

Reimagining Nationhood, Religion, and Society: A Critical Exploration of V.D. Savarkar's Thought

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Abstract:

V.D. Savarkar, a towering figure in Indian political thought, shaped nationalist discourse with his controversial and multifaceted views on nationhood, religion, and society. His concept of "Hindutva" extended beyond religion, emphasizing a cultural and civilizational unity that transcended individual faith. This research critically examines Savarkar's ideas and their implications on modern India's political and social fabric. It delves into his understanding of the nation as a unified cultural entity, his stance on religion, particularly Hinduism, as a foundational pillar of national identity, and his views on social cohesion and reform. The study also explores Savarkar's complex relationship with Indian secularism, assessing his enduring influence on contemporary political ideologies. By scrutinizing key texts, speeches, and political actions, the research highlights the relevance of Savarkar's thoughts in current debates on nationalism, social justice, and religious identity. Ultimately, it presents a nuanced analysis of Savarkar's intellectual legacy, offering insights into the evolving relationship between nation, religion, and society in India.

Key Words: Nationhood, Religion, Society

1.0 Introduction

The political and intellectual legacy of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966) has left an indelible mark on the shaping of modern India's national identity. As a staunch advocate of Hindutva, Savarkar introduced a framework that intertwined the concepts of nationhood and religion, particularly emphasizing the centrality of Hindu identity in the construction of Indian nationalism. His works such as *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* sparked critical debates regarding the definitions of Indian identity, the role of religion in politics, and the structure of an ideal Indian society.

Savarkar's ideology has been both revered and criticized. While his proponents argue that his ideas are crucial to preserving the unity and integrity of India, detractors caution against the exclusivist and communal undertones of his thought. Savarkar's influence extends beyond his own time, as his ideas continue to shape the ideological foundation of several political movements in contemporary India. His vision of a Hindu Rashtra remains a subject of scholarly scrutiny, particularly in light of India's secular constitutional framework and its diverse, multi-religious society.

This study aims to provide an in-depth exploration of Savarkar's thoughts on nationhood, religion, and society, examining how they interact and manifest in political, social, and religious contexts. Through this analysis, we will explore the relevance of his ideas in the contemporary discourse of Indian nationalism, secularism, and religious identity.

1.1 Savarkar's Concept of Nationhood

Savarkar's vision of nationhood was deeply rooted in the cultural and historical unity of India. He perceived the nation as more than a mere political entity; it was a civilizational continuum shaped by shared history, culture, and geography. In Hindutva, Savarkar argued that the essence of nationhood was defined by those who viewed India as both their Pitribhumi (fatherland) and Punyabhumi (holy land). This distinction, he believed, created an unbreakable bond between the land and its people, particularly those belonging to the Hindu faith. His definition of nationhood excluded certain religious communities, notably Muslims and Christians, whom he viewed as having external allegiances. This exclusionary aspect of his thought has drawn significant criticism for fostering a divisive view of the Indian nation. However, his supporters argue that Savarkar's conceptualization was intended to solidify a cohesive national identity in the face of foreign domination.

In contemporary discussions on Indian nationalism, Savarkar's views continue to influence right-wing political discourse, particularly with regard to the role of religious identity in the nation-state. While India's constitutional framework enshrines secularism, Savarkar's Hindutva ideology presents an alternative vision of national unity that prioritizes cultural homogeneity.

1.2 Religion and Hindutva: More than a Faith

Savarkar's conceptualization of Hindutva was more cultural than religious. He distinguished Hindutva from Hinduism by framing the former as a broader civilizational identity, not confined to religious beliefs. In *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, he clarified that Hindutva encompassed all those who shared a cultural and historical connection to India, regardless of their religious practices. This expansion of Hindu identity, however, raised critical questions about the exclusion of non-Hindus, particularly Muslims and Christians. Savarkar viewed these communities as external to the Indian nation due to their supposed allegiance to foreign lands and religious centers. This stance has been widely criticized for promoting religious intolerance and contributing to communal divisions in Indian society.

