In India, History invariably evokes political passions in the public domain. One of the reasons for this is that the popular conception of history in the mass imagination continues to be an act of recognition and celebration of the spirit of selfless service, bravery and sacrifice on the part of individuals, families, castes, communities and political parties. History writing is considered as an important mode of appropriating, accumulating and constantly renewing “the cultural capital”, the durable stuff that goes into the making of contemporary political discourses in India. Savarkar’s “The Indian War of Independence” was an important book written in this tradition. In March, 2003, when a portrait of the Hindutva Hero Veer Savarkar in Parliament’s Central Hall was unveiled, the public opinion was sharply polarised between those who sang his praises and others who denounced him for his role in the Indian national movement and Gandhi murder.

For his followers, Veer Savarkar(1883-1966) continues to be a figure of great reverence despite the fact that he was included as a co-conspirator in the assassination of Gandhi.: a patriot, prolific writer, historian, motivator, and above all an individual with a revolutionary faith in the motherland. The book was written originally in Marathi, in 1908, when Savarkar was about twenty-five years of age and was living in London. The English translation of the book was printed in Holland and a large number of copies were smuggled into India. It has been claimed that so far six editions of the book have been published and it was widely read in the revolutionary circles of the nationalist movement. According to the Publisher’s preface (London, May 10, 1909) Savarkar’s objective in writing this book was to let the Indians know “how their nation fought for its Independence and how their ancestors died.”

This genre of ‘inspirational history’ writing should not be confused with academic history and perhaps, should be judged in its own terms. Today, a deep faultline continues to divide this sort of history from the multiple genres of academic history writing in India.
V.D.Savarkar’s book ‘The Indian War of Independence-1857’ is in actuality a book about a revolution which he thought had failed, just like the Russian revolution of 1905.\(^1\) “It is difficult to find in Indian history another Revolution, so exciting, so quick, so terrible, and so universal!” In fact, the author is obsessed with the word ‘Revolution’ with a capital R. There is hardly a page of the book on which this word does not figure. There are many pages on which it figures as many as five times! Apart from other reasons including “treachery of Sikhs”\(^2\) the, For him the Revolution failed because of many other reasons. On the other hand, the Bengali intellectual Iswar Gupta, editor of Sambad Parvakar, in 1857, had admired the Sikh patriotism of loyalty to the British. He had ridiculed the attempt of the rebels to match British military prowess. In the average Bengali reckoning, the revolt of 1857 was just another of those upsurges that had occurred in Bengal a century ago.\(^3\) A certain kind of indecisiveness was responsible for the failure of this “national revolution”. “There is no other life-killing poison”, observed Savarkar, “to a revolution than indecision. The sooner and the more sudden the spreading of a revolution the greater are its chances of success…the wave of Revolution was inevitably checked for three weeks after the freedom of Delhi”\(^4\) It is clear from the list of “important books consulted” by the author that the raw material of the book was almost entirely collected from the books on the ‘History of Indian Mutiny’ written by the British authors.

\(^1\) V.D.Savarkar, The Indian War of Independence, Phoenix Publications, Bombay, First authorised and Public edition in India, 1947. There is reference to the Russian revolution at page 93. It seems Savarkar was aware of the failed revolution of 1905.
\(^2\) Ibid. p.158
\(^4\) Ibid. p.128; p.158
For V.D. Savarkar, writing history of “1857” was essentially a roll call of honour and glory, an act of remembrance and commemoration. Though on the surface, the book gives the impression of narrating the events of the uprising, in actuality, it is a sort of political manifesto, a passionate perpetual call to an armed Revolution against the British. But Savarkar knew that this call could not acquire the necessary powerful appeal, unless he had created a new set of patriotic heroes who supposed to have consciously chosen the path of armed resistance to the rulers and sacrificed their lives for the noble cause of “Swadharma and Swaraj”\(^5\). The prominent figures involved must first be projected as heroes motivated not by any considerations of self-interest but by an ideology, if their names were to stand out as metaphors of self-sacrifice, sacredness and bravery. That is, his was an attempt to create an indigenous source of nationalist inspiration, a sort of new emotional reservoir. No one before him had thought of narrating the stories of Laxmi Bai, Nana Saheb, Bahadur Shah, Kumar Singh, Moulvie Ahmad Shah, Azimullah and Tatia Tope in this novel way through the narrative of history where they emerged as a new pantheon of heroes of the mythical “national Revolution.” No wonder that Savarkar should have begun his project (which when legally printed in 1947 came to 552 pages) by discussing the nature of the historical method itself.

