

Sir Syed Ahmed and Veer Savarkar: Polar Opposites, Counter-strategic Thinkers

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There are some fundamental misconceptions associated with a glimpse of Indian history. According to popular belief, the British ended Muslim rule in India. It is widely portrayed that British power was established in India in 1757, but even in 1859, Maratha powers ruled from Peshawar in the north west to Tanjore in the south east. M.G. Ranade remarked "In the first place, it should be noted that the immediate predecessors of the British rulers of India were not the Mahomedans, as is too often taken for granted, but they were the Native rulers of the country, who had successfully thrown off the Mahomedan yoke."¹

The power equations shifted with the formation of the British Raj in 1819, following the third Anglo-Maratha war. The strategies used by native Hindus and Muslims to gain dominance, which were traditionally based on warfare, were also altered. During the colonial period, constitutional mechanisms such as competitive exams, representation in legislatures, offices, and the armed forces became the means of power.

The understanding of ideologies and movements by Hindu as well as Muslim leaders can throw more light on the Indian politics in British era.

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-1898), the founder of Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, (later known as the Aligarh Muslim University) and 'Aligarh political movement', is one name that stands out in this context. His influence on Muslim politics persisted throughout the colonial era. Mushtaq Hussain Zuberi, alias Nawab Viqar-ul Mulk, honorary secretary of the M.A.O. College and Syed Ahmed's successor, was instrumental in forming the Muslim League. None other than Jinnah, paid a tribute to his movement in following words 'Aligarh is the arsenal of Pakistan'.²

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On the other hand, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966), also known as Veer (Braveheart) Savarkar, can be regarded as the father of political Hindutva during the colonial period. He was involved in revolutionary activities against the British Raj from a young age and was sentenced to life imprisonment in Andaman between 1910 and 1921. In 1923, he authored 'The Essentials of Hindutva.' From 1924 to 1937, he was interned in Ratnagiri. He served as president of the Hindu Mahasabha from 1937 to 1943.

Despite their different lifespans and tenures, both leaders have had a profound impact on Indian communal politics. Syed Ahmed and Savarkar had different views on not only Hindu and Muslim issues but on freedom struggle also.

"Ignorance on the part of the people, that is, misapprehension of the intentions of government,"³ was one of the major reasons for the revolt of 1857, according to Syed Ahmed. He refuted the notion that it was a pre-planned attempt to overthrow the British rule.

He also attempted to defend Muslims in a variety of ways, citing factors such as overwhelming poverty and unemployment among Indians, particularly Muslims. Furthermore, prior to the outbreak, the Mahommedans had not considered jihad against Christians.

On the contrary, Savarkar in his magnum opus "1857 the war of Indian independence" tried to prove that it was pre-planned struggle by former native rulers in which soldiers and common people contributed. He also reiterated that Hindus and Muslims fought side by side against the British East India Company for "swadharma and Swarajya," - religion and sovereignty.

The competitive principle

When the Congress demanded competitive exams in India in 1886, Syed Ahmed opposed it in speeches delivered in 1887 and 1888 by pointing out the differences

in Indian society and defending Muslim interests in the following words: "I am going to speak of the evils likely to follow the introduction into India of the competitive principle. I do not wish to speak in the interest of my own co-religionists, but to express faithfully whether I think the country is prepared for competitive examination or not. What is the result of competitive examination in England? You know that men of all social positions, sons of Dukes or Earls, of darzies and people of low rank, are equally allowed to pass this examination. Men of both high and low family come to India in the Civil Service. But as regards Indians, the case is different. Men of good family would never like to trust their lives and property to people of low rank with whose humble origin they are well acquainted." ⁴

As the president of Hindu Mahasabha in 1937, Savarkar announced his view on state policy:

"Let the Indian State be purely Indian. Let it not recognize any invidious distinctions whatsoever as regards the franchise, public services, offices, taxation on the grounds of religion and race. Let no cognizance be taken whatsoever of being Hindu, Mohammedan, Christian or Jew. Let all citizens of that Indian State be treated according to their individual worth irrespective of their religious or racial percentage in the general population" ⁵

in his statement issued in 1945, Savarkar said the Hindu Mahasabha recognized all citizens of India as one and didn't believe in majority and minority. He said a meritorious Parsi would have the first chance in an appointment if he is found to be more meritorious than Hindu and Muslim candidates. ⁶

It should be noted that the competitive principle was weakened by the Indian Council Act of 1909, which granted Muslims separate electorates with a greater weight than their population in the legislature. Periodically, the leaders of the Muslim League demanded numerous special rights for the Muslim Community. When the media compared Savarkar and Jinnah as communal leaders in 1938, Savarkar told them that they were not birds of the same feather because he stood for equality and no concessions while Jinnah demanded more and more concessions for Muslims. ⁷

Notions about nations

Another argument made by Syed Ahmed in opposition to the competitive principle planted the seeds for the country's division. To bolster his case against the competitive principle, he denied the Indian subcontinent's historical cultural unity. According to him, not only do Hindus and Muslims belong to different 'nations', but even Hindus of different provinces do not belong to the same nation. He also projected castes and sects as part of different nationalities.