Despite these criticisms, Savarkar's ideology remains influential in contemporary India, particularly in political movements that emphasize Hindu cultural supremacy. His ideas continue to resonate in the debates surrounding secularism and the role of religion in the public sphere. The persistent relevance of Savarkar's Hindutva reflects ongoing tensions between India's secular identity and the push for a culturally homogeneous nation.

1.3 Savarkar's Vision of Social Reform and Cohesion

In addition to his political and religious views, Savarkar advocated for social reform within Hindu society. He was a vocal critic of the caste system and untouchability, which he saw as impediments to national unity and progress. Savarkar's vision for India involved the eradication of social hierarchies and the promotion of a more egalitarian society. His stance on social reform was in some ways progressive, as he advocated for the integration of all Hindus regardless of caste into the national fold. He argued that the strength of the nation could only be realized through internal cohesion, which required the dissolution of divisive social practices. However, his reformist zeal was limited by his emphasis on Hindu identity as the basis for national unity, which marginalized non-Hindu communities.

The complexities of Savarkar's social vision are relevant today in discussions about caste-based discrimination and the struggle for social equality in India. His ideas on social reform have found resonance in political movements that seek to balance tradition with progress, though his exclusionary views on religion remain a point of contention.

1.4 Savarkar's Legacy and Its Impact on Contemporary Politics

Savarkar's thoughts on nationhood, religion, and society have left an enduring legacy in Indian political discourse. His advocacy for a culturally unified Hindu nation continues to influence right-wing ideologies, particularly those espoused by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). These groups draw upon Savarkar's ideas to advance their vision of India as a Hindu Rashtra.

The ongoing relevance of Savarkar's thought is particularly evident in debates over secularism, religious freedom, and national identity. His vision of a culturally homogeneous nation contrasts sharply with India's secular constitution, which guarantees equal rights and protections to all religious communities. Despite this tension, Savarkar's ideas have gained traction among those who view secularism as an impediment to national unity. Moreover, Savarkar's critiques of colonialism and his emphasis on self-reliance continue to resonate in contemporary political narratives of nationalism and self-determination. His legacy, therefore, is one of both inspiration and controversy, shaping India's political landscape in profound ways.

1.5 Savarkar's Views on Secularism and its Relevance to Indian Politics

Savarkar's approach to secularism, particularly in the context of Indian politics, remains one of the most debated aspects of his philosophy. His interpretation of secularism was distinct from the Western notion of a strict separation between religion and state. Instead, Savarkar envisioned a secularism that recognized the cultural unity of India, which he believed was primarily rooted in Hindu civilization. For Savarkar, the idea of Hindutva was not confined to religious practices but was an expression of a larger cultural identity. This, in his view, was the basis for national unity. He contended that India's secularism should not undermine the cultural hegemony of the Hindu majority, but instead, protect and promote it.

Savarkar criticized Indian secularists for what he perceived as an overemphasis on appeasing minority communities, particularly Muslims, at the expense of the Hindu majority. In his writings, he argued that true secularism should treat all religions equally but also recognize the historical and cultural dominance of Hinduism in India's societal structure (Savarkar, 1923). His views are frequently cited in debates regarding the role of religion in Indian politics, especially in the context of the rise of political parties that advocate for Hindu nationalist ideologies.

However, critics of Savarkar point out that his version of secularism was fundamentally exclusionary. While he advocated for equality of all citizens under the law, his emphasis on Hindu culture as the bedrock of Indian identity marginalized religious minorities. Scholars argue that this selective secularism sowed the seeds of communalism by emphasizing religious identity as a marker of national belonging (Sharma, 2015). This interpretation of secularism remains at odds with the constitutional framework of India, which enshrines equal rights for all citizens irrespective of religion, caste, or creed. The relevance of Savarkar's views on secularism is seen in contemporary Indian politics, particularly with the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalist parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Many of these parties have drawn upon Savarkar's ideas to challenge India's pluralistic secularism, arguing that it has been too accommodating to minority communities, especially Muslims, and has neglected the cultural and religious rights of the Hindu majority. The BJP's policies, such as the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir and the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), have been seen by critics as attempts to institutionalize Savarkar's vision of a Hindu-centric nation (Banerjee, 2020).