Later on, these very names were to be popularised through nationalist poetry and novels. He connected events and individuals in such a way that the book turned out to be a sort of structured plot of social memory of Indian nationalism; and that too at its very originary moment. For Savarkar, a history book was not supposed to be some deaf and dumb monument awaiting to be appropriated through ritual practices of various kinds. History, for him, was a Goddess, a witness as well as a participant. This is how he ends.

\(^5\) Chapter I; “Swadharma and Swaraj”.
one of his chapters: “Tell us now O Muse of History, how Nana Sahib, the Moulvie of Lucknow, the Rani of Jhansi, and other grand heroes clung to this principle (the Revolution) with such extraordinary persistence! And fail not to tell, also, O History, how all Indians could not cling to it as these Heroes did! Come and sing the songs of glory and of praise with us in the first part, and, also, come and weep with us later on!”

The aim of the book seems to be not only to create but also to transmit ‘an archive of social memory’ to the coming generations with a view to teaching them what anthropologist Wendy James calls “possible choreographies of future practice.” Savarkar believed that history of the Revolutionary War of 1857 was “most likely to animate the rising generation of India with the faith that there was no reason why it should not be practicable …to try again.”

It is only through the shared network of social memory that a collective or a group experiences and acquires its distinctive cohesion and demarcates its boundary of inclusion/exclusion. The other name for the consequence of this process is identity formation. Memory with its multi-dimensional emotional energies is central not only to the formation of an identity but also its changing forms and articulations. “Memory”, observes Wendy James, “is more than intellectual knowledge of the past, but is a lived framework for the partial revisions of the present which go on around us all the time, and for changing expectations of the future too.”

An other idea which was not supposed to be forgotten by the new generations was the idea of Hindu-Muslim unity. Page after page it is stated that this unity is essential for the victory of an armed Revolution against the British. “The five days during which Hindus

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6 Ibid. p.159.
7 Ibid. p.x.
and Mahomedans proclaimed that India was their country and that they were all brethren, the days when Hindus and Mahomedans unanimously raised the flag of national freedom at Delhi. Be those grand days ever memorable in the history of Hindusthan!" Interestingly, these lines were written by a man who later on was to propound, and that too much before Jinnah’s Lahore speech in 1940, that there were two nations in India, one Hindu and the other Muslim.

Savarkar composed his magnum opus on the 1857 uprising, The Indian War of Independence, in London in 1907-8. History was for him not only about remembering but also about forgetting. He exhorts his countrymen thus: “…those who fulfilled their duty to their religion and to their country….let their names be remembered, pronounced with reverence! Those who did not join them in the holy war, through indifference and hesitation, may their names never be remembered by their country. And, as for those who actually joined the enemy and fought against their own countrymen, may their names be for ever crushed.”

Mr. Savarkar’s was an attempt to look at the incidents of 1857 from the “Indian” point of view. Thus writing history for him meant that the participants were to be “re-presented” as being “Indians” first and Muslims, Hindus, Brahmans, Gujjars, and women later. A new scale of hierarchies of loyalties where nationalism stood as the primary identity was put in place for the first times, and it continues to be upheld in many quarters even today. In this he was also guided by his “Indian theory of Revolution”, a kind of revolutionary principle which runs through the entire Indian history as opposed to the European History.

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9 The Indian War of Independence, p. 126
A leading revolutionary himself, he was attracted and inspired by the burning zeal, the heroism, bravery, suffering and tragic fate of the leaders of 1857, and he decided to re-interpret the story with the help of all the material available to him at the time. He claims to have spent days and months at the India office library studying the period.

