[**A damaging debate on Savarkar**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1658381/a-damaging-debate-on-savarkar)

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A TWO-VOLUME book on Vinayak Damodar Savarkar has triggered unease among liberal intellectuals. Savarkar was a suspect in the conspiracy to assassinate Gandhi and is said to have closely escaped conviction. In the liberal lore, he is the chief author of Hindu fascism. They never fail to highlight his craven apologies to his British jailers to seek freedom from prison. Hindutva advocates regard him as a towering hero, much more actively since their party took power in 2014.

Penguin Random House has published the book by Vikram Sampath — whose biography of singer Gauhar Jan I liked, not least for the CD of her rare recordings that came with the text. The Savarkar book found the same publishers that pulped Wendy Doniger’s academically lauded volume on mythologies and histories of the Hindus, a sacrilege for which Penguin cited Indian laws, but which is seen as a euphemism for yielding to Hindutva.

Having said that, it is equally true that the Savarkar book has earned pre-publication endorse­ments from notable academics and politicians who include supporters of Hindutva. After reading the first volume (1883-1924) one would say that it has plenty of material — new and old — that can be gainfully used by Savarkar’s liberal critics to challenge his right-wing fans, particularly the growing tribe of Muslim-baiters among them. These communalists inevitably include leaders and supporters of India’s ruling party, the BJP, and its ideological fountainhead, the RSS.

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A word of caution for Savarkar’s critics is recommended. Demands to ban readings of his works from college syllabuses — as reportedly witnessed in Kerala — are spiteful and even self-harming, and I shall explain why. On the other hand, past attempts to stall his glorification have not been entirely successful. When the Congress opposed the installation of his portrait in parliament, for instance, senior party leader Vasant Sathe threatened to walk out. In other words, there are supporters of Savarkar lurking in different parties.

Couldn’t Savarkar’s arguments be used from his book on the 1857 uprising to foil those who quote him to promote hatred of Muslims and Christians?

Perhaps the most important reason in today’s context to tone down a self-defeating and ultimately poorly timed criticism of Savarkar flows from a pragmatic perspective. It just so happens, like it or not, that the most strident opponent of the Savarkar-hugging Modi government is the Savarkar-loving right-wing Shiv Sena. The latter, once in alliance with the BJP, today head their own government in Maharashtra with the help of the Congress, a relatively secular entity. Is this a good time to press the divisive debate on Savarkar? If the Congress adlibs the critics and berates the controversial and muddled Savarkar, though it is unlikely to be that foolish, what could become of the fragile coalition courageously fighting the Modi establishment from Mumbai?

Any needless acrimony could drive a wedge between coalition partners — exactly what the BJP wants ahead of a slew of key state polls. It’s a quandary, but it could become tragic also for too many rights activists and advocates of secular democracy who have found handy spaces in Mumbai’s ‘Hyde Parks’ unwittingly under the Shiv Sena. A BJP-RSS assault on the Mumbai movie industry, a strong bastion of secular culture, could leave it vulnerable without the Shiv Sena’s backing. These are good reasons to lower the hackneyed and low-yield criticism of Savarkar. There are other purposes too.

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Important personalities from history are revered or taken apart for valid reasons. Gandhiji has been accused of a racist past in South Africa whereby he pleaded for Indians to be protected from close proximity with black Africans. The University of Ghana would [not allow his statue](https://www.dawn.com/news/1451216) on the campus citing this reason. Nehru has been criticised as an acolyte of the British Commonwealth. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was a great educationist but harboured views against less privileged Muslims, and so forth. Which of the faces are we to show?

There are also two sides to Savarkar. On the one hand he formulated his communally divisive ideas of Hindutva. And there’s the other in which he could not possibly conceive of the glory of India without Muslim participation. Couldn’t Savarkar’s arguments be used from his book on the 1857 uprising to foil those who quote him to promote hatred of Muslims and Christians?

Of communal harmony in 1857 he says: “So, now, the antagonism between the Hindus and the [Muslims] must be consigned to the past. Their present relation was one not of rulers and ruled, foreigner and native, but simply that of brothers, with one difference between them of religion alone. For, they were both children of the soil of Hindusthan. Their names were different, but they were all children of the same; India therefore being the common mother of these two, they were brothers by blood. Nana Sahib, Bahadur Shah of Delhi, Moulvie Ahmed Shah, Khan Bahadur Khan, and other leaders of 1857 felt this relationship to some extent and, so, gathered round the flag of Swadesh (self-rule) leaving aside their enmity, now so unreasonable and stupid. In short, the broad features of the policy of Nana Sahib and (his aide) Azimullah were that Hindus and [Muslims] should unite and fight shoulder to shoulder for the independence of their country and that, when freedom was gained, the United States of India should be formed under the Indian rulers and princes.”

Could it not become a powerful tool against deepening communalism to confront Savarkar’s partisans with his lofty ideals of Hindu-Muslim unity, instead of citing his divisiveness?

The reason for the somersault too seems puerile as academic-activist Shamsul Islam found in Savarkar’s plaint: “A large number of the wicked warders consisted of Mussalmans … And the prisoners under them were mostly Hindus. The Hindu prisoners were persecuted…” However, Barindra Kumar Ghosh (younger brother of Aurobindo Ghosh) in his memoirs of the Andaman prison insists the jail officials equally abused the Muslim prisoners.

Why allow Savarkar’s lofty vision of a united and secular India to be blurred by some uncouth jail warders’ cruelty with their prisoners?

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