

Reading V.D. Savarkar's The Indian War of Independence and M.K. Gandhi's Hind Swaraj Together

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Abstract: This essay undertakes a co-reading of two very important texts that emerged during the anti-colonial movement in India. In 1909, they encountered each other in India House, the home of Indian revolutionaries founded by the influential Shyamji Krishna Varma (1857-1930). SWATANTRYAVEER Savarkar (1883-1966) and MAHATMA Gandhi (1869-1948) both patriots, subscribed radically different views on how India that is *Bharat* should win its freedom. Savarkar advocated for “armed revolt” while Gandhi promoted non-violent *Satyagraha* to achieve freedom. Dhananjay Keer, notable biographer of both Savarkar and Gandhi, believed that Gandhi wrote *Hind Swaraj* in 1909 in response to Savarkar’s advocacy of armed revolution. Savarkar’s *First War of Independence* was also published the same year. Interestingly, both books were banned by the colonial government and continue even today to shape the Idea of India. This essay contends that both worldviews warrant recognition as coexisting and parallel elements within the broader cosmology of knowledge.

Savarkar's The Indian War of Independence (hereafter as IWI, 1857)

Veer Savarkar acutely understood that the actual phenomenal world was far from attaining the ‘Divine Age’ where ‘Truth rules in the hearts of every man’ⁱ. In other words, he knew that the possibility of attaining the goal of ‘universal justice’ and of ‘ultimate beatitude’ did not arise in this real world. He therefore argued that human beings had to engage themselves through some sort of morally justifiable action in order to check or eradicate ‘sinful’ and ‘aggressive tendencies’ⁱⁱ in human beings so as to establish justice in this world. Because, he continued, if there was no fear in the heart of man that ‘Nature’ would create ‘an avenger for the temporal injustice’ they had committed, “the earth would have been bent under the devil-dance of unchecked robbery and oppression” or “the whole world would have swarmed today with Tsars and robbers!”ⁱⁱⁱ

Savarkar contended that proclivity for retribution against any form of injustices was in-built in human nature. So, he thought that if he could turn this in-built human nature into morally justifiable ‘action’ for seeking retribution then this worldly temporal human existence would be free from injustices and an era of “Universal Justice’ could be established. By way of explaining the importance of the retributive ‘action’, he further added “if there was no propensity in a human nature towards a terrible revenge for a horrible injustice suffered, the

brute in man would have been still the dominating factor in human dealings.”^{iv} It was this feeling for the necessity of morally justifiable retributive ‘action’ which led Savarkar to theorise and rationalise retribution.

Now, the question to be asked here is what, according to Savarkar, were the primary means for seeking retribution against the perpetrators or abettors of sinful injustices? This question is important because Savarkar’s reply will provide us significant clues to understand his position on the use of violence as means of seeking retribution. In this context, his book *IWI, 1857* (particularly the Chapter X of the book) is very helpful and provide us with Savarkar’s explicit reply to the above question. In chapter X of *IWI, 1857*, Savarkar wrote:

...so long as even to make that state of universal justice possible the Human mind has to be very busy eradicating sinful and aggressive tendencies, so long rebellion, bloodshed and revenge cannot be purely sinful... before passing judgement on the history and the authors of any revolt, bloodshed, and revenge there must be a full and minute inquiry of the circumstances under which they took place. Revolt, bloodshed and revenge have often been instruments created by nature to root out injustice and introduce era of justice. And when justice uses these terrible means for her salvation, the blame of it does not lie on Justice but on the preceding cruel injustice, the power and insolence called forth the means...^v

Thus, for Savarkar, if human beings ethically resorted to these Nature-created means of revolt, bloodshed and revenge only to fight sinful aggressive tendencies the ‘era of Justice’ could be established in the world. By corollary, the avenger would be absolved from the sin of using violence so long as he was using it against some preceding injustice.