One of the organising principles of Savarkar’s book is the view that what the British had called “The Sepoy Mutiny”, in fact, was the first war fought by Indians in the cause of Independence. Not only that, it was regarded by him “as a planned and organised political and military rising aimed at destroying the British power in India.” For Savarkar, the revolt was significant as it emerged as the epitome of Hindu-Muslim unity. The revolt was a unique moment in India’s history when people belonging to different religions, castes, languages, regions and cultures came to fight together to oppose the British rule. In his conclusion he observed that “the Revolution of 1857 was a test to see how far India had come towards unity, independence and popular power.” Savarkar approvingly quotes the following words from Forrest’s Introduction as a significant lesson to his countrymen: “Among the many lessons the Indian mutiny conveys to the historian, none is of great importance than the warning that it is possible to have a Revolution in which Brahmins and sudras, Hindus and Mahomedans, could be united against us…” (*footnote2. P.544. George William Forrest, State Papers.). The other lesson which the book spelt out clearly and loudly was that this was only a “great rehearsal” for the more powerful insurrection which would inevitably revisit Indian

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11 The Indian War of Independence, p.544.
12 Ibid. p.vii.
13 Ibid. p.544
history in the future. Logically, the rising at Vellore was a rehearsal of the “great rising” of 1857. Savarkar elaborates:

“Just as in a theatre, before the actual performance, several rehearsals have to be gone through so in history, before the actual and final attainment of freedom, in order to harmonise the whole performance, several rehearsals in the shape of risings are necessary. In Italy, the rehearsals started as early as 1821, and only in 1861 was the play successful. The rising at Vellore in 1806 was such a rehearsal on a small scale…..Hindus and Mahomedans together had risen in the name of religion and liberty….Before the final performance, how many rehearsals have to be gone through! Only the actors should boldly stick to their tasks and never cease their rehearsals.” The Mutiny of the Madras Army at Vellore on July 10, 1806, is considered to be the first mutiny since the arrival of the British in India, not only by Savarkar but some others also. It was swiftly put down, as a British officer escaped, and alerted his superiors. It is usually ascribed to two factors. The first was that new army regulations forced the soldiers to eliminate all marks of religious identity. The Hindus were told to erase all caste marks; the Muslims were forced to shave their beards and moustaches. Further more, the soldiers had been guarding the sons of Tipu Sultan. They are said to have won over the soldiers’ loyalty. In fact, Tipu’s second son, Fateh Hyder, was proclaimed king, and the old Mysore flag raised over the fort. For a detailed account of this mutiny and the process through which the Company Raj was evolving into the colonial state. James W. Hoover reminds us that that the Vellore mutiny was the largest and most violent of a series of insurrections against the British which took place across southern India after 1750. Hoover has unearthed a remarkable document, an arz or petition from eleven sepoys. In this
document, the sepoys point out that the rule of the British had been welcomed as they were seen to be fair to the sepoys. However, their position had deteriorated in all respects. Higher ranks for Indian officers had been abolished, pay and service conditions had fallen, and mutual respect had been replaced by authoritarianism.\footnote{15 For detailed account see, James W. Hoover, Men Without Hats, Manohar, Delhi, 2007.}

Obviously, Savarkar was looking on 1857 as the precursor of many other rebellions to come. Infact, a deep conviction in the inevitability of such a Revolution to repeat itself continued to inspire the various revolutionary currents in India during the struggle for Independence. As opposed to the Gandhian strategy of non-violence, these insurrectionists of various ideological persuasions continued to believe that British rule could only be overthrown by organising a violent revolt of the Indian people. Inspired by the Ghadar of 1857, the demobilised Punjab Sikh soldiers in America founded a new nationalist party “the Ghadar Party” in America in 1903\footnote{16 Puri, Harish K., Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organisation and Strategy, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, 1983. In 1923, these Ghadarites joined hands with the Third Internation in Moscow. For details see, Bhagwan Josh, Communist Movement in the Punjab:1926-47, New Delhi, 1979.}.

