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Vinayak Chaturvedi

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## Violence as Civility: V.D. Savarkar and the Mahatma's Assassination

Vinayak Chaturvedi

Department of History, University of California, Irvine, CA, USA

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines V.D. Savarkar's interpretation of the *place* of violence within his larger arguments about civility as a way to rethink the murder of M.K. Gandhi – the Mahatma. Savarkar's seminal work on Hindutva transformed political debate in the twentieth century by rethinking the categories of 'Hindu' and 'Hindusthan.' His contributions to the debates on civility provided an important insight: that is, violence was central to the understanding of what he calls Hindu civility – and by extension Hindu civilization. For him, to marginalize the centrality of violence was to not only overlook the basic foundation of civility, but it was to ignore the foundation of what it meant to be a Hindu. It was a radical statement of inscribing violence as central to the episteme of Hindu thought. This paper argues that Savarkar's interpretation of political assassination was a key component of his conceptualization of violence as an ethical mode of conduct. It further examines Savarkar's writings on the need for political assassinations against those individuals who promoted 'excessive non-violence.'

### Keywords

Hindutva; V.D. Savarkar; M.K. Gandhi; assassination; Hindu civility; violence

A Member of Parliament in India recently asked me if I had found the 'smoking gun' that linked Vinayak Damodar Savarkar to the murder of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi – the Mahatma. I explained that based on the materials I had consulted in archives in India, the UK, and the US there was no evidence that could substantiate a direct connection. But the metaphor of the 'smoking gun' was certainly provocative – and not an accident – given that Nathuram Godse used an Italian made 9 millimetre Beretta semi-automatic pistol to kill Gandhi on 30 January 1948. For over seven decades, scholars have debated Savarkar's role in the assassination.<sup>1</sup> This should not come as a surprise given that Savarkar was one of the nine individuals arrested for the murder. Moreover, Godse saw himself as Savarkar's disciple; thereby, connecting the two for posterity. While in prison, Godse was granted permission to read Savarkar's Hindu Mahasabha speeches on Hindutva that were published in *Hindu Rashtra Darshan* in order to prepare his official statement to the court.<sup>2</sup> But in his prison writings, Godse argued that Savarkar did not influence him. He states, 'I deny categorically what the Prosecution has so falsely maintained that I was guided in my action by Veer Savarkar'.<sup>3</sup> Savarkar was tried as one of the conspirators in Gandhi's death, but he was eventually acquitted due to insufficient evidence. Godse was found guilty of the crime and executed.

Although I did not find the 'smoking gun', I came across a 1936 report written by G.K. Joshi, the District Magistrate of Ratnagiri, in which he explains that it is possible to imagine that Savarkar *could* kill Gandhi. Joshi states, 'In the India of 1937–38, I wonder what [Savarkar] will say about Mr. Gandhi and Mr. Gandhi about him. Sitting in an armchair, it is easy to visualize Savarkar with a revolver in hand following someone for his blood. But it is far more difficult to do what one

visualizes'.<sup>4</sup> Joshi's report was filed while Savarkar was under house arrest and the government restricted his movement. In other words, twelve years before Gandhi's assassination, an official perception was already circulating about the plausibility of Savarkar's role in a future murder of the Mahatma. Perhaps this was to be expected, as government officials were well aware that Savarkar was linked to other assassinations. His first major appearance in the Indian and British press began with his public defence of Madan Lal Dhingra, Savarkar's revolutionary comrade in London, who assassinated Curzon Wylie in July 1909. In December 1909, a handgun that was sent by Savarkar to India was used in the assassination of A.M.T. Jackson, the District Magistrate of Nasik. Savarkar was eventually arrested and convicted for his role in the Nasik case. He was viewed as the inspiration to the murderers; he was never the individual who pulled the trigger.

In many ways, the Gandhi murder trial in 1949 marked the end of Savarkar's public life, despite the official judgement. With the exception of a small number of dedicated followers, Savarkar was largely viewed as an enemy, since political opponents continued to associate him with Gandhi's murder. The emergent body of literature that examines Gandhi's assassination has provided important insights into the connections and events leading up to the moment Godse fired three shots into Gandhi's body.<sup>5</sup> The Red Fort Trial continues to fascinate scholars and activists alike. The availability of video footage of the nine conspirators at the trial, some with smiling faces, has left lasting questions about the meaning of the murder.<sup>6</sup> Every 30<sup>th</sup> January, national debates about the assassination are resurrected for the public commemoration of the anniversary of Gandhi's death. The spectre of Gandhi continues to haunt the nation, as if there will be a resolution once Savarkar's links to the murder are established.

In the midst of these debates there is a crucial source that remains to be considered: Savarkar's writings. In 1963, three years before his death, Savarkar completed *Saha Soneri Pane*.<sup>7</sup> It is in this work that Savarkar discusses the idea that Hindus have assassinated enemies, including individuals who promoted what he calls 'excessive non-violence'. Savarkar does not explicitly mention Gandhi, but this text provides an unexplored framing of Gandhi's murder. The book initially had a limited circulation in the Marathi speaking public in India, but it reached a wider audience after the 1971 publication of its English translation, *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History (SGE)*.<sup>8</sup> However, Savarkar's last book remains the least known of his writings on Hindutva, as it was generally viewed as simply reiterating earlier arguments promoting Hindu India – a theme that was generally considered otiose for the secular, postcolonial nation.

By the time Savarkar penned *SGE*, the essentials of Hindutva – namely, a shared geography of the nation, a common race, and a common civilization – that he had proposed in the 1920s were largely ignored in India.<sup>9</sup> He was aware that Hindutva was now marginalized. Yet he considered this a temporary phenomenon. Further, for Savarkar, the fact that, in 1947, India was divided into two nation-states – India and Pakistan – did not mean that Hindus needed to abandon Hindutva. Instead, the postcolonial moment following the partition was precisely the time when Hindus needed to unite.<sup>10</sup> In *SGE*, Savarkar explains that studying India's long history – dating back to antiquity – is valuable because it shows how Hindus had found themselves in crises in the past. The central purpose of writing *SGE*, therefore, was to illustrate that Hindutva was not fugacious, because there were six glorious epochs, spanning several millennia, which provided examples of how Hindus had remained resilient in working towards creating a Hindu nation. For Savarkar, this was only possible because these individuals had historically been inspired by a code of conduct called 'Hindu civility'.

