one popular and the other more academic, both within a nationalist



frame, both emerging at about the same time. While Shejwalkar was by far the better academic historian, Savarkar's historical writings secured a much broader readership; even Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's first prime minister, read them. This makes it a mode of historical writing to which we must pay careful attention, both because of its importance to his followers and its larger appeal during his own time and beyond.

The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries in Maharashtra witnessed an explosion of histories written in Marathi. This burst of history writing produced empiricist and positivist works by historians like Shejwalkar to be sure, but it also enabled the writing of exuberant, if undisciplined, histories—a category that includes Savarkar's own historical writings. The academic discipline of history—what Dipesh Chakrabarty has termed the “cloistered” life of history—was still in its infancy, and only a few universities offered degree-granting programs in Indian history.<sup>35</sup> Research languages taught in these universities were ranked on the basis of an Orientalist colonial agenda with Sanskrit at the top followed by Pali, Prakrit, Persian, and Arabic, with the primary aim of separating the literary from the historical.<sup>36</sup> The curricular bent of regional languages such as Marathi, considered “vernaculars,” was entirely literary in this first instance and not oriented toward source criticism or narrative history. Prachi Deshpande has argued that the emphasis of this early work was toward the *mulyamāpaṇa* (evaluation) of exemplary figures and epochs and dynastic chronologies.<sup>37</sup> Academic norms about how history should be written, and on the basis of what kinds of sources and orientation, were debated in institutions, such as the one founded by V. K. Rajwade—the Bharat Itihas Sanshodhan Mandal (1910)—on the fringes of the young academy.<sup>38</sup> This allowed enormous room for the “popular” yet authoritative historian who was not an academic professional to emerge.<sup>39</sup> It is against such a background that one can see Savarkar writing not just rhetorically powerful but also authoritative histories for his time and place.

35. Chakrabarty, *The Calling of History*, 6–8.

36. Deshpande, *Creative Pasts*, 86–88.

37. Deshpande, *Creative Pasts*, 88–79. See also Naregal, *Language Politics*, 101–37.

38. Deshpande, *Creative Pasts*. For a quick look at the Bharat Itihas Sanshodhan Mandal and the dispute in the 1920s and 1930s between Jadunath Sarkar and G. S. Sardesai on the one side and the “Poona School” of historians on the other, see 103–4. For a detailed look at the rise of academic history in India, see Chakrabarty, *The Calling of History*.

39. I am grateful to Prachi Deshpande for pointing this out to me and redirecting me to her book, *Creative Pasts*.



In the final chapter, I take up the manner in which Savarkar and others have used the story of his life. In Maharashtra, there is a near-mythological story about him that circulates widely. Reduced to its essentials, it goes like this: Savarkar was such a brilliant student, poet, writer, and historian that his genius generated resentment from lesser men. While in London, rising in reputation and stature while staying at Shyamji Krishnavarma's India House, he emerged as the mesmerizing leader of other young revolutionaries, writing fiery nationalist and patriotic tracts. He was then falsely arrested by the British, enduring unspeakable hardship in prison in the Andamans, where he was singled out for brutal and abusive treatment by an evil warder. The story then follows him back to India, describes his house arrest and his subsequent leadership of the Hindu Mahasabha, focusing on his stalwart defense of the rights of Hindus against the perfidious and untrustworthy Muslims on the one hand and the perfidious and untrustworthy Gandhi on the other. The story concludes with his false implication in Gandhi's assassination, which led to him spending the rest of his life in seclusion in Bombay, where, eventually, by a supreme act of will, he refused medication when ill and died of his own free will, taking *ātmārpan*.

This mythologized tale of a great revolutionary is replete with unidimensional figures that are household names in the parts of Maharashtra that revere Savarkar: Yesuvahini, the saintly sister-in-law; the evil warder; fanatical Afghans; generally untrustworthy Muslims (with a few exceptions here and there); Muslim-appeasing Gandhi; the cowardly INC party. It is also Savarkar's narrative about himself.

A cursory reading of Savarkar's writings reveals that he was not given to humility. In his memoirs, he matter-of-factly remarks on his own brilliance. While self-representations are inherently inaccurate, Savarkar's biographers follow his lead, never questioning his views, in ways that became critical factors in the making of his own legacy. Very few of Savarkar's Marathi biographers insert any genuine critical distance between themselves and their subject. What Savarkar wrote about himself became what Savarkar's acolytes claimed about him, only then to be used as straightforward evidence of the truth of what Savarkar claimed.

