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“Savarkar and Gandhi on Politics of Religion”
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In this paper, I read the seminal text of Hindu nationalism – *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*¹ written by Indian revolutionary Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in 1923, by drawing on insights from Carl Schmitt, the German political theorist; in particular, Schmitt’s discussion of affective nationalism, political antagonism, and the friend-enemy distinction.² I examine Savarkar’s use of religion, more specifically; I focus on his discussion of Muslims.

My argument is that Savarkar’s use of religion, its resonance, can be best understood, as an appeal for political mobilization, which is affect driven.³ It is in opposition to and a response to other contemporary religious appeals for political mobilization, namely, the Pan-Islamist Khilafat movement (the mass-mobilization of Indian Muslims against the British move to dissolve the Ottoman Empire and the Caliphate after the first world war) and also Gandhi’s politics of religion. Thus, in Savarkar’s *Hindutva*, we see certain formulation of the political, which, I argue, has Hindu-Muslim relations or the question of Muslims in India, as its criterion. In turn, it is around this criterion or the political question of Muslims that an idea of India, of India’s unity, is created and recreated by Savarkar, but also, as I allude to in this paper, alternatively and more famously, by Gandhi.

By a close reading of the text, I mean, to read its rhetorical maneuvers, to examine the nature of its appeal, which is being constructed. Here, I follow Quentin Skinner, who has argued that texts are political and ideological maneuvers, in that they offer contextual perspectives on

¹ Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (1923) (Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1969).

² I engage primarily with Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* (1932), trans. George Schwab (University of Chicago Press, 2007) and *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1923), trans. Ellen Kennedy (MIT Press, 1985).

³ Affect refers to emotion or subjectively experienced feeling, more precisely; it refers to an initial visceral response, whereas, emotion is affect channelized through certain culturally defined routes. For the idea that affective intensities are a basic part of the forming of national and community identifications, see Kam Shapiro, *Carl Schmitt And The Intensification Of Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

the nature of politics itself.⁴ It is an attempt is to recognize the relationship between political ideas in the text and their affective power, not simply in terms of “faction or instrumentality.”⁵ In other words, religion (since I focus on the use of religion) is to be treated as an open set of ideas that is expressed in terms of political theory, rather than as an essence of Indian culture or as a political instrument of Indian nationalism.⁶ In this sense, I am interested in the question that the historian Gyanendra Pandey has asked, perhaps rhetorically in his case, in that, why does the myth of Hindu nationalism continue to resonate with the masses even when its inconsistencies have been outed?⁷

Put differently, as the practice of modern mass-politics fully emerged, in the interwar period, with the Non-Cooperation-Khilafat Movement alliance, there was also the simultaneous emergence of religious politics for mobilizing the masses, which inextricably linked religion’s affective appeal to mass-politics in India.⁸ While this new pattern of mass-politics based on religion’s affective appeal emerged as a powerful and central force, it has remained often understudied because of its characterization as a pathological form of politics or dismissed altogether as an echo of old colonial notions. Thus, this paper addresses this crucial terrain of Indian political history and provides a link between religion’s affective appeal and mass-politics. Before I get into the discussion of Savarkar’s text, I will briefly outline a background. Firstly, who is Savarkar and why is this text, his short political pamphlet *Hindutva* important? Savarkar

⁴ James Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Oxford, 1988), 2-15, in Shruti Kapila, ed., *An Intellectual History For India* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 106, note 30.

⁵ C. A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 222.

⁶ Shruti Kapila, ed., *An Intellectual History For India* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), vi.

⁷ Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Oxford University Press, 2006); *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories* (Stanford University Press, 2006).

