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The Idea of India: Debating Savarkar's Nationalism vs Gandhi's Civic Nationalism

- by Prof. Alok Tandon



Introduction

The idea of India remains problematic, even today, after so many years of independence because it is linked to the ideology of nationalism: the type of nation we would like to be. Since there are various models of nationalism, it remains an open question which one to emulate. In contemporary times, we face a conflict between two competing models of nationalism — Savarkar's Ethnic Nationalism and Gandhi's Civic Nationalism. In a charged atmosphere of polarized communal identities, it is pertinent to understand the two models in depth so that we can make a wise choice. The intention of this paper is to do that. Hence, in the first section, we will begin with a historical review of the ideology of modern nationalism and its development in the West in two primary forms and connect them to the development of nationalism in India. The second section will highlight Savarkar and Gandhi's differing ideas regarding religion, politics, violence, Indian identity, and civilization. In the third section, we will focus on understanding how their divergent views lead to their adopting different brands of nationalism. In the final section, we will evaluate the Gandhian & Savarkar models in the Indian context of a multi-religious, multi-cultural society to ascertain which one can better lead to and serve the needs of a peaceful future.

Section 1: A Historical Review of the ideology of modern nationalism

It is an established fact that nationalism has emerged as one of the most potent forces in the modern world. However, there is no consensus about its definition among thinkers – both of the East and the West. Though its origin can be traced back to 18th century Europe, the forms that nationalism has taken are so diverse that it is very difficult to bring these under a single conceptual scheme. Even the concept of 'nation' is ridden with rival definitions. There is little agreement about the role of the ethnic, as opposed to the political components of the nation, between its subjective elements like 'will' and 'memory' and more objective elements like 'territory' and 'language'. The situation is not much better when we

consider the concept under review, namely, nationalism. Again, there is a difference between those who stress the cultural rather than the political aspects of nationalism. Some equate it with 'national sentiment,' others with nationalist ideology and language, and still others with nationalist movements. A synthesis incorporating all these elements is possible, as suggested by some. However, some common themes can be culled out from the varied definitions of different scholars. Thus, autonomy, unity, and identity are the themes and ideals that have been pursued by nationalists everywhere. Nationalism, as such, is a doctrine of freedom and sovereignty; people must be liberated from external constraints so that they can become masters of their own destiny. To achieve this aim, people must be united by dissolving all internal divisions and live in a historical territory that becomes their sacred homeland, with a single public culture passed down from generation to generation as a precious and cherished heritage, as an expression of their authentic identity. Ties of blood, race, language, region, religion, and custom all play a part in it.

Two distinct categories of Nationalism: Cultural and Political

As may be anticipated from our foregoing discussion, there are two primary, quite distinct, categories of nationalism, namely, cultural and political. These are based on and articulate competing conceptions of the idea of 'nation,' and they have their own distinctive organizations, pursuing differing political strategies.

The political nationalist's ideal is a civic polity of educated citizens united by common law and citizenship. His conception of a nation is rationalist, and his ultimate aim is to form a homogenous group rooted in one's common humanity that transcends cultural differences. Thus, the purpose is essentially modernist, with the goal to secure a representative state for one's community where all citizens are equal participants in realigning themselves with a cosmopolitan, rationalist civilization.

Unlike the political nationalists, the state for the cultural nationalists is accidental. For the latter, the essence of a nation is its distinctive civilization, the product of its unique history, culture, and geography. Political nationalists view nations as living personalities and organic beings, not just political units. They cherish uniqueness and individuality, and therefore, universal citizenship rights are to be rejected in favor of natural divisions within the nation. In fact, the aim of the cultural nationalists is to bring about the moral regeneration of the historic community in order to recreate a distinctive national civilization. For this purpose, cultural nationalists believe in celebrating their cultural uniqueness through ethnic rituals and rejecting foreign practices. Thus, their identity is rooted in their own culture, viewed as different, if not superior to other cultures. It follows, therefore, that they strongly oppose the assimilation of their community in any universal model of development, liberal or socialist.

