Savarkar

Praise for the book

'A lively, well-researched, and balanced account of a hugely controversial figure. Full of rich, moral ambiguity, it will fascinate and provoke even if you don't agree.' **Gurcharan Das**

'Vinayak Damodar Savarkar was controversial, while he was alive, and remains so, even after his death. Strong in his convictions (the manner of his death is an example), he inspired, but perhaps did not always endear. His political differences also explain why he did not always get his due. Vaibhav Purandare has written a wonderful biography, based on a considerable amount of research. Veer Savarkar truly comes alive, a product of his life and times, not easily compartmentalized into black or white. For those prone to clichés and stereotyping, an extremely balanced book.' **Bibek Debroy**

'Superbly written and deeply researched, this book is neither hagiographic nor does it suffer from unbalanced criticism. Vaibhav Purandare's portrayal of Savarkar's life and politics shows us a revolutionary freedom fighter who, sadly, became the ideologue of divisive Hindutva, with the needle of suspicion forever pointing at him for his involvement in the plot to kill Mahatma Gandhi.' **Sudheendra Kulkarni**

Savarkar

The True Story of the Father of Hindutva

Vaibhav Purandare

juggernaut

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Author's Note

In December 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) visited Cellular Jail on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, where scores of India's freedom fighters were once incarcerated for long periods by the British government. This was a place of pilgrimage for him, Modi said: after all, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, ardent nationalist and revolutionary, had spent a whole decade in a damp cell there. As a product of the Hindu nationalist movement, Modi's sense of nationhood is underpinned by Savarkar's theory of Hindutva or Hinduness, and so is his idea of sinewy national self-assertion and a foreign policy based not on an abstract dream on the distant horizon but on realism and realpolitik. Thus, once inside Savarkar's cell, Modi took on the posture of a pilgrim. He sat cross-legged on the floor, eyes shut in a prayerful, meditative way, in front of a photograph of Savarkar that has been kept there – the devotee invoking silently, inside the sanctum sanctorum, the image of his presiding deity.

At around the same time, Rahul Gandhi, the scion of free India's longest-ruling dynasty, the Nehru–Gandhis, was

mounting a sharp attack on Savarkar, labelling him as someone who wrote letters of abject apology to a foreign ruler simply to be able to get out of prison; the Rahul-skippered Congress even described Savarkar as a 'traitor'. Rahul contrasted Savarkar's approach with that of Mahatma Gandhi and of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who, he said, had never given in to British bullying despite all the hardships they faced in so many jails.

When Savarkar died in 1966, he was on the fringes of Indian politics and was an ignominious figure, having been arrested and named as an accused in the plot to assassinate Gandhi. His infamy in the Gandhi murder case and his relative political obscurity would remain undisturbed in the future, it was believed.

Savarkar's political resurrection in the new millennium and the robust revival of his story and myth are, therefore, remarkable. The resurrection actually began in the mid-1980s, when Hindu nationalism, for long dismissed as a marginal and spent force, suddenly burst on the Indian scene with the BJP and its leader L.K. Advani championing the cause of religious identity. After the Indian experience of BJP governments led by A.B. Vajpayee, which nudged India into the new century on the back of nuclear tests and an intense India–Pakistan armed conflict, and especially since Modi's emergence amid communal violence in Gujarat in 2002 and his subsequent rise to the prime minister's post, Savarkar's Hindutva has unleashed the kind of political energies it was never really expected to.

With his brand of nationalism gaining so much ground and at least momentarily eclipsing the Nehruvian social and political template that once appeared impossible to supplant in

a pluralistic society, the historical figure of Savarkar now looms large in the Indian political landscape. In fact, his prominence in the realm of public debate today is far more striking than it had been at several points in his own chequered life. Not since 1966, when Dhananjay Keer's biography of Savarkar was published in the year of Savarkar's death, has there been a full-length biography of the man in English. A fresh look at his life, especially given his prominence in India today, is in order.

A man of extremes, Savarkar also evokes extreme reactions. The most fervent commentary on Savarkar is centred principally on four points: his status as freedom fighter owing to mercy petitions he wrote to the Raj from Port Blair, his advocacy of Hindutva, his opposition to the Quit India movement and his alleged role in Gandhi's assassination. We will come to each of these turn by turn.

Savarkar was given two terms of life imprisonment by the British Raj, and they were meant to run consecutively and not concurrently. Life imprisonment then meant twenty-five years, so he was to spend fifty years in jail in all. He was dispatched to the Andamans and was incarcerated there for ten years, from 1911 to 1921. During this time he wrote at least seven petitions asking for mercy and requesting an early release.

To cry 'cowardice' and 'surrender', to call him a 'traitor', or to say he was 'begging for mercy from the British while Gandhi was sleeping on the dirt floor of a jail' is unwarranted and puerile. While he was in prison, Savarkar was tortured in the most abominable, medieval ways. He was put into solitary confinement for long stretches of time. He was deprived of food and water and made to do hard labour; he would faint from exhaustion but still wasn't given reprieve from work. He was

chained to a wall, hands extended above his head, for hours at a stretch on consecutive days. During these spells, he was not even allowed to go to the bathroom to relieve himself and had to stand in his own filth chained to the wall. Is it really fair to judge what a person says or does under such conditions of inhuman torture?

Savarkar, by the way, was not the only one to submit such mercy petitions. His fellow prisoner and revolutionary Barindra Kumar Ghose, Aurobindo Ghose's brother, did so, as did Satyendranath Bose and many other celebrated Indian rebels, not merely in the notorious Cellular Jail of Kaala Paani but in comparatively milder prisons on the Indian mainland as well. In the late 1920s, for instance, many of the widely revered revolutionaries convicted in the Kakori conspiracy case involving an attack on a train carrying government funds, including the protagonists of the attack Ramprasad Bismil and Sachindranath Sanyal, wrote mercy pleas. Thankfully we do not brand them as traitors. Savarkar certainly does not deserve singling out on this count.

While Savarkar was seen as a fringe player towards the end of his life, he started out as a fearless and pioneering anti-colonial crusader. He called for complete independence from the British Raj at least twenty years before the Congress did so in its resolution of 1929. Savarkar called for Purna Swaraj at a time when India's most enthusiastic nationalists were submitting mild representations to the Raj, at most pushing for greater representation on the central and provincial law-making councils or for 'home rule', which meant self-government or responsible government under the overarching umbrella of a sunset-defying Empire. This does not make the one greater

and the other less great, for the Congress, under Gandhi, was the biggest mass organizer of the liberation movement. But Savarkar was among the earliest to push the boundaries and propel the national movement towards its chief goal.

Indeed, Savarkar was a central figure in Indian politics, certainly a pivotal one in the first half of his political life. When Gandhi visited London during the years that Savarkar lived there (1906–11), he interacted with Gandhi, then and later, as an equal. He had similar interactions and correspondences with Subhas Chandra Bose and Babasaheb Ambedkar in subsequent years, other hints to his status. In the early 1940s, Muhammad Ali Jinnah was secretly planning to engineer a meeting with Savarkar when the issue of Pakistan had become hugely contentious. (Whatever their political differences, none of these luminaries seem to have viewed Savarkar as a 'traitor'.)

Savarkar and the numerous cases against him were at the heart of much correspondence between top British officials, from the level of the Secretary of State, the official in charge of Indian affairs in London, to the Viceroy, the Raj's hands-on head on Indian soil. Savarkar triggered a significant amount of discussion among British politicians, journalists and opinion-makers before and after his arrest in the English capital in 1910 and attempted escape in Marseilles the same year, and he created an international furore and diplomatic tensions between France and Britain as his case for political refuge on French territory came up for adjudication before an international tribunal in The Hague in 1911. Among the Englishmen who demanded his instant release from British captivity at the time was none other than the then home secretary Winston Churchill.

On the point of his ideology of Hindutva: Savarkar underwent a dramatic transformation, roughly halfway through his life, from being an advocate of Hindu–Muslim unity to being the chief theorist and champion of Hindutva when he wrote his tract on the contentious subject in 1921. So massive and fundamental was this ideological metamorphosis that it is impossible to get a complete picture of Savarkar's life story and his complex personality without seeing what triggered it and what implications the change carried for him and for the larger Hindu community and India as a whole in the longer term – implications which are real and acutely felt in this day and age. For Savarkar this change was both profoundly personal and intensely political in nature – personal because of certain experiences he had had in Cellular Jail, and political because it emerged in the aftermath of the Gandhi-backed Khilafat movement and in an era of inflamed Hindu–Muslim tensions.

There has been much argument on what constitutes the core of Hindutva or Hindu nationalism. Yet, whatever its many variations – soft, hardline, or the push for acknowledgement that Hindu culture and civilization must be seen as the seedbed for the structure of the nation state – Savarkar's version of Hindutva started out as essentially exclusivist by removing from the ambit of Indian nationhood Muslims and other communities. With time, he became more and more hardline and extremist, asking for the elimination of Urdu words from Marathi and Hindi in the 1920s and 1930s and, a few years before his death in the 1960s, calling for violent reprisals against Muslims, including sexual violence against Muslim women. It is impossible to defend these extremist positions of Savarkar's.

The Quit India movement is a far more complicated issue,

however, but Savarkar's opposition to it does not make him a British collaborator. There was significant opposition to the movement from Indians across the political spectrum such as the deprived classes hero B.R. Ambedkar, the Indian Liberals, the All India Students' Conference, the communists and the Muslim League leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Some of the opposition was over whether the time was opportune for such a mass agitation, given that the Japanese were on the verge of showing up on India's borders, and over whether it would work as a tactical and strategic gambit. Even Nehru was in favour of cooperating with the British in the war effort, and although he finally gave in to the Mahatma, his political guru, despite his deep internal conflict, the many kisan sabhas across the country set up with Nehru's blessings vigorously opposed Gandhi's call.

This period of history is, in fact, thanks largely to our school and university textbooks, wrongly understood to be one where Indians stood as a monolithic force against the British. There were key questions to be decided at that time. What would a post-British India look like? What accommodation and arrangement would there be between various Indian communities and religious groups? What of the separate electorates and reserved seats that the British had granted on the basis of religion? What of voting rights, which were not equal in British India – only taxpayers and the landed were allowed to vote, and the principle of separate electorates implied that one Hindu vote had less power than one Muslim vote.

Right through the freedom movement, Indians were preoccupied with these questions, and whether it was Savarkar, Ambedkar, the Indian Liberals, Jinnah or several others, Gandhi and Nehru included, they felt, from time to time, that

they had concerns to address or policies to prioritize which were either as critical as their responses to British rule or, at some huge inflection points, more important for the moment than dealing with the British. For Savarkar the war was an opportunity to strengthen Hindu society militarily – should military strength be needed to be deployed in a post-British India to assert Hindu dominance – and for working out an arrangement for representative politics and democracy between India's various communities. He simply chose to focus on that, at that fraught moment, and not on evicting the British. Whether one agrees with Savarkar's priorities is a separate issue. But it is a pointlessly Congress-centric view to say that those who were not taking part in the Quit India movement were all British collaborators.

Perhaps the prickliest issue of all is the one related to Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. Savarkar was arrested and arraigned in the case and later acquitted. That acquittal stands, and even the government of the time did not challenge it; yet in the public realm, the circumstantial evidence that was marshalled and offered during the trial shows why the finger of suspicion was pointed at him and why the jury is still out on the subject. The evidence against Savarkar includes his open endorsement of Nathuram Godse's aggressive anti-minority agenda and his purported meetings with Godse and some of the other conspirators just days before the killing. Savarkar's sharp alignment with such a group alone was enough to take much lustre off his original standing in the imagination of his contemporaries as an outstanding revolutionary hero. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, India's deputy prime minister and home minister, put it bluntly and correctly: Savarkar couldn't

escape the moral burden of the assassination even if he was not criminally culpable.

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Savarkar's life was dramatic, and the drama got more and more intense as his life went on – particularly because of the fundamental transformations, some of which we have glimpsed in this introductory note, that Savarkar underwent. This book looks in depth at the contradictory phases of Savarkar's life. It aims to pack in detail and at the same time make easily accessible the man's complete story – the various parts of the puzzle which, if seen separately and in isolation, cannot inform us adequately about his controversial and ever-changing personality.

To tell Savarkar's story accurately and comprehensively, it is imperative to make a deep dive into the fundamental Marathi sources. Most of Savarkar's writings and speeches are in Marathi and comprise eight volumes published by the Swatantryaveer Savarkar Smarak in Mumbai. Some works have been translated into English, but the translations are either inadequate and awkward or archaic and dense. For this book I have exhaustively gone through all his Marathi writings in the original – a few thousand pages filled with essays, a series of autobiographical works, his books on Indian history, letters, public statements, and fiction too, in the form of novels, novellas, poems and plays. Speeches too are a part of the eight volumes, but there are some available in audio format as well, listening to which helped me understand the subject of this biography better as a public communicator thanks to tone,

tenor, voice and intensity that plain text simply cannot capture.

Trawling through Marathi newspaper archives enabled me to reference a whole range of opinions on Savarkar by his contemporaries, opinions altogether unnoticed till date because they remained untranslated and thus inaccessible to English readers or totally obscured in the mists of time. These include views expressed by the likes of Lokmanya Tilak in his paper *Kesari*, the brilliant editor of *Kaal*, S.M. Paranjpe, the famous historian V.K. Rajwade, Savarkar's fellow revolutionary-turned-Gandhian P.M. or 'Senapati' Bapat and, fascinatingly, the campaigning editor and agent provocateur P.K. Atre with whom Savarkar had controversial verbal combats on a series of topics ranging from Hindutva and Mahatma Gandhi to the Indian response to the British Raj and after.

Many people who knew Savarkar well, among them his doctors, friends, critics and followers, have also written meticulous accounts of their experiences and conversations with him in Marathi, which again have remained inaccessible to English readers. I have gone through all these accounts and brought to light anecdotes which have so far remained unknown, after cross-checking these with other dependable sources from the period. Savarkar's friend S.L. Karandikar, editor of *Trikaal*, for instance, had a series of conversations with him from 1937 to 1939, among the most contentious years of his life as he assumed leadership of the Hindu Mahasabha while war clouds were on the horizon; Karandikar's biography of Savarkar in Marathi, published in 1943, has gripping material which lay unexplored; likewise the book *Shodh Savarkarancha* by the noted Marathi historian Y.D. Phadke, who grew up as an admirer of Savarkar and later turned into a trenchant

critic. Nathuram Godse's brother Gopal Godse's account of the Gandhi assassination is well known to English readers, but his other memoir, related to one full year he spent with Savarkar in the Red Fort prison when the latter was held as an accused in Gandhi's killing, is hardly known, but has been useful in throwing light on the episode.

I have consulted in the original some entirely ignored Hindi sources too, such as the works of the legendary writer Yashpal, who was a part of the revolutionary movement in north India in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Documents of the British Raj, all in English, from India and the UK – police and court records, confidential reports issued about Savarkar by crime and intelligence department sleuths to their bosses, official correspondence from the level of secretaries to the Viceroys, India Office papers and UK parliamentary debates – have been studied, as have reports of the Cardew and other commissions set up by the British to examine conditions in the penal colony in the Andamans at the time Savarkar and his brother Babarao were there. For this period the impressions of Savarkar that his fellow prisoners such as Barindra Kumar Ghose and Ullaskar Dutt and prison officials developed, and which have long been overlooked by historians, have been recorded, as are the views – again mostly overlooked in the context of the Savarkar story – of both top Liberal and Conservative British leaders such as the Labour Party founder Keir Hardie, the first big British Marxist and Social Democratic Federation leader H.M. Hyndman, the fearless UK parliamentarian Josiah Wedgwood, the well-known Secretary of State for India Lord Morley, the one-time Bombay governor Lord Sydenham, Viceroy Lord Linlithgow

and the unabashed imperialist Winston Churchill. A host of French publications of the time have been looked at as well, along with a number of British newspapers of different political orientations, for the record of Savarkar's years in London, furious debates on The Hague case, and for his later radically altered ideological stance.

Papers such as the *Bombay Chronicle*, which followed the lives of Indian nationalists closely and both praised and criticized Savarkar, were of inestimable value, as was the material about him – both in his avatar as a revolutionary and as chief architect of Hindutva – written by contemporary national leaders such as Gandhi, Nehru, Bose, Patel, Jinnah and Ambedkar, and even well-wishers of India such as Gandhi's friend C.F. Andrews and Savarkar's friends the English littérateurs David Garnett and the fiery socialist Guy Aldred. Their exchanges in themselves show the many trajectories and currents of the Indian freedom movement and Savarkar's positions at various critical points.

Finally, I have mined the audio archive of Cambridge University's Centre of South Asian Studies, where many audio interviews of Indians who witnessed the freedom struggle, Partition and the first two decades of independent India lie untapped. These tapes have also brought to the fore material never before used to tell Savarkar's story.

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It is important to know Savarkar's story to be able to make sense of India today, and possibly the India of tomorrow. Savarkar would have certainly approved of 'ghar wapsi', the Hindu right's campaign to reconvert people back into the Hindu fold.

He would also have likely approved of the BJP government's displays of muscular nationalism. He was all for displays of military strength against India's often-hostile neighbours such as Pakistan and China, and favoured timely and proper reprisals against their acts of aggression. But while Savarkar's common ground with the ruling BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is well known, some other ideas of his actually fly in the face of conservative political opinion but would find a resounding echo in liberal chambers. For instance, his firm opposition to cow worship and the Hindu penchant of making too much of it. Or the fact that he provocatively said, 'The epitaph for the RSS volunteer will be that he was born, he joined the RSS and he died without accomplishing anything.'

Savarkar was a radical figure, at times hard to contain in a box. His life story is riveting and extraordinary, and in getting to know Savarkar we may better understand the multiple dimensions of the Indian freedom movement and the various strands of thinking, and action, that we witness in public life today.