Framing Savarkar
Reading the Author’s Introduction and the Publishers’ Notes to Savarkar’s Indian War of Independence -1857*

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Savarkar was not only a revolutionary, but also one who could reflect on the revolutionary life. The earlier generation of 1857 perhaps lacked the ability or at the very least, the opportunity to reflect on their action, because their historical moment in the 19th century could not yet provide that capacity for self-reflection. So while 1857 might have left its legacy of attraction and inspiration, it did not leave a legacy of long study in libraries. This is why Savarkar and the historical moment from 1909 onward is decisively different from an earlier age of pure (but unreflective) heroism. Savarkar makes it clear that for him historiography is not meant to be objective (and hence neutral) but a catalyst to calibrated action, and indeed a testament to human actional agency. [The second of a three part series. The first is available at http://www.esocialsciences.org/Articles/ShowArticle.aspx?acat=eSSays&aid=4553 ]

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The brief 1909 Publisher’s Preface of Savarkar’s the Indian War of Independence—1857, has the word ‘War’ in its title. This differentiated it from the colonial narrative of the Sepoy’s Mutiny or Indian Mutiny. This point is remarked on in the 1947 Publisher’s Note when the Congress Government finally lifted the ban on the book in May 1946. Already, several terms are in play—‘sepoy’, ‘Indian’, ‘War’. According to the 1909 Preface the purpose of the book was to “show [Indians] how their nation fought for its Independence and how their ancestors died”. It is not surprising that the colonial authorities were incensed—all these terms had prescience in the context of Indian disaffection in the first decade of the 20th century. Then only the most extreme nationalists were talking of Independence, nationhood and the glory of the fatal means of achieving these goals—death, and death in the sense of the carrying on the continuity of oneself and one’s ancestors. The book however labours under a burden—for this recognition of the ancestor’s martyrdom is still lacking in most Indians. Instead of honouring that memory, Indians are “ashamed to own them… hideous calumny hover[s] over and smother[s] down the spirit of martyrdom”.

* Savarkar’s text of the Indian War of Independence—1857 is available in its entirety online at www.savarkar.org. I have not modified the language when I quote despite the presence of grammatical errors and inelegancies in the original text.
So it was natural to wish to celebrate Savarkar’s banned book by republishing it in Bombay in 1947 January on the eve of Indian Independence. By this time, the task of memorialising the “freedom struggle” was already underway. Memorialists make impatient historians—G M Joshi, the publisher in 1947, is eager to put Savarkar within the history he (Savarkar) had launched in 1909. 1909 is fairly midway between 1857 and 1947. The role Joshi gives Savarkar is carefully formulated:

He [Savarkar] was a leading revolutionary himself, was attracted and inspired by the burning zeal, the heroism, bravery, suffering and tragic fate of the leaders of 1857, and he decide to re-interpret the story and to relate it in full with the help of all the material available to him at the time. He spent days and months at the Indian Office Library studying the period.

Savarkar is both a revolutionary as well as someone who can reflect on the revolutionary life. This did not happen with the brave souls of 1857. The earlier generation of 1857 apparently lacked the ability, or at the very least the opportunity to reflect on their action. This was perhaps due to their aforementioned tragic fate, or perhaps it was because their historical moment in the 19th century could not yet provide that capacity for self-reflection. For burning zeal, heroism, bravery and suffering do not have reflection as its necessary concomitant. Hence while 1857 might have left its legacy of attraction and inspiration, it did not leave a legacy of long study in libraries. This is how Savarkar and the historical moment from 1909 onward is decisively different from an earlier age of pure (but unreflective) heroism. Only reflection can make us grasp the inner motive of history such that it can be manipulated for the ends of the community. As Savarkar writes in the Author’s Introduction:

The nation that has no consciousness of its past has no future. Equally true it is that a nation must develop its capacity not only of claiming a past but also of knowing how to use it for the furtherance of its future. The nation ought to be the master and not the slave of its own history.