Political nationalism emerged in the West, where a sophisticated urban middle-class culture had already developed from the Renaissance onwards, and effective boundaries of the nation-state either existed or were about to be formed. Nationalism then took on a constitutional form. However, the situation in the East was different: nationalism arose here as an imitative response to the rationalist culture of the West. As no secular middle class existed here and society was predominantly agrarian, dominated by a reactionary aristocracy, nationalists tried to create a visionary nation based upon ancient historical memories and unique cultural attributes. They asserted a superior mystical, organic bond between peasants, land, and communities against the rationalist citizenship model of the West. Therefore, one can agree with Kohn and Gullner that cultural nationalism is a defensive response by the educated elites to the impact of exogenous modernization on existing status orders and that this may result in the reassertion of traditionalist values of the community, as now being witnessed in the contemporary Middle East and Asia.

The above discussion is an attempt to provide a theoretical framework for our problem. We now need to understand the context and trajectory of Indian nationalism. Irfan Habib declares:

“It (Indian nationalism) is precisely the movement against colonial domination among the exploited countries which, by converting oppressed countries into nations, has created the largest category of nations. Of this, India offers a signal example.”²

There were perceptions of India as a country, like (Jambudvipa in Ashoka’s inscriptions, 3rd c. BC, and ‘Bharata’ in *Kharavela’s Hattigumpha* inscription, 1st c. BC, and also Amir Khussarau’s patriotic description of India (*‘Hind’*), but they did not term it a nation.

After the British conquest, the experience of shared suffering and common resistance grew within India as a whole. The lack of patriotic feelings among Indians due to their primary loyalties to their castes needed to be addressed before people could feel a sense of national unity. “This could only be achieved when the masses joined it, and here Gandhi’s role has to be recognized as crucial”³, admits Irfan Habib. Therefore, one can discern three complex processes which led to the development of the Indian nation:

First is the historical belief that a geographic territory is some country. Second, the idea of nationhood was borrowed from the West after the French Revolution. Third, the struggle against colonial oppression, wherein the role of the Indian freedom movement was most crucial³. The mainstream of the freedom movement, led by Gandhi, Patel, Nehru, and others, clearly maintained that India, as a nation, would not belong to any single religious community but would integrate people of all communities living in unity. The establishment of a secular welfare state was meant to ensure the genuine well-being of the people.

However, along with mainstream civic nationalism, another form of ethnic nationalism emerged, primarily aimed at ensuring the survival of the group’s cultural identity. Threatened by European modernity and in order to regain self-respect, a section of the intelligentsia set about constructing a historical ‘Golden Past’ and renewing traditions sanctioned by it. An ambivalence existed in this approach as it tried to appropriate the strong

point of the colonial aggressors while keeping the nation's cultural identity intact.

As an ideology, Hindu Nationalism was constructed between 1870 and 1920. It was inspired by socio-religious movements initiated by high-caste Hindus belonging to the *Arya Samaj*. Later in the 1920s, threatened by the mobilization of Muslims in the *Khilafat* movement, Hindu Nationalist organisations, like the *Hindu Mahasabha*, and the *Rashtriya Sawayamsevak Sangh (RSS)*, emerged and strengthened Hindu Nationalism by adopting “the strategy of simultaneous stigmatization and emulation of the Other through reference to an invented tradition”⁴, as we can see in the writings of V.D. Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar. Since our purpose in this paper is only to compare the ideas of nationalism in Gandhi and Savarkar, we shall limit our discussion to these two. Of course, parallel to Hindu Nationalism, the movement of Muslim Nationalism also developed in pre-partition days, upon which we will not dwell here.

