

Gandhiji and Savarkar in Post-Truth Project of Saffron Brigade

by
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Perhaps Vinayak Damodar Savarkar didn't ever think that new-age Sangh Parivar patriarchs would drag him in such an uncomfortable controversy and that too involving none other than Gandhiji! While formally releasing a book on Savarkar on October 13 in the presence of RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, Defence minister and former BJP president Rajnath Singh claimed that Savarkar had submitted mercy petitions to the colonial administration while he was locked up in the Andaman jail and that it was Gandhiji who had asked him to do so! The same Gandhiji after whose assassination in 1948 Savarkar was accused of having connivance with Nathuram Godse and was arrested (though released for inadequate evidence) by the police. Expectedly, Rajnath Singh's strange statement has drawn criticism from various quarters and has found a place in the media as well.

Savarkar's Life Sentence

The statement is another burning proof of the kind of murky disinformation campaigns the Saffron bosses are habituated with. The matter will be clear if we take a glance at the series of events following Savarkar's imprisonment and mercy petitions he had submitted one after another.

Savarkar was first arrested in London in 1910. He was brought to India. The special tribunal imposed a life sentence and subsequently he was transferred to the Andaman Cellular Jail on July 4, 1911. There were two main allegations against Savarkar, his alleged involvement in the December 1909 assassination of AMT Jackson, then district collector in Nasik under Bombay province. It was Savarkar who from London had supplied the revolver for killing Jackson in India, the British intelligence suspected. There was also allegation of "conspiracy" against the British Raj under Section 121A of the Indian Penal Code. Meanwhile, in June 1909, V D Savarkar's elder brother Ganesh Savarkar was also sentenced to life imprisonment and subsequently sent to the Andamans.

The Andaman period of the Savarkar brothers ended in May 1921. Both of them were sent from the Cellular Jail to the Ratnagiri Jail in Maharashtra, and finally to the Yerwada Jail in Pune. On January 8, 1924, Savarkar's prison life came to an end. But he was not allowed to move beyond Ratnagiri district without permission of the government till 1937. However, there was not much difficulty in carrying out his pro-Hindutva political moves, though not much overtly. In 1939, Savarkar became the president of the All India Hindu Mahasabha.

Mercy Petitions

Savarkar's Cellular Jail episode is more studied, but because of his submission of one mercy petition after another to the colonial government. Savarkar first applied for a waiver days before coming to the Andamans, though it was not accepted. Savarkar wrote his first petition from the Cellular Jail within six months. In October 1913, Sir Reginald Craddock, member for the Home Department of the Viceroy's Executive Council, visited the Cellular Jail and spoke to the

prisoners, including Savarkar. After that Savarkar submitted his second petition on November 14, 1913 and promised to “serve the Government in any capacity they like, for as my conversion is conscientious so I hope my future conduct would be. By keeping me in jail nothing can be got in comparison to what would be otherwise.” In the same letter, Savarkar identified himself as a “prodigal son” and said: “...where else can the prodigal son return but to the parental doors of the Government?” (Ref. R C Majumdar, Penal Settlement in Andamans, 1975)

When the World War I broke out in 1914, Savarkar again offered to serve the government to his “...best to render the hands of the British dominion a bond of love and respect and of mutual help.” (Petition dated 14 November 1913). In 1918, he again submitted another petition in the same way. The last petition of Savarkar from Andaman was dated March 30, 1920 before he left the Cellular Jail and was sent to Ratnagiri Jail. However, even this was not his last as a prisoner, he submitted a new petition promising to stay away from politics before his release from the Yerwada Jail in 1924.