The purpose of this essay is to examine Savarkar's argument on the *place* of violence within his larger discussion about civility as a way to rethink Gandhi's murder. For Savarkar, violence in the form of assassination was not only ethical, but also a foundational aspect of Hindu civility. As one of the most controversial Indian political thinkers of the twentieth century, Savarkar transformed political debate by rethinking the categories of 'Hindutva', 'Hindu', and 'Hindusthan'. His contributions to the debates on civility were in direct contrast to Gandhi's seminal writings on the same topic; in them Savarkar argued that violence was central to any understanding of Hindu civility –

and by extension Hindu civilization. The idea of violence as civility was a provocative intervention in the conceptual history of 'civility' in the twentieth century. For Savarkar, to marginalize the centrality of violence was not only to overlook the basic foundation of civility, but it was to ignore the foundation of what it meant to be a Hindu.

## II

In July 1909, M.K. Gandhi travelled from South Africa – where he was settled at the time – to London for the purpose of lobbying the government on behalf of Indians in South Africa. In addition, he wanted to meet Indians based in Britain to better understand their concerns about nationalism and colonialism. In October 1909, he was invited as the guest of honour at a Vijayadashami function, in which he was asked to speak to an audience of sixty or seventy people, which included Savarkar.<sup>11</sup> Gandhi delivered a speech in which he discussed the importance of honouring the king of Ayodhya Ramachandra by all Indians – Hindus, Muslims, and Parsis.<sup>12</sup> Two additional individuals spoke after Gandhi; he then turned to Savarkar and invited him to speak. Savarkar thanked Gandhi, and stated the following, 'You have requested me not to speak on any aspect of current affairs but only about our ancient past. What can we say of today? Plague, slavery, bondage. How wonderful it is to think of the past!'<sup>13</sup> As Gandhi had met a number of Indian revolutionaries in London – namely, members of Shyamji Krishnavarma's India House<sup>14</sup> and the Abhinav Bharat Society (ABS) – he had decided against a public discussion about *all* forms of politics at the event. Savarkar then recited passages from the Ramayana, and discussed the nature of violence in the epic, especially as the function was meant to celebrate Ramachandra's killing of Ravana. Gandhi described Savarkar's lecture as 'a spirited speech on the excellence of the *Ramayana*'.<sup>15</sup>

It appears that Gandhi and Savarkar had other conversations too, including discussions about the Bhagavad Gita. Gandhi writes, 'When I was in London, Savarkar and others used to tell me that the Gita and *Ramayana* taught quite the opposite of what I said they did'.<sup>16</sup> For Gandhi, the violence in the Ramayana and the Gita served as allegories for the internal conflict in all humans. For Savarkar, the appropriation and necessity of violence in both texts was meant to be interpreted literally, as an essence of the human condition. Moreover, he argued that violence was a central feature of all human history. The fact that Savarkar was living in London at this time, and actively engaging with anarchists, meant that he was familiar with or aware of some aspects of anarchist philosophy, especially the conceptualization of the need for assassinations and bombings as part of the 'propaganda of the deed'.<sup>17</sup> Savarkar and Gandhi's divergent interpretations about violence set them apart from this moment forward.

The roots of the earliest disagreement between the two figures began in the shadows of the assassination of Curzon Wylie. On the evening of 1 July 1909, Madan Lal Dhingra attended a function of the National Indian Association, held at the Imperial Institute. The association was established to promote 'social engagement' between the English and Indians residing in London.<sup>18</sup> Wylie was a member of the council and treasurer of the association, but he also worked for police intelligence and served as an assistant to the Secretary of State for India. Dhingra had completed his studies at University College, London, and planned to sit for the I.C.E. examination later in the year. Around 11PM, Dhingra walked up to Wylie and shot him four times in the head; thereby, killing him. When Dr. Cawas Lalcaca, a guest at the function, tried to stop the attack Dhingra fired another two rounds, and killed Lalcaca as well. Dhingra was captured and handed over to the police.

On July 5th, a public meeting was held to condemn the murder of Wylie. It was a crowded event attended by many individuals, including Savarkar, Surendranath Bannerjea, Bipin Chandra Pal, and the Aga Khan. Savarkar describes the meeting in the following terms: 'Speaker after speaker denounced the murder, the man, the motive, the revolutionary rascals and their tenets'.<sup>19</sup> The president of the meeting proposed a resolution to formally condemn Dhingra. According to Savarkar, the president announced that the resolution had passed unanimously, although there

was no actual vote. Savarkar then objected and stated that he had voted against the resolution. He explains that he was then physically attacked by some individuals at the meeting for speaking against the resolution. The following day, *The Times* (London) published a letter entitled, 'Mr. Savarkar's Statement', in which Savarkar explains that he was arguing for proper procedure for voting at the meeting.<sup>20</sup> But he also wanted Dhingra to be treated fairly, before being condemned as a criminal by a group that had committed a crime in attacking him at the meeting.

Savarkar's public defence of Dhingra drew a great deal of attention. The revolutionary tactics promoted by Savarkar, the India House, and the ABS were heavily criticized by Indians and the British alike. After all, Dhingra had publicly killed Wyllie as part of his commitment to revolutionary politics. At Dhingra's trial, held on July 19th, Dhingra read the following as part of his explanation for the murder: 'I do not want to say anything in defence of myself, but simply to prove the justice of my deed'.<sup>21</sup> He continued, 'I maintain that if it is patriotic in an Englishman to fight against the Germans if they were to occupy this country, it is much more justifiable and patriotic in my case to fight against the English. I hold the English people responsible for the murder of 80 millions of Indian people in the last fifty years . . . It is perfectly justifiable on our part to kill the Englishman. I wish that the English people should sentence me to death, for in that case the vengeance of my countrymen will be all the more keen'.<sup>22</sup>

Dhingra was found guilty of killing Wyllie, and on August 17th, he was executed. The ABS, led by Savarkar, organized the printing of a postcard commemorating Dhingra as a revolutionary; the postcard included excerpts from Dhingra's statement at his trial about the 'justifiable' use of violence. It also included the text of an oath taken by all members of ABS, who swore a commitment to the 'bloody, relentless war against the foreigner'.<sup>23</sup> A purpose of celebrating Dhingra's death was to make clear that Wyllie's killing was part of a larger effort to wage war against colonial rule in India. It was to underscore the point that Dhingra's assassination of Wyllie was not a random act of violence, or a single killing. The British government was also aware that revolutionary activity posed a threat at home and in India.