Section 2:

2a Savarkar's Hindutva

V. D. Savarkar first codified the ideology of Hindu Nationalism in the 1920s in the context of a new and threatening level of perception of Muslim militancy, preparedness, and organization. His book, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, first published in 1923, is considered a basic and essential text of Hindu Nationalism. This book rests on the assumption that Hindus are vulnerable in comparison to pan-Islamism and calls for consolidating and strengthening Hindu nationality in defense of race and land so that others may not dare to attack. Savarkar learned about ‘threatening others’ through his study of Mazzini and Garibaldi in England in 1906. He translated Mazzini's autobiography into Hindi and, in the introduction, compared Garibaldi to Shivaji and Mazzini to Shivaji's guru Ramdas. This suggests how far Savarkar's nationalism was an imported concept, which he tried to apply in his own country through a process of reconstructing tradition. It must

also be noted that Savarkar himself was not a believer. His plan was to fashion a homogeneous community, which extreme differentiation within Hindu society could not allow. Therefore, he minimizes the importance of religion in defining who is a Hindu and claims that Hinduism was only one of the attributes of 'Hinduness'. According to him, Hindutva rests on three pillars: geographical unity, racial features, and a common culture, which stemmed from the mythical reconstruction of the Vedic 'Golden Age.'

For Savarkar, the notion of territory was different from that of the universalist conception of nationalism as it cannot be dissociated from Hindu culture and Hindu people. For him, Hindus were primarily descendants of Aryans who first settled on the banks of the Indus and were inhabitants of the zone between the rivers, the seas, and the Himalayas. The first Aryans in the Vedic era developed 'the sense of unity of a people'. His stress was on geographical unity and not on territorial conceptions of nationalism. Unlike them, he emphasised the ethnic and racial aspects of a Hindu nation. He averred:

"The Hindus are not merely the citizens of the Indian state because they were united not only by the bonds of the love they bear to a common motherland but also by the bonds of common blood. They are not only a nation but a race – jati "5

Thus, by assuming the existence of a potent binding factor of blood, Savarkar's racial criterion minimizes the importance of internal divisions in Hindu society. However, the notion of racial purity is absent from Savarkar's ideology and, therefore, does not lead to an absolute rejection of the 'Other'. No doubt, Muslims and Christians are threatening 'others' for Savarkar, but defining them as Hindus by race who became converts only a few generations ago, he suggests that they could be reintegrated into Hindu society, albeit as subordinate citizens.

Further, instead of the Hindu religion, Savarkar uses the 'a common culture' criterion for *Hindutva* ideology. It gives crucial importance to rituals, social roles, and language in Hinduism. He says:

“Hindus are bound together not only by the ties of love we bear to a common fatherland and common blood that courses through our veins and keeps our hearts throbbing and our affections warm, but also by the tie of the common homage we pay to our great civilization – our Hindu culture, which could not be better rendered than by the word, Sanskriti, suggestive as it is of that language, Sanskrit, which has been the chosen means of expression and preservation of that culture, of all that was best and worth preserving in the history of our race” ⁶

Therefore, one can agree with Christophe Jaffrelot that:

“Savarkar’s notion of Hindutva rests on cultural criteria rather than on a racial theory and is accordingly in tune with the traditional Brahmanical world view; but at the same time, it represents ethnic nationalism, which borrows much from western theories.” ⁷

It is true that Savarkar’s *Hindutva* marked a qualitative change in Hindu Nationalism and provided a more systematic exposition of it. After the decline of the *Hindu Mahasabha*, of which Savarkar was President, the RSS, under the leadership of Hedgewar, who had read *Hindutva*, further developed the ideology of Hindu Nationalism. But Savarkar’s foundational contribution to *Hindutva* cannot be denied.