This idea of being the master and not the slave of history contains a passage relevant to Savarkar’s contemporary reputation. Savarkar writes:

For it is absolutely unwise to try to do certain things now irrespective of special considerations, simply because they had been once acted in the past. The feeling of hatred against Mohamedans was just and necessary in the times of Shivaji—but such a feeling would be unjust and foolish if nursed now, simply because it was the dominant feelings of the Hindus then.

At the very least a door is left open here for a revival of the “feelings of hatred” not just if circumstances dictates such, but as an essential corollary of the belief that history is to be used. In other words, though claiming to be a historian, Savarkar makes it clear that for him historiography is not meant to be objective (and hence neutral) but a catalyst to calibrated action, and indeed a testament to human actional agency. The historian should not be content to be merely an accountant, or spectator, who comes after the event, and whose objectivity is valorized precisely because he has no actional stake in
it. Savarkar does not frame this as a question of Indian historiography as opposed to a British/Western one, but instead assumes that British/Western historiography operates under the same mechanism even if they often hide under the banner of neutral, objective writing.

For Savarkar, all history is necessarily biased, and this is its strength, for the goal of history-writing is inspired (and often patriotic) action and not disinterested and detached truth. This is after all the reason he feels that Indian historians, and not merely British ones, should write about 1857 in the first place. For, if only the British wrote about 1857, and no Indian historian or participant wrote about the event (Savarkar in 1909 bemoans the fact that in another decade all those who took part in 1857 would surely be dead), British interest in reducing it to a transparent case of a localised mutiny would win, and once again, the British would prove to be masters of their history. This would be in the double sense of both winning the war, and memorialising their triumph as the only true history. As a corollary, Indians would be losers doubly, as well as permanent slaves to their own lost history.

Yet this is just the beginning of the differences between 1857, 1909 and 1947. For the book then begins a strange journey that tests and creates its own history. The 1947 Publisher’s Note gives us an additional, and larger, section called ‘The Story of this History’ which is a history of the publishing vicissitudes of the book and of Savarkar’s evolving thoughts on his motivations for writing it. The book, according to Savarkar’s article in *Talwar* (Sword), a part of his *Abhinav Bharat* (New India) Revolutionary Society and published from Paris, claims that this work served the double function of accurate recounting (history) but simultaneously, meticulous pragmatic and inspirational plans “to place before the revolutionists an outline of a program of organization and action to enable them to prepare the nation for a future war of liberation.” The idea Savarkar envisaged was an “armed national revolt” (italicized in the original), which was dismissed as “chimerical by the then extremists” as well as “inconceivably incomprehensible even to the highly patriotic Indian world”. The book then sought to “familiarize this Indian patriotic world with at least these words [i.e. Independence and Revolution] in daily thought, and by their constant repetition, like that of a mantram, to hypnotize the youthful political minds into a sub-conscious attraction for the noble concepts.” It is significant that this *mantram* was being repeated in 1947, when to most people, Indian included, India had won Independence by Gandhian non-violent means. However, Savarkar and his publishers insisted that words like Revolution, far from being dated in this moment of Independence, was in truth central to the legacy.

Or was the term dated? It must be remembered that in the 1940s, a decade of World Wars, armies would very much be on the minds of people. Further, the saga of the ‘mutiny’/uprising by Royal Indian Navy soldiers, as well as the trial at the Red Fort of senior officers of Subhas Chandra Bose’s (1897- ) rebel Indian National Army, one that had fought against the British, was still very present. There was much anger at the
victims of police firing in this charged atmosphere of military revolt and alleged treason. The pertinence of the present trials is clear: the Note contains a quote saying that it was
certain that

…the recent efforts of the Indian National Army would have been again dubbed as an
Ignoble Mutiny effectively crushed by the valiant British-cum-Congress arms and
armlessness [sic]. But thanks to Savarkar’s book the Indian sense of a ‘Mutiny’ has been
itself revolutionised. Not even Lord Wavell … can now call Bose’s efforts as a Mutiny.

Hence the Publisher’s Note is apposite to its time as it continues:

Veer Savarkar always emphasized the necessity in the Indian condition of carrying
politics and patriotism to the camp, to the military forces in India, for rendering any
armed revolt practical.

