

Savarkar's Hindutva and the Evolution of Indian Nationalism

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Abstract

The ideological construct of Hindutva, as articulated by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, has played a significant role in shaping a distinctive strand of Indian nationalism. This conceptual paper seeks to examine Savarkar's formulation of Hindutva not merely as a religious identity, but as a broader civilizational and cultural framework intended to unify the Hindu community into a cohesive national entity. Through a critical analysis of its historical development, core principles, and sociopolitical implications, the study explores how Hindutva diverges from both traditional Hinduism and secular interpretations of nationalism. The paper begins by situating Savarkar's ideas within the broader anti-colonial nationalist movements of the early 20th century, highlighting the socio-political context that gave rise to his ideology. It then delves into the definitional boundaries of Hindutva, emphasizing its emphasis on common ancestry, culture, and territorial unity. The study further analyses the influence of Hindutva on Indian national identity, particularly its impact on political discourse and the conceptualization of citizenship and belonging. While acknowledging Hindutva's contribution to the discourse on national unity, the paper also engages with major criticisms, particularly those related to its exclusionary tendencies and its implications for India's religious minorities. These tensions are explored through both historical critiques and contemporary political developments. The final section reflects on the enduring legacy of Savarkar's thought and its relevance in contemporary India, especially in light of ongoing debates on nationalism, pluralism, and secularism. By offering a nuanced conceptual analysis, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of Hindutva's role in the evolution of Indian nationalism and raises critical questions about the ideological directions shaping India's democratic and cultural future.

Keywords: Hindutva, Indian Nationalism, Cultural Nationalism, Religious Identity, Secularism in India

I. Introduction

The evolution of Indian nationalism has been marked by a diverse array of ideological influences, ranging from secular liberalism and religious pluralism to cultural traditionalism and political radicalism. Among the key figures who contributed to this ideological spectrum, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar stands out for articulating a distinctive vision of the Indian nation through the concept of *Hindutva*. First introduced in his 1923 pamphlet *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, Savarkar's formulation sought to redefine national identity by grounding it in a shared ancestry, common culture, and territorial unity, distinct from the metaphysical and spiritual dimensions of Hinduism as a religion. His ideas emerged during a critical period of colonial

resistance and socio-political unrest, offering an alternative to the dominant secular-nationalist discourse championed by leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. While Savarkar's revolutionary activities and intellectual contributions have earned him both admiration and criticism, his ideological legacy has profoundly shaped contemporary debates on nationalism, identity, and the role of religion in public life. This conceptual paper aims to critically examine Savarkar's Hindutva as a theoretical construct, exploring its origins, core principles, and influence on the broader narrative of Indian nationalism. It investigates how Hindutva seeks to consolidate a national identity rooted in cultural unity while also analyzing the exclusions and tensions it generates, particularly in relation to India's religious and linguistic minorities. By situating Savarkar's thought within both its historical context and contemporary relevance, the study attempts to offer a nuanced understanding of Hindutva's enduring impact on Indian political and cultural consciousness. In doing so, it raises important questions about the compatibility of such a framework with the pluralistic and democratic ideals enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

A. Background and Context

The rise of Indian nationalism during the colonial period was not a monolithic movement but a complex interplay of diverse ideological strands. While the Indian National Congress largely promoted a secular, inclusive nationalism focused on democratic values and anti-colonial resistance, alternative visions also emerged that sought to define the nation in more culturally homogenous terms. One of the most influential and controversial of these was articulated by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar through his concept of *Hindutva*. Developed in the early 1920s, in the aftermath of the First World War and in the context of heightened communal tensions and political unrest, Hindutva sought to construct a Hindu-centric vision of nationhood based on shared racial ancestry, cultural heritage, and territorial loyalty. This formulation was deeply shaped by both Savarkar's revolutionary experiences and his exposure to Western political theories of nationalism and identity. It was also a reaction to the perceived failures of inclusive nationalism to assert a strong civilizational identity in the face of British colonial domination and internal religious divisions. The broader context of Hindu revivalism, the anxieties over Muslim separatism, and the quest for a unified national identity all played significant roles in shaping the ideological environment in which Hindutva was conceived. Thus, understanding Savarkar's Hindutva requires situating it within the early 20th-century political climate—a period marked by competing visions of India's future, debates over cultural authenticity, and the struggle to define the essence of Indian nationhood.