⁸ For discussion on Noncooperation-Khilafat Movement alliance, see e.g., Amalendu Misra, *Identity and Religion: Foundations of Anti-Islamism in India* (SAGE, 2004); Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (Columbia University Press, 1982); M. Raisur Rahman, “The Mahatma and the Maulana: Understanding Minority Politics in British India,” *Rivista di Studi Sudasiatici* 2, no. 1 (January 12, 2007): 57–84.

was an Indian revolutionary, who in 1906, went to London to study law (much like Gandhi had gone about two decades earlier). In 1910, he was arrested for his involvement in the assassination of a British MP, and was sentenced to two life-terms, and was sent to Andaman Islands where the British exiled Indian political prisoners. After spending more than ten years there, he was brought in 1921 to a prison on the Indian mainland. It was during this time, while in prison, that Savarkar wrote *Hindutva*. It was secretly published in 1923. In 1924, the British released Savarkar on the condition that he would not participate in politics. In Independent India, Savarkar was again arrested and tried in 1948 when Nathuram Godse, an admirer and associate of Savarkar, assassinated Gandhi. While, Savarkar was acquitted in 1949, his subsequent life was spent largely sidelined in India's national politics, for his alleged association with Gandhi's assassination. Savarkar wrote *Hindutva* in English, not in his first language Marathi as his other works, which probably suggests that Savarkar's main audience in *Hindutva* was the English educated Indian middle class - a trans-regional pan-Indian audience.

Much later, of course, especially from the politics of 1980s (here, I am referring to fragmentation of Indian politics with the demise of the Congress as the nationalist hegemonic party and the emergence of caste-based, regional, and religious politics), Savarkar and his text *Hindutva* would re-emerge into prominence as Hindu nationalism's ideology, more particularly, with its appeal in its formulation on the question of Muslims in India. As Janaki Bakhle has rightly pointed out, the significance of *Hindutva* is in its affective power, in that what was a short text is now a full-fledged political and intellectual discourse by the same name.⁹

Secondly, I will briefly introduce the reader to Carl Schmitt and his concepts that are revealing, when examining Savarkar's text. Carl Schmitt was a legal and political theorist of the interwar

⁹ Janaki Bakhle, "Country First? Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966) and the Writing of Essentials of Hindutva," *Public Culture* 22, no. 1 (2010): 186.

period in Germany and later a prominent Nazi ideologue. Schmitt was anti-liberal and wrote extensively about the crisis of liberalism in the new emerging paradigm of mass-politics or mass-democracy. By mass-politics, or the politics of mass-mobilization is meant a politics that appeals to the public, where, nationalism, for instance, emerges as a galvanizing discourse, meant to be broadcasted, to create and mobilize the whole ‘people,’ which is different from, factional politics. We can also think of this contrast in terms of politics from above (e.g., the Hegelian state) and politics from below (e.g., non-state politics of Gandhi¹⁰). However, Schmitt sets up this contrast rather differently.¹¹ Schmitt calls the Hegelian state the universal state, a state that is qualitatively distinct from and above the society. In this sense, it is a stable entity. However, in the age of mass-politics or mass-democracy, this qualitative distinction between the state and society has lost its previous clarity. Thus, Schmitt argues for a total state, an ultimate authority, whose purpose would be the polemical negation of the neutral state, where the economy, laws, etc., are neutral or separate non-political spheres. It is here that Schmitt critiques liberalism, its universalism and depoliticization.

For Schmitt, politics, in its constituent form, involves friends and enemies, (I am now describing Schmitt’s concept of the friend-enemy distinction), which means, the distinction between those who are with and those against whom one struggles. Intense struggle/conflict and the possibility of death are necessary for there to be the political, i.e., the possibility of dying for what one is is the final determining quality of the human (not different from Gandhi’s political thought in this sense¹²). However, what is important about the friend-enemy distinction is not so

¹⁰ Uday Singh Mehta, “Gandhi on Democracy, Politics and the Ethics of Everyday Life,” *Modern Intellectual History* 7, no. 02 (2010): 355–371.

¹¹ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 22–25.

¹² M. K. Gandhi, *Gandhi: “Hind Swaraj” and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony J. Parel (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

much any particular notion of who is with or against whom one must struggle, but the claim that only by means of distinction does the question of politics and what it means to be human arise.

