‘Coin of Blood’
Savarkar’s The Indian War of Independence – 1857

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Savarkar’s chief claim from the outset is that the Revolution was the manifestation of deep underlying principles. Indeed this sense of the underlying principles can alone justify such massive loss of life. It is the depth of that ‘root-principle’ that leads not only to the recruitment of hundreds and thousands to its cause, but also explains the extraordinary spread of the violence—from Peshawar to Calcutta. This notion of spatial expansionary logic was crucial to Savarkar. The spatial spread legitimised the principle for it cannot be reduced to mere regional interests. The nation is being created and legitimised as a dynamic space (rather than mere inert geography) in the ‘coin of blood’. The coin of blood had diverse fusing functions—not only spatial, but also between classes and religions too.

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A perusal of the List of Important Books Consulted at the beginning of the book reveals how almost entirely indebted Savarkar was to British writers. These writers do not seem all propagandists of the virtues of the British Crown—as one might expect if one understood Savarkar’s purpose as one of reading against the grain. There is a wide variety of genres—archives such as the State Papers, essays, narrative (British and ‘native’, as well as personal ones), reminiscences, and even Mrs. Coopland’s A Lady’s Escape from Gwalior, as well as anonymous books written in English by Officers and Military personnel. What is largely missing is the native/Indian historian—of these native ones, one is an anonymous Bengali, and one of the others, a Marathi writer Vinayak Konddev Oak, is only referred to as an object of ridicule. For Oak was being typically British in that he instrumentalized the Mutiny/Revolution as being one only caused by the perceived outrage at the greasing of cartridges with cow and pig fat.

Savarkar’s chief claim from the outset is that the Revolution was the manifestation of deep underlying principles. Indeed this sense of the underlying principles can alone justify such massive loss of life. Savarkar writes of the “all-moving principle for which hundreds and thousands of men fight” (19). This principle is essentially a deep historical motive, which even the actors may not always be conscious of. It is the depth of that ‘root-principle’ that leads not only to the recruitment of hundreds and thousands to its cause, but also explains the extraordinary spread of the violence—from Peshawar to Calcutta. This notion of spatial expansionary logic was crucial to Savarkar—a formula that was to be repeated in a
later text like *The Essentials of Hindutva* where he constantly refers to the wide expanse of ‘Attock to Cuttack’. To name is to claim: the spatial spread legitimised the principle for it cannot be reduced to mere regional interests. The nation is being created and legitimised as a dynamic space (rather than mere inert geography) in the ‘coin of blood’ (20). The coin of blood had diverse fusing functions—not only spatial, but also between classes and religions too—hence “not only sepoys, but thousands of peaceful citizens and Rajas and Maharajas…Hindu and Mohammedan” (21).

Further legitimation of the deeper principles beyond the instrumentality of greased cartridges is in the rich associative histories that Savarkar tracks. He draws inspiration from the older, archetypal Revolutions and Wars. He writes:

“The real causes of the French Revolution were not simply the high prices of grain, the Bastille, the King’s leaving Paris, or the feasts. These might explain some incidents of the Revolution but not the Revolution as a whole. The kidnapping of Sita was only the incidental cause of the fight between Rama and Ravana. The real causes were deeper and more inward” (22).

In a sense then, despite dismissing the religious sense of outrage caused by the greased cartridge, Savarkar returns to the religious analogy of the *Ramayana* to make his case. Yet he equally enrolls Muslims:

“What were they [principles] that Moulvies preached them, [that] learned Brahmins blessed them, that for their success prayers went up to heaven from the mosques of Delhi and the temples of Benares? (22)

According to Savarkar those principles were Swadharma and Swaraj, the protection of Religion and Country (in the original this latter clause is written in capitals). The Emperor of Delhi Bahadur Shah Zafar (“adorable and powerful throne”) is approvingly quoted at length for understanding these deeper principles. The relation between Swaraj and Swadharma is captured in the formula that “Swaraj without Swadharma is despicable and Swadharma without Swaraj is powerless” (24). This is because, as even Mazzini, the Italian hero so dear to so many Indian revolutionaries wrote: “The Eastern mind has … no vast barrier between Heaven and earth”.