Later on in the 1920s, Indian communists were to uphold the flag of insurrection by attempting to organise the ‘Russian’ or ‘Chinese’ type revolution in India. Even today, one of the currents of Indian Communism called “Naxalites” or “Maoists” are carrying on their activities with a view of armed seizure of state power.\footnote{17}

The leadership of these various revolutionary groups in the nineteen twenties seems to have circulated the book very widely in order to use its “fiery inspiration” to sustain faith in this conviction. Without such a conviction an alternative and parallel movement to the Gandhi-led movement of the Indian National Congress could not be built. The first
introductory chapter which tells the story of this ‘history’ claims that Savarkar had written this book to “inspire his people with a burning desire to rise again and wage a second and a successful war to liberate their motherland.”

According to G.M. Joshi, editor of the Marathi weekly journal “Agrani”, five English editions of the book were published before 1947. It seems no other book in India had such a checkered history. The book was written originally in Marathi, in 1908, when Savarkar was about twenty-four years old. Finding that it was not easy to get the book printed in India, an unsuccessful attempt was made to get the Marathi book printed in Germany. Later on the book was translated into English by a group of individuals staying at India house, London. Efforts were made to get it printed in London but the British detectives made its publication impossible. In a letter to “The London Times” Savarkar criticised the British Government for proscribing the book before its publication. Ultimately, the English Translation was printed in Holland and hundreds of its copies were smuggled into India. It has been claimed that the second edition of the book was published by Lala Hardayal, a follower of Savarkar who was associated with the formation of the Gadhar Party, predominantly of retired Punjabi Sikh soldiers, in America in 1913. This Party called itself “the Gadhar Party” in order to underline the fact that the spirit of “1857” was its source of inspiration. The Party regularly printed its newspaper “Gadhar” in Urdu and Punjabi and it was circulated widely among the Sikh immigrants. It was claimed, and this claim has been repeated once again recently. The third edition of the book supposed to have published by Bhagat Singh and his comrades

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18 The Indian War of Independence, p.iv.
19 The newspaper published lot of nationalistic poetry. Now the Panjabi University, Patiala, has published two collections of this poetry called: GHADAR DI GOONJ (ECHOS OF THE GHADAR)
in 1928. An Urdu translation of the book was also published. While the fifth edition, it is claimed, was published by Subash Chandra Bose and Rash Behari Bose in Japan in 1944. One of the army corps of Bose was named after Laxmibai, the Rani of Jhansi. The introduction further claims that “directly and indirectly the book has influenced, animated and guided at least two generations in India.”

Chapter, dated 10th January, 1947, was written by G.M. Joshi, editor of a Marathi Magazine. According to him the book was also to serve another purpose. “He also expected that the history should serve to place before the revolutionists an outline of a programme of organisation and action to enable them to prepare the nation for a future war of liberation. It would never have been possible to preach such a revolutionary gospel publicly throughout India or carry conviction so effectively as an illuminating illustration of what had actually happened in the nearest past would do. So he invoked the warriors of 1857 to deliver his message through their own mighty words and mightier deeds.”

Even a cursory reading of the book leaves the reader with an impression that the study of 1857 seem to have undertaken by Savarkar less to delineate the contours of the happenings of that event but more as a sort of scaffold to mount and project his own vision of how the “revolutionary forces” were to be organised to successfully execute “a country-wide plot to overthrow the British domination in India by actually waging an armed revolutionary war.” Simultaneously, the story weaves two parallel strands, the critique of a failed revolution as well as the presentation of a schema of how to succeed

