



Veer Savarkar's Idea of Retribution

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Abstract

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's key writings are replete with terms like revenge, retribution, bloodshed, revolt etc. In some of his important works, he provided in-depth descriptions of battles, killings, arson, destruction of temples and homes and other similar incidents. This essay examines some of his key works in an effort to comprehend Savarkar's philosophy of retribution. It will make an attempt to answer these questions: What was Savarkar's philosophy of retribution? Why was retribution so important for Savarkar? What is the role of retribution in his idea of nationalism? It demonstrates that Savarkar strongly believed that retribution was the sole means to demonstrate the moral as well as the physical fitness of a nation to survive on an equal footing with other nations. By doing this, he redefined violent acts as ethically acceptable as long as they were used as a means for retribution to correct past injustices and served the national interests.

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1. Introduction

As a realist, Savarkar realized that the actual phenomenal world was far from attaining the "Divine Age", in which "Truth rules in the hearts of every man"^[1]. To put it another way, he was acutely aware that it was impossible to attain the idealistic goal of "universal justice" and of "ultimate beatitude" in this world. Therefore, he contended that humans must engage themselves in some morally justifiable actions in order to curb or eradicate "sinful" and "aggressive tendencies" in man in order 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"^[2]!

Savarkar argued that proclivity for retribution against any form of injustices was in-built in human nature. He therefore, believed that if he could transform this innate human propensity to seek revenge 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. He went on to emphasize the significance of the retributive action by saying that "if there was no propensity in 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"^[3]." Savarkar theorized and rationalized retribution because he firmly believed that morally justifiable retributive action was necessary.

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

² *Ibid.*, p. 260.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

crimes is the question that needs to be explored here. This question is crucial because Savarkar's response will provide us critical hints about his position on the use of violence as means of seeking retribution. Savarkar's precise response is found in his book *The Indian War of Independence, 1857*, especially in Chapter X. 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 ^[4]...

According to Savarkar, if people ethically resorted to what he called "nature-created means" like revolt, bloodshed and revenge to combat sinful aggressive impulses, the "era of Justice" could be established in the world. Consequently, the avenger would be absolved from the sin of using violence as long as he was using it to correct some preceding injustice. Savarkar's belief that "armed revolution" was the only way to fight foreign domination in order to achieve national independence is connected to the significance of his philosophy of retribution. It is generally known that, in Savarkar's case, every national movement for independence was a struggle to establish "Swadharma" and "Swaraj". By equating Swadharma with Swaraj, 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 ^[5]...

The "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". Thus, Savarkar inspired his god-fearing readers to actively participate in the national independence movement. More importantly, it also dismantled the inner moral barriers that prevented them from exacting retribution on the oppressive and dominating alien rulers. 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.

He argued that "armed rebellion" 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 ^[6]." Savarkar equated 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". He further claimed that this idea stirred the Indian people while fighting against the political slavery during what he called "the Revolution of 1857". Savarkar hoped that his readers would be ready to fight against political slavery if they realized that the notion of "political slavery is tantamount to destruction of religion".

Another facet of Savarkar's idea of national retribution was his belief that it was a means to demonstrate the moral as well as the physical fitness of the nation to survive on equal footing with other nations. Herbert Spencer's social Darwinist theory of survival of the fittest had an impact on Savarkar. References to Spencer's thought may be found throughout Savarkar's writings. He considered Spencerian opinions as truths of existence. In the preface to *Hindu-Pad-Padashahi*, he wrote: "...before we make out a case for unity, you must make a case for survival as a nation or a social human unit. It was this fierce test that the Hindus were called upon to pass in their deadly struggle with the Mohammadan powers".

