IMPACT FACTOR 7.50 (SJIAI)

BIHAR SHODH SAMAAGAM

Multidisciplinary, Multi-Lingual, Peer Reviewed /Refereed Open Access Journal
Vol. 4, Issue 4 October-December, 2026
Available online : https://www.biharshodhsamaagam.com/
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23539676

ISSN : 3048-6971

V. D. Savarkar and Indian Composite Culture: Cultural Nationalism and the Question of Pluralism

Moin Ahmed
Research scholar, Department of History
Ranchi University, Ranchi, Jharkhand
Email: tobemoinahmad@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's views on Indian nationalism and culture, as well as how they relate to the idea of composite culture in India. Because of his creation of Hindutva and his comprehension of the cultural underpinnings of the Indian people, Savarkar holds a prominent and contentious place in contemporary Indian intellectual and political history. His publications, particularly Essentials of Hindutva (1923), expressed an idea of Indian nationhood based on shared ancestry, cultural customs, shared geography, and historical awareness. The idea of India as a historically developing composite civilisation formed via interactions among many religious, linguistic, ethnic, and regional communities is critically examined in relation to Savarkar's conception of cultural unity.

The research places Savarkar's ideas within the larger intellectual discussions of the late colonial era, when conflicting interpretations of Indian nationalism arose in reaction to communal politics, colonial rule, and the independence movement. In addition to analysing Savarkar's opinions on Hindu identity, Muslims and Christians, national belonging, and the historical interactions between various populations, it looks at his distinction between cultural nationalism and political nationalism. The conflict between his focus on cultural homogeneity and the historically diverse nature of Indian culture is highlighted.

The paper contends that because Savarkar's theory situates cultural and civilisational unity inside a framework that is primarily Hindu, it poses a serious threat to the inclusive view of composite culture. However, the study looks at the intricacies and historical background of his views rather than reducing them to a straightforward denial of cultural contact. The article aims to shed light on the ongoing discussion about cultural plurality, national identity, and the definition of Indianness by examining Savarkar in conjunction with the broader historiography of Indian nationalism and composite culture. It comes to the conclusion that Savarkar's philosophical legacy is still essential to comprehending the current struggles between majoritarian and pluralist interpretations of Indian nationalism.

Keywords: Hindutva, Composite Culture, Nationalism, Pluralism.

Introduction

A profound dispute over the definition of the country characterises the intellectual history of contemporary Indian nationalism. As the Indian national movement grew in strength against British imperial rule in the late colonial era, scholars and political figures struggled with a central question: What is the fundamental unity of the Indian subcontinent? A diverse range of religions, languages, sects, and regional customs were found throughout the large area. Two different conceptions of nationhood arose from this historical complexity.

A well-known vision was pluralistic and civic. The concept of a "composite culture" (*gaṅgā-jamunī tehzeeb*) was articulated by this paradigm, which was led by individuals such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru and eventually codified in the Indian Constitution. It proposed that centuries of integration, communication, and reciprocal exchange among many ethnic and religious communities had transformed India into a dynamic, open-ended civilisation. According to this concept, Indian identity was cumulative rather than exclusive, and equal constitutional citizenship, common anti-colonial resistance, and geographical coexistence were the foundations of national belonging.

A different conception of nationhood based on organic cultural, civilisational, and ethno-religious homogeneity ran counter to this pluralist view. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966) was the main architect of this ideational framework. In his groundbreaking 1923 work Essentials of Hindutva (later reissued as Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?),

extreme anti-colonial insurgent turned ideological theorist Savarkar created the idea of Hindutva ("Hindu-ness"). Savarkar aimed to redefine Indian nationalism on a shared cultural essence, common ancestry, and a unified civilisational history founded in Hindu antiquity rather than around shared anti-colonial struggle or abstract territoriality.

In Indian political philosophy, Savarkar has a pivotal and contentious position. His writings offered a critique of the inclusive, composite conception of nationhood, contending that the cohesive force required to maintain a powerful national state was absent from simple geographic presence in the absence of cultural coherence. Savarkar questioned the fundamental tenets of composite nationalism by connecting authentic national identity with a particular civilisational matrix that simultaneously defined India as fatherland (pitribhumi) and holy land (punyabhumi).

The article examines Savarkar's perspectives on nationalism and culture, critically analysing the relationship between his conception of Hindutva and the notion of India's composite culture. It charts his intellectual growth, scrutinises the fundamental tenets of his ideology, investigates his perspectives on religious minorities, and juxtaposes his cultural nationalism with other late colonial nationalist ideologies. Lastly, it assesses how this intellectual heritage still influences discussions about national identity, pluralism, and majoritarianism in modern India.