By making a clear-cut distinction between Hinduism and *Hindutva* and giving a broader definition of *Hindutva*, which encompasses the social, cultural, political, and linguistic spheres along with the religious sphere, Savarkar was able to create a broader unity, as exemplified in his answer to the question, ‘who is a Hindu?’ He avers:

*“Every person is a Hindu who regards and owns this Bharat Bhoomi, this land from the Indus to the seas, as his fatherland and holy land of the origin and the cradle of his religious faith.”*⁸

In a single stroke, this definition includes followers of Vedas, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism as constituents of Hindus but excludes Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Moreover, fellow Hindus are categorized through a love of:

“Hindu civilization’ is characterised by a common history, common heroes, a common literature, a common art, a common law and a common Jurisprudence, common fairs, and festivals, rites and rituals and ceremonies and sacraments.”⁹

Thus, instead of resting on the Hindu religion, a broad Hindu cultural identity is created, which can easily serve as an Indian Identity for political purposes. Therefore, one can say that ‘*Hindutva*’ is the key concept of Savarkar, which serves as the basis of Hindu Nationalism. Let us now see how it differs from Gandhi’s concept of Hindu religion.

2b Gandhi’s Hinduism

Hinduism, as a religious tradition, is difficult to define. For Gandhi

“Hinduism is not an exclusive religion. In it, there is room for the worship of all the prophets of the world. It is not a missionary religion in the ordinary sense of the term.”¹⁰

For him, the essence of Hinduism is truth and nonviolence, and *moksha* is its central principle. Though he believes in the *shastras*, like the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, and *Puranas*, and was a great admirer of the *Bhagavad Gita*, he rejects any injunction in the *shastras* which is opposed to reason, truth, and nonviolence. Thus, he could easily oppose the inhuman practices of untouchability against Dalits and women, which the *Shastras* sanctioned. Though he locates himself as an insider to mainstream Hinduism and calls himself a *Sanatan* Hindu, his profound and radical interpretation of Hinduism adds new dimensions to it in the form of *sewa* (service) *marg*

(path), in addition to the three traditional *margas* (*gnana, karma, and bhakti*) of Hinduism, as paths to attain *moksha*, i.e., salvation.

Gandhi's views on religion seem far removed from the traditional understanding of religion when he contends that religious practices, ideas, and beliefs must be tested for reason. On the one hand, he has deep faith and acceptance of the truth of all religions, but on the other hand, he is well aware of the imperfections of all existing religions as they are mediated through the interpretations of imperfect human beings. Thus, an imperfect human institution is subject to a process of evolution and re-interpretation. Therefore, it seems that Gandhi holds two conceptions of religion: an ideal one and the other that of a customary institutional religion. He also compared true religion with the trunk of a tree and the formal religions, its branches. True and perfect religion existed only conceptually. It had little in common with dogmas, rituals, superstitions, and bigotry which organised religions generally have. For him, religion and morality are inseparable. When he says that politics without religion has no value, he is talking about a universal ethical religion and not organised religion. He may be wavering, at times, between ideal religion and institutional religion, but he could bring forth a new understanding of religion and its praxis in which fighting against social evils, inequalities, and injustices is part and parcel of one's religious duties.

Gandhi's above understanding of religion defined his conception of Hinduism, which was poles apart from what orthodox Hindus practiced. He never consulted astrologers and had no time for elaborate *pujas* and rituals. His Hinduism is all-inclusive, not sectarian, free from hatred, and practices oneness with other human beings and all life forms. Though he proclaimed himself to be a *sanatani* Hindu, he did not privilege any one religion over another, not even his own. Thus, his emphasis is on giving them equal respect against the confrontational approach of many others.

Violence/Nonviolence

Gandhi and Savarkar held contrasting views regarding violence, which resulted in their different understanding of Indian history and their future vision of the Indian nation. Savarkar justified violence and criticized Buddhists for their creed of nonviolence because it made Hindus weak and unable to take revenge against those who had humiliated them in the past. Thus, his narrative of violent history contrasts sharply with Gandhi's advocacy of the pacifist narrative and concept of nonviolence. He fiercely criticized Gandhi's nonviolence and expressed his views in no uncertain words.