Next, focusing on Savarkar's text, I will attend to some key passages, some key points, on his discussion of Muslims. Alongside, I will further unpack Schmitt's political theory. The central thesis of the *Hindutva* is in a Sanskrit shloka, which Savarkar repeats throughout the text a few times: "*A Sindu Sindhu paryanta, Yasya Bharatbhumika Pitribhuh Punyabhushchaiva sa vai Hinduriti smritah.*"¹³ Here, Savarkar tells us that India's geography extends from the Indus river in the north to the seas in the south, and anyone who wholeheartedly loves and recognizes India, as not only their *Pitribhu* (land of one's ancestors or fatherland/motherland), but also as their *Punyabhu* (holy land), can be in the Hindu fold, and thus, be considered Hindu (India's natural inhabitant). So, the question is, what is this nationalism? How do we describe it? Is it a religious impelling? I argue that it is not about religion qua religion. If we think of Schmitt's discussion on nationalism, Schmitt has argued that one could speak of nationalism, that which appears organic, only after the 'political' (political struggle/conflict) has been settled, through the friend-enemy distinction. So, nationalism could be along the lines of religion qua religion, as in the case Anglican England, Protestant Germany, or Catholic Spain, but also along the lines of race, an ideological world-view (like Russian Communism), or ethnicity, as long as these factors attain an affective dimension.¹⁴ In other words, a compelling myth could be created in various ways, depending on the context; however, it has to harness many affective intensities into a unitary national one.

Thus, if we return to the shloka, we see that the nationalism that Savarkar rhetorically constructs, is about: religion's cultural traditions (religion), along with a territorial attachment (a

¹³ Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (1923), 116.

¹⁴ Anustup Basu, "The 'Indian' Monotheism," *Boundary 2* 39, no. 2 (January 1, 2012): 111–141.

mythic geography), and a community determined by common origin (ethno-racial basis) – all these together make the myth of the Indian nation, not for what they are in particular or in their essence, but in a unity, when these intensities are harnessed into a unitary nationalism.

Secondly, I will discuss the antagonism or the hostility in the text, toward Muslims. Most directly, Savarkar addresses the question of Muslims in the section named, ‘Foreign Invaders.’¹⁵ Here, the mythic Indian nation, conceived in territorial terms, is confronted by Muslim invaders. Indus is the frontier line in the north, which Muslims cross to invade India, the land of peace and plenty. It is India that single-handedly fights morally and militarily, “day after day, decade after decade, century after century,”¹⁶ and as Savarkar tells us, it is an eternal fight, where the existential conflict with the Schmittian ‘enemy’ forges a people into a nation. Savarkar further adds, “That day the conflict of life and death began. Nothing makes Self conscious of itself so much as a conflict with non-self. Nothing can weld peoples into a nation and nations into a state as the pressure of a common foe. Hatred separates as well as unites. Never had Sindhusthan a better chance and a more powerful stimulus to be herself forged into an indivisible whole...”¹⁷

Savarkar is talking about antagonism, not any antagonism though, but existential antagonism or political antagonism. Let me unpack this concept, namely, that of political antagonism. Schmitt argued that all concepts are constructed on the basis of pairs of constitutive oppositions, in that this is how we understand them. Thus, “in the realm of morality the final distinctions are between good and evil, in aesthetics beautiful and ugly, in economics profitable and unprofitable.”¹⁸ In his friend-enemy distinction, Schmitt offers a criterion to which political actions and motives could be reduced. However, the friend-enemy distinction is not the same as

¹⁵ Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (1923), 42–44.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 42–43.

¹⁸ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 26.

the other distinctions, instead, the political supersedes and subsumes all other spheres. As Schmitt wrote, “Every religious, moral, economic, ethical, or other antithesis transforms into a political one...for example, a class in the Marxian sense ceases to be something purely economic and becomes a political factor when it reaches this decisive point (of intensity), for instance, when Marxists approach the class struggle seriously and treat the class adversary as a real enemy and fights him...The real battle is then of necessity, no longer fought according to economic laws, but has – next to the fighting methods in the narrowest technical sense – its political necessities and orientations, coalitions and compromises, and so on...”¹⁹

So, what this means is that the political can derive its energy from the most varied spheres, from religion, economics, morality, and any other antitheses. Moreover, then it does not even describe its own substance any longer, in that it can detach itself from its original meaning or antithesis. In this sense, only the intensity of the friend-enemy distinction remains, i.e., groupings of people whose motivations can be religious, national (in the ethnic or cultural sense), economic, or of any other kind. Furthermore, here the characterizing element is the enemy, not the friend. In other words, it is the enemy through which the friend is defined. However, it is not a personal hatred, as Schmitt wrote: “The enemy is not merely any competitor or just any partner of a conflict in general. He is also not a private adversary whom one hates. An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity. The enemy is solely the public enemy, because everything that has a relationship to such a collectivity of men, particularly to a whole nation, becomes public by virtue of such a relationship.”²⁰ The key to Schmitt’s friend-enemy distinction is that it presupposes both friend and enemy. Thus, political mobilization in this sense is fundamentally irrational and affect-

¹⁹ Ibid., 37–38.