Intellectual Legacy: From Ideologue to Revolutionary Anti-Colonialism

It is necessary to place Savarkar's early life amid the anti-colonial movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in order to comprehend his ideological trajectory. Savarkar grew up during a time when political radicalism against British imperial rule was on the rise. Savarkar adopted a militant strategy for national freedom, influenced by the writings of Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini and the history of Maratha resistance under Shivaji.

Savarkar established political organisations like Abhinav Bharat (Young India Society) while attending Fergusson College in Pune and then Gray's Inn in London. He also rose to prominence among Indian revolutionaries in Europe, working out of India House. His first significant historical work, The Indian War of Independence of 1857 (1909), was written during this time in London (1906–1910).

Savarkar reinterpreted the 1857 rebellion in The Indian War of Independence of 1857, which colonial historians had written off as a confined mercenary troop insurrection. Savarkar reinterpreted the uprising as a coordinated, deliberate national attempt to topple foreign oppression. Notably, his account highlighted the importance of Hindu-Muslim harmony as a prerequisite for national liberation:

"The rising of 1857 was a grand, national movement... Hindus and Mohammedans forgot their old animosities and fought shoulder to shoulder for the liberation of their common motherland" (Savarkar, 1909/1947, p. 12).

In this early text, Savarkar praised Muslim leaders like Bahadur Shah Zafar and Maulvi Ahmadullah alongside Hindu figures such as Nana Sahib and the Rani of Jhansi. The political imperative at this stage was territorial unification against a common external oppressor i.e. the British Raj.

However, Savarkar's political outlook underwent a significant transformation following his arrest in 1910, his dramatic attempt to escape at Marseille, and his subsequent conviction in two trials that resulted in a sentence of fifty years' transportation. Imprisoned in the Cellular Jail in the Andaman Islands from 1911 to 1921, Savarkar experienced harsh incarceration alongside political prisoners of various backgrounds.

During these years of solitary confinement and forced labor, alongside his observation of religious dynamics within the prison system and the broader rise of communal politics on the mainland (such as the Khilafat Movement), Savarkar re-evaluated his political philosophy. He moved away from a purely anti-colonial territorial nationalism toward a civilisational and cultural definition of the nation.

Smuggled out of prison and published under the pseudonym "A Maratha" in 1923, *Essentials of Hindutva* marked this shift. Written while Savarkar was detained in Ratnagiri, the text ceased to view the nation merely as a territorial entity occupied by various inhabitants. Instead, it argued that true nationhood required a deep organic bond composed of shared blood, common culture, and a unified historical consciousness.

The Core Architecture of Hindutva

Central to Savarkar's political philosophy is his precise distinction between two terms that had often been used interchangeably: *Hinduism* and *Hindutva*. For Savarkar, failing to separate these concepts led to persistent confusion in discussions of Indian national identity. Savarkar made this distinction explicit in *Essentials of Hindutva*:

"*Hinduism is only a derivative, a fraction, a part of Hindutva... Hindutva embraces all the departments of thought and activity of the whole Being of our Hindu race*" (Savarkar, 1923/1969, p. 3).

By defining *Hindutva* beyond orthodox religious dogma, Savarkar formulated an overarching cultural identity. Under this definition, an atheist, an agnostic, or a follower of non-Vedic traditions (such as Buddhism, Jainism, or Sikhism)

could fully belong to the *Hindu* nation, provided they shared the cultural, historical, and territorial heritage of the land. To establish who belongs to this national collective, Savarkar formulated three foundational criteria. A person is a Hindu, and thus a full member of the nation (*Rashtra*), if they fulfil three interconnected conditions:

First is Territorial Bond (*Pitribhumi* / Fatherland): The individual must inhabit the geographic territory of *Akhand Bharat* (Undivided India), traditionally bounded by the Indus River (*Sindhu*) in the north and the Indian Ocean in the south. This land must be recognised as the ancestral fatherland. Secondly Racial/Blood Bond (*Jati* / Common Blood): The individual must inherit the blood of the ancient Vedic and indigenous inhabitants of India. Savarkar posited that despite regional, linguistic, and caste divisions, the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent shared a common ancestral bloodline forged through millennia of endogamy and intermixture. Thirdly Cultural Bond (*Sanskriti* / Common Culture): The individual must inherit and align with the overarching cultural traditions, social customs, historical memories, heroes, and festivals of Indian civilisation.