Despite the controversies surrounding his thoughts, Savarkar's critiques of secularism continue to resonate in India's ongoing struggle to define the relationship between religion and the state. His views offer a counter-narrative to the Western liberal model of secularism, advocating instead for a model that integrates religious and cultural identity with national unity. As India grapples with questions of religious pluralism and national identity, Savarkar's ideas remain a powerful, albeit divisive, influence in shaping the discourse on secularism.

1.6 Savarkar's Contribution to Indian Nationalism and the Freedom Struggle

V.D. Savarkar's contribution to Indian nationalism and the freedom struggle is often viewed through the lens of his revolutionary activities and his ideological evolution from a staunch anti-British activist to a proponent of Hindutva. Savarkar's early involvement in the Indian independence movement was marked by his radical stance against British rule. He was a key figure in the establishment of revolutionary groups such as the Abhinav Bharat Society, which advocated for armed resistance against the colonial regime (Jaffrelot, 1996). His seminal work *The First War of Indian Independence* (1909), which highlighted the 1857 revolt as a national uprising rather than a series of localized mutinies, inspired a generation of revolutionaries.

Savarkar's revolutionary zeal earned him a life sentence to the infamous Cellular Jail in the Andaman Islands, where he spent over a decade. During this period, his political ideology underwent significant changes. While in prison, Savarkar began to formulate his ideas on Hindutva, which shifted his focus from anti-colonial revolutionary activities to the construction of a Hindu nationalist identity. Upon his release, he increasingly distanced himself from the mainstream Congress-led independence movement, which he criticized for its emphasis on non-violence and its inclusivity towards Muslims (Deshpande, 2014).

Savarkar's nationalism, as articulated in his later writings, was characterized by an emphasis on Hindu identity as the foundation of Indian nationhood. He believed that the Indian nation should be built on the cultural and religious unity of Hindus, viewing Islam and Christianity as foreign influences that undermined this unity. This marked a departure from the inclusive, multi-religious nationalism espoused by figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, who advocated for a pluralistic and secular vision of India.

Despite his ideological divergence from the mainstream freedom movement, Savarkar's contribution to Indian nationalism cannot be overlooked. His advocacy for self-reliance, his critique of colonialism, and his efforts to mobilize Hindu identity as a unifying force played a significant role in shaping the nationalist discourse. His writings, particularly on the glorification of India's past and the call for a strong, unified nation, continue to influence nationalist ideologies in contemporary India (Mehta, 2018). Savarkar's legacy in the freedom struggle is complex. While he is often criticized for his divisive views on religion and his alleged complicity with the British authorities after his release from prison, his early contributions to the revolutionary movement and his role in formulating an alternative vision of Indian nationalism are widely acknowledged. His ideology, which blends elements of nationalism, religion, and social reform, remains a key reference point for political movements that seek to define Indian identity in terms of cultural and religious homogeneity.

In contemporary India, Savarkar's nationalism is often invoked by right-wing political parties that champion Hindu cultural supremacy and seek to redefine the nation's identity along the lines of Hindutva. His ideas continue to shape the discourse on nationalism, secularism, and religious identity, making him a pivotal figure in the ongoing debate about the nature of Indian nationhood.

1.7 Conclusion

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar remains a polarizing figure in Indian history, his thoughts on nationhood, religion, and society continuing to spark intense debate. His vision of a culturally unified Hindu nation, grounded in the principles of Hindutva, offered a counter-narrative to the secular and pluralistic ideals enshrined in India's Constitution. While his views on religion and national identity were exclusionary, his advocacy for social reform and the abolition of caste-based discrimination demonstrated a commitment to internal cohesion and national progress. In contemporary India, Savarkar's legacy is visible in the resurgence of right-wing political movements that draw upon his ideas to promote a culturally homogenous nation. The tensions between his vision and India's secular identity remain central to political discourse, reflecting the ongoing struggle to define the nation's character in a diverse and pluralistic society.

This study has critically examined Savarkar's contributions, revealing the complexities of his thought and its implications for modern India. His enduring influence highlights the challenges of balancing religious identity with national unity in a country that prides itself on its diversity. Savarkar's legacy, while controversial, continues to shape the evolution of Indian nationalism and its future trajectory.

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