"Everyone can understand that the first condition for the introduction of competitive examination into a country is that all people in that country, from the highest to the lowest, should belong to one nation... But this is not the case with our country, which has people with different nations. Consider the Hindus alone. The Hindus of our Province—the Bengalis of the East and the Mahrattas of the Deccan—do not form one nation. If in your opinion the peoples of India do form one nation, then no doubt competitive examination may be introduced; but if this be not so, then competitive examination is not suited to the country." ⁸

Muslim leaders had, since 1906, argued before the British that the proportion of Muslims to the Hindu majority becomes much larger if a reduction be made for the 'uncivilized portions' (the term was used by the 1906 delegation) of the community enumerated under the heads of animist (read tribals) and other minor religions (read Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism), as well as for those classes who are ordinarily classified as Hindus, but properly speaking are not Hindus at all. ⁹ Therefore, by reducing Hindus to caste Hindus only, Muslims sought to surpass Hindus as a whole in terms of power distribution. When the Muslim League was negotiating for parity in the 1940s, they used the same strategy.

Another Muslim thinker, Mohammad Iqbal, expanded on the two-nation theory. According to him, Islam's ummah (the entire community of Muslims united by religious ties) and nationalism are contradictory concepts. ¹⁰ Thus, the Muslim leadership of the Aligarh school emphasised that "Muslims are one nation" while denying the nationality of Hindus based on their internal diversity.

One can find counter argument to the claims of Muslim leaders in Savarkar's writings. Savarkar denied "many nation" theory and other allegations on "United Hindu nation", he argued:

"Ever since the Vedic ages in the past, our forefathers had been shaping the formation of our people into a religious, racial, cultural and political unit. As a consequence of it all, growing organically the Sindhus of the Vedic time have grown today into Hindu Nation, extending over India and holding India in common as their Fatherland and their Holy Land. No other nation in the world, excepting perhaps the Chinese, can claim a continuity of life and growth so unbroken as our Hindu Nation does. The Hindu Nation is not a mushroom growth. It is not a treaty nation. It is not a paper made toy. It was not cut to order. It is not an outlandish makeshift. It has grown out of this soil and has its roots struck deep and wide in it. It is not a fiction invented to spite the Muslims or anybody in the world" ¹¹

Savarkar defined Hindu as everyone who regarded and claimed this Bharatbhoomi—from the Indus to the

Seas—as his ‘Fatherland’ and ‘Holy Land’.¹² Fatherland, according to him, means the race that evolved in India, whose ancestors as emperors, lawmakers, reformers and leaders of the society were born here and contributed to the land. Holy Land means the land of one’s prophets and seers, of one’s god-men and gurus, the land of piety and pilgrimage. By his definition of Hindu, Savarkar placed a greater emphasis on the Hindu civilization as represented by a common history, common heroes, a common literature and art, a common law and jurisprudence and common fairs and festivals, rites and rituals, ceremonies and sacraments rather than just a religion.¹³

Savarkar also addressed internal diversity and nationalism: “A nation is not marked out as a separate unit because its people have no subdivisions and diversities amongst themselves but because they, as a whole, present a more homogeneous unity amongst themselves than they have in common with all other alien national units; because they differ definitely and immensely more from all other peoples in the world than they differ amongst themselves from each other.”¹⁴

If the United States, with its warring crowds of African, Americans, Germans and Anglo-Saxons, having a common past not exceeding four or five centuries, put together can be called a nation, then Hindus must be entitled to be recognized as a nation par excellence Savarkar emphasized. He also asserted that since countries are named after the majority of their population, India should be referred to as the Hindu nation. He contended that other communities in the country should be considered minorities rather than nations.

Furthermore, Savarkar took concrete steps to unite the Hindu nation. In order to strengthen Hindu unity, he promoted inter-caste dining, the right of all castes to preach Vedas and other religious practises, and the abolition of untouchability. He also urged all Hindu sects to register themselves as Hindus, such as the Jain (Hindu), Santhali (Hindu), Sikh (Hindu), Lingayat (Hindu), and others, to consolidate Hindus demographically during the 1940 Census. In 1944, he organised the Akhand Hindustan Conference in New Delhi, bringing together scholars, political figures from across all parties, and Hindu sects who supported the idea of a united India.