There are, then, two historical registers here: Savarkar in 1909 looking back at 1857, and
Savarkar in 1947 looking back at his 1909 work. What is also at stake is the orientation
of the future kind of State India aspired to be. This is in terms of its inheritance of a
violent, revolutionary legacy, and in contradistinction to the official history of Gandhian
non-violence, one that is referred to in the Note contemptuously as the “Mahatmic
School”. Suddenly, the longed for Independence had arrived but it brought new and
unexpected dangers—there was now a hostile country, Pakistan, on either side of the
border. A strong military would have to be developed, not against the faraway British,
but against the neighborhood.

Savarkar writes that he had been surprised that what he had thought to be inert
history had leapt into his eyes as an injunction and imperative. 1857 was not past,
something to be delegated to the proverbial dustbin of history, but instead, “the spirits of
the dead seemed hallowed by martyrdom. And out of the heap of ashes appeared forth
sparks of a fiery inspiration.” This was unexpected—the revisiting of what was
considered dead history, a mere mutiny—now turned out to be wholly and insistently
different. It was a prefiguration, dynamic and not inert, and relentlessly true, throwing
light simultaneously on the past and (more significantly) on the future. In 1909 Savarkar
was speaking this truth openly for a while under the auspices of the Free India Society in
London. But this openness was not to last long, for truth, far from thriving in the open, is
often driven back into its closet. Or perhaps the 24 year old Savarkar was more openly
revolutionary in Marathi than in English and in England. In time, only a member of
Savarkar’s own Abhi Nava Bharat Secret Society was willing to undertake the risk of
publication. For once, it seemed there was a mole in the Police rather than the other way
round as was typically the case in those times, and hence the manuscript was smuggled
back to Savarkar in London via Paris. In despair, Savarkar tried (perhaps ironically,
perhaps fittingly) to use an Orientalist Nagari type-press in Germany to publish, but it
was abandoned “owing to the uncouth and ugly Nagari typecast in Germany, and to the
fact [the great tradition of German Orientalists notwithstanding] that the German
compositors were absolutely ignorant of the Marathi language.
This publication history is significant for its oscillations between, on the one hand the great pride that the Indians in India and the European diaspora felt for the work and author, and on the other, the shame of not being able to bring this essential truth of the age to the public eye. Under British rules of fair play, books were proscribed even before they were printed. The charge of sedition could be made without clear proof of what the seditious object was, or even whether such an object existed. Savarkar himself wrote to *The London Times* saying that if the authorities could reveal the object in a court they should be able to openly initiate charges against him. The history of the travails of the manuscript scripted in miniature the travails of the truth of the claims of the book. This was the fact of Indian slavery to a pan-European tyranny (for even the French colluded/were dominated by the British)—but it also bespoke the cunning that was required to elude that shame of slavery. The book was finally published in Holland before being smuggled back to France, and later to India inside canonical (and more significantly, voluminous) works of European literature.

This may be interpreted as another act of ironic and cunning revolt. One of the men who smuggled the work thus was Sikandar Hayat Khan (1892-1942). Hayat Khan, who became the chief minister of Punjab, was to have an influential relationship with the concepts of Muslim minority-protection, the autonomy of Muslim-majority Provinces, and the 1940 Lahore Resolution for Pakistan. Revolutionaries and votaries of minoritarian politics made strange bedfellows within a single person. Savarkar was a hero to many, at least for a time. Hence historically at least, the planes of anti-colonial nationalism and minoritarian and majoritarian democratic politics were often obscured, for 1909 was indeed the year of the Minto-Morley reforms that ushered in that very democratic (though at that time, minimally representative) politics. Again, unsurprisingly to thoughtful historians, the extension of the bounty of representation was simultaneous with the increased persecution of perceived extremists like Savarkar. There were many hangings of members of secret revolutionary societies, as well as life-sentences and forced exile, and this is when the much-recounted story of Savarkar’s heroic personal escape from authorities took place.