Gandhiji and Savarkar

It is more than evident from Savarkar’s life and works that none other than he had been responsible for all the mercy petitions, with which Gandhiji had nothing to do. Gandhiji came back from South Africa to India finally in 1915 to settle permanently. By then, Savarkar had become a habitual mercy petitioner. Gandhiji’s first comment on Savarkar’s imprisonment came in 1920 and that too in response to a letter (dated 16 January 1920) sent to him by Savarkar’s younger brother Narayan Rao Damodar Savarkar. This letter is mentioned in the nineteenth volume of Gandhiji’s Collected Works (p.348). In the letter, he pointed out that the government was reluctant to release his two brothers and what to do in such a situation? “Please let me hear from you as to how to proceed in such circumstances,” wrote Narayan Rao. In a reply letter (January 25, 1920), Gandhiji said that it was “difficult to advise” him; however, Gandhiji added, “I suggest, however, your framing a brief petition setting forth the facts of the case... I suggest this in order that it would be possible to concentrate public attention on the case.” (Volume 19; Letter No. 197, p. 348)

Where is the advice to beg for forgiveness in this answer? Gandhiji’s entire emphasis was on the merit of the case to draw “public attention” to a political issue.

What Savarkar Did

But what did Savarkar do? In a petition dated March 30, 1920, he wrote, “The brilliant prospects of my early life all but too soon blighted, have constituted so painful a source of regret to me that a release would be a new birth and would touch my heart, sensitive and submissive, to kindness so deeply as to render me personally attached and politically useful in future.” Referring to the ‘release’ as his ‘new birth’, Savarkar prayed for his freedom with a clear promise to play a ‘politically useful role’ in the future.

In Favour of Release, Not Mercy

Gandhiji was in favour of the release of the Savarkar brothers, like many other political prisoners. In an article titled 'Savarkar Brothers', published in the May 26, 1920 issue of Young India (Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol.20, pp. 368-361), Gandhi wrote: "Both these brothers have declared their political opinions and both have stated that they do not entertain any revolutionary ideas and that if they were set free they would like to work under the Reforms Act, for they consider that the Reforms enable one to work there under so as to achieve political responsibility for India. They both state unequivocally that they do not desire independence from the British connection. On the contrary, they feel that India's destiny can be best worked out in association with the British."

Gandhiji was well aware of Savarkar's political position in no uncertain terms! Unlike what the Savarkar brothers argued, the Indian National Congress did not adopt the Montagu Chelmsford Report (1918) and the Government of India Act (1919). The newly born Communist Party of India even raised the demand for complete independence in the Ahmedabad session of the Indian National Congress in 1921.

What Did Savarkar Say?

Even though the Sangh Parivar bosses have talked a lot, did Savarkar himself say anything about Gandhiji's so-called 'advice'? In this connection, attention should be drawn to Savarkar's two books. His 'My Transportation for Life' was published in 1927 originally in Marathi, later translated into English, and the available current edition has been brought out by Abhishek Publications, Chandigarh, in 2020. This book of about five hundred and fifty pages narrates in detail his experience of prison life. 'My Transportation for Life' was preceded by a collection of Savarkar's letters from behind bars, titled 'An Echo from the Andamans', published in Nagpur in 1924.

Nowhere in these two books has the issue of Gandhiji's 'advice' been referred to by Savarkar. There is no mention of even Savarkar's younger brother writing a letter to Gandhiji. Obviously, Savarkar maintained a golden silence on the issue and this was probably because of his political difference with Gandhiji.

On the contrary, in 'My Transportation for Life', Savarkar was very critical of Gandhiji. The book has a section subtitled 'The Confusion of Gandhism' (pp. 520-522) and it contains a detailed account of Savarkar's hostile attitude towards the non-cooperation movement. In another section of the book (pp.499-501), Savarkar recalled the experience of two Congress workers in Andaman, in a very sarcastic tone. Both the Congress workers, Savarkar mentioned, were active in freedom struggle defying the police warrant against. Gandhiji came to know the matter and asked them to surrender to the court. They obeyed Gandhiji's instructions knowing fully its consequences. Both of them went back, faced trial and as expected, were convicted and placed in the Cellular Jail. Savarkar claimed both of them had later repented for meeting Gandhiji. What did Savarkar tell them? "I plainly told them that he (Gandhiji-A.B.) alone was not to blame in this affair. Those who had the weakness to obey him implicitly, were as much to

blame and deserved as much censure as he.” (p. 500) Savarkar was bold enough to assert his views!

The Gandhiji-led non-cooperation movement was not acceptable to Savarkar. “Non-cooperation”, he wrote, “cannot be a principle, it is only a remedy for the time being.” What was his ‘principle’? Savarkar was quite unambiguous in letter and spirit: “That politics worth name is neither cooperation nor non-cooperation. It is responsive cooperation...” (p. 501) The real value of Gandhiji’s ‘advice’ to Savarkar is clearly revealed.

Why Gandhiji?

However, Gandhiji’s name is raised only to give a kind of legitimacy to Savarkar’s mercy petitions aiming at manipulating public perception. It helps those petitions look innocent and benign. To serve their petty purposes the Saffron bosses have no hesitation in questioning even Gandhiji’s integrity and moral standing. They want to drag Gandhiji closer to Savarkar. Whatever attempt is made now to make the mercy petition issue look innocent, it is well known that the courage, determination, sacrifices and values upheld by the imprisoned freedom fighters played a historic role in drawing a large number of common people in the anti-colonial mass struggle. Sangh Parivar’s attitude towards the mercy petitions bears witness to their attitude towards the freedom struggle.

Hindutva and Mercy Petitions

Savarkar was unrepentant about his mercy petitions, throughout his life. Understandably, Savarkar as a Hindutva icon did not see the issue the way the freedom fighters looked at. The prison-life of Savarkar was a sort of preparatory period for him -- he groomed himself to emerge as an embodiment of Hindutva and to fulfil the dream of institutionalising Hindutva. ‘My Transportation for Life’ and ‘An Echo from the Andamans’ have depicted the episode reliably. Both these publications are not like the prison-life memoirs of other freedom fighters. Savarkar’s prison-writings revolve around the orbit of his own concern.

Not surprisingly, after his release from the Cellular Jail, Savarkar prepared the manuscript of the ‘Essentials of Hindutva’ (later renamed as ‘Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?’). The book was published in 1923 only to become a road map for the Hindu Mahasabha and its allies. It was followed by the establishment of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in September 1925. Hindutva politics was all set to take an organised form -- just when the freedom struggle was taking the form of a nationwide mass political struggle.

The question why the Hindutva icon was so prone to petitioning for mercy is irrelevant in terms of history. Collaboration with the colonial regime and opposition to the anti-colonial struggle were two defining features of Hindutva politics (and of the Muslim communalism as well) during the pre-independence period. So, it was not quite unusual for Savarkar to find life in a colonial-era prison useless. Praying for release on mercy petitioning following the path of

‘responsive cooperation’ was, therefore, a natural consequence. Even after his release, Savarkar chose to cooperate with the colonial regime, which was not quite unusual for him.

Communal politics and the anti-colonial struggle can never go hand in hand; one cannot belong to both the camps at the same time. Communal politics is fundamentally divisive, whereas the anti-colonial movement especially in a country like ours gains strength in its inclusiveness.

Nevertheless, Savarkar is the only ‘Hindutva Icon’ who was transported to the Andamans for life by the colonial regime. To the neo-liberal pro-Hindutva forces, Savarkar is still one of the most precious figures!

In 2002, the Vajpayee government was desperate enough to rename Port Blair Airport of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands after Savarkar. The BJP then was the largest party in the NDA government though yet to enjoy majority in Parliament on its own.

Since 2014, the BJP under Narendra Modi, with an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha, with a solid corporate backing, has been a new incarnation. The ultra-statist Hindu majoritarian rulers are now hell-bent on making a ‘discovery’ of their own version of Indian history. To them, an absolute appropriation of the history of India’s freedom struggle is, therefore, a compulsion. Through Savarkar they perhaps aim to manufacture a common ground, they can share with the legacy of India’s freedom struggle, whenever they wish to and certainly in their own terms. Bracketing Gandhiji and Savarkar together is, therefore, one of the immediate goals of the post-truth project of the Saffron Brigade. (END)

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