B. Significance of Savarkar's Hindutva

Savarkar's Hindutva holds significant importance not only in the historical development of Indian nationalism but also in shaping the contemporary political landscape. At its core, Hindutva was an attempt to redefine the concept of nationhood by emphasizing a cultural and civilizational unity rather than a mere political or geographical one. Savarkar's work presented a vision of India where the Hindu community, defined by shared ancestry, language, and cultural practices, formed the fundamental basis of national identity. This was a direct challenge to the more

inclusive secular nationalism promoted by leaders like Gandhi and Nehru, which sought to unify the diverse religious and cultural groups of India under a broad, pluralistic national banner. By positioning Hindutva as the defining principle of Indian identity, Savarkar not only influenced nationalist thought but also provided the intellectual foundation for several political movements that later emerged in the post-independence era. The ideological framework of Hindutva resonated particularly with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and other Hindu nationalist organizations, which continue to play a significant role in India's political discourse today. The significance of Hindutva lies not only in its historical context but also in its enduring influence on contemporary debates regarding national identity, religious pluralism, and the role of religion in politics. While its critics argue that Hindutva fosters exclusion and divisiveness, its proponents contend that it offers a cohesive and unapologetically Hindu vision of India's national future. The continued relevance of Hindutva, especially in the context of rising nationalism in the 21st century, underscores its lasting impact on Indian political ideologies and the ongoing conversation around what constitutes the 'Indian' identity.

II. Understanding Hindutva

A. Definition and Core Principles

The term **Hindutva**, popularized by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in his 1923 treatise *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, occupies a pivotal position in the ideological landscape of Indian nationalism. Although often translated as "Hinduness," Hindutva transcends religious identity to encapsulate a broader civilizational and cultural ethos. For Savarkar, Hindutva signified the essence of being a Hindu not merely in the religious sense, but in terms of shared heritage, ancestry, and allegiance to the Indian nation.

Savarkar articulated **three essential criteria** for defining a "Hindu":

1. **Common Nation (Rashtra):** The individual must regard India as their fatherland (pitribhumi).
2. **Common Race (Jati):** They must share a common ancestry with the Hindu community.
3. **Common Culture or Civilization (Sanskriti):** They must partake in the traditions and values that originated and flourished in India.

This tripartite framework formed the ideological foundation of Hindutva, setting it apart from the inclusive and spiritual connotations of Hinduism as a religion. Hindutva was positioned as a cultural and political identity, not confined to faith but defined by an emotional and historical connection to the Indian subcontinent.

Savarkar's conceptualization was marked by a secular emphasis, insofar as he did not restrict Hindutva to religious orthodoxy or ritual practices. Instead, he emphasized cultural nationalism, wherein loyalty to the nation-state and its civilizational past became the ultimate markers of belonging. In doing so, Savarkar proposed a unitary national identity, one that would resist internal divisions and external threats.

B. Historical Context and Ideological Development

To understand the genesis of Savarkar's Hindutva, it is essential to situate it within the colonial context of early 20th-century India. The period was marked by the burgeoning of diverse

nationalist ideologies, ranging from the moderate constitutionalism of the Indian National Congress to the radical anti-colonial movements inspired by revolutionary and socialist thought. The trauma of British subjugation and the desire to forge a cohesive national identity prompted intellectuals to redefine notions of community and nationhood.

Savarkar's ideological evolution was significantly influenced by European nationalist movements, particularly the ideas of ethnic nationalism and cultural unity that were prevalent in late 19th- and early 20th-century Europe. During his time in England, Savarkar absorbed the lessons of Giuseppe Mazzini and other nationalist thinkers, synthesizing them with Indian historical experiences. His engagement with historical revisionism—notably in his work *The First War of Indian Independence* (1909)—demonstrated his commitment to constructing a heroic past that could galvanize the masses.

The Partition of Bengal (1905) and the subsequent communal tensions heightened concerns about national unity, particularly in light of the growing assertiveness of Muslim separatist politics. Savarkar perceived a pressing need to define and consolidate a Hindu identity that could act as a counterforce to perceived internal divisions and external domination. Hindutva emerged as a response not only to British imperialism but also to what he regarded as the fragmentation of Hindu society and the challenges posed by religious minorities.

