V.D. Savarkar and the *Indian War of Independence*: Contrasting Perspectives of an Emergent Composite State

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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.¹

The history of the tremendous Revolution that was enacted in the year 1857 has never been written in this scientific spirit by an author, Indian or foreign.²

On May 10th of this year, the day of the 150th anniversary of the Meerut uprising, Lal Krishna Advani, currently the opposition leader in the Lok Sabha and formerly Home Minister (1998-2004) and Deputy Prime Minister (1999-2004), declared the date as “a sacred day in the long history of our Motherland.”³ May 10th, Advani wrote, was a “super-sacred day in the history of India for it marked…the beginning of what subsequently came to be regarded as India’s first war of Independence.” The remainder of Advani’s essay is a paean to V.D. Savarkar’s famed (and in terms of the British colonial regime, infamous) historical interpretation of the 1857 ‘mutiny’ as a “war of Independence.” Savarkar’s book, Advani wrote, was “remarkable for its inspirational

¹ An Indian Nationalist [V.D. Savarkar], introduction to The Indian War of Independence, 1857 (London: n.p., 1909), vii. Eight English-language editions of the book have been published since the first publication in 1909. The 1909 edition will be used herein unless otherwise cited.
² The Indian War of Independence, 5.
and analytical content.” Importantly, it “debunk[ed] all the self-serving theories of British historians.”

In this paper, I examine briefly Savarkar’s seminal work on the “Mutiny of 1857.” Divided into three sections, I explore three themes in this paper:
1) the historical context in which Savarkar wrote the manuscript and its subsequent publication and banning by the British, in the years 1907-1909; 2) a discussion of the book itself; and 3) the historiographical and political legacy of the book. In conclusion, I consider whether Savarkar’s interpretation of the events of 1857 were conceived in terms of a composite Indian national identity. I argue that Savarkar’s historical narrative reveals Hindu and Maratha exclusivity, and should be interpreted in that respect rather than as a text that celebrates a unified and composite past, present, and future Indian nation.

Savarkar’s book, *The Indian War of Independence, 1857,* (*IWI*) though proscribed by the British in 1909, was essential reading for Indian nationalists, up until (and even after) formal independence from British rule in 1947. Savarkar’s book was embraced and distributed by Indian national heroes such as Madame Cama, Har Dayal, Taraknath Das, Bhagat Singh, and Subhas Chandra Bose. The book was equally significant as a historical corrective to biased accounts, mostly British, which represented the war as merely a sepoy (*sipahi*) mutiny. Advani noted the important role the book played in political and historiographical realms, writing that Savarkar’s *IWI* was “remarkable for its inspirational and analytical content.” The apparent dual role of the nationalist reading of the rebellion is evident in the epigraphs above. Savarkar sought to inspire Indians as a national collective to rebel against British rule, while simultaneously providing a
“scientific” and objective historical account of the events related to the “mutiny” as “nationalist struggle” in 1857.

Savarkar completed the original Marathi manuscript of *IWI* in 1907. The manuscript developed out of a shorter essay he had written in 1907, printed in India in the newspaper *Vihari*, and extended in a more rhetorical flair in preparation for the fifty-first anniversary of the rebellion in 1908. That essay, entitled “Oh Martyrs,” was a call to arms. Memorializing the revolutionaries of 1857, Savarkar wrote of his and other Indians’ dedication to *swaraj*:

> We take up your cry, we revere your flag, we are determined to continue that fiery mission of ‘away with the foreigner’ [*maro feringi ko*], which you uttered, amidst the prophetic thunderings of the revolutionary war.

In 1909, the first English edition of *IWI* was printed under the pseudonym, “An Indian Nationalist.” Savarkar’s history of the war of 1857 was meant to serve two purposes: as an instrument to raise the national consciousness of Indians and as a revision of imperial histories. It was the first such “mutiny” account banned, under the Sea

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4 The first English edition was published in 1909.