²⁰ Ibid., 28. See footnote 9. Schmitt cites Plato’s *Republic* (Bk. V, Ch. XVI, 470) to underline that the ‘enemy’ is *hostis*, i.e., the public enemy, and not *inimicus*, a private one.

driven in nature. In other words, rationality – what is rational for a group to do to preserve itself as a group – is not only not universal, but also not rational.

It follows that while religion contributes ideas or terms, but more importantly, it contributes affect, which colors these other forms of antagonism (economic/class, racial/ethnic, etc.). Also, affect then detaches itself from doctrine (religious doctrine) and becomes a contributing agent to another kind of antagonism (e.g., national or ethnic-racial). Thus, when I argue that the use of religion for political mobilization is affect driven, what I mean is that it relates to group preservation, it is not something separate with its own rationality. In this sense, nationalism takes from religion something amorphous – that is separate from religious doctrine.

In this light, we may try to understand an important discussion in Savarkar's text about whether Muslims can be included in the Indian nation or not.²¹ Savarkar argues that non-Hindus (i.e., Muslims, but also others such as Christians) could be part of the Hindu civilization; and yet, they cannot be recognized as Hindus. Even *Bohra* and *Khoja* Muslims, who may be patriotic and love India as their homeland and may have an almost pure Hindu blood, yet, they are not Hindus, since their non-Hindu religion means that they have effectively ceased to own the Hindu civilization as a whole. In other words, it is essential that they feel they belong to no other civilization. It is here, in the religious sense, in its sentimental and territorial appeal, that Muslims (and Christians) consequently get excluded. In the case of Muslims (as well as for Christians and Jews), Savarkar points to the contradiction between their ties to a common holy land and their tenuous loyalty to their homeland. Savarkar writes, "Look at the Mohammedans. Mecca to them is a sterner reality than Delhi or Agra. Some of them do not make any secret of being bound to sacrifice all India if that be to the glory of Islam or could save the city of their prophet. Look at the Jews; neither centuries of prosperity nor sense of gratitude for the shelter

²¹ Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (1923), 100–102.

they found, can make them more attached or even equally attached to the several countries they inhabit. Their love is, and must necessarily be divided between the land of their birth and the land of their Prophets.”²² Pan-Islamism of the Khilafat movement is clearly a problem and Savarkar draws a stark distinction between Hindus and Muslims (who may not always feel “as Indians first and every other thing afterwards.”²³). He further adds, that the nation/any nation is about those who are the essence – Hindus in the case of India, but as Savarkar puts it, “axiomatically true everywhere in the world (protestant Christians in the case of America) - that a nation requires a foundation to stand upon and the essence of the life of a nation is the life of that portion of its citizens whose interests and history and aspirations are most closely bound up with the land and who thus provide the real foundation to the structure of their national state.”²⁴

Thus, we see here that Muslims are excluded; they are certainly not part of the core of the Indian nation. However, what does “it is essential that they feel they belong to no other civilization” mean? What is the test of this feeling, or put differently, how would Muslims prove that they feel that they belong to no other civilization? Moreover, this is a kind of paradox in the text, a certain ambivalence, in that, while Hindus ultimately constitute a homogeneity that Muslims are unable to qualify to, sometimes, some Muslims like Akbar and Dara Shikoh (Savarkar discusses these as exemplars) may be accommodated. While the present paper is limited in its scope, I will briefly mention Zizek’s discussion about anti-Semitism,²⁵ which possibly provides an insight into how Savarkar’s text creates the ‘Hindu’ and the ‘Muslim.’ Zizek argues that at first, ‘Jew’ appears as a signifier connoting a cluster of different properties (greedy, dirty, lazy, intriguing, and so on), but this is not yet anti-Semitism. To achieve that, an

²² Ibid., 135–136.