The ultimate test of national belonging within Savarkar's theory lies in the alignment of one's *Pitribhumi* (Fatherland) with one's *Punyabhumi* (Holy Land) an individual's ancestral land and sacred geography coincide within the territorial boundaries of India, their national loyalty is viewed as organic and undivided. For Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs, India is simultaneously the land of their ancestors and the birthplace of their religions, philosophies, and holy sites.

Savarkar and the Critique of Composite Culture

The central point of conflict between Savarkar's political philosophy and mainstream Indian nationalism centres on the concept of "composite culture" (*mushteraka tehzeeb or gaṅgā-jamunī tehzeeb)*. Proponents of composite culture argued that centuries of co-existence between diverse religious groups particularly Hindus and Muslims had forged an integrated Indian identity. This synthesised culture was reflected in vernacular languages (such as Urdu and Hindustani), classical Hindustani music, architectural styles, Sufi-Bhakti traditions, and shared social customs.

Savarkar offered a direct critique of this composite thesis. He maintained that a viable nation could not be constructed on a syncretic blend of competing traditions. From his perspective, the theory of composite culture obscured historical conflicts and presented a false equivalence between indigenous traditions and foreign influences.

Savarkar's critique rested on three main conceptual arguments:-

The Primacy of Pre-Islamic Antiquity: Savarkar argued that Indian nationhood was not formed in the medieval period through cultural synthesis, but was already established in antiquity. He pointed to the Vedic period and the consolidation of political authority under empires like the Maurya and Gupta dynasties as the foundational era of Indian civilisation. In his view, the fundamental identity of India had been established long before the arrival of Islamic or European influences. Subsequent cultural additions were either secondary overlays or elements that resisted assimilation into the broader Hindu framework.

Secondly Cultural Homogeneity vs. Structural Pluralism: While composite nationalists viewed regional and religious variations as evidence of a rich, multi-layered civilisation, Savarkar saw unassimilated cultural variance as a source of weakness. Drawing on nineteenth-century European theories of nationalism specifically Ernest Renan's emphasis on shared historical memories and Giuseppe Mazzini's focus on cultural unity Savarkar asserted that political cohesion required a primary, unifying cultural core. He argued that a state lacking cultural unity would remain vulnerable to internal division:

"*A Hindu is not only a brother to a Hindu because he belongs to the same motherland... but because his blood is enriched by the same ancestral heritage and his mind is nourished by the same cultural stream"* (Savarkar, 1923/1969, p. 84).

Last is the Distinction Between Political Belonging and Cultural Loyalty: Savarkar drew a line between political nationality and cultural nationalism. While he supported equal legal rights for all citizens in a future democratic state, he maintained that national identity could not be separated from Hindu heritage. In his presidential addresses to the Hindu Mahasabha during the late 1930s and early 1940s, he articulated a framework where minorities would enjoy full political equality as individuals, but without special communal privileges or the power to redefine the cultural identity of the nation:

"*The Indian State must be based on the principle of 'one man, one vote'... No minority shall be allowed to dictate to the majority, nor shall the majority oppress the minority"* (Savarkar, 1949, p. 158).

However, this political equality was paired with a requirement that the national identity, symbols, state iconography, and official language (Sanskritised Hindi written in Devanagari) remain grounded in Hindu cultural heritage.

The Question of Minorities: Muslims, Christians, and Sacred Geography

The most controversial element of Savarkar's theory of Hindutva is his treatment of non-Indic religious communities, specifically Indian Muslims and Christians. In setting the criteria for national belonging, Savarkar applied his test of sacred geography (*Punyabhumi*).

While Indian Muslims and Christians met the first criterion (*Pitribhumi*), as their ancestors had lived on the subcontinent for generations, Savarkar argued that they did not fulfil the second criterion (*Punyabhumi*). Because the sacred sites, holy places, and foundational historical events of Islam and Christianity are located in the Middle East, Savarkar posited that Indian adherents of these faiths experienced a dual loyalty:

"*For though Hindusthan to them is Fatherland as to any other Hindu yet it is not to them a Holyland too. Their holyland is far off in Arabia or Palestine... Their love is divided*" (Savarkar, 1923/1969, p. 113).

Savarkar's analysis was framed primarily in terms of political loyalty rather than purely theological disagreement. He expressed concern that when a citizen's holy land lies outside their fatherland, extraterritorial religious ties could override national allegiances during times of crisis. He cited the Khilafat Movement (1919–1924) wherein Indian Muslims mobilised in support of the Ottoman Caliphate as evidence that religious solidarity could take precedence over local territorial priorities.

