Major Debates Between V.D. Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar: Diverging Visions of Hindutva

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Abstract

This article explores the intellectual and ideological debates between Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, two pivotal figures in the Hindutva movement. Although both are cornerstones of Hindu nationalism, their views diverged significantly on key issues such as the role of the state, the inclusion of non-Hindus, and the methods for realizing a Hindu Rashtra. By analyzing their writings and speeches, this article elucidates the major differences in their thoughts and assesses the implications for the broader Hindutva movement.

Keywords

Hindutva, Ethnic Nationalism, Cultural Nationalism, Savarkar, Golwalkar

Introduction

The Hindutva movement, which has left an indelible mark on India's political landscape, is often associated with two of its most influential architects: V.D. Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar. Savarkar, the progenitor of the term "Hindutva," laid the ideological foundation for Hindu nationalism, while Golwalkar, as the second Sarsanghchalak of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), was instrumental in institutionalizing and propagating these ideas. Despite their shared commitment to a Hindu Rashtra, their visions diverged on several crucial points, leading to a complex and nuanced discourse within the movement. This article examines these debates, focusing on their differing views on nationalism, the state's role, and the inclusion of non-Hindus in the Hindu Rashtra.

The Concept of the Nation: Ethnic vs. Cultural Nationalism

One of the most fundamental differences between Savarkar and Golwalkar lies in their conception of the nation. Savarkar's idea of Hindutva was rooted in ethnic nationalism. In his seminal work *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, Savarkar defined Hindutva as a commonality of race, culture, and religion among the people of India. According to Savarkar, a true Hindu is one who regards India as both their "Pitrubhumi" (fatherland) and "Punyabhumi" (holy land). This definition inherently excluded those whose holy lands lay outside India, such as Muslims and Christians, unless they embraced Hindu culture and identified themselves with the Indian nation-state (Savarkar, 1923).

In contrast, Golwalkar's conception of the nation was more cultural and civilizational. In his book *We, or Our Nationhood Defined*, Golwalkar emphasized the cultural unity of the Hindu nation rather than a strict racial or ethnic identity. He argued that the Indian nation was defined by its civilizational heritage, which was predominantly Hindu. Golwalkar envisioned a Hindu Rashtra that could accommodate non-Hindus, provided they accepted the cultural primacy of Hinduism and lived as loyal citizens under the overarching Hindu culture (Golwalkar, 1939). This approach was more inclusive than Savarkar's, allowing for the possibility of integration without complete assimilation.

The debate between ethnic and cultural nationalism has significant implications for the Hindutva movement. While Savarkar's model emphasized a more rigid, exclusionary identity, Golwalkar's approach allowed for greater flexibility in integrating non-Hindus into the Hindu Rashtra. This divergence reflects broader tensions within the movement regarding the nature of Indian identity and the inclusivity of the Hindu nation.

Role of the State: Secularism vs. Theocratic State

Another critical area of disagreement between Savarkar and Golwalkar was the role of the state in the Hindu Rashtra. Savarkar, despite his strong advocacy for Hindu nationalism, maintained a belief in the separation of religion and state. He argued that the state should remain secular, ensuring that religion did not interfere in governance. Savarkar's secularism, however, was not the same as the Western concept of secularism; it was more about protecting the cultural identity of the Hindu nation without allowing religious dogma to dictate state policy. In his later writings, Savarkar articulated his vision of a secular state where Hindutva served as a cultural identity rather than a religious or theocratic mandate (Savarkar, 1963).

Golwalkar, on the other hand, envisaged a more theocratic state where the laws and governance would be deeply influenced by Hindu scriptures and traditions. In *Bunch of Thoughts*, Golwalkar rejected the Western model of secularism, which he saw as alien to Indian culture and detrimental to the Hindu way of life. He argued for a state where Hindu dharma (righteousness) guided the political and social order, ensuring that the Hindu nation was preserved and protected (Golwalkar, 1966). Golwalkar's vision was more aligned with the idea of a theocratic state, where the boundaries between religion and state were blurred, and the state became an instrument for enforcing the cultural supremacy of Hinduism.