²³ Ibid., 139.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso, 1989), 96–97.

inversion takes place, when all the meaning is given to the signifier (when we say: ‘they are like that (greedy, dirty, lazy...) because they are Jews.’). However, this inversion is not tautological, in fact, tautology is no longer possible, because ‘Jew’ in ‘because they are Jews’ does not connote the plurality of its original meanings anymore. Instead, it refers to an unattainable extra or surplus, to what is ‘in ‘Jew’ more than Jew.’ In other words, the signifier of ‘Hindu’ or ‘Muslim’ once accomplished, can detach from the multiple meanings that were attached to it and take all the agency, in that it does not even have to be defined anymore.

Yet another line of inquiry that has remained outside the scope of the present discussion is to situate Savarkar’s formulation of Hindu-Muslim relations alongside Gandhi’s. For Gandhi also most prominently invoked and used religion in politics. Thus, Gandhi provides a contemporaneous account on the question of Muslims in India. Faisal Devji has made an argument based on political theory of friendship about Gandhi’s politics of friendship, that for Gandhi, Hindu-Muslim relations are framed in terms of the fraternal, and the fraternal is the friend, thus the Muslim is the fraternal friend of the Hindu.²⁶ It follows that the Muslim is both outside the Hindu fold but also conjoined relationally. Devji asks, in reference to Gandhi: how is politics of friendship possible? (friendship as choice, a politics of desire, against politics of liberal interests, Devji contrasts this with brotherhood, which is a natural passive state of unity). Devji argues that Gandhi faced a choice between the violence of national brotherhood and the violence of liberal interests, which he felt compelled to speak of friendship as something irreducible to either. Thus, politics of friendship introduces rather than dissipates antagonism, for friendship cannot be a given and must be worked at, because a friend is a potentially always a stranger, if not an enemy.²⁷ In this regard, it is instructive to note that Schmitt’s friend-enemy

²⁶ Faisal Devji, *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence* (Harvard University Press, 2012).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

distinction does not deal with the friend as such, as some have critiqued, most famously, Derrida, who directly critiques Schmitt's politics of the enemy in his own elaboration on the politics of friendship.²⁸

Also, significantly, Savarkar's and Gandhi's use of religion and their anti-liberal politics is in several ways in opposition to the Nehruvian paradigm that dominated post-Independence politics. In this regard, Martha Nussbaum, in her analysis of the rise of the Hindu Right provides an important insight. She argues that while Nehru's economic policies are often criticized, a deeper limitation, which is rarely discussed, is his disdain for religion in politics.²⁹ Nehru's idea of modernity as scientific-socialist development, to overcome India's feudalism, meant that religion was marginalized in Indian politics. Partition; further reinforced fear and suspicion, as religion was equated with extremism. Thus, Nehru inadvertently invited a narrower view of secularism, as liberal pluralists avoided the entire issue altogether, leaving space for religious extremists to monopolize this important aspect of politics.³⁰

Finally, to conclude, the challenge in trying to theoretically understand a text such as Savarkar's *Hindutva* is that it is inherently interventionist, much like Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*. While the present attempt is a preliminary one and thus limited, the danger is always that the meaning of Savarkar's seminal text (and also of Savarkar as a political signifier) could only oscillate from obscurity to what would amount to cliché.³¹ Nonetheless, the elusiveness of the text's meaning must not simply be resolved by teleology alone, based on what *Hindutva* means post-1980s. In the interwar period, many amorphous possibilities existed, with alternative ideas of India. Often, these have been synthesized in a Hegelian fashion with the arrival of Gandhi

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (Verso, 2005).

²⁹ Martha Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 82.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

³¹ Cf. Shapiro, *Carl Schmitt And The Intensification Of Politics*.

and the ever forward, all-encompassing march of the history of modern India. Thus, focusing on Savarkar's *Hindutva* is to reinterpret religion in twentieth-century India as a place of political debate of ideas both global and Indian.