The ideological development of Hindutva was also shaped by the debates surrounding secularism and pluralism within the Indian nationalist movement. While leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru envisioned a composite nationalism that accommodated India's religious diversity, Savarkar advocated for a majoritarian cultural nationalism rooted in the primacy of Hindu civilization. His view diverged sharply from the inclusive ethos of Congress-led nationalism, favoring instead a homogenized and assertive national self-image.

In essence, Hindutva was both reactive and proactive—a reaction to the disintegration of Hindu identity under colonial rule and a proactive blueprint for reconstructing the Indian nation along culturally cohesive lines. By emphasizing shared origin, culture, and history, Savarkar sought to create a robust ideological foundation that would not only resist colonial domination but also assert a distinct Hindu identity in the evolving framework of Indian nationalism.

III. Impact on Indian Nationalism

A. Shaping National Identity

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's conception of *Hindutva* fundamentally altered the trajectory of Indian nationalism by introducing a cultural and civilizational lens to the idea of the nation. While earlier nationalist discourses—especially those shaped by figures like Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, and later, Mahatma Gandhi—focused on political self-rule, moral authority, and civic nationalism, Savarkar advanced a vision rooted in cultural homogeneity and historical continuity. This alternative framework redefined the nation not as a pluralistic political entity, but as a historically unified cultural organism whose essence resided in Hindu civilization. The primary effect of Hindutva on Indian national identity was the emphasis on common ancestry, territorial loyalty, and cultural unity. Savarkar proposed that true belonging in the Indian nation required emotional and historical identification with the land of Bharat as both

Pitribhumi (fatherland) and *Punyabhumi* (holy land). This criterion implicitly excluded religious communities—particularly Muslims and Christians—whose sacred geographies lay outside the Indian subcontinent. As a result, the inclusive civic nationalism envisioned by the Indian National Congress came into tension with this exclusivist cultural nationalism, leading to an ideological bifurcation that continues to influence Indian political discourse.

Savarkar's influence also led to the conflation of Hindu identity with national identity, a shift that shaped public perceptions of patriotism and belonging. The figure of the Hindu hero—drawn from mythological and historical sources—became emblematic of national pride and resistance. Figures such as Shivaji and Rana Pratap were recast not only as regional leaders but as pan-Indian nationalist symbols, meant to inspire a unified Hindu consciousness.

In shaping national identity, Hindutva also promoted a historical reinterpretation of India's past, one that emphasized resistance against Islamic invasions and colonial rule. The glorification of a Hindu golden age and the vilification of foreign rulers created a binary worldview that defined India's national essence in opposition to perceived 'outsiders.' This historiographical approach has had long-lasting effects on educational narratives, public memory, and political rhetoric in independent India.

B. Influence on Political and Social Structures

The ideological framework of Hindutva gradually moved from intellectual discourse to organizational mobilization. Savarkar's vision provided the philosophical foundation for the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in 1925 by K. B. Hedgewar. The RSS emerged as a disciplined and hierarchical cultural organization committed to propagating Hindu unity, moral strength, and social service. While Savarkar himself was never a member, his ideas deeply influenced the RSS's structure and mission.

Hindutva's impact on Indian political structures became more visible with the emergence of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) in 1951 and, later, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). These political arms articulated a vision of India rooted in the civilizational ethos outlined by Savarkar. In practice, this translated into policies and rhetoric that promoted majoritarian cultural values, opposed preferential treatment for religious minorities, and called for a Uniform Civil Code as a symbol of national integration.

Socially, Hindutva has had a dual influence. On one hand, it has succeeded in mobilizing large sections of the Hindu population across caste and regional lines, fostering a sense of shared identity. This mobilization often occurs through cultural festivals, public processions, educational institutions, and volunteer networks. On the other hand, it has contributed to sectarian polarization, particularly through its emphasis on the historical grievances of Hindus and the portrayal of minorities—especially Muslims—as “the other.”

A key legacy of Savarkar's Hindutva is the politicization of religious identity in post-independence India. Political campaigns, electoral strategies, and public policies have increasingly engaged with religious symbolism, communal narratives, and cultural markers of Hindu identity. This shift has influenced debates on secularism, minority rights, and the role of religion in the public sphere.

Moreover, the Hindutva worldview has shaped institutional attitudes and state policies. Issues such as temple restoration, cow protection, the status of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) have been framed within a Hindutva paradigm. These developments demonstrate how a cultural ideology once located at the margins of nationalist discourse has moved toward the political centre.