In time, the book had a life of its own in the avatars of diverse Indian languages—Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi, Tamil, as well as abroad in the Indian and revolutionary diaspora. It was now even sold to raise funds for bringing weapons to India. All this was now happening in the context of the confusions following the breaking out of the First World War. The War immeasurably inflated the value of Savarkar’s work—history was alive again in pointed fashion, and it was no surprise when many revolutionaries supported the enemy’s enemy, Germany. ‘Mutinies’ broke out again in Hong Kong, Singapore and Burma. As the publisher recounted all this in 1947, the parallel was inevitably drawn to the contemporary events regarding the Indian National Army fighting the same war against the same authorities in the same part of the world—Southeast Asia. The connection is made explicitly in the Note:
Throughout this later revolutionary period [the Second World War], it became evident from the trials of hundreds of leaders and followers that this history of the first Indian War of Independence of 1857 proved to be a perennial source of inspiration, and provided a detailed sketch of the program of action. Apparently even in the latter war, expensive copies of Savarkar’s work were found in the possession of the revolutionaries/dissident Armies.

Though the original Marathi work was lost by the intrepid Madam Bhikaiji Rustom Cama (1861-1936) in Paris in the confusions of the First World War, its afterlife continued in several languages. The claims to that afterlife of the book are, in truth, a claim to certain continuous semiology of War in the narrative of the Indian Independence Movement. This narrative was in contrast to the narrative of a purely peaceful, non-violent achievement of Independence. The Publisher’s Note derided the latter as “the vagaries of the half-witted and even immoral doctrine of absolute non-violence”.

The Note claims that one of the people who used the sale of the book to raise funds was none other than the much-idolised Bhagat Singh (1907-1931) who raised funds for his Party with the proceeds of the sale. This Party, it must be remembered was in its latter years Socialist. More pertinently one must wonder if this was a Party at all, for it was a Party that called itself an Army—the Indian Hindustan Socialist Republican Army. Thus the fate of Savarkar’s book repeats the secret history of War, the Indian War of Independence, which was a continuous and ongoing, if a frequently dormant War; one that only paused in 1857, but was actually revived in 1909, and, continuing its subterranean journey through Bhagat Singh, Rash Bihari Bose and Subhas Chandra Bose, through the Indian political psyche in army camps as well as prison camps. This War for Independence may not have achieved final fruition even in 1947 for the Indian nation was confronted with a perpetually hostile neighborhood.

Hence, perpetual War is the secret, mentoring, martyr-guzzling legacy of 1857—the Note continues:

The greatest value of Veer Savarkar’s Book lies in its gift to the Nation of that Torch of Freedom in whose light I and a thousand other Indians have [named] our dear daughters after Laxmibhai, Rani of Jhansi… For he [Savarkar] never could conceive that the ‘Rising of 1857’ was an event complete by itself. He looked upon the War of 1857 as but a campaign in the war of Independence in its entirety. He did not therefore mean the book to serve as merely the annals of the past but also as a source of inspiration and guidance to the Future. Consequently he must be expecting this History to continue to discharge its mission yet further till the end in view is accomplished.

Ahead lay, beyond 1947, an infinite future eventuation of this open-ended mission of Independence in its entirety.

There is thus miraculous fortuity, and hence, an almost divine validation and justice in this patriotic alchemy… The book continued to be regarded as a veritable Bible by the Indian Revolutionaryists ever since the armed struggle for Indian Independence initiated by the Abhi Nava Bharat bands down to recent times when full-fledged armies marched to the battle-fields under Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. Directly and indirectly the book has influenced, animated and guided at least two generations… That is why the Nation itself
made it a point of honour to keep the book alive as a national asset in defiance of the
violent efforts of the foreign government to suppress and kill it. Its survival despite of it
all is almost miraculous. Miraculous too is the survival of its illustrious author who, in
spite of untold sufferings and sacrifices, trials, tribulations and transportations, has been
spared by Providence to witness the triumphant march of [his] Revolutionary principles
and programmes.”

Hence, Savarkar leaves us with a fateful legacy of hyper-vigilance that is relentlessly
self-militarising and unbounded in its futural claims.