The first – and perhaps only – public meeting between Gandhi and Savarkar was held in the immediate aftermath of the execution of Dhingra. Gandhi had followed the newspaper coverage of Wyllie's murder and Dhingra's trial. He wrote, 'Every Indian should reflect thoroughly on this murder . . . Mr. Dhingra's defence by Indian revolutionaries was inadmissible . . . He was egged on to do this act by ill-digested reading of worthless writings . . . It is those who incited him to this that deserve to be punished'.<sup>24</sup> Needless to say, this was a serious indictment of all revolutionaries who had supported Dhingra, but especially Savarkar, who had just published his influential book entitled, *The Indian War of Independence of 1857 (IWI)*. More important, as noted by Anthony Parel, 'it was well known among Indian expatriates living in London that Savarkar was the man who "incited" Dhingra to commit the murder'.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps Gandhi wanted to avoid a direct confrontation with Savarkar at the Vijaydashami celebrations in this context.

In mid-November, a few weeks after the Vijaydashami function, Gandhi boarded a ship back to South Africa. It is well noted that on the return journey, he felt the urgency to write what became his best known work, *Hind Swaraj, or Indian Home Rule*, in which he presents arguments against an unnamed revolutionary. By not specifically identifying Savarkar, or any other individual, *Hind Swaraj* may be considered Gandhi's response to emergent revolutionary thought, but there are passages that appear as direct responses to Savarkar himself. For the purpose of this paper, it is worth considering the following dialogue in *Hind Swaraj*:<sup>26</sup>

READER (The Revolutionary): 'At first, we will assassinate a few Englishmen and strike terror; then, a few men who will have been armed will fight openly. We may have to lose a quarter of a million men, but we will regain our land. We will undertake guerrilla warfare, and defeat the English'.

EDITOR (Gandhi): 'Do you not tremble to think of freeing India by assassination? What we need to do is to kill ourselves. It is a cowardly thought, that of killing others. Whom do you suppose to free

by assassination? The millions of India do not desire it. Those who are intoxicated by the wretched modern civilization think these things. Those who will rise to power by murder will certainly not make the nation happy. Those who believe that India has gained by Dhingra's act and such other acts in India make a serious mistake'.

For Gandhi, the idea of the assassination was directly linked to his understanding of modern civilization, which was antithetical to Indian civilization. It was also a serious indictment against Indian revolutionaries, like Savarkar, who were not only celebrating the assassination as legitimate, but also promoting it as an ethical mode of conduct. Thus far, I have provided a context for thinking about the place of Dhingra's assassination of Wylie. The coming out of Savarkar as a public figure coincided with this killing. The coordination of Savarkar and the Indian revolutionaries in London directly influenced the ways in which Dhingra has been remembered as a martyr, freedom fighter, patriot, anti-imperialist, and revolutionary. For Savarkar, Dhingra's assassination of Wylie represents a revolutionary act of anti-colonialism. Gandhi's assassination by Nathuram Godse clearly represents something else. What is common for both Dhingra and Godse are the close ties to Savarkar and his ideas. In fact, I suggest that the two assassinations not only serve as bookends for Savarkar's political career, but they help us to consider how Savarkar's career is often interpreted: the anti-imperial Savarkar, and the Savarkar of Hindutva.

### III

Savarkar was arrested in London on 13 March 1910, on multiple charges, including 'procuring and distributing arms' and 'delivering seditious speeches'. The charges were all related to Savarkar's role in the planning and murder of A.M.T. Jackson in what was called the 'Nasik Conspiracy Case'.<sup>27</sup> He was sent to India for trial, where he was found guilty and sentenced to two life terms in the Cellular Jail, located in Port Blair on the Andaman Islands. Savarkar had originally arrived in London in 1906 to train as a barrister, but quickly shifted his focus away from his formal studies to write books and work as a political organizer. In 1907, he had published his first book on Giuseppe Mazzini, the nineteenth century Italian intellectual, whose writings on Italy's nationalist resistance to the Austro-Hungarian empire had inspired Savarkar's own work.<sup>28</sup> In the same year he also completed writing *IWI* – a book that achieved a global circulation, especially in Asia, North America, and Europe.<sup>29</sup> *IWI* eventually appeared in print in 1909. The government banned both of Savarkar's publications, but neither suffered the fate of his third book on the history of the Sikhs – a text that was never published.<sup>30</sup> It is unclear whether the manuscript was lost in the post, or if it was confiscated and destroyed by British officials.

Savarkar's commitment to writing history persisted throughout his political career. With the exception of annual letters to his family, Savarkar was not allowed to write during his period of incarceration in the Cellular Jail. Once he was transferred to Maharashtra, he returned to a period of productivity. In 1923, he published his seminal text, *Essentials of Hindutva* (*EOH*), followed by a book on the history of the Marathas entitled, *Hindu-Pad-Padashahi* (*HPP*), in 1925.<sup>31</sup> In the 1920s-1930s, Savarkar also wrote in multiple genres, including drama, poetry, journalism, autobiography, and biography. After serving his sentence as a political prisoner, Savarkar became the president of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha from 1937-1944. In this period, Savarkar promoted the message of Hindutva to his supporters in India and beyond in his correspondence and writings. He consistently cited his historical writings in nearly all of his work to establish his claims about the need for his supporters to read not only the history of India, but also world history. For Savarkar, historical texts were powerful. At one level, he argued that histories had the potential to inspire and motivate individuals to take up direct political action in the future. At another level, he explained that acquiring historical knowledge was the key to evoking a change in the essential nature of the reader. Although Savarkar does not provide specific details or mechanisms for how the change takes place in each individual, he asserts that readers of *his* historical texts would not only gain knowledge

about 'Hindu History', but in the process they would be prepared to take up the fight against the oppressors of Hindus. As a consequence, it was essential for Hindus to learn *their* history for the betterment of Hindus.