Further, if the principle or motive were so exalted, failure would become no cause for loss of faith. Did Guru Govind Singh’s loss diminish his luster, or, in the longer term, even deter his cause? Thus what separates a mutiny from a revolutionary war is not success or failure, but the principles of nationality and religion. Principles are not a priori, but rooted in historical memory. Just as the memory of the Guru inspires and goads, so too in India, the loss at Plassey goaded and rankled. It was not that 1857 happened *ab novo*—there was Hyder Ali, Nana Farnavis, the rehearsal mutiny at Vellore among others. If it were not for the perennial, proverbial traitor, the brave followers of the Guru and the Sikhs, would have been unbowed.

The mirror image of Savarkar’s desired imperium seemed to be his ideological nemesis, Lord Dalhousie’s—the latter wrote of a similarly expansionary vision of India as being from the Himalayas to Rameshwaram, from the Sindhu to the Irrawady. What India held by birthright, Dalhousie (whom Savarkar calls greedier than Ravana) had to carve in coins of blood. The mythological and historical allusions are not superfluous but tightly woven into the rhetoric. Savarkar writes: “In the grave
at Satara was buried a magnificent Hindu Empire [this is a reference to Shivaji’s historical relationship to Satara where he was crowned]. And it is no wonder that Dalhousie, who was a believer in the Resurrection of Jesus was afraid that out of Satara might rise a future Hindu Emperor who would confound the foreigner and establish Swaraj.” (30) What was further galling about Dalhousie’s betrayal of the ally at Satara, was its direct contravention of the Hindu shastras in terms of the rules of inheritance, adoption, rights of succession, of lived royal and peasant custom, as well as earlier British treaties, promises and legal process, and lastly, the clasped hand of friendship. When annexation happened, it was in a vulgar and graphic manner, with the looting of the treasury, and the indifferent sale of horses and elephants and queens. There was the surreal anomaly of the army marching in to ravage the kingdom even as aged and panicked queens sent their lawyers to London in the hope of justice and redress.

Not all acceded to this new imperial coinage of blood. Martyrs arose—chiefly Nana Sahib and Laxmi Bai, “crusaders in the Holy War, glorious even in their defeat.” (35) Nana Sahib came from venerable, ‘holy’ Maharashtrian stock, from an old and respectable Bhatt family. When Nana Sahib was made heir, Savarkar writes in a manner anticipating the expansive, expansionary and appropriative language of his 1921 work The Essentials of Hindutva:

The throne of the Peshwas is not an ordinary thing! It was on this that the great Baji sat and ruled an Empire. It was for this that the battle of Panipat was fought. On this have been poured the sacred waters of the Sindu for the anointing of generations of Peshwas. (36)

Like Nana Sahib, the Rani of Jhansi also had the right pedigreed geography—she was born in Varanasi, and that too to a family that belonged to the retinue of the Peshwas. The children grew up in sword-play as if the very air was pregnant with destiny and foreboding and opportunity, the Nana austere and eighteen, and Lakshmi Bai seven, not far removed from the Manusmriti ideal of the perfect marriageable age. As Savarkar notes, “such occasions make history more romantic than romance.” (37) Such children were required, for the current Peshwa Bajirao the Second was actually spending precious state money on treacherously helping the British in Afghanistan and the Punjab against the brave Sikhs. The British repaid the loan by questioning Nana Sahib’s succession. This was an occasion for the genius of the Nana’s ambassador in his cosmopolitan court. The ambassador was Azimullah Khan, of whom Savarkar writes:

Of the important characters in the Revolutionary War of 1857, the name of Azimullah Khan is one of the most memorable. Among the keen intellects and minds that first conceived the idea of the War of Independence, Azimullah must be given a prominent place. (39)

Azimullah had risen from poverty by sheer merit, learning English and French, became a scholar and diplomat, and when in Brighton and London, had the English women swoon over him. Yet the British remained intransigent, and soon war became inevitable.

On the one hand the scheming British, on the other, the lyricized, mythic political of a sort of Ramayana image—Nana Sahib’s palace on the Bhagirathi was
beset with throngs of cheerful citizenry amid carved ivory and gold set in diamonds, a stable of the best-bred horses of the realm, fortified with swords and guns—“all the luxury and taste and splendor of the Hindu palace…” (41). To be faithful to such a heritage was to risk losing it in battle. Such is the paradox of the moral Maratha or Rajput King who only inherits to the extent that he, simple-living and generous in any case midst all that splendor, can yet stake it all—“pride was his greatest wealth.” (42)

The next chapter is, perhaps in historical prescience, titled ‘Ayodhya’, but at that time it was better known as a part of the lands of the Nabob [sic] of Oudh. British interference reduced administration to a farce—which then allowed the British to claim suzerainty in the name of maladministration. Instead of the image of the effete Wajid Ali Shah of popular puritan or decadent imagination, Savarkar depicts him as one who diagnosed the ‘white worm’ correctly, and set about to reform the army. But Dalhousie simply disregarded earlier treaties, like the 1837 treaty; as such treaties did not accord with his ambitions. The annexation had even less reason than the others as there were legitimate heirs who were direct and un-adopted unlike the cases of Nagpur and Jhansi respectively. The bizarre reasons for annexing Oudh included offences like giving presents of shawls to servants of both sexes.

Savarkar is aware of the fact that the Mohammedan Wajid Ali Shah had mostly large Hindu landowners—and the British promptly intervened in the land ‘rights’ of this aristocratic class. Here again, in terms of the thorny question of land equity, Savarkar lyricises landowner-villager relationship to one of “[the] faithful homage in the profuse flow of sincere tears” of the villagers when they saw their erstwhile landlords now impoverished. There is no citation for such sentiment—his British sources fail him here, for or against the grain. Indeed so indignant is Savarkar on behalf of the dispossessed landlords that he writes:

The world-wide difference between Swarajya and foreign rule was, thus, brought painfully to the notice of all Oudh.(52). Here again it must be noted that at the time of composition in the first decade of the 20th century, the concept of Swarajya, or the injunctive desire for it, was by no means a given. Evidence upon evidence of British perfidy had to be adduced to make the case. This is what Savarkar is engaging in—and he is considered an extremist, as the case is made in an explicitly angered, vengeful political tone in contrast to, say, Gandhi, who while historically contemporaneous in his writing of Hind Swaraj, deliberately spiritualises Swarajya into a civilizational dilemma seemingly agnostic of the specificities of British colonialism. It is thus significant that 10 years later Savarkar too would interpret the conflict with the British/West on a multi-millennial civilizational horizon with the new concept of Hindutva, one which is unavailable in this earlier work where the agential categories are War/Revolution. History for Savarkar, in the latter work, becomes no more the immediate past of 1857, but the entirety of the race from the earliest origins. The re-orientation of the political thus takes place in the context of a transformation of the temporal ground.

How did Savarkar make this turn in the later book Essentials of Hindutva to exclude Islam when at so many points in the Indian War of Independence—1857 there is for him a parity of Hinduism and Islam? This is not a simple anomaly for the
centrality of that parity is integral to the argument. Further, England is often seen as purely Christian, and Directors of the East India Company are quoted explicitly invoking the Christian mission. In the 19th century such quotations are not hard to find as religion was intertwined, if not always inextricably, with colonialism. But the case of the parity of Hinduism and Islam is significant in light of the later developments of Savarkar’s thoughts, and the further development of the notion of the Hindu Right over the first quarter of the 20th century. Here is Savarkar:

But not satisfied with the tacit insult of the religion of India from the very day he set foot on the Indian soil up to the terrible battles of 1857, the Feringhi has been making steady and unceasing attempts to trample the Hindu religion and the Moslem faith…

That the English fully believed that Hindusthanis would be ashamed of their religion when they saw the light of western civilization and give it up, that they would consider the Bible more sacred than the Vedas and the Koran, and that they would be gathered together in the fold of the Church, leaving their Temples and Musjids [sic]…The mind of the Feringhi was filled with such contempt and such hatred for the Hindu and Moslem faiths—the two principal religions of India—that very prominent writers, forgetting even order conventionalities, constantly heaped shameful abuse on the two religions whenever they got a chance. (54-55)

Macaulay’s 1836 dream of there being no idol-worshipper in 30 years in Bengal is also cited. Religion, for Savarkar, is individuality itself, and to deprive a people of individuality is to ensure ease of perpetual enslavement.

There is then in the text a curious digression on what the British learnt from the controversial Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. A systematic comparison of Savarkar’s use of Aurangzeb vis-à-vis other ideologically loaded interpretations of Aurangzeb like Jadunath Sarkar’s (1870-1958) who wrote a mammoth five volume History of Aurangzeb from 1912 to 1924 (Sarkar had written a shorter India of Aurangzeb in 1901) is yet to be done. According to Savarkar the British learnt that to deprive a person of religion is to deprive them of individuality, and hence to rule continually and easily. But where Aurangzeb erred, and the British did not, was to deprive the enslaved of that religion/individuality not by direct persecution but by impoverishing Kings (through annexation) who then would no longer be able to patronise temples and mosques, the social and political sites of religious community.

Savarkar then reminds the reader of the abolition of sati, and, avoiding a discussion of the merits or demerits of the abolition and the right of the involved women, takes instead a suspicious view of the deeper design of the abolition as being one premised on an interference in religious belief. Savarkar is on familiar ground— soon enough he brings up the key polarising legislations of the late 19th century—the Widow Remarriage Act, the right of converts to retain property, as well as technological disintegrations of caste-Hindu community by the invention of common and shared railway carriages. All this discussion is significant in revealing how the world of 19th century religious antagonism permeates the text, and how the question of religion is never far away from the political. Thus despite claims to transcending the sectarianisms of Hinduism to make the case for a larger peninsular Unity, the question of religion, especially the resentments it stimulates in terms of British interference, is a large part of the emotive drive and plea of Savarkar’s work. It is the repression of religion that stimulates the velocity of the circulation of the coin of
blood. The secular cannot be so easily dis-embedded from religion—not just psychologically, but even, and especially, conceptually. Is interference, the sign of the lost individuality, dependent on religion, even as the Unity of the State-to-be must be post-religious? And are not the very models of tyranny then to be inferred from religious tyranny—thus though on the one hand Savarkar decries the British interference in the Mohammedan religion as much as in Hinduism, nevertheless the model of the tyrant is Aurangzeb. And as one learns from the consequences of that earlier tyranny, the present too will generate its own equivalent consequence:

…indeed there was not the least difference between the tyranny of Aurangzeb and the tyranny of the Company’s Raj…To allow the continuance of this system of interfering with religion by means of laws made by aliens was to follow the lifting of the sword of Aurangzeb. And when the English had begun to take up the role of Aurangzeb, there was no other remedy than that India must produce a Shivaji or a Guru Govind. (57)

As in the Essentials of Hindutva, the Sikhs are a special, even favoured case—there is no iconic antagonistic and tyrannical Sikh leader as the Mohammedans had with Aurangzeb. This is even granting that the Mohammedan citizenry in themselves was patriotic—as were most of its Kings including Bahadur Shah Zafar. The question of the Mohammedan holy-land is not discussed as in the later text—rather the weakness of the Mohammedan lay in the episodes of tyrannical rule epitomised by Aurangzeb. Ironically, after Partition, many of the Sikh holy-lands would indeed end up in the newly foreign land of Pakistan.

In time, the sepoys determined that

…they would not rest quiet until they had destroyed the political slavery and this dependence which was at the root of all this trouble. What religion can a slave have? The first step toward Dharma is to be a free man of a free country. (63)

Thus religion is again tied, and indeed seen to be dependent on politics and moral virtue. Hence even though Savarkar does not commit himself to beliefs in any particular Hindu text or lineage (even on the live issue of the cartridge lubricated with beef-fat), his text emphasizes the hierarchy. In other words, the political subsumes the religious even if the former needs the latter as fuel and intelligible public rationale. For the imagery turns quickly religious with the invocation of Puranic wars even as it is simultaneously of this-world in a material and spatial sense—the stolen Kohinoor is mentioned, as is the exiled King Theeba of Burma, Tanjore, Arcot and Sambalpur. What unites the religious and the dispersed-regional is the experience of theft and dispossession—the lost coins of blood that must now generate new coins of blood.

eSSays, Govind on Savarkar-Part 3
Reposted 2014