The significance of his philosophy of retribution was more to do with his idea that “armed revolution” was the only means to fight national independence against foreign domination. It is also well known that in the case of Veer Savarkar every national movement for independence was a fight for establishing ‘*Swadharma*’ and ‘*Swaraj*’. This *Swadharma*=*Swaraj* equation of Savarkar established complex inter-connections between ‘nation’ and ‘God’/‘religion’ which he described as below:

...God is the essence of Justice, and slavery is the absence of justice. God is the essence of freedom slavery is the absence of freedom. Hence where there is God there cannot be slavery and where there is Slavery there cannot be God or Godliness. Where there is no place for God, there can be no religion. In short, true religion cannot exist where slavery, the nursery of injustice, is rampant. Slavery is the straight road to Hell and true religion is a means of attaining Heaven. To walk in the path leading towards Heaven, the shackles of slavery must be broken...^{vi}

“*Swadharma*=*Swaraj*” equation on the one hand invoked in the minds of his readers an understanding that abstinence from fighting against political slavery was tantamount to the very destruction of ‘God’ / ‘religion’. This notion instigated his readers to directly participate in the national independence movement. And on the

other hand, it broke down the inner moral resistances that prevented them to from taking retribution against the alien domination and oppression. This could be one of the reasons for Savarkar to consider total *ahimsa* or complete non-violence as sinful because it allowed slavery, injustice, oppression to continue.

It was because of his idea of *Swaadharna*=*Swaraj* equation that Savarkar thought revolution was the inevitable reaction against British oppression. He wrote “because India has been subjected to innumerable and cruel oppressions each of which would have justified the revenge.”^{vii} Savarkar also attempt to approximate his idea of retribution with the philosophy of *Ramadas* and *Pran Nath*: “to win *Swaraj* for the sake of religion, by fighting and dying for it”^{viii} and said that this idea stirred the Indian people while fighting against the political slavery at the time of what he called the Revolution of 1857. Savarkar was hopeful that one his readers understood that the notion of “political slavery is tantamount to destruction of religion” would be ready to fight against political slavery. Another aspect of Savarkar idea of national retribution was that he thought it was a means to prove the moral as well as physical fitness of the nation to survive. This idea was influenced by idea of Herbert Spencer’s Social Darwinist idea of survival of the fittest. There are references to Spencer’s thought scattered throughout Savarkar’s writings.

Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*

For Gandhi, the primary goal of Indian national movement was not to expel ther British rulers and reinstate Indian rulers in their place. According to Gandhi, to limit the meaning of *Swaraj* as ‘India under Indian rulers’ would be similar to ‘English rule without the Englishman’^{ix}. Gandhi wrote in *Hind Swaraj* as quoted below:

In effect it means this: we want English Rule without the Englishman. You want the Tiger’s nature, but not the tiger; that is to say, you would make India English. And when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan but Englishtan. This is not the *Swaraj* I want.^x

So, Gandhi proposed that to free India from the colonial rule, we should find out the real cause of India’s state of slavery. “If the cause of India’s slavery be removed, India can become free.”^{xi} In Gandhi’s estimation the whole of India was not under slavery. It was only those people who were influenced by Western Civilization that were enslaved. Thus, Western civilization was the real cause of India’s slavery. So, the primary goal of India’s struggle for *Swaraj* was to free from the tight grip of western civilization. Only then India can be free. Further, the only right path to bring *swaraj* was the means of non-violent *Satyagraha*, soul-force. The *Styagrahi*, the practitioner of the means of *Satyagraha* must perform a moral duty to tell the English courageously that “if they wish to remain in India along with their civilization, there is no room for them.”^{xii} If they denied these, Indians would no longer play the part of the governed.

Conclusion

Both Savarkar and Gandhi are two principal thinkers and leaders of modern India. From the above discussion, one can see that both of them, like many other nationalist thinkers of their time, analyse the condition of British colonial rule in India and articulate their nationalist responses in their own ways. *The Indian War of Independence* and *Hind Swaraj* are two texts that emerged from an ongoing intellectual debate between the respective authors and should therefore be read in conjunction with one another, recognizing and appreciating both as parallel worldviews. Regardless of their divergent outcomes in terms of political or philosophical orientation, each warrants thoughtful engagement and critical appreciation.

ⁱ V.D. Savarkar, *The Indian War of Independence, SELECTED WORKS OF VEER SAVARKAR*, Vol. 1, Abhishek Publications, Chandigarh, 2007, p. 261.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 262.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 260.

^{iv} Ibid., p. 262.

^v Ibid., p. 260.

^{vi} Ibid., pp. 51-52.

^{vii} Ibid., p. 261.

^{viii} Ibid., p. 52.

^{ix} Sharma, Suresh and Shurud, Tridip, n.d., trans., ed., (2010), *M.K. Gandhi's Hind Swaraj: a critical edition*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, p. 24.

^x Ibid., p. 24-25

^{xi} Ibid., p. 59

^{xii} Ibid., P. 53.