*SGE* was Savarkar's only major work written in independent India (and after Gandhi's death). It was Savarkar's return to producing history – a genre that occupied much of his prominent publications in the first half of the twentieth century. In addition to being a companion volume to *EOH* and *HPP* on the theme of Hindutva, *SGE* also served as Savarkar's final argument on the history of warfare in India. While Savarkar's *oeuvre* contains extensive discussions about the complexities of Hindutva, it is in *SGE* that he provides an analysis of the importance of Hindu civility. However, in order to understand his conception of civility, Savarkar assumes that the readers of *SGE* will be familiar with his argument about Hindu civilization. In *EOH*, for example, Savarkar explains, 'our great civilization – our Hindu culture, which could not be better rendered than by the word Sanskriti, suggestive as it is of that language, Sanskrit, which has been the chosen means of expression and preservation of that culture, of all that was best and worth preserving in the history of our race'.<sup>32</sup> He continues that Hindu civilization – *sanskriti* – represents 'a common history, common heroes, a common literature, common art, a common law and common jurisprudence, common fairs and festivals, rites and rituals, ceremonies and sacraments'.<sup>33</sup> While he provides general examples to illustrate commonalities among Hindus, he also adds the caveat that he is not able to be 'exhaustive' in his interpretation. Yet, he concludes that any individual who identifies himself as a Hindu must claim Hindu civilization as *his* own. Needless to say, Savarkar's argument about civilization was vague, if not incomplete or fully articulated in *EOH*. Perhaps by turning to the idea of Hindu civility in *SGE*, Savarkar sought to further clarify his conception of Hindu civilization.

However, it is worth noting that Savarkar's own writings also complicate a fuller analysis of his interpretation of both civilization and civility. First, in the 1920s and 1930s, Savarkar mainly wrote as a political prisoner when his writings were monitored and censored by the colonial state. In instances when he was able to smuggle his writings out to a publisher, as was the case with *EOH*, his name did not appear as the author of the text. Not surprisingly, Savarkar's writings from this period are sometimes inconsistent, incomplete, and fragmentary. Second, 'Hindu civility' is a phrase that Savarkar develops in *SGE*. His interpretation of Hindu civility and civilization is made more difficult by the fact that Savarkar often uses the terms interchangeably. If we turn to *Saha Soneri Pane* (or the official Hindi translation *Chhah Svarnim Prshth*), 'Hindu *sabhyata*' is used in the text, rather than 'Hindu civility'.<sup>34</sup> *Sabhyata* can be defined as cultivated, politeness, or educated manners. However, I would argue that this is not how Savarkar uses the term in *SGE*. Instead, he appears to define the term as culture, civilization, and civilized state.<sup>35</sup> Savarkar's inclusion of 'Hindu *sabhyata*' is further complicated by the fact that in his other key writings, such as *EOH*, he typically translates *sanskriti* as civilization, rather than *sabhyata*. In other instances, *sanskriti* is defined as culture; in some places it is both civilization and culture. I delineate these distinctions here not to suggest contradictions in Savarkar's writings, but rather to point to some of the difficulties in interpreting his thought based on the terms that he uses across his many texts. The overlap (or distinction) between culture and civilization is certainly not specific to Savarkar's writings, or to works on *sabhyata* and *sanskriti*.<sup>36</sup> The global history of 'civility' (and its cognates) are complex and entangled in specific historical processes. For example, the starting point for Norbert Elias's pathbreaking *The Civilizing Process* begins with a discussion of the complex conceptual histories of the German uses of *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*.<sup>37</sup> Further, in a comparative study of the concept of 'civility' in thirteen languages in Europe and Asia, Margrit Prenau and Helge Jordheim have argued that the concept's 'semantic networks' function *differently* in different languages and cultures across time.<sup>38</sup>

What then does Savarkar mean by Hindu civility? He explains that there is an exemplary code of conduct prescribed within Hindu civilization that needs to be at the centre of all social and political interactions. More specifically, in the context of *SGE*, this means that Hindus need to protect civilization at all costs by exhibiting bravery, valour, and heroism. Due to the fact that Savarkar is

primarily interested in examining periods of warfare, he argues that any understanding of civility must also take into account the virtuous, ethical, and necessary uses of violence. In fact, he suggests that any interpretation of civility that ignores the centrality of violence is antithetical to Hindu civility – and by extension to Hindu civilization.

Savarkar's conception of Hindu civility contributed to the robust public debates in the twentieth century on defining and interpreting that concept of civility in colonial and postcolonial India.<sup>39</sup> Among intellectuals in India there were divergent ideas of how to define 'Hindu civilization', 'Indian civilization', and 'civilization' more generally. In part, these were anti-colonial responses to writings that had declared that India had no civilization or lacked civilization. They were also nationalist claims to a civilization (and antiquity) as part of their nationalism. As a consequence – and not surprisingly – there was no agreement about the modes of behaviour that exemplified 'civility'. Savarkar was not interested in contemporary interpretations of civility within India, especially those proposed by figures like Gandhi, who conflated civility with non-violence, peace, and passive resistance. Savarkar also appeared to reject normative arguments about civility and civilization emerging out of colonial writings that privileged the developmental process of Western Civilization, while simultaneously asserting that civilization in India remained at a primitive stage of human society. As one of the many thinkers who sought to stake a claim within the intellectual debate, Savarkar provides an interpretation of civility that distinguishes itself from all others by arguing that violence was a characteristic of civility – and, civilization, more generally. In other words, for Savarkar, *SGE* serves as a trenchant critique of the normative interpretations of civility, while also promoting an alternative discourse of 'Hindu civility'.