The debate on the role of the state within Hindutva ideology reveals a fundamental divergence in their approaches. Savarkar's model allowed for a pluralistic society under a secular state framework, albeit with a strong Hindu cultural identity. In contrast, Golwalkar's vision was less accommodating, favoring a state that actively promoted and enforced Hindu values and norms. This divergence continues to influence contemporary interpretations of Hindutva, particularly in the political strategies of the RSS and its affiliated organizations.

Inclusion of Non-Hindus: Assimilation vs. Exclusion

The question of how to incorporate non-Hindus into the Hindu Rashtra is another major point of contention between Savarkar and Golwalkar. Savarkar was more inclusive in his approach, advocating for the assimilation of non-Hindus into the Hindu fold. He believed that non-Hindus, particularly Muslims and Christians, could be part of the Hindu Rashtra as long as they accepted the cultural dominance of Hinduism and identified with the nation's history and heritage. Savarkar's emphasis was on cultural assimilation rather than religious conversion, allowing for the possibility of non-Hindus integrating into the Hindu nation (Savarkar, 1949).

Golwalkar, however, adopted a more rigid and exclusionary stance. He viewed non-Hindus, especially Muslims and Christians, with deep suspicion, considering them as potential threats to the Hindu nation. In *We, or Our Nationhood Defined*, Golwalkar argued that non-Hindus could only live in the Hindu Rashtra if they completely subordinated themselves to Hindu culture and renounced any claims to equality with Hindus (Golwalkar, 1939). He was particularly concerned about the perceived loyalty of Muslims and Christians to their religious communities outside India, which he believed posed a danger to the unity and security of the Hindu nation.

This debate highlights the tension between assimilation and exclusion within the Hindutva movement. Savarkar's approach allowed for a more inclusive Hindu Rashtra, where non-Hindus could be integrated through cultural assimilation. In contrast, Golwalkar's vision was more exclusive, requiring non-Hindus to fully subordinate themselves to Hindu culture or face marginalization. The implications of this debate are profound, as they continue to shape the Hindutva movement's strategies towards religious minorities in India.

Strategies for Achieving a Hindu Rashtra: Activism vs. Institutionalization

Savarkar and Golwalkar also differed in their strategies for achieving the Hindu Rashtra. Savarkar, a staunch activist and revolutionary, believed in direct action and political engagement as means to establish the Hindu Rashtra. His activism was rooted in his belief that Hindus needed to assert themselves politically and militarily to protect their interests and establish their dominance in India. Savarkar was also a proponent of militarization and the need for Hindus to arm themselves against perceived threats from non-Hindu communities (Savarkar, 1949). His approach was confrontational, emphasizing the need for assertive and sometimes aggressive actions to achieve the goals of Hindutva.

Golwalkar, in contrast, believed in a more gradual and institutionalized approach to achieving the Hindu Rashtra. As the head of the RSS, Golwalkar focused on building a strong and disciplined organization that would spread the message of Hindutva through social and cultural work rather than direct political action. He emphasized the importance of character-building, discipline, and community service as means to strengthen the Hindu nation from within. Golwalkar's strategy was more focused on long-term cultural transformation, believing that a strong and united Hindu society would naturally lead to the establishment of a Hindu Rashtra without the need for direct confrontation (Golwalkar, 1966).

This difference in strategy reflects the broader tactical diversity within the Hindutva movement. Savarkar's activism and focus on political engagement have influenced more aggressive and confrontational approaches within the movement, while Golwalkar's emphasis on institutionalization and cultural work has shaped the RSS's long-term strategy of social and cultural transformation.