However, Savarkar did not present this exclusion as permanent or genetic. He suggested that members of minority communities could be fully integrated into the Hindu nation (*Rashtra*) through cultural and emotional assimilation. This process required:Recognising Indian heritage, historical figures, and cultural traditions as their own.Then Subordinating extraterritorial religious loyalties to national allegiance. And Adopting the cultural idioms and historical narrative of the Indian nation.

Scholars such as Christophe Jaffrelot (1996) and Gyanendra Pandey (2001) observe that this framework creates an asymmetric model of citizenship. While members of Indic faiths are treated as natural citizens whose national loyalty is self-evident, members of non-Indic faiths must continuously demonstrate their patriotism and cultural alignment to be considered fully part of the nation.

B. R. Ambedkar shared Savarkar's critical view of Gandhi's idealisation of traditional village life, but his analysis of Hindu society differed fundamentally from Savarkar's. Ambedkar saw the caste system (*varna* and *jati*) as an oppressive hierarchical structure that fractured Hindu society and denied basic human dignity to Untouchables (Dalits). In *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), Ambedkar argued that true national unity was impossible without dismantling the religious texts and social norms that sustained caste discrimination.

Savarkar also recognised that caste divisions weakened Hindu society and advocated for social reforms such as ending untouchability, supporting inter-caste dining (*sahabhojan*), opening temples to all castes, and abolishing hereditary caste professions. During his internment in Ratnagiri (1924–1937), Savarkar established the Patit Pavan Mandir, a temple open to all caste groups, and campaigned against caste restrictions.However, their underlying motivations were distinct: Savarkar's motivation was pragmatic and nationalist: caste reform was necessary to unite the Hindu population into a cohesive political force capable of defending national interests. Ambedkar's motivation was grounded in social justice and universal human rights: caste had to be destroyed because it was inherently exploitative, regardless of its impact on national consolidation.

Ambedkar remained skeptical of Savarkar's *Hindutva*, arguing that a consolidated Hindu nation risks turning social majorities into permanent political majorities, potentially marginalising lower castes and religious minorities (Ambedkar, 1940/1945).

Conclusion

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's political thought represents a major turning point in modern Indian intellectual history. By formulating the concept of *Hindutva*, he challenged the inclusive, civic model of nationalism that guided the Indian National Congress and later formed the constitutional foundation of the post-colonial republic.

Savarkar's critique of composite culture was not a simple rejection of historical interaction; it was a systematic attempt to anchor Indian national identity in a shared civilisational, cultural, and territorial inheritance. By defining the nation through the triad of fatherland (*Pitribhumi*), shared ancestry (*Jati*), and sacred geography (*Punyabhumi*), he established a cultural nationalism that prioritised internal cohesion and historical alignment over pluralist synthesis.

This ideological framework introduced a enduring question into Indian political life: Can a multi-ethnic, multi-religious civilisation sustain a democratic nation-state around an organic, majoritarian cultural core, or does its stability depend on preserving a pluralist, composite identity?

As contemporary India navigates debate over secularism, historical interpretation, citizenship, and national identity, Savarkar's intellectual legacy remains central to the discussion. His works continue to shape how political movements, scholars, and citizens define the limits, character, and meaning of Indianness.

Reference

1. Ambedkar, B. R. (1945). *Pakistan or the Partition of India*. Thacker & Co. (Original work published 1940)
2. Gandhi, M. K. (1938). *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*. Navajivan Publishing House. (Original work published 1909)
3. Jaffrelot, C. (1996). *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s*. C. Hurst & Co. Publishers.
4. Nehru, J. (1946). *The Discovery of India*. Meridian Books.
5. Pandey, G. (2001). *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*. Cambridge University Press.
6. Patnaik, P. (2020). The concept of Hindutva and its contradictions. *Social Scientist*, 48(5/6), 3–14.
7. Savarkar, V. D. (1947). *The Indian War of Independence of 1857*. Phoenix Publications. (Original work published 1909)
8. Savarkar, V. D. (1949). *Hindu Rashtra Darshan: Collection of Presidential Addresses Delivered at the All India Hindu Mahasabha Sessions*. Laxman Ganesh Khare.
9. Savarkar, V. D. (1969). *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (5th ed.). Veer Savarkar Prakashan. (Original work published 1923 as *Essentials of Hindutva*)
10. Savarkar, V. D. (1971). *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History* (S. T. Godbole, Trans.). Veer Savarkar Prakashan. (Original work published 1963)
11. Thapar, R. (2014). *The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities through History*. Aleph Book Company.