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20 L.K. Advani, The Indian Express, May 10, 2007. “150 years of Heroism, Via Kala Pani.” It is clear from an article published in the Punjabi monthly magazine KIRTI that Bhagat Singh and his comrades seem to have read the book and biographical sketch of Savarkar. See the article THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MAY TENTH, April 18, 1928.
21 The Indian War of Independence, p. xviii.
22 Ibid. p.viii.
23 Ibid. p. 72-73.
in the next revolution. He is using the personalities of 1857 more as ‘actors’ who are made to think, feel and speak according to the script provided by the author himself. It becomes clear from the chapter “Secret Organisation” (Chapter VII) that Savarkar was convinced that “the forces of the Revolution were thus maturing themselves all over India…” and then he poses the question: “how to organise properly all the materials for the war so as to bring the War of Independence to a successful conclusion.” 24 In this chapter Savarkar makes Azimullah return to the palace of Nana Saheb after his wonderings in Russia, Europe and Egypt. It is here that they are shown as having a discussion about the programme of “National War”: “In short, the broad features of the policy of Nana Saheb and Azimullah were that the Hindus and the Mahomedans 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….How to achieve this ideal was the one all-absorbing thought of everyone in the palace of Brahamavarta. Two things were necessary for the success of this terrible war that was to be waged to win back freedom. The first thing was to create a passionate desire in Hindusthan for this ideal; the second was to make all the country rise simultaneously for the purpose of achieving it.” 25 Attributing the new meaning of what was called “Hindusthan” to Nana Saheb, he states that it was to be “the united nation of the adherents of Islam as well as Hinduism….It was no national shame to join hands with Mahomedans then, but it would, on the contrary, be an act of generosity. So, now, the original antagonism between the Hindus and Mahomedans might be consigned to the past. Their present relation was one not of rulers and ruled, foreigner and native, but

24 Ibid. p.71.
25 Ibid. P.76.
simply that of brothers with the 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 mother. India therefore being the common mother of these two, they were brothers by blood.” 26 The leaders of 1857, he repeats again and again, gathered round the flag of Swadesh “leaving aside their enmity, now so unreasonable and stupid.”27

For Savarkar depicts the revolt as a brilliantly organised conspiracy the details of which Nana Saheb had already worked out in his mind. His agents were moving from one Durbar to another in order to sow “the seeds of Revolution” as well as to draw them into the “War of Independence.” In order to ‘awaken all the latent power of the people” Nana Saheb successfully sent “thousands of Fakirs, Pundits, and Sanyasis in an incredibly short time”28 The idea of successful pan-Indian conspiracy hatched with remarkable secrecy seems to have been picked up by Savarkar from John William Kaye. “For months, for years indeed, they had been spreading their network of intrigues all over the country. From one native court to an other, from one extremity to an other of the great continent of India, the agents of Nana Saheb had passed with overtures and invitations discreetly, perhaps mysteriously, worded to princes and chiefs of different races and religions, but most hopefully to all to the Mahrattas….There is nothing in my mind more substantiated than the complicity of Nana Saheb in widespread intrigues before the outbreak of the mutiny. The concurrent testimony of witnesses examined in parts of the

26 Ibid. p.76
27 Ibid. p.76
28 Ibid.p81.
country widely distinct from each other takes this story altogether out of the regions of the conjunctural.” 29

Savarkar’s own self-perception as a revolutionary deeply influenced the story line of this book. His own psychological state of mind was attracted and inspired by the burning zeal, the heroism, bravery, suffering and the tragic fate of the leaders of the revolt of 1857. This could not but have coloured the re-interpretation of the story of 1857. Reading through the book leaves one in no doubt that he was composing the book as an inspirational revolutionary tale calculated to touch the inchoate emotion which always underpins the early stages of the phenomenon called nationalism. It was an activist’s history designed with the idea that the reader after going through the material assembled here must close the book with a sense of pride in the revolutionary legacy of his ancestors. One of his statements, issued by Savarkar in 1908 from London, observed:

“The war begun on the 10th of May 1857 is not over on the 10th of May 1908, nor can it ever cease till a 10th of May to come sees the destiny accomplished and our motherland stands free!” 30 For Savarkar never could conceive the ‘Rising of 1857’ was “an event complete by itself.” He looked upon 1857 as but a campaign in the “war of independence in its entirity.”