Implications for the Hindutva Movement

The debates between Savarkar and Golwalkar have had lasting implications for the Hindutva movement. Their differing views on nationalism, the role of the state, the inclusion of non-Hindus, and strategies for achieving the Hindu Rashtra have contributed to the movement's ideological diversity and tactical flexibility. This diversity has allowed Hindutva to adapt to changing political and social contexts, but it has also led to internal tensions and contradictions.

Savarkar's emphasis on ethnic nationalism and political activism has influenced more militant and exclusionary strands within the movement, while Golwalkar's cultural nationalism and institutional focus have shaped the RSS's approach to social and cultural work. The coexistence of these divergent strategies and ideologies within the Hindutva movement has led to both its strength and its internal contradictions. On one hand, the movement's ability to appeal to a wide range of supporters—from those favoring a more aggressive, exclusionary nationalism to those advocating for a gradual cultural transformation—has allowed it to sustain its influence over time. On the other hand, the tensions between these different approaches have sometimes led to conflicts within the movement, particularly when it comes to policy implementation and public messaging.

The legacy of these debates is evident in contemporary Hindu nationalist organizations and political parties, which often oscillate between Savarkar's and Golwalkar's strategies depending on the political

climate. For instance, the RSS continues to prioritize cultural work and social organization, aligning with Golwalkar's vision, while political entities like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have at times adopted Savarkar's more direct and confrontational tactics in their political campaigns and governance.

Conclusion

The intellectual debates between V.D. Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar encapsulate the complex and multifaceted nature of the Hindutva ideology. As foundational figures in the movement, their contributions have significantly shaped the contours of Hindu nationalism in India. However, their differing visions reflect underlying tensions and contradictions within the ideology itself.

Savarkar's conceptualization of Hindutva as a form of ethnic nationalism sought to redefine Indian identity based on shared ancestry, culture, and religion. His definition of a Hindu, rooted in the concepts of *Pitrubhumi* (fatherland) and *Punyabhumi* (holy land), was exclusionary, particularly towards Muslims and Christians. Critics argue that this approach risks creating a divisive national identity, while defenders view it as a necessary response to colonialism and internal divisions.

In contrast, Golwalkar emphasized cultural nationalism, focusing on the civilizational unity of India through Hindu culture. His vision, which required all inhabitants of India to accept Hindu cultural primacy, has been critiqued as culturally imperialistic and exclusionary, particularly in its treatment of non-Hindus as second-class citizens. Despite these criticisms, Golwalkar's supporters argue that his ideas were aimed at preserving India's unique cultural heritage and ensuring national cohesion.

The most contentious debate between Savarkar and Golwalkar centers on the inclusion of non-Hindus in the Hindu Rashtra. Savarkar's approach was more inclusive, advocating for the assimilation of non-Hindus, provided they accepted Hindu cultural dominance. Golwalkar, however, was more exclusionary, viewing non-Hindus with suspicion and advocating for their subordination to Hindu culture.

These debates are indicative of the broader tensions within Hindutva, particularly regarding the balance between cultural cohesion and religious pluralism. While both thinkers sought to create a unified national identity, their approaches reveal the inherent contradictions within the movement. Savarkar's secularism, which sought to separate religion from the state, contrasts sharply with Golwalkar's theocratic vision, which sought to integrate Hindu religious principles into the governance of the state.

In critiquing these ideas, it is essential to consider the historical context in which they were formulated. Both thinkers were responding to what they perceived as existential threats to Hindu civilization, whether from colonial rule or religious minorities with transnational loyalties. Their exclusionary rhetoric, while problematic from a contemporary liberal perspective, can be seen as a defensive response to these challenges.

Ultimately, the debates between Savarkar and Golwalkar continue to shape the Hindutva movement and Indian politics. Their ideas remain central to discussions on Indian identity, secularism, and the role of religion in the state. While their visions of a Hindu Rashtra have been both influential and controversial, the ongoing discourse around their ideas provides valuable insights into the complexities of nationalism, cultural identity, and the future of the Indian nation.

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