In conclusion, Savarkar's Hindutva has exerted a profound and lasting impact on Indian nationalism. It redefined the criteria of national identity through a cultural and civilizational lens and laid the groundwork for enduring changes in India's political and social structures. While its legacy remains contested, its influence on the shape and direction of Indian nationalism is undeniable.

IV. Criticisms and Controversies

A. Exclusive Nature and Ideological Rigidity

Despite its foundational role in shaping a strand of Indian nationalism, Hindutva has attracted sustained criticism for its exclusive and rigid ideological framework. One of the most frequently cited critiques is that Hindutva reduces the complex diversity of Indian society into a monolithic Hindu identity, which not only marginalizes internal differences but also delegitimizes alternative visions of the nation.

Savarkar's tripartite criteria for national belonging—common nation, race, and culture—are deeply exclusionary by design. This framework prioritizes ancestral and cultural homogeneity over constitutional citizenship, thereby excluding religious communities that do not share India's civilizational roots. Critics argue that this approach essentializes identity based on birth and culture rather than values or democratic participation. As a result, Hindutva is often seen as antithetical to the liberal, inclusive, and pluralist ideals enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

The ideological rigidity of Hindutva leaves little room for syncretic traditions, intercultural exchange, or evolving identities. It tends to draw rigid boundaries between "insiders" and "outsiders," creating a binary worldview that resists dialogue and dissent. This rigidity has manifested in hostility toward secularism, which Hindutva proponents often label as "pseudo-secularism" or appeasement of minorities. In doing so, the ideology delegitimizes attempts to build a civic national identity based on legal equality and religious neutrality.

Furthermore, critics point out that Hindutva's historical revisionism is driven more by political necessity than by academic rigor. By selectively glorifying Hindu pasts and vilifying periods of Muslim rule, the ideology constructs a narrative of cultural victimhood that is leveraged to justify majoritarian mobilization. This instrumentalization of history contributes to communal polarization and undermines efforts toward social cohesion and historical nuance.

B. Implications for Religious and Cultural Minorities

The implications of Hindutva for India's religious and cultural minorities have been among the most contentious and debated aspects of the ideology. Savarkar's framing of Muslims and Christians as communities with external allegiances casts them as perpetual "outsiders" to the Indian nation. While the Constitution guarantees equal citizenship regardless of religion, the

Hindutva worldview introduces an ideological hierarchy of belonging, wherein Hindus are seen as the natural and original inheritors of the nation.

This ideological stance has led to real-world consequences. The political rise of Hindutva-affiliated organizations has coincided with increased incidents of communal violence, hate speech, and targeted discrimination against minorities. Social practices such as “love jihad” narratives, cow protection vigilantism, and religious conversions have been weaponized to control and surveil minority communities. These actions not only infringe upon civil liberties but also foster an atmosphere of fear and alienation.

Moreover, cultural expressions of minorities—including language, dress, food habits, and religious practices—have come under intense scrutiny and politicization. Policies promoting cultural homogenization, such as calls for Sanskrit or Hindi primacy, uniform civil codes, and restrictions on religious festivals, are often seen by critics as attempts to erase the plurality that characterizes Indian society.

The rhetoric of Hindutva has also influenced state institutions, including the police, judiciary, and education system. There are growing concerns that institutional neutrality is being compromised, as public institutions increasingly reflect majoritarian biases. The portrayal of minorities in school curricula, media narratives, and public discourse frequently aligns with Hindutva interpretations, reinforcing stereotypes and historical grievances.

Internationally, human rights organizations and academic scholars have raised alarms about the erosion of democratic norms and minority protections under regimes influenced by Hindutva ideology. While proponents argue that Hindutva is a legitimate form of cultural nationalism that seeks to rectify historical wrongs, critics maintain that it promotes an exclusionary nationalism that undermines the pluralistic fabric of the Indian republic.

In summary, while Hindutva has mobilized large segments of Indian society under a shared cultural banner, it has also attracted significant criticism for fostering ideological intolerance and institutionalized majoritarianism. Its impact on religious and cultural minorities challenges the ideals of inclusive nationalism and raises fundamental questions about the nature of citizenship, identity, and democracy in contemporary India.

V. Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

A. Continued Influence on Indian Political Thought

The legacy of Savarkar’s *Hindutva* is both enduring and transformative in the context of Indian political thought. Though originally situated on the ideological fringes of the nationalist movement, Hindutva has, over the past century, moved steadily toward the political mainstream. Today, it serves as the philosophical bedrock for a significant section of India’s political establishment, notably the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its broader ideological ecosystem, the Sangh Parivar.

Savarkar’s emphasis on a culturally homogeneous nation continues to inform political narratives, electoral strategies, and policy frameworks. Themes such as *national pride*, *civilizational continuity*, *decolonization of the mind*, and *assertive cultural identity*—once confined to ideological treatises—are now central to public discourse and state policy. The language of

“Bharat Mata,” reverence for ancient Hindu texts, and the celebration of Hindu icons in the national pantheon illustrate the deep imprint of Hindutva on contemporary political thought.

Moreover, Hindutva has profoundly shaped debates on citizenship, secularism, and nationalism. For instance, the framing of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), debates over the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), and judicial verdicts such as the Ayodhya temple case all reflect Hindutva's ideological influence on questions of national identity and historical justice. These developments signal a paradigmatic shift in Indian politics, wherein cultural nationalism increasingly defines the contours of legitimacy and governance.

Intellectually, Hindutva's legacy is also evident in the emergence of a new cohort of scholars, commentators, and policymakers who advocate for a "civilizational state" model of India. This model, inspired in part by Savarkar's ideas, positions India not just as a nation-state but as the inheritor of a continuous and distinct Hindu civilization. While this vision appeals to a sense of historical grandeur and national resurgence, it also raises critical questions about its compatibility with India's constitutional secularism and multicultural heritage.

B. Challenges and Prospects for Inclusive Nationalism

The contemporary prominence of Hindutva poses profound challenges for the idea of inclusive nationalism, which was a foundational aspiration of India's freedom struggle and constitutional order. Inclusive nationalism, as envisioned by Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar, was pluralistic in spirit, recognizing India's deep religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity as a source of strength rather than division. In contrast, the Hindutva paradigm often promotes a majoritarian identity that risks marginalizing large segments of the population.

One of the most pressing challenges lies in balancing civilizational pride with democratic inclusivity. While cultural nationalism may provide a unifying narrative for some, it can become exclusionary when it prescribes a singular identity as normative. This is particularly problematic in a country where minorities constitute nearly 20% of the population and where regional, linguistic, and caste-based diversities are integral to the national fabric.

Another significant challenge is the erosion of secular institutional ethos. As state apparatuses increasingly reflect the values and symbols of Hindutva, concerns about the neutrality of public institutions—from universities and courts to law enforcement—have intensified. The politicization of cultural identity not only undermines minority rights but also restricts freedom of expression, academic independence, and civil liberties.

Yet, prospects for inclusive nationalism remain viable if India can reclaim its pluralist legacy while accommodating legitimate aspirations for cultural recognition. This would require a deliberate commitment to constitutional values, protection of minority rights, and the fostering of inter-community dialogue. Educational reform, judicial safeguards, and civil society activism will play crucial roles in preserving the democratic and secular character of the nation.

Moreover, a truly inclusive nationalism can engage with the cultural contributions of all communities without demanding conformity. It can celebrate Hindu heritage as one strand of India's complex identity while equally acknowledging the historical and cultural roles of Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis, and tribal communities. In this vision,

nationalism becomes not an imposition of sameness but a celebration of coexistence and mutual respect.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the contemporary relevance of Savarkar's Hindutva lies not only in its growing influence but also in the urgent questions it raises about the future of Indian democracy. Whether India continues on the path of cultural majoritarianism or reaffirms its commitment to pluralism and constitutionalism will define the next chapter of its national story. The dialogue between these competing visions of nationalism—assertive and inclusive—remains central to understanding India's political and moral trajectory in the 21st century.

In tracing the ideological roots, political impact, and contemporary relevance of Savarkar's Hindutva, it becomes clear that his formulation of cultural nationalism has left a profound and enduring mark on the Indian national imagination. While it has mobilized a strong sense of civilizational pride and unity among sections of the population, it has also introduced ideological rigidity and exclusion that challenge the pluralistic ideals upon which modern India was founded. The continuing tension between majoritarian nationalism and inclusive democracy defines the evolving character of Indian nationalism today. As India navigates the complexities of identity, governance, and coexistence, the legacy of Hindutva remains both a potent force and a contested terrain—demanding critical engagement and a renewed commitment to constitutional values and social harmony.

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