6 Savarkar read the essay at an India House celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the first war of independence. Copies of the leaflet were sent to various addresses in India. One copy was in the possession of the Criminal Intelligence Department, GOI. C.J. Stevenson-Moore, who was the Director of Criminal Intelligence, informed the Home Department (GOI) about the leaflet, “which apostrophises the Mutineers of 1857 and prophesies a revolution in 1917.” Government of India, Home (Political) Department, December 1908, #19 “Subject: Leaflet entitled ‘Oh Martyrs’,” NAI.

The Sea Customs Act of 1878 allowed for the Government of India to “prohibit or restrict the bringing or taking by sea or by land goods of any specified description into or out of India across any customs frontier as defined by the Central Government.” Quoted in E. Lauterpacht, ed., *International Law Reports*, vol. 31 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 242.

which have been used so long by Hyndman and Krishna Varma....The Mutiny Book is a case in point.¹⁰

Savarkar’s *IWI* was for the British colonial Government of India a prime example of seditious literature. It was on par with, if not worse, than the impact drugs had on society. According to C.J. Stevenson-Moore, Director of Criminal Intelligence, “Seditious literature is no less deleterious than cocaine but the existing restrictions to its consumption are very insufficient.”¹¹ One of the charges brought by the British against Savarkar was for the dissemination of highly seditious literature (sedition: sec. 124A of the Indian Penal Code [IPC]) and such dissemination of seditious literature constituted a criminal act (sec. 121, IPC)—“waging of war against His Majesty the King Emperor of India by…the publishing or circulating written matter for inciting to war.”¹² In the commitment order written by Alexander Montgomerie, 1ˢᵗ Class Magistrate, Nasik, he listed *IWI* as one of the examples of seditious literature “[that] contain attacks on the British rule in India under the disguise of history or mythology.”¹³ Montgomerie cited page 69 of the 1909 edition to show the degree of sedition:

The [sic] heroic martial song sung with spirit by minstrels would cause the arms of the hearers tingle and itch for battle and their blood would begin to boil on listening to the exploits of their ancestors; then, the subject would suddenly be changed and before the eyes would be forced the image of their present helplessness. And the hearers would be roused to rise against the Feringhi and act in the present the heroism they admired in the past.¹⁴

¹² Joint Charges in Special Tribunal Cases Nos. 2, 3, & 4 of 1910, Bombay High Court (BHC).
¹⁴ Alexander Montgomerie, dated February 8, 1910, Nasik, Government of Bombay, Home (Special), 60-B/1910, MSA.
In reaction to the import ban in August 1909, of *IWI*, Savarkar protested against the injustice such government suppression and halfheartedly distanced himself from authorship of the book. The Pune-based newspaper, *Kal*, published a letter dispatched from London by Savarkar. In it he wrote:

My attention has been drawn to the orders issued by the Government of India under the Customs Act, prohibiting the entry of a History of the Indian Mutiny alleged to be written by me, into India. It may be legal to suppress a book even before it is published. But certainly it can never be just. The Governor-General of India has mentioned my name in this connection without any inquiry and thereby laid himself open to censure. If the evidence in the hands of Government was reliable, they should have informed me of the charge and heard me. But it appears that Government are pleased to attack me unawares. Under such circumstances, I can only declare that I have no connection with any book of such a nature as is indicated in the orders of the Government of India.\(^\text{15}\)

For fifty years, until the time Savarkar began writing his revolutionary narrative, historical accounts of the events of 1857 remained in the domain of British colonial power and imagination. Although there existed a diversity of British opinion as to whether the ‘mutiny’ was in fact a ‘national’ revolt, British accounts nevertheless constructed a picture of the sepoys and other rebels as selfish, petty and naïve.\(^\text{16}\) Savarkar sought to offer an alternative interpretation: the self-interest of loyalists such as Maharaja Jayajirao Scindia of Gwalior contributed to the defeat of the revolutionaries.

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\(^{15}\) Printed in *Kal*, September 17, 1909, in Confidential Weekly Report on Native Papers July-December, 1909, MSA.