#### IV

Rather than adopting philosophical or hermeneutical traditions taken up by other intellectuals of his time, Savarkar elaborates key concepts and ideas in contemporary political thought in his historical writings.<sup>40</sup> His interpretation of 'civility' in *SGE* certainly fits into this mode of analysis. Yet, in consonance with his earlier writings, Savarkar's arguments remain fragmented or incomplete at best. Despite what may be considered numerous gaps in Savarkar's writings, it is possible to suggest that he produced his arguments – in this instance his claims for Hindu civility – within a context of public debates on civility in India. By the time Savarkar was writing *SGE*, the Gandhian principles of non-violence continued to have a popular reception in independent India, even after the Mahatma's death. Gandhi was remembered as a figure who perpetuated peace throughout his lifetime.<sup>41</sup> Savarkar fundamentally opposed Gandhi's political discourses and the celebration of his ideas in the second half of the twentieth century. As a result, *SGE* may be read as Savarkar's final response to Gandhi's claims, but also as a statement against those who marginalized Hindutva in the pursuit of promoting a secular nation. An examination of Gandhi's writings on civility suggests that Savarkar was aware of his interpretations, but it is also likely that his arguments were a direct response to Gandhi.

Gandhi published a seminal article entitled 'Civility' in *Navajivan* on 18 December 1921, explaining his key arguments about the concept.<sup>42</sup> He begins with a critique of the nature of politics in the early twentieth century. He states, 'civility, good manners and humility – these virtues are at such a discount these days that they seem to have no place at all in the building of our character'.<sup>43</sup> Gandhi continues that civility is really an expression of what he calls 'the spirit of non-violence'; in contrast, 'incivility and insolence are indicative of "the spirit of violence"'.<sup>44</sup> Why is this an important distinction for Gandhi? He proposes that all politics of non-cooperation must adhere to the principles of civility. Incivility, on the other hand, should be avoided at all costs, for it is really synonymous with 'brutishness'. This not only means being courteous towards the government and its supporters, but also displaying manners, respect, and politeness in all interactions. The purpose is to exhibit a 'spirit of love' as an effective means for pursuing all political interactions. Gandhi



concludes his essay by arguing that civility should not only be considered a ‘virtue’, but each individual should try to ‘cultivate it’ as part of individual or national culture.<sup>45</sup>

Gandhi’s essay on civility bears many of the themes that he addressed in *Hind Swaraj*. Although, Gandhi never named the individual or individuals who inspired the figure in the text, he was clear in his later writings that the purpose of *Hind Swaraj* was very specific: ‘[it] was written in answer to the revolutionary’s arguments and methods’.<sup>46</sup> Gandhi did not want to cede his political agenda to any revolutionary, Savarkar or any other figure.<sup>47</sup> *Hind Swaraj* was Gandhi’s reply to contemporary revolutionary thought that was circulating globally. I suggest that when we consider Gandhi’s essay on civility, it is not only an extension of his reply to an unnamed revolutionary, but an intervention in the public debate on civility in India.

When Gandhi’s essay was published, Savarkar was imprisoned in the Cellular Jail, and it precedes any of Savarkar’s interventions on ‘civility’ or ‘civilization’.<sup>48</sup> Due to Gandhi’s own explanation about the rationale for writing *Hind Swaraj*, scholars have tended to accept that Gandhi was replying to revolutionary thought.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, what is typically not discussed is the possibility that Savarkar was responding to Gandhian conceptions of civilization and civility in his seminal work.<sup>50</sup>

## V

In the early parts of *SGE*, Savarkar explains that he has a very specific interest in writing about the long history of warfare: namely, that Hindus needed to understand the plight of fellow Hindus who had faced difficult circumstances in the past. This history provided a necessary context for his discussion of Hindu civility. He asserts that India had been in a permanent state of war, dating back to antiquity, in which ‘foreign invaders’ entered the territory for political gain.<sup>51</sup> He explains that Hindus had been resilient by fighting and resisting in these periods. He further gives the examples of Hindu victories against the Persians, Ionians, Greeks, Kushanas, Huns, and Shakas to illustrate his point. On the other hand, he also explains that many of these early invaders opted to settle down and acculturate themselves into Hindu society after their respective defeats. Hindus continued to win for centuries, because individuals had properly understood the principles of Hindu civility, especially in periods of warfare. For Savarkar, this was not only an acknowledgement of the greatness of Hindu civilization, but it also reflected the fact that these early conflicts centred on politics, not religion.

Savarkar directly contrasts the early history of India with what he calls the ‘Hindu-Muslim epic war’ in the period approximately ranging from the 10th-19th century CE.<sup>52</sup> In order to elaborate this concern, Savarkar interrogates how ‘Islam invaded Hinduism’. He points out that Muslim invasions fundamentally differed from the previous conflicts in India, because Muslims wanted to establish their political *and* religious dominance over Hindus. In the process, many Hindus were not only conquered, but also converted to Islam. Hindus, who had in earlier centuries resisted the incursions of all outsiders, were no longer able to fight successfully in the new wars. He asks, ‘Why were they afraid? Why did they feel it to be against their Hindu religion itself to launch such armed counter-offensive[s] against the Muslim?’<sup>53</sup> He explains that the demise of Hindu civility began with the emergence and spread of Jainism and Buddhism in India in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. This marked the moment when Hindus had first adopted ‘extreme non-violence, kindness, love, [and] truth’, while abandoning their powerful theories of warfare, which were successfully adopted in the early historical conflicts.<sup>54</sup> Violence was not an option for these Hindus. Savarkar argues that the consequence of promoting such ideals was an ‘abject surrender’ to Muslims.

Savarkar provides a trenchant critique of those Hindus who had historically promoted non-violence and rejected all theories of warfare. For him, these Hindus were responsible for the persistent presence of Muslims in India for the past millennium. He suggests that Hindus refused to embark on attacks, because they had accepted an ‘exceptional code of conduct’ that was ‘virtuous’ and ‘tolerant’ of Muslims.<sup>55</sup> For Savarkar, any conduct that promoted non-violence simply could

not be considered a reflection of civility; instead, he states it was ‘perverted virtue’ against Hindu civility.<sup>56</sup>

## VI

While Savarkar establishes that Hindus had accepted a code of conduct based on non-violence, there were select Hindus – ‘heroes’ in Savarkar’s terms – who bravely fought Muslim persecution in India. Savarkar further explains that Hindus should remain optimistic given the contemporary circumstances of decolonization. For him, the end of British rule provided a further example that violence worked in ridding Hindus of their enemy; the concatenation of revolutionary activity, including assassinations, bombings, guerilla tactics were all effective. He argues that the fate of Muslims will follow all the others who had entered India as conquerors. He states, ‘Thus of all the foreign aggressions over India, that took place during the last two thousand years, the greatest and mightiest one ... that of the British was in the end utterly defeated by India and its political dominion crushed to pieces! Thus disappeared the mighty English empire!’<sup>57</sup>

What is worth noting is that in his discussion of heroes, Savarkar provides a clue that helps to uncover a central feature of Hindu civility: the influence of the Bhagavad Gita. Savarkar explains that the proponents of non-violence had either forgotten or misunderstood the central message of the Bhagavad Gita: *karma yoga*, or the discipline of action.<sup>58</sup> For him, the Gita was the seminal text that provided the message that all men needed to follow their *dharma* though discipline in everyday life; this included taking up arms in periods of warfare. Savarkar was specifically thinking of the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, the two main figures in the Gita, in which Krishna instructs Arjuna to attack his cousins and kill them if necessary as part of his religious duty. For Krishna, these acts of violence – warfare – must be executed without any attachments to desire or pleasure, but for the primary service of God. Savarkar interpreted the dialogue as a message for Hindus to fight against injustice and exploitation by taking up arms as a part of their *dharma*. However, he points out that Hindus had followed an ethical code of conduct (*dharmayudda*) in wars with all enemies in India. *Dharmayudda* was a form of righteous or legitimate warfare that served as a guiding principle in battles and wars discussed in numerous Hindu texts, including the Gita. As a code of conduct was necessary for all battles, warring groups or clans would only engage in a fight after agreeing to specific guidelines or parameters that adhered to *dharmayudda*.

Savarkar explains that in the ‘Middle Ages’ Hindus had forgotten the fundamental message of the Gita, especially when dealing with Muslims. He asserts that even after the arrival of Muslims into India, Hindus promoted what he calls ‘extreme non-violence’ or they followed the ethical code of conduct in battle, despite the fact that Muslims ignored *dharmayudda*. For Savarkar, Muslims considered these principles as an opportunity to not only dominate Hindus, but also to further establish power in India. Moreover, Savarkar argued that since Hindu warriors were aware that their Muslim counterparts were unwilling to prescribe to *dharmayudda* or any other code of conduct, Hindus should have taken up an alternative tactics of warfare. He points out that even in the Gita, Krishna counsels Arjuna for the need to give up principled warfare with an enemy that is unethical.

Savarkar suggests that the message of the Gita is necessary for an understanding of Hindu civility. By turning to the Gita, he is able to further clarify his interpretation of violence. For India’s future, wars needed to be fought by taking up strategies beyond *dharmayudda*. Not only did Hindus need to urgently forsake non-violence, but they had to adopt specific methods of warfare to fight against Muslims – including those methods that were unjust and cruel. Savarkar explains that there were select individuals who had historically turned to the Gita when others had forgotten its message; these were the true heroes of Hindu history. Yet in *SGE*, Savarkar also struggles with a paradox. Despite the presence of these heroes during the ‘epic war’ between Hindus and Muslims that lasted nearly a thousand years, Islam had firmly established itself in India. Although these heroes valiantly resisted injustices perpetrated by the Muslims, what is most striking is the tacit

acknowledgement that there was no one historical figure who actually exhibited a full understanding of Hindu civility – and by extension the Gita. For Savarkar, if such an individual had actually existed in the past, Hindus would not be confronted with the contemporary political and religious problem. In other words, it is possible to suggest that Savarkar was looking for a Hindu hero of the status of Arjuna in the Gita.

## VII

As Gandhi noted about his interactions with Savarkar in London, the two disagreed about the fundamental message of the Gita. Gandhi discusses this point further in ‘Discourses on the Gita’, in which he reasserts his claim that the violence discussed in the Gita was an allegory. He explains,

... the physical battle [in the Gita] is only an occasion for describing the battle-field of the human body. In this view the names mentioned [e.g., Krishna and Arjuna] are not of persons but of qualities which they represent. What is described is the conflict within the human body between opposing moral tendencies imagined as distinct figures.<sup>59</sup>

For Gandhi, the Gita was not advocating, promoting, or encouraging violence; it represented the ultimate internal struggle in all humans that was resolved by a moral commitment to non-violence. Throughout *SGE*, Savarkar identifies key periods in the past when the idea of non-violence became a dominant discourse in India. For example, he remains ambivalent about the Buddha and Buddhism. He links it to the fact that Buddhist monks shared with the world that India had abandoned a theory of warfare for non-violence. For Savarkar, this was a major shift that marked the beginning of the new imperial ventures into India, culminating with Islamic invasions, and later the arrival of the Europeans. For him, it was the turn towards non-violence that was responsible for the long-term subjugation of Hindus. The re-emergence of non-violence in the twentieth century posed a major concern for the future of Hindus according to Savarkar – even *after* decolonization. However, in *SGE*, he provides a resolution to this historical problem: the annihilation of the proponents of non-violence. He states, ‘It is for the development of human virtues that the individuals who promote non-violence, a curse of human weakness that cripples individuals, should be subjected to cruel violence’.<sup>60</sup>

In David Hardiman’s discussion of *SGE*, he explains that Savarkar presents a narrative about an assassination that may be interpreted as a rejoinder to Gandhi’s arguments about non-violence.<sup>61</sup> Hardiman turns to Savarkar’s analysis of Ashoka, the emperor of the Mauryan Empire in the third century BCE, who adopted Buddhism and non-violence after his victory against the kingdom of Kalinga – a war in which it is estimated that 100,000 individuals died, and 150,000 were displaced.<sup>62</sup> For Savarkar, Ashoka’s abandonment of a theory of warfare after his victory by turning to non-violence made India vulnerable to foreign attacks.<sup>63</sup> He further argued that Ashoka was ‘anti-national’ as his turn to Buddhism weakened India’s independence at a time when Ashoka could have consolidated his power. Moreover, Ashoka’s descendants perpetuated the problem further by not protecting the integrity of India’s empire, as there was no theory of warfare in this period. Savarkar specifically laments the failure of the emperor Brihadrath Maurya, who practiced Buddhism at the cost of weakening India. But he explains that a military general named Pushyamitra assassinated Brihadrath, and he became the new emperor. Savarkar states, ‘The Buddhistic Mauryan Empire met its doom that day!’<sup>64</sup> Pushyamitra abandoned the principle of non-violence and resumed warfare in order to fight off ‘foreign invaders’ in India, such as the Greeks. For Savarkar, Pushyamitra not only restored pride in India, but he had faithfully ‘defended’ the territory. This was only possible by abandoning non-violence. Hardiman suggests that Savarkar’s discussion of the assassination of Brihadrath at the hands of Pushyamitra is an analogy for Gandhi’s murder by Nathuram Godse.<sup>65</sup>

Savarkar further clarifies what he means by cruel violence. He explains that Brihadrath was not simply assassinated; he was beheaded. He states, ‘Pushyamitra had to cut off the head of Brihadrath Maurya ... simply as a national duty’.<sup>66</sup> The coupling of assassinations with beheadings is found

throughout Savarkar's descriptions of the Hindu perpetrators of violence. Brihadrath is not the only figure who suffers this cruel death. Throughout *SGE*, Savarkar makes a distinction between 'murder' and 'assassination': Hindus are described as being 'brutally murdered' by foreign invaders, but Hindus participate in the more ethical form of violence – assassination. Savarkar begins by discussing the assassination of Greek governors by Hindus that led to the independence of India from the Greek empire. He also explains, 'Chandragupta and Chanakya had to assassinate, as an unavoidable national duty, Samrat Mahapadma Nanda'.<sup>67</sup> Further, in Vijaynagar in the sixteenth century, assassinations continued, as a military commander named Naresh killed the ruling monarch Shalva Narsinh.<sup>68</sup>

What is striking about the assassination in Vijaynagar is Savarkar's assertion that internal conflict amongst Hindus functioned as a 'political revolution' in which Hindus were assassinating other Hindus. Hindus were not only assassinating 'foreign invaders' in the name of independence or national duty, but they were killing Hindus. In the conclusion of *SGE*, Savarkar further asserts what distinguished Hindus since antiquity was the fact that they 'did not refrain from avenging the spilling of Hindu blood by shedding enemy blood'.<sup>69</sup> And, more important, he states, '[Hindus] beheaded those who proved treacherous to the Hindu cause'.<sup>70</sup> Needless to say, this did not exclude killing other Hindus. Violence is at the centre of Savarkar's interpretation of Hindu civility, but it also defined what it meant to be a Hindu. He further argues that both bloodshed and vengeance are necessary for Hindus to eliminate injustice. Non-violence, on the other hand, was antithetical to being a Hindu.

## Conclusion

In reflecting on meeting Gandhi in London, in 1909, Savarkar states, 'I happened to be closely acquainted in a friendly way when he had come to England where he was then known simply as Barrister Gandhi and thereafter throughout our lives came together and many times in conflict – in the political arena in India'.<sup>71</sup> Gandhi's refusal to speak about politics at the meeting meant that their public discussion centred on warfare, violence, and the conflicts of gods in the Ramayana. Gandhi saw this discussion as reflecting the internal conflict of all humans, while Savarkar viewed it as relevant to the interpretation of the world in the twentieth century. The more that Gandhi wanted to move away from a literal reading of the epics, the more Savarkar appeared to rely on them to interpret the contemporary condition.

For Savarkar, his historical narratives had the power to influence Hindus. History was instructive in teaching Hindus about the centrality of violence. Hindus had turned to violence against *all* enemies, and when necessary they used cruel violence against proponents of non-violence. A study of past events helped Hindus to understand that violence was a normative feature of Hindu history. Further, at no point does he say that *SGE* is an engagement with Gandhi or his ideas, or that the assassination of any figure was an analogy for the killing of Gandhi. Rather the text provides examples of the importance of assassinations by Hindus, for Hindus, as a direct consequence of Hindu civility. For Savarkar, perpetrating cruel violence against the proponents of non-violence has a long history too; assassinating individuals by beheading them was a legitimate response. By the twentieth century, the discourse of non-violence had become influential again, and the resolution for Savarkar was to turn to the message of the Gita. No matter how literally *SGE* is read today, it is not the 'smoking gun' linking Savarkar to Gandhi's assassination. Yet it provides further insights into Savarkar's interpretation about the centrality of violence as part of an ethical mode of conduct called Hindu civility. In the framework provided by Savarkar, Gandhi was assassinated by Nathuram Godse, but he did not suffer the cruel violence of Brihadrath Maurya or others. In the end, his assassination was only one of many in the long history of Hindus. And, as the twenty-first century has demonstrated, it is not the last one either as Savarkar's argument for violence as civility continues to inspire his followers.

## Coda

On Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's seventy-first death anniversary on 30 January 2019, Pooja Shakun Pandey walked up to an effigy of Gandhi in the city of Aligarh and shot it three times. Inside the effigy were balloons filled with a red liquid symbolizing blood that oozed out once the shots hit their target. A small audience had gathered to celebrate the re-enactment of Gandhi's assassination. Individuals shouted, 'Mahatma Nathuram Godse, zindabad, zindabad! Mahatma Nathuram Godse, amar hai, amar hai!' (Long live Mahatma Nathuram Godse! Mahatma Nathuram Godse is immortal!) Pandey was eventually arrested, along with her husband Ashok Kumar Pandey, on a number of charges. She explained that she did nothing wrong, and compared her desire to shoot Gandhi's effigy to the annual celebrations of the slaying of Ravana on Vijaydashami. However, she stated that she would return every 30<sup>th</sup> January to repeat the symbolic assassination of Gandhi in honour of Godse, who is now identified as 'mahatma'.