Militarization

Even though the British initially came to India for trade, they used military force to seize and hold onto power. Syed Ahmed tried multiple ruses to promote Muslim interests. He knew full well that though it was difficult for Muslims to get political power through the legislature or civil services, they could achieve military power very easily by increasing their strength in the army. So he

stressed on militarization of Muslims. He said: A second error of Government of the greatest magnitude is that it does not give appointments in the army to those brave people whose ancestors did not use the pen to write with; no, but a different kind of pen nor did they use black ink, but the ink they dipped their pens in was red, red ink which flows from the bodies of men. O brothers! I have fought the Government in the harshest language about these points. The time is, however, coming when my brothers—Pathans, Syeds, Hashimi, and Koreishi; whose blood smells of the blood of Abraham—will appear in glittering uniform as Colonels and Majors in the army. But we must wait for that time. Government will most certainly attend to it; provided you do not give rise to suspicions of disloyalty (to the British rulers).¹⁵

As an armed revolutionary, Savarkar knew the significance of military power. Since the First World War, he had also inspired many revolutionaries to join the British army. As president of the Hindu Mahasabha prior to the second world war, he called for the "militarization of Hindus." Since 1857, the British have prohibited the recruitment of certain castes, deeming them non-martial castes. In the 1930s, Hindu Mahasabha leaders Savarkar and Munje convinced the British to abolish the caste distinction between martial and non-martial Hindus when recruiting Hindu youth for the British Indian army.

During his militarization campaign, Savarkar went across the country emphasizing his viewpoint that World War II was a golden opportunity for Hindu youths to get arms training and to use it for the nation’s advantage as and when the time comes. Hindu Mahasabha workers joined hands with army recruitment officers and started rifle clubs. Savarkar appealed to the youths of Konkan specially the Bhandari and Kharvi classes, who were traditional sailors, to get their training in the navy and capture positions there.

Thanks to the Hindu Mahasabha’s militarization campaign, lakhs of Hindu youths joined the British Indian army and, in a span of five years (1939–43), the Hindu strength rose from around thirty percent to almost 70 per cent.

Subsequent developments proved Savarkar right. Of the total Muslim soldiers in the British Indian army, over 90 per cent chose to join the Pakistan army at the time of Partition and, soon after Partition, Pakistan attacked India in 1947 and occupied one-third of Jammu and Kashmir. Had the military balance been against India at the time of Partition as compared to Pakistan, the new Muslim nation could have even tried to swallow Muslim-majority areas on the Indian border in Rajasthan, Gujarat and even West Bengal, where Muslims still outnumber Hindus.

External allies

Syed Ahmed did not hesitate to solicit assistance from any external Muslim nations in order to gain a competitive edge over Hindus:

“At the same time, you must remember that although the number of Mahomedans is less than that of the Hindus, and although they contain far fewer people who have received a high English education, yet they must not be thought insignificant or weak. Probably they would be by themselves enough to maintain their own position. But suppose they were not. Then our Mussalman brothers, the Pathans, would come out as a swarm of locusts from their mountain valleys, and make rivers of blood to flow from their frontier in the north to the extreme end of Bengal. This thing who, after the departure of the English, would be conquerors would rest on the will of God. But until one nation had conquered the other and made it obedient, peace could not reign in the land. This conclusion is based on proofs so absolute that no one can deny it”¹⁶

Following in the footsteps of Syed, Jinnah threatened the British during a session of the Muslim League in Madras in April 1941 saying that if the English failed to create an independent group of Pakistan states, others would come and do it, thus indicating that foreign Muslim powers would be forced to intervene if Britain didn't act on his demand.¹⁷

Savarkar questioned the military capacity and the contemporary global political position of Islamic countries such as Turkey, Persia and Afghanistan, and declared: ‘I can only remind them that the Hindus have also some trump cards in their hand...the Hindus too have a united Hindu-Buddhist front from Jammu to Japan.’¹⁸

Savarkar was not constructing a castle in the air. Founder of the INA, Rash Behari Bose, who drew revolutionary inspiration from Savarkar in his young age, wrote him a letter in 1938 which is in tune with Savarkar's above statement.

“The Hindu movement should not be confined to India alone. As I wrote in my last letter, the Buddhists are also Hindus, and every attempt should be made to create a Hindu block extending from the Indian Ocean up to the Pacific Ocean. For this purpose, the Hindu Sabha should take immediate steps for establishing branches of Mahasabha in Japan, China, Siam and other countries of the Pacific and sending their representatives for creating solidarity among the Eastern races.”¹⁹

What after the British?

The creator of Aligarh movement refused to join hands with Hindus against British.²⁰ Syed Ahmed also raised very fundamental question that who will be in the power after British and he even maintained that there will be

no possibility of power sharing between Hindus and Muslims. The only way is to one should conquer another nation. This is the origin of two nation theory in Indian Politics.

“In whose hands shall the administration and the Empire of India rest? Now, suppose that all English, and the whole English army, were to leave India, taking with them all their cannon and their splendid weapons and everything, then who would be rulers of India? Is it possible that under these circumstances two nations—the Mahomedans and the Hindus— could sit on the same throne and remain equal in power? Most certainly not. It is necessary that one of them should conquer the other and thrust it down. To hope that both could remain equal is to desire the impossible and the inconceivable.”²¹

Historians, citing Savarkar's 1937 presidential address, also accuse him of endorsing the two-nation theory. However, they ignore the fact that Muslim politics in the 1930s shifted in the direction of a separate Muslim state. Mohammad Iqbal demanded a Muslim state in northwest India, within or without British control, in his 1930 League presidential speech. Choudhary Rahmat Ali first coined the word "Pakistan" in 1932 to refer to a distinct Islamic state. On Muslim demand, Sindh was separated from Bombay province in 1936.

In fact, In the era of the Congress's policy of "Hindu Muslim unity at Hindu cost", Savarkar had the audacity to address the separatist politics: “I warn the Hindus that the Mohammedans are likely to prove dangerous to our Hindu nation and the existence of a common Indian State even if and when England goes out. Let us not be stone blind to the fact that they as a community still continue to cherish fanatical designs to establish a Moslem rule in India. Let us work for harmony, let us hope for the best, but let us be on our guard!”²²

Even though he used the term "two nation," he did not support it; in fact, he perceived it as a threat to the Indian nation.

“It is safer to diagnose and treat a deep-seated disease than to ignore it. Let us face unpleasant facts as they are. India cannot be assumed today to be a Unitarian and homogenous state, but on the contrary, there are two nations in the main—the Hindus and [the] Muslims in India...”²³

In the same breath, he said: “...And as it has happened in many countries in similar situation in the world, the utmost we can do under the circumstances is to form an Indian State in which none is allowed to have special weightage of representation and none is paid an extra price to buy his loyalty to the State. Mercenaries are paid and bought off, not the sons of the motherland to fight in its defence”²⁴

Even after diagnosing Muslim separatism, Savarkar

was willing to form a common Indian state based on the principle of equality, which is in contrast to Muslim politics.

Conclusion

By examining the ideologies of Savarkar and Syed Ahmed or concepts of Hindu nation and Muslim nation respectively, one can conclude that historians have largely misinterpreted the "two nation" theory. Indeed, both Hindus and Muslims claimed to be the nation themselves, but neither was willing to acknowledge the other as the nation.

Even the factors that defined the nations differed. Muslim political thinkers asserted that they are one 'nation' or Ummah united by Islamic brotherhood, regardless of territorial boundaries. Savarkar's Hindu nation, on the other hand, is a geo cultural identity based on Indic culture rooted in Indian territory.

In 1947, Syed Ahmed's successors were successful in establishing Pakistan on the basis of Islamic nationalism. However, the aftermath illustrates that they were unable to bind the various cultural territorial entities in the name of Islam.

On the other hand, one cannot deny the inherent oneness of the Indian subcontinent, which Savarkar referred to as Hindu nationalism and which played a major role in unifying the rest of India following Partition and India's evolution. It is significant and inversely true that when and where the cultural, religious or political Hindu identity has weakened, the demand for geographical and political separation from India has cropped up. Significantly, the developments over the past 70 years have fortified Savarkar's words that 'Hindus are themselves a nation in India.'

Sir Syed Ahmed's name is rarely mentioned in mainstream media and academic debates, despite the fact that the founder of the Aligarh movement played a significant role in colonial, particularly Muslim, politics. In contrast, Savarkar's name is frequently used for non-issues, such as petitions during confinement, however the ideological discourse is largely avoided.

When addressing the Hindu-Muslim conflict, contemporary Indian politics employs the same terminology and considerations as the colonial era. Subsequently, it is more important to evaluate the ideologies and strategies of such leaders, as well as their causes and consequences.

Notes

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