Unlike Savarkar's glorified legitimation of violence, Gandhi refuted the right to resort to violence, even against injustice. For him, violence was always wrong and needed to be condemned. Although his rejection of violence may seem to be absolute, this is not always the case since he made many exceptions in his life and in India's struggle for political freedom. Even his *satyagraha* can be interpreted as propagating the 'use of minimum violence'. He himself opined:

"I do believe that where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence".¹¹

That is why Gandhi supported war. As a practical idealist, Gandhi understood that violence cannot be removed entirely from human society. For him, as long as we live, some minimum violence is necessary. However, one must remember that his chief contribution was in using nonviolence as a means of social action to fight against the violence of others with nonviolence.

Savarkar was a staunch critic of the idea of absolute nonviolence, which, according to him, constituted one of the reasons for the defeat of Indians at the hands of foreigners. Therefore, he gave no place to King Ashoka in his list of national heroes because of his preaching of the Buddhist principle of *ahimsa*. Like absolute nonviolence, he also rejected absolute tolerance towards other religious communities, as this might harm the nation. His idea of tolerance was relative in nature, and he advocated the legitimate

right of Indians to retaliate as a form of justifiable vengeance. For him, mass violence, genocides, and atrocities against innocents were merely natural consequences of the passion for vengeance. Thus, he justified plunder and violence by Maratha forces on Christians, terming such events as 'occasional excuses'. He wanted to make the Hindu race 'military minded, spirited and valorous and Hinduise all politics and militarize Hinduism'. Gandhi, on the other hand, critiqued Hindu militancy, highlighted its demerits and repudiated revolutionary terrorism:

*"Do you not tremble to think of freeing India by assassination? What we need to do is to kill ourselves. This is a cowardly thought of killing others. Those who rise to power by murders will certainly not make the nation happy."*¹²

For Gandhi, the means adopted were as crucial as the end.

Section 3: Savarkar & Gandhi's different brands of Nationalism

As seen above, the irreconcilable differences between Gandhi's and Savarkar's views on religion, violence, history, and civilization led to their formulating divergent brands of nationalism, incorporating differing future visions of the Indian nation. Thus, Savarkar's Hindu nationalism excludes all non-Hindus, as per his own definition of 'Who is a Hindu'. Terming the Muslims in India as 'suspicious friends', if not enemies, he ousted them because their Holy Land was outside India. Though he was not unfavorable to friendship with Muslims during the political struggle for freedom, as stated in his popular book, 'The First Indian War of Independence of 1857' (1909), this early projection of Hindu-Muslim unity was completely reversed later when he articulated *Hindutva* as a political ideology of ethno-religious nationalism to include culture and race. The purpose was to unify and mobilize the hierarchical castes among Hindus under a communal banner and to construct this into a dominant majority, to which non-Hindus would become subordinate minorities. This way he exclusively equates 'Hindu' as well as 'Hinduism' with the Indian nation; Hindu and India

become synonymous. For him, nationalism and communalism are not conflicting ideas, as every type of patriotism is more or less communal and parochial. Applying this criterion, only Hindus can claim to be true patriots towards India. The inevitable result was his vociferous support of Jinnah's two-nation theory on 15th August 1943 in Nagpur:

"I have no quarrel with Mr. Jinnah's two-nation theory. We Hindus are a nation by ourselves and it is a historical fact that Hindus and Muslims are two nations".

In contrast to Savarkar's nationalism, Gandhi's idea of India is:

"India cannot cease to be a nation because people belonging to different religions live in it. The introduction of foreigners does not necessarily destroy the nation as they merge in it. India has been such a country".¹³

For Gandhi, India's religious and linguistic diversity was an asset, not a liability. Thus, Gandhi's idea of India accommodates all religions, castes, and tribes. In *Hind Swaraj*, he outlined a course of action to achieve independence through nonviolent means, unlike Savarkar's militant nationalism, where violence is a natural response.