It is as if the legacy of Savarkar's disagreement with Gandhi in London in 1909 on the interpretation of the Ramayana continues today. While Pandey operates at the level of a symbolic killing, others assassinate their enemies by shooting them at point-blank range – something that has become all too common today. In the aftermath of Pandey's re-enactment, commentators rhetorically asked, 'How many times will Gandhi be killed?' The answer may not please those who lament the decline of civility in today's India, as the rise of Hindu civility will ensure that cruel violence will continue. And, as Savarkar had argued, the message of the Ramayana (and the Bhagavad Gita) will be taken literally.

## Notes

1. Nandy, "Final Encounter"; Chaturvedi, "Vinayak & Me"; Noorani, *Savarkar and Hindutva*.
2. "Arms From Kirkee Arsenal Men: Approver's Evidence", *The Times of India*, 28 July 1948. I owe special thanks to Neeti Nair for this reference.
3. Godse, *May It Please Your Honour*, 45.
4. Maharashtra State Archives (Mumbai), Home Department (Special), File Number 60-D (g), part I (1936), Report from G.K. Joshi, District Magistrate, Ratnagiri, to the Secretary to Government, Home Department (Political), Bombay, 1 November 1936.
5. Gandhi, "Let's Kill Gandhi!"; Ghosh, *Gandhi Murder Trial*; Khosla, *The Murder of Gandhi*; Malgonkar, *The Men Who Killed Gandhi*.
6. British Pathé. "Mahatma Gandhi Murder Trial", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qc7LXisoJIU>, accessed 12 June 2020.
7. Savarkar, *Saha Soneri Pane*.
8. Savarkar, *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History*. For the purposes of this essay, I have relied on *Six Glorious Epochs* for most citations. For comparative purposes, please see the Marathi original and/or the official Hindi translation: Savarkar, *Chah Svarnim Prshth*.
9. Savarkar, *Essentials of Hindutva*.
10. Savarkar, "Protest Against the Vivisection of Hindusthan".
11. Parel, "Editor's Introduction", xxxix.
12. Gandhi, "Vijaya Dashami", 189–90.
13. Savarkar, "Vijaydashami", 611. An English translation of selections of the essay "Vijaydashami" is available on [www.satyashodh.com](http://www.satyashodh.com), accessed 10 June 2020.
14. Fischer-Tiné, "Mass-Mediated Panic".
15. Gandhi, "Vijaya Dashami", 189.
16. Gandhi, "Discourses on the "Gita", 82.
17. Aldred, "Savarkar Arrested". Savarkar was also familiar with the writings of Peter Kropotkin, one of the leading theorists of anarchism.
18. Old Bailey Proceedings Online, Trial of Madan Lal Dhingra, 19 July 1909 (Reference Number t19090719-55), [www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), version 8.0, accessed 16 February 2019. (Hereafter, OBP)
19. Gupta, *Life of Barrister Savarkar*, 63. Chitra Gupta was a pseudonym used by Savarkar. See Chaturvedi, "A Revolutionary's Biography".
20. V.D. Savarkar, "Mr. Savarkar's Statement", *The Times* (London), 6 July 1909.
21. OBP, Trial of Madan Lal Dhingra.

22. Ibid.
23. British Library, Asian & African Studies Reading Room, EPP 1/46, “The Oath of the Abhinava Bharat”, 13 March 1910.
24. Gandhi, “Curzon Wylie’s Assassination”, 428.
25. See note 11 above.
26. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 75.
27. Brückenhaus, *Policing Transnational Protest*, 28–32.
28. Savarkar, *Mazzini Charitra*.
29. Savarkar, *The Indian War of Independence of 1857*.
30. Savarkar, *Six Glorious Epochs*, 396.
31. Savarkar, *Hindu Pad-Padashahi*.
32. Savarkar, *Essentials of Hindutva*, 80.
33. Ibid., 88.
34. Savarkar, *Chah Svarnim Prshth*.
35. This is consistent with Mohinder Singh’s argument that in the late-nineteenth to early twentieth century period, *sabhyata* was a translation of civilization in Hindi. Singh, “Spectres of the West in Hindi”, 188.
36. Singh, “Spectres of the West”.
37. Elias, *The Civilizing Process*.
38. Prenau and Jordheim, eds., *Civilizing Emotions*, 3.
39. Bhattacharaya, *Talking Back*.
40. Chaturvedi, “Rethinking Knowledge with Action”, 418–19.
41. Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*.
42. Gandhi, “Civility”, 287–90.
43. Ibid., 287.
44. Ibid., 288.
45. Ibid., 290.
46. Gandhi, “At It Again”, 286.
47. Chaturvedi, “Rethinking Knowledge with Action”, 438.
48. Savarkar, *My Transportation for Life*.
49. Parel, “Editor’s Introduction”, *Hind Swaraj*, xxvii.
50. There are, of course, comparisons in other contexts; see Kapur, “Gandhi and Hindutva”.
51. See note 30 above, 118.
52. Ibid., 221.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., 256–57.
55. Ibid., 222.
56. Ibid., 170.
57. Ibid., 474–5.
58. In this section, I am drawing on arguments on Savarkar’s interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita in Chaturvedi, “Rethinking Knowledge with Action”.
59. Gandhi, “Discourses on the “Gita””, 76.
60. Savarkar, *Chah Svarnim Prshth*, 360.
61. Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*, 175.
62. Lahiri, *Ashoka in Ancient India*.
63. See note 61 above, 175.
64. See note 30 above, 78.
65. See note 61 above, 175.
66. See note 30 above, 78.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid., 354.
69. Ibid., 472.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid., 468.

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