His was an attempt at ‘history writing with a mission.’, with a certain end in view which was yet to be accomplished. No doubt he was impressed by the “hallowed martyrdom” of those who had participated in it. Spelling out the significance of written history as one

30 The Indian War of Independence, p.xx.
of the necessary ingredients in the making of a nation, a popular theme among the nationalists of the 19th century, Savarkar observed in the introduction:

"The nation that has no consciousness of its past has no future. Equally true it is that a nation must develop its capacity not only of claiming a past but also of knowing how to use it for the furtherance of its future. The nation ought to be the master of and not the slave of its own history. For, it is absolutely unwise to try to do certain things now irrespective of special considerations, simply because they had been once acted in the past. The feeling of hatred against the Mahomedans was just and necessary in the times of Shivaji- but, such a feeling would be unjust and foolish if nursed now, simply because it was the dominant feeling of the Hindus then."31 One of the important lessons which the nationalist intellectual of the 19th century had learnt from his contact with the western culture through the western historians, especially the British, was that there was a close relationship between history and formation of nationalist identity. Reclamation of one’s history, after all, was believed to be one of the most important and effective tools of nation making.

In the very first line, Savarkar reiterates the significance of written history for the formation of a modern nation. But what sort of history was conducive for the attainment of such a laudable purpose of making a nation out of diversity of cultures, religions and languages? In this paragraph Savarkar spells out the essence of his historical method. The past claimed has to be such that that it acts as a useful weapon for advancing the cause at hand. The rules of its excavation could not be devised and validated according to some external philosophical propositions “irrespective of special considerations” of the desirable goal. The recovery of the relatively autonomous past for its own sake to
advance the knowledge of a society’s self-awareness did not interest Savarkar. It has to be an emotive past and that too highly surcharged with the inspirational energy. Its stringing together of carefully mined facts must be laced with the explicit intention of nurturing a conviction in the reader. For Savarkar, a historian was not supposed to be a narrator of bald facts with an attitude of studied neutrality. He must also be a sort of an alchemist the magic of whose method could transform the very nature of ‘facts’ in the process of claiming a certain past.

Unwittingly, V.D. Savarkar had created a new genre of writing nationalist history. And that too at a time when the intellectuals in Bengal were either still harping on the need to write such a history or were busy trying to appropriate ‘Sikh’ and ‘Maratha’ histories as an inseparable part of a new pan-Indian nationalist history (or should one say Hindu nationalist history) through their poems, novels and dramas. Interestingly, the future events of the twentieth century did not fully vindicate the underlying project of Savarkar’s empirically investigated source based history, a desirable history of the future disguised as a history of 1857, either in terms of an armed revolt of the Indian people or in terms of Hindu-Muslim unity. While, on the other hand, the spectre of imagined history of Bankim Chandra as portrayed in Anand Math continues to hover over twenty-first century India. It is one of the ironies of Indian history, that eighteen years later, it was Savarkar himself, who in 1925, not only theorised that Hindu history through the concept of Hindutva but also spent his entire life fighting to make it a reality. His writings continue to inspire this trend in Indian Politics even today. Thus, an

31 Inid. P.xxv.
32 For detail see Tagore’s poems about Sikh heroes.
‘empirical history’ has turned out to an ‘imaginary history’, while ‘an imaginary’ one got transformed into an ‘empirical’ one.

There could be and there are many varieties of nationalist histories in India. There is a nationalist approach to history informed by a deep commitment to the ethical idea of the relationship between ends and means. A historical method informed by such an ethical framework creates its own intrinsic checks and balances and acts as many-layered filter for a historian’s own emotional world as well as a more balanced standard of human judgement. The aim of such nationalist histories is to temper the blind assertion of nationalist emotion where everything could be easily fitted in ‘black’ and ‘white’ boxes, and the world could be neatly divided between “us” and “them”, “friends and foes”.

Anything and everything could be justified in the name of love of motherland or fatherland. A nationalist approach to history writing guided by ethical norms at its command can possibly avoid some of the serious pitfalls of rabid nationalist approach and thereby re-construct the story of a nation’s history in a relatively nuanced and less subjective vision.