Thus, for Savarkar, it was only through the means of seeking retribution that a nation could prove themselves to the other nations that they could live with them in equal terms. Retribution was absolutely necessary to bring about unity among the nations. He maintained that there could be "no friendship without retribution". The following quote from Savarkar's *Hindu-Pad-Padashahi* will better demonstrate the issue:

"There could not be an honorable unity between a slave and his master. Had the Hindus failed to rise and prove their strength to seek retribution for the wrongs done to them as a nation and a race, even if the Muhammadans stretched out a hand of peace, it would have been an act of condescension and not of friendship, and Hindus could not have honorably grasped it with that fervor and sincerity which sense of equality breed ^[7]"

Using a variety of historical examples, Savarkar tried to demonstrate that seeking retribution without the proper knowledge of 'virtue' was equally sinful and detestable. He argued that retributive actions without proper knowledge of 'virtue' proved to be "more detrimental to the welfare of mankind, more harmful to the national interests and give rise to horrible atrocities and the greatest of sins ^[8]." Savarkar, therefore, contended that the avenger (who may be an individual, a group, a race, a nation) seeking retribution should be well versed in "what virtue is" and "how to differentiate between virtues and vices", paying particular attention to time, place and person.

Savarkar did not view virtues and vices as two categories of rigidly defined, mutually opposing, fixed qualities. That does not, however, imply that Savarkar did not distinguish between virtues and vices. One may argue that according to Savarkar, virtues and vices are easily interchangeable depending on the situation. For instance, a virtue in a specific situation may become a vice and vice versa under different circumstances. Then, what standard did Savarkar employ to distinguish between virtues and vice? Savarkar's response

⁴ Ibid., p. 260.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 51-52.

⁶ Ibid., p. 261.

⁷ V.D. Savarkar, *Hindu-Pad-Padashahi, SELECTED WORKS OF VEER SAVARKAR, VOL.4*, Abhishek Publications, Chandigarh, 2006, p. 11.

⁸ V.D. Savarkar, *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History, SELECTED WORKS OF VEER SAVARKAR, Vol.3*, Abhishek Publications, Chandigarh, 2007, p. 169.

was that virtue and vice should be determined based on its utility to the human society. Thus, he wrote: "...in practice or in ethical code a virtue should be called a virtue only to the extent to which it was useful to the best interest of the human society. And, the moment it begins to cause harm to mankind it should be considered a vice and discarded forthwith^[9]." One could argue that his concept of virtue was largely influenced by the modern European idea of utilitarianism.

Savarkar made a strong case that anyone who upheld what had been written or said in the religious text as transcendental "virtues" was bound to eventually perish individually as well as nationally. According to him, religious virtues were virtues as long as they were embraced by the time, place and person. He said that if someone adopted such "virtues" without considering the "time, place and person" simply because they were written in some religious texts then such "virtues" would invariably bring disaster to the human society. As a result, virtues that were practiced without the necessary knowledge were not virtues but they were extremely distorted virtues. Savarkar listed three qualities Satwik (mild, gentle), Rajas (passionate), and Tamas (irascible, irritable) and argued that even these qualities should be considered based on the peculiar condition of time, place and person.

Savarkar attempted to draw a parallel between his notions of virtue with the moral lesson of the Bhagwat Gita. He believed that during the Hindu-Muslim war, Hindus endured greater suffering than Muslims could inflict upon them. He explained that it so happened because Hindus of those times had "perverted sense of virtue". He claimed that Hindu nation forgot that the moral lessons of the Bhagwat Gita. According to Savarkar, "the quintessence of the Bhagwat Gita is the consideration of the fine distinction between man and man^[10]". Vinayak Chaturvedi rightly argued that "for Savarkar, the creation of historical knowledge that embodied key ideas of the Gita was necessary for transforming the individual and the nation^[11]."

Unlike other nationalist leaders of his time, Savarkar vehemently disagreed the stereotype that Hindu were tolerant people. Savarkar believed that this trait of Hindus was a sign of weakness and attributed Hindus's defeat at the hands of their adversaries was due to their tolerant and the mild nature. He reprobated Prithviraj Chauhan and Maratha rulers for releasing the arch enemies of the Hindus like Mohamad Ghori and the Rohila Najibkhan. Savarkar believed that Hindus would be defeated as long as they adhered to the maxim "to let go the vanquished and abjectly surrendering enemy" simply because it was written in some text book. In the past, Muslims consistently showed tremendous contempt for virtues of Hindus. Savarkar contended that the fate of Prithviraj Chauhan was well deserved and attributed it to his erroneous conception of virtue.

In his writings, Savarkar described how Hindu kings responded to Muslim invasions in the past to highlight the severe repercussions of mistaken sense of virtue. In his interpretation of the Hindu history, Muslim invaders destroyed Hindu temples whenever they assaulted Hindus. Additionally, they, with the intention of insulting Hindus, plastered the sacred idols taken from the Hindu temples into the portal steps in Muslim royal places, used as the slabs and

tiles for lavatories, water-closets and urinals. However, because of their morbidity, Hindus never punished Muslims after winning the battle and having every chance to do so. Rather, Muslim invaders were granted land and financed to construct Masjids. In contrast, the Muslims reciprocated the religious virtues of the Hindus by repeatedly destructing the Hindu sacred temples. As a result, Savarkar believed that "to be tolerant towards those Muslims who called these and many other atrocities their religious duty is the very the very negation of virtue, its sacrilegious perversion^[12]!" Savarkar saw this as an illustration of the detrimental and catastrophic consequences of embracing virtue regardless of time, place and person. The following is how Savarkar explained the core idea of "Religious virtue is a virtue!":

...If that alien religion is also tolerant of our religion, our tolerance towards it can be a virtue. But the Muslim and Christian religions which boldly proclaim it to be their religious duty to destroy most cruelly the Hindu religion and to eradicate from the face of the earth the Kafirs and the heathens, can never be described as tolerant of other religions. In this respect of these intolerant foreign religions the very extremely intolerance which seeks to retaliate their atrocities with superatrocious reprisals itself becomes a virtue!...

In Savarkar's philosophy of retribution, being tolerant regardless of time, place and person became a sin. It follows that Hindus had been committing these transgressions in the name of virtue. Therefore, Hindus should be intolerant when they faced with intolerant others. It is a prerequisite to demonstrate the moral as well as the physical fitness of a nation to survive on an equal footing with other nations.

The political writings of V.D. Savarkar reflect his uncompromising desire for building India into a strong nation-state at any costs. For Savarkar, history was significant for drawing moral lessons which were essential in transforming the Hindus. He wrote the history of the Hindus with a firm determination to demonstrate that revenge, retaliation and bloodshed, if resorted with a consideration of time, place and person, were a means for ensuring the existence and the independence of the Hindu nation. At the same time, he contended that India became subservient to foreign rule only when India adopted total non-violence and other perverse religious virtues without considering its harmful effects on the national existence.

One of his goals was to transform the Hindus by breaking down their inner moral resistances against the use of violence by reading his own moral lessons into the past events of the Hindus. His sole purpose was to turn Hindus into martial race. Hence, "Hinduize all politics and militarize Hindudom!" became his later political motto. He thought that Justice to the Hindu nation could be brought about only by the sole principle of "Might is Right!" One can see that in Savarkar's political philosophy there is a complex interplay between his idea a Hindu nation, its past and the power to take retribution. Even if one disagrees with his political beliefs, we must recognize the significance of Savarkar's ideas on the Indian politics and society at large. Of course, Savarkar's works received little attention from the serious sections of the contemporary Indian academia. Merely

⁹ Ibid., p. 147.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 168.

¹¹ Vinayak Chaturvedi, *Rethinking Knowledge with Action: V.D. Savarkar, The Gita, and Histories of Warfare*, Modern Intellectual History 2010, Cambridge University Press, p. 417.

¹² Ibid., p. 169.

blaming Savarkar as the ideological proponent of Hindutva politics or two-nation theory will not help much in facing the intellectual as well as ideological challenge thrown up by his ideas. This essay is a modest attempt to start academic engagement with V.D. Savarkar's works. Due to the limitations of space, some of the arguments against his thought is not discussed here.

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