In this last chapter, I examine selections from three examples of this continuous Marathi memorialization. The first is Savarkar's biography—*Life of Barrister Savarkar*—and his memoirs, which spell out the core narrative of his life and function almost as a template-gospel. The second is a sampling of authorized biographies, beginning with Sadashiv Rajaram Ranade (1924) and followed by R. G. Bhope (1938), M. S. Gokhale (1940), and S. L. Karandikar (1943). Y. D.

Phadke, the renowned Marathi historian, eviscerated these books for their inattention to factual accuracy in his work *Śōdha Sāvarakarāncā* (Search for Savarkar). I am not interested in repeating Phadke's work but in examining these biographies for their role in encouraging a steady stream of biographies in Marathi on Savarkar that continue to be written in the present. The third set of works I look at are what I am calling the *darśana-dakṣiṇā* (witness-homage) literature. These are books that are linked to the biographies, but they offer a humanization of the remote myth of Savarkar with an authorizing gloss: the moment of *darśana* (witness) or *pratyakṣa* (direct experience with one's own eyes) and the biography as prestation or homage—a gift offered to one's spiritual parent or teacher (*dakṣiṇā*). All this literature is central, I argue, in spreading the secular gospel of Savarkar, who remains widely known within Maharashtra in large measure because of this literature. Commemorative biographies of Savarkar continue to be written, even now. If we wish to understand how Savarkar was mythologized and by whom, this literature provides some of the answers.<sup>40</sup>

I began this project over ten years ago, initially hoping to write a quick and concise biography of a complicated man and thereby expand both the content and scope of our understanding of Hindu fundamentalism. The more I read, the more the complexities kept mounting. Savarkar's prose was incendiary, without a doubt—he verbally assaulted his interlocutors, threw ad hominem insults around, made assertions that were fanciful or worse—and yet he came to be venerated. If we do not understand the affective power of his poetry or the poetic resonance of his rage, we cannot understand his charisma and his influence. My recognition that he was precociously gifted or learned or knowledgeable about poetry is not meant as a gesture of support for his politics. At the same time, my critical attention to the rage of his anti-Muslim diatribes is not meant as a dismissal of his clearly copious intellect or anticolonial nationalist passion. Both are intended to explain the different features and facets of his appeal because it will not do, in my opinion, to assume that all those who support him and his politics are deluded, brainwashed, ignorant, simple-minded, or worse—fascists or fools.

In India today, Savarkar is a near-mythic figure, in large part because he has become the intellectual father for the political party currently in power, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and its leader, Prime Minister Narendra Modi,

40. I am grateful to my colleague Jonathan Sheehan for posing the question of genre and reception in pointed ways that allow me to make the argument that the genre of *darśana-dakṣiṇā* literature itself answers the reception question.

whose views are largely congruent with Savarkar's. Viewed from the perspective of the early years when Savarkar wrote his formative works and poems and established his nationalist persona, the story of his apotheosis was by no means inevitable. After reading this book, I suspect the reader will no longer find the apotheosis quite as surprising as it might once have seemed. I provide the background for understanding Savarkar's ascendancy, even though I conclude my history of Savarkar's life—as he was released from house arrest in 1937—when India was still ten years away from independence. I do not address Savarkar's writings or participation as President of the Hindu nationalist political party, the Hindu Mahasabha, in the major anticolonial events post-1937, which include the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, plunging India into a world war without consulting any elected Indian representatives, the Quit India movement (1942), the traumatic partitioning of British India, and Pakistani and Indian independence (August 14, 1947, and August 15, 1947, respectively). I leave it for others to explain why, and how, Savarkar has become the most important political thinker in contemporary India, displacing the architects of independence and India's early postcolonial history. Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar had views of India that could not have been more different than those of Savarkar. And yet the history I tell here will both explain the conditions under which Savarkar developed his fundamental ideas about nationalism, about Muslims, about caste, about history, and ultimately about his own foundational role for the emergence of an independent India and why these ideas might have undergone a resurgence at a time of populist politics, backlash against the tolerant secularism of India's early history, and widespread geopolitical tension across Asia and the Middle East. Although I stop my account in 1937, I explicitly address how Savarkar fashioned an image for himself that was meant to be available for further mythologization and how it might be that the contradictory elements of his thought and life have not just survived but thrived in our current historical moment.

Let us begin with the first part of this story.

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