Unlike Savarkar's fusion of religion and culture, Gandhi separated the two in his arguments against the two-nation theory. In his views, religious differences were not absolute; there are so many commonalities in all religions, which undercut religious differences. Savarkar's Ideology of cultural nationalism is thus an antithesis of Gandhi's inclusive nationalism. Gandhi defined nationhood in non-religious terms, prioritising one's Indian identity above other forms of religious, ethnic, or cultural identity:

"We are Indians first and Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, and Christians after." ¹⁴

Further, he cautioned Hindus that it was a mistake to think that, after independence, India would belong solely to Hindus.

Though Gandhi supported the adoption of parliamentary democracy after independence, his vision for the future was *swaraj* or self-rule, not just freedom from British rule. Towards this end, he outlined his 'Constructive Program', which is to be undertaken as an extra-parliamentary means to complement democracy. Gandhi's mission of life, as stated in *Hind Swaraj*, was nothing other than the moral regeneration of Indians, which he considered to be the true identity of the Indian civilization, compared to Western civilization, which is based on bodily pleasures and material comforts. Thus, he provided a strong critique of modernity, an alternative vision, and a road map to attain it. Savarkar had no such vision; his only attempt was focused on reviving the cultural glory of an imagined past in the form of a strong Hindu nation that could survive in the ferocious life struggle amongst nations. However, as a Hindu social reformer, he opposed untouchability.

Thus, comparing the two, it can be said that Gandhi had a profound and better vision for nation-building than Savarkar. By patriotism, Gandhi meant the welfare of the whole people. He was an internationalist and patriot, not a narrow nationalist and chauvinist like Savarkar. This is the reason why he could inspire many leaders like Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela, as well as movements for liberation globally. But the question must be asked as to why, after 75 years of Gandhi's martyrdom, which had shifted Savarkar's Hindu Nationalism to the margins, contemporary Indian society seems to be in the grip of the ideology of Hindutva. What lies behind its success, and what will be the implications of its success for Indian society in the future? Though it is not the purpose of this paper to go into the details of the historical trajectory of the Hindu nationalist movement, it is essential to point out the strategy adopted by them to succeed. As pointed out earlier, it was the strategy of 'stigmatization and emulation of threatening others'. First, the exaggerated dominant presence of others was used to create a strong feeling of vulnerability along with a minority complex in the majority. Moreover, the extreme differentiation of Hindu society into castes and sects added an

additional predisposition to such a feeling. Secondly, efforts were made to reform Hindu society by selectively imitating those cultural traits of others, which were believed to have given strength and superiority to others. This borrowing was not done openly but under the pretext of a reinterpretation of Hindu traditions. A myth of the 'Vedic Golden Age' was ideologically constructed to regain self-esteem and defend threatened identity. The system of *varnas* was reinterpreted to serve as a model of a cohesive Hindu society. Thus, the Hindu nationalist strategy of identity-building relies paradoxically on both simultaneously stigmatizing and emulating the Other to produce a Hindu nationalist identity that has more to do with Brahmanical culture and little to do with Hinduism. The partition of India and the creation of a separate Muslim state along India's borders helped Hindu nationalism to employ the above-mentioned strategy.

Conclusion

The question then arises: What kind of system of governance would best suit our country to ensure its trajectory of growth without getting embroiled in present-day controversies?

The following words of Mahatma Gandhi should inspire our duty as citizens of a democratic nation:

*"It is not nationalism that is evil; it is the narrow, selfishness, exclusiveness which is the bane of modern nations which is evil."*¹⁵

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- About The Author

Alok Tandon is an independent researcher, known for his rational and inquisitive spirit, as well as for his passion and commitment to philosophy. After doing his Ph.D. in philosophy, he was recipient of ICSSR general fellowship for his project, Religion and Violence and ICPR resident and project fellowship. He was also honored by *Akhil Bhartiya Darshan Parishad* with "Nagar Award" for his contribution in the field of Philosophy.

E-mail: aloktndn1@gmail.com, Mobile: +91-9450856180, 6392192862