History as an artifact is not only the Past trying to assert its continuity into the Present but also the Present trying to seek its validation in the Past. Therefore, history is made as much by historians as it is made by the historical actors themselves. The desire to invoke the complex emotion of pride, passion and sacrifice in the reader forms an essential quality of the nationalist narrative. This thrust is central to the method of any nationalist historian and provides the driving energy of a variety of nationalist narratives. Yet within the confines of this shared methodology, and perhaps genre, different nationalist

33 See the recently published book by Julius J. Lipner, ANADAMATH or The Sacred Brotherhood by Bankimchandra Chatterji, Translated with an Introduction and Critical Apparatus. Oxford University Press,
historians could operationalise their hypotheses in a variety of ways. In this context two important questions could be raised here: Is the nationalist author attempting to write an angry book designed not only to inform but also to stir passions and generate outrage, even hatred? Or does the author self-consciously leave room for spaces of ambiguity and ambivalence in her/his narrative where the reader could pause, and if necessary, let her/his own judgement come into play? In the context of Savarkar, probably the question could be formulated in another way. Perhaps, I need to raise these questions in the larger context of the relationship of History to Politics. Even while not losing its sense of autonomy, all scholarship, especially the historical scholarship, does feed into the formulation of contemporary political discourses. But most of the time, it does so in very subtle, unintended and indirect ways. The reason being that in such crafting of the narrative there is always an emotional disconnect between the researcher and her/his material. While in the case of “political activist historian” who, in the process of construction of his/her narrative, consciously or unconsciously seeks to invoke a sense of sympathy for a particular conviction this relationship is of immediacy. In other words, for such a historian, the emotional pressure exercised by the ideology may get diluted at times but it is never absent. But if the nationalist historian is not a liberal nationalist, say like Pattabhi sitarammya, but rather like V.D.Savarkar, who himself self-consciously upheld an extremist version of nationalism, he or she is more likely to find it difficult to hear the voices with different accents and of contradictory articulations which are always present in any given society. This rules out the construction of the past social reality with a vision where the spectrum of voices is captured with all their polyphonic nuances. Even when the societies are involved in Revolutions, Wars and Partitions lot continues to
happen in the middle spaces of the societal spectrum. Perhaps it could be stated without exaggeration that the resultant victory or defeat, complicitous stand-off or compromise between the enemies fighting on the “frontlines”, always depends upon more on the decisive shifts in the societal spectrum of this middle ground. One variety of nationalist historians, and V.D.Savarkar belongs to it, is more likely to focus his ‘telescope’ on the flashy acts of heroism only, which takes place on the “frontlines” of the societal spectrum. While the other variety of nationalist historian may make use of both, a ‘telescope’ as well as a ‘microscope’, thereby desiring to capture the complexity, ambiguity, and ambivalence of the so-called passive ‘historical actors’ belonging to the ‘middle ground’. This is one profound lesson which Boris Pasternak sought to teach to the historians in general, and historians of the Russian Revolution in particular, through the central character of his novel Dr ZHIVAGO.

Fifty years ago, in 1957, when the centenary celebrations of “1857” got off to a start in India, the nationalist mood was relatively different from today’s surcharged atmosphere. In a simple ceremony at the Rashtrapati Bhawan when a book entitled “Eighteen Fifty-Seven”, was presented to President Rajendra Prasad, the Vice-President Radhakrishnan, also the President of the Centenary Committee, observed: “…the author of the book, Dr. S.N.Sen, an eminent historian, has given an account which was singularly free from passion and prejudice. During these many years the rebellion had been described in different ways—as a military revolt, conflict between progress and reaction and India’s first struggle for freedom. Readers of the book would form their own judgement on the
nature of that upheaval and how far these characterisations were valid.”34 Perhaps, indirectly, Dr. Radhakrishnan was trying to suggest that there could not be one but many histories of “Eighteen Fifty-Seven.” Today, the framework of ‘progress and reaction’ would also involve looking at “1857” through the Feminist as well as Dalit perspectives.

Let it be emphasized as a conclusion that V.D. Savarkar’s work was not merely about creating the myth of an Indian Identity but also about another question: What was the best path which must be followed by the coming generations of Indians to overthrow the British rule? What kind of programme and politico-military strategy would be best suited to successfully accomplish the task of achieving the Swaraj?

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34 The Hindu, May 12, 1957.