Savarkar, having culled from materials at the British (Museum) Library, read against the grain of the preponderance of imperial histories that interpreted the events of 1857 as a military insurrection. Relying on “mutiny” interpretations of Charles Ball, John Kaye, George Bruce Malleson and George Otto Trevelyan, among others, Savarkar alluded to the difficulties encountered by one offering a counter-narrative to the mutiny. He wrote:

It is a simple truism patent even to the uneducated that the most tiny house cannot be built without a foundation strong enough to support its weight. When writers who profess to write the history of the Revolution that was enacted in India in 1857 ignore this common sense principle and do not try to discuss the real causes that led to it and impudently maintain that the vast edifice of the Revolution was built on a blade of straw, they must either be fools or, what is more probable, knaves. Anyway, it is certain that they are unfit for the holy work of the historian.

The causative factors that led to the events of 1857 were, according to Savarkar, the “principles” of swadharma and swaraj. British accounts that attributed the mutiny to poor administration by the East India Company, or to the annexation of Oudh (1856), or to the employment of tallow to grease the cartridges for the Enfield rifle, were all “misleading.” Also misleading were notions that Rajas and Ranis participated in the mutiny out of self-interest and not in the interests of the putative Indian nation.

The historical legacy of India’s past became an instrumental part of Savarkar’s project. For Savarkar, British historical representations of India were seriously distorted. It was therefore necessary to rewrite India’s past, and in this specific case, to reinterpret

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the causes and conditions of the ‘mutiny’ from a nationalist perspective. The revolt then was a manifestation of India’s past martial spirit in the form of a modern revolutionary movement that sought freedom from colonial rule. Savarkar expressed his aspiration for educated and enlightened Indians to collectively identify with a sense of independence, similar to the experience of revolutionists in America and France. In fact, India was to perfect upon those revolutions: independence and the creation of a new social order. Savarkar anticipated, in a new social order, the eradication of untouchability. He offers a rather simplistic and unsophisticated view that the reform of caste authority was a sufficient trope for a new social order. Reference to class, caste, or sectarian-religious aspects to the rebellion are subsumed by the amplification of national identity as the determining factor, the causative force, which had erased all differences except those between the European *feringhi* and the anti-colonial nationalist Indian, in the war of independence.

*IWI* is divided into four sections: 1) “The Volcano”—events that led to the “war; 2) “The Eruption”—the early success of the “revolutionaries”; 3) “The Conflagration”—the “revolution” defeated; and, 4) “Temporary Pacification”—the “failure” of the “war.” The geological and mythical metaphors present an interesting perspective on the interpretive narrative to “war.” The geological process involved in the formation of a volcano can take millions of years—it is gradual (though eruptions may seem dramatic and immediate) and organic. The “eruption,” sudden or determinable, is not unexpected—it is not emotive, there exist root causes that eventuate in an eruption. Allusions to a volcanic eruption are also related to the myth of *Jvalamukhi*, the goddess of fire, whose eternal flames reduce, and purify, all matter to ash. Sections three and four
reinterpret the ‘mutiny’ as a “war.” Military organization and strategy, pitched battles, and a sense of purpose with set goals, swaraj or self-rule, established the events of 1857 as indeed a war of independence. Most important, the “defeat” is only “temporary,” since independence will be the natural outcome of a resurgent and revolutionary nationalist struggle that will be violent, disruptive, and creative, and, moreover, successful.

In the opening pages of the book, Savarkar gives a brief exposition on “doing history,” on how one should properly interpret the past: “An upright and impartial historian must try to discover and discuss fundamental causes.” Savarkar attempts to locate the foundational principle for the “revolution” in the awakening of a nationalist self-consciousness and the presence of a revolutionary nationalist spirit was in actuality an imposition on the part of the author. Yet, even more remarkable than Savarkar’s claim to represent an authentic past is his epistemological grounding. Not only was the “revolution” uncovered, it was revealed authoritatively and historiographically, as never before, in the “scientific spirit by any author, Indian or foreign.” Savarkar’s apparent devotion to empiricism was itself a part of the matrix of the colonial experience. In his bid to reclaim the past in terms of a unique national history, Savarkar was unable to liberate the Indian nation from an Enlightenment rationalist discourse: the nation as a natural, organic, and historical process that could be explained and comprehended.

19 Savarkar, Indian War of Independence, 4.
20 Savarkar, Indian War of Independence, 5. For Savarkar, British opinion and historical representation of the ‘mutiny’ is presented as a discursive imperialist discourse. In that sense, British views were essentially monolithic and uniform.
empirically.\textsuperscript{22} Thus, the uncovered facts discovered by Savarkar would reveal India had not only been a great civilization, but it was a great nation long before the arrival of the Europeans.\textsuperscript{23} It was left to Savarkar to present the history of the “mutiny” as it really was: a “war” to liberate the Indian nation from the shackles of British tyranny.

In the first chapter, “Swadharma and Swaraj,” Savarkar challenges British distortions of the factors that led to the revolt and explains the “great principles” that “were the real causes and motives.”\textsuperscript{24} The British historiographical episteme was in many ways an unquestioned construct overturned in Savarkar’s book when he challenges two points of dispute in regard to causative factors to the mutiny: the tallow-greased cartridges and the annexation of Oudh (Awadh). Initial reports of a mutiny by native troops of the Bengal Army attributed the revolt to a rumor that pig grease and beef fat, used to lubricate the newly introduced Enfield rifles (1856), had insulted sepoy religious sensibilities, both Muslim and Hindu, to the point of rebellion.\textsuperscript{25} The greater purpose for the greased cartridges, so the rumor (and reports of the rumor) continued, was as part of a larger plan by Lord Canning to convert the troops to Christianity.\textsuperscript{26} The other half of the paired distortions—the degree to which the annexation of Oudh contributed to the rebellion—is similarly dismissed as one of the principle causes for the war of independence. In February 1856, Dalhousie annexed Oudh, the last remaining vestige of the Mughal dynasty. The nawab, Wajid Ali Shah, was exiled to Matiabruj, near Calcutta.

\textsuperscript{22} See for example Uday Mehta, \textit{Liberalism and Empire} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 112-113.
\textsuperscript{23} By 1923, Savarkar substituted Muslims and Islam for the British, evidenced in \textit{Hindutva, who is a Hindu?} (orig. Marathi ed. 1923; Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1969).
\textsuperscript{24} Savarkar, \textit{Indian War of Independence}, 7.
\textsuperscript{25} Savarkar, \textit{Indian War of Independence}, 8. The introduction of the Enfield rifle, to replace the musket, to the Bengal Army in 1856, necessitated the use of grease on the cartridges. Soldiers had to tear off the (greased) cartridge with their mouth and as per the rumor ingested pig or beef fat.
\textsuperscript{26} This aspect to the important role of the greased cartridges in fueling the mutiny is provided in George Bruce Malleson, \textit{The Indian Mutiny of 1857}, 7\textsuperscript{th} ed. (London: Seeley, 1898), 37-38.
After annexation, Savarkar points out much later in the text, residents of Oudh sank “deeper and deeper in misery.” The British annexation of Oudh was yet another impetus and motivating reason for the rebellion, as were the greased cartridges, but both acted only as “secondary” factors. More important, however, were the real “causes,” the protection of religion (swadharma) and country (swaraj).

In a symbolic reference to India’s mythic past, Savarkar describes Ravanna’s kidnapping of Sita merely as an incidental event in the long-awaited battle that resulted in Ramrajya. Ramrajya, a metaphor for the incipient and idealized Hindu nation, was thus an inevitable manifestation of dharmarajya (moral character of the State). Rama’s rescuing of Sita is congruent to the liberation of India from British colonial rule. The greased cartridges and the annexation of Oudh therefore were only minor incidents that concealed the unfolding history of the Indian nation’s rebirth. Quoting from Ramdas’ Dasbodh, Savarkar clearly states how the protection of religion and country were manifest in India’s past and present: “Die for your dharma, kill the enemies of your dharma while you are dying; in this way, fight and kill, and take back your kingdom.”

Cultural and political differences between Indian and European constituted for Savarkar the essence of national identity. Any and all British attempts to exclude religion from the arena of politics were anathema to Hindu tradition. He wrote: “Orientals have never had the idea that swadharma and swaraj have no connection with each other.” Swadharma was “safety in the other world” and swaraj was the “sword of material power.”

Throughout the first chapter, Savarkar challenges the consensus opinions of imperial historians who described and determined the events of 1857 to be a ‘mutiny.’

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27 Savarkar, Indian War of Independence, 197.
28 Savarkar, Indian War of Independence, 10.
29 Savarkar, Indian War of Independence, 10.
Instead, the war of independence was part of the continuum of the Hindu nation from the mythic past to the historic present. Rama’s victory over Ravana resulted in the establishment of the first Hindu kingdom. Rama, ideal king and warrior, reigned for hundreds of years because he adhered to the principles of swadharma and swaraj. Ramrajya was possible, not only because of dharmarajya or statecraft, but also because Rama personified the ideals of dharma. Any properly functioning state (kingdom or nation) rested on the collective soul of individual morality and Rama exemplified the ideal moral individual fit to rule such a state. Metaphorically, the twentieth century (re)emergence of the Hindu nation would arise as a result of an adherence, individually and collectively, to swadharma and swaraj. Savarkar’s intention was to detail the emergence of a modern Indian national movement struggling for independence from colonial rule. In doing this, he charted the emergence of nationalism by tracing the consolidation of British power throughout the Indian subcontinent.

The onset of British power began with the victory at Palashi (Plassey) in 1757, and it becomes the terminus for the “chain of causes” leading to the nationalist uprising. Owing to the success of ‘John Company’ (the EIC), the British took control of Bengal, and thereafter followed the ascendancy of colonial power. The governance and expansion of the dominion remained in the hands of the EIC, though delimited by ever-increasing influence of Parliament (e.g. East India Company [Pitt’s] Act of 1784), until the passage of the Government of India Act of 1858. Under Governor-General Warren Hastings, the EIC expanded and concentrated its power in Bengal and the Northwest Provinces (which became the United Provinces). Lord Wellesley expanded British power to Mysore, Pune, and the farther reaches of northwest India. The arrival of Dalhousie in
1848 saw the eventual annexation of the Punjab and parts of Burma—in short, the farthest reaches of British India were attained. The territorially expanse of the British Raj, or what becomes Akhand Bharat, was henceforth geographically inscribed by the colonial regime. Savarkar however depicts Bharat Mata geographically as a pre-modern cartographic image of the Indian nation. The cultural influence of the Aryans (and Vedic peoples) constituted the boundaries of the nation and was superseded by British imperial designs.

It is at this point in the historical narrative that one of the central motifs of Savarkar Indian War of Independence surfaces, that of Maratha power. The magnificent role of Maratha power is represented by the figures Nana Sahib and Lakshmi Bai (Rani of Jhansi), “martyrs…who sacrifice[d] their lives for the country, religion, and freedom.” Nana Sahib was the heir to the position of Peshwa, or leader of the ineffectual Maratha confederacy, occupied by his adoptive father, Baji Rao II who died in 1853. Dalhousie, the Governor–General, refused to recognize Nana’s title, and importantly his pension, under the doctrine of lapse. Malleson remarked even though Nana Sahib “had no title in law…. [T]he natives of India believed then, they believe still, that he had a moral claim superior to all law.” This British action of disrespect for local

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30 In 1925, one year after Hindutva was published, Savarkar released his glorified history of the Maratha Empire, The Maratha Movement (Hindu Pad Padshahi); or, the Story of the Maratha Struggle to re-establish Sovereign Hindu Power (New Delhi: Hindu Sahitya Sadan, 2003).
tradition and authority set into motion a necessary element to the revolt. Subsequently, Nana Sahib played a prominent role in the attack on the garrison at Cawnpore (Kanpur) in June of 1857. Despite the ferocity of Nana Sahib’s siege at Cawnpore, out of which he received the designation of “badmash”, “highway robber”, “satan, and “fiend,” what is important about him for Savarkar was “that Nana fought for Swarajya and bled for Swadesh.” Linking the past of 1857, and the bravery of Nana Sahib, with the present of the early 1900s, Savarkar wrote further: “It was essentially necessary that the whole world should realise the fact that a grand and terrible vengeance is visited sooner or later on those who commit the sin of depriving Hindusthan [sic] of Independence.”\(^{34}\)

The other “martyr,” Lakshmi Bai, the Rani of Jhansi, whose father was under the employ of Baji Rao II, as a young child played with Nana Sahib and his future commander, Tatya Tope. Later in life, she wedded the Maharaja of Jhansi, Gangadhar Rao (Newalkar), and became “Rani.” Unable to produce children, they adopted a child only days before the death of the Maharaja. Following Gangadhar’s death in 1853, Dalhousie again refused to recognize the legitimacy of title to the adopted son, and in 1854, Dalhousie formally annexed Jhansi in spite of the protestations and petitions of the Rani. Disinherited, Lakshmi Bai became an important participant during the siege of Jhansi. Consequently, many years later, Lakshmi Bai’s courage and bravery were immortalized in poems, ballads, and nationalist pamphlets and postcards.\(^{35}\)

\(^{34}\) Savarkar, *Indian War of Independence*, 33.
\(^{35}\) One of the most famous poems was Subhadra Kumari Chauhan’s “Jhansi Ki Rani” (1930). A photopostcard (mistakenly, not actually of Lakshmi Bai) was issued by Madame Cama in 1910, and sold and distributed in the United States, Europe, and India. The postcard was dedicated to the “memory of the Martyrs of the Indian War of Independence of 1857.”
The common experience of disinheritance was to have created a desire among the rebels to resist any further encroachment of traditional networks of power by the British. Individual self-interest and the yearning to restore Indian political and cultural traditions were coeval with the emergence of a modern Indian national self-consciousness. By refusing to recognize the Hindu tradition of adopted heirs in their rush for imperial expansion, the British created the necessary conditions for nationalist self-consciousness among the rebels. In the end, the grievances of Nana Sahib and Lakshmi Bai became “national” ones. Consider, for example, Nana Sahib’s *ishtihar* (or proclamation), which even though it appears to support the restoration of the Mughal Emperor, provided sufficient allusion to Savarkar’s claims of a nationalist awakening. The Proclamation read in part:

> It is well known that in these days all the English have entertained these evil designs, first to destroy the religion of the whole Hindustani army and then to make the people Christians by compulsion. Therefore we, solely on account of our religion, have combined with the people, and have not spared alive one infidel, and have re-established the Delhi dynasty on these terms…

In its entirety, the proclamation could be read as Nana Sahib’s support for the sovereign power in the person of Bahadur Shah, or alternatively, representing his own claim to *Peshwa*. Regardless of the meaning and intent of Nana Sahib’s *ishtihar*, British imperial expansion, through the acquisition of power (land, people, administration, revenue) by dismantling the rights of titled chiefs and princes (and their offspring), created a bulwark of solidarity and resistance among elite-based networks of local power.

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36 The last part of the incomplete sentence reads: “[…] and thus act in obedience to orders and receive double-pay.” Nationalist self-consciousness was perhaps not enough to awaken the martial spirit; but double-pay may have been the lure necessary to increase rebellion among soldiers and civilians alike. Mowbray Thomson, *The Story of Cawnpore* (London: R. Bentley, 1859), 143. Thomson, a Captain in the Bengal Army, was “one of the only two survivors from the Cawnpore garrison” (title page). In the preface, Thomson informs the reader that he was one of four survivors (who escaped in a “state of nudity”), two of who died within weeks after Nana Sahib’s siege of the garrison.
Savarkar discusses the annexation of Oudh in a chapter titled “Ayodhya.” Ayodhya, the mythical capital of Rama’s kingdom, serves as the symbolic focal point of swadharma and swaraj. However, Ayodhya’s role during the “war” was insignificant. Savarkar instead stresses the legitimating support given by traditional elite networks of power to nawabs, zamindars, and talukdars. British delegitimation of the nawab Wajid Ali Shah’s authority resulted in the “eruption” of the war of independence. Savarkar argues that the annexation of Oudh undermined the East India Company’s own policy to abide by the “rule of law.” The rights inherent to a native state, and the related privileges and obligations vital to the stability and existence of the talukdars and zamindars (and the well-being of villagers), were distinguished with the British annexation of Oudh in 1856. After that, Hindu landlords and upper-caste Hindus coordinated their efforts to resist the tyranny of British imperial expansion. According to Savarkar, the tyranny of annexation engendered the “self-awakening of the national consciousness”:

The world-wide difference between swarajya and foreign rule was, thus, brought painfully to the notice of all Oudh. All their previous history stood before them vividly. They realized full well now that even death was preferable to living in slavery. How long to look on, while the swadeshi was reduced to dust and swarajya was no more? They hated intensely these insults and this shameful condition.37

The rupture of local traditions attendant with the annexation enflamed the nationalist passion of disparate groups, solidifying the people of Oudh and elsewhere, regardless of caste, class, religion, and region. British imperial self-interest and disregard toward new acquisitions thus set the stage for the rebellion. All that was needed was the flame to light fire.

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In the next chapter, “Adding Fuel to the Fire,” Savarkar discusses of socio-religious reformist measures introduced by the British. The imposition of colonial authority into arenas normally governed by local structures of power and social relations acted a motivating factor for the rebellion, and “lit the fire” of the “common” people. This gave the “war” its national character. The logic in the argument is that not only had the British subverted Indian political authority, but that the establishment of cultural hegemony had been integral to colonial rule. The promotion of Christianity, concurrent with the “sanitizing” of Hindu rituals and customs, increased the antagonism of Indians to the *feringhi*. According to Savarkar, the British abolition of *sati* and female infanticide, their criminalization of *thagi*, and the passage of the Widow Remarriage Act were not measures intended for moral progress, but instead served another purpose. That purpose was to eradicate Indian religions, and thus any nationalist sentiment, and supplant with Christianity. Savarkar declared, “that any changes in the societal habits based upon religious texts can be brought about only by the authority of those religions and through their adherents.” Such oppressive measures on the part of the British were reminiscent of the “tyranny” of Aurangzeb.\(^\text{38}\) The British imposition of “despotic authority” afforded Indians “no other remedy than that India must now produce a Shivaji or a Guru Govind.”\(^\text{39}\) One of the most egregious acts was Dalhousie’s ban on the Hindu practice of adoption, which existed as a “noble” tradition and a “sacred commandment of the Hindu *Dharmasastras*.\(^\text{39}\) Savarkar affirms the importance this last gesture served to foment the

\(^{38}\) Savarkar wrote: “There was not the least difference between the tyranny of Aurangzeb and the tyranny of the Company’s Raj” (49).

\(^{39}\) Savarkar, *Indian War of Independence*, 49.
war: “the [munitions] magazine required only [a] lighted match to explode with violence and this act of Dalhousie supplied it.”

The most transparent chapter that displays Savarkar’s presentism, of the importance of the interpretation for didactic purposes and the encouragement of a revolutionary movement, is found in “Secret Organization.” Savarkar stressed the importance of organizing “secret cells,” which stemmed from his interest in European revolutionary movements and the military organization and tactics adopted and utilized in the ascendancy of Shivaji. Savarkar, like many other Indians, had been deeply impressed by Giuseppe Mazzini’s writings and actions, and the success of secret cells in manifesting a unified Italy. Secret cells were essential for the organization of rebel forces across vast distances and among diverse communities. A broad-based support system of secret cells successfully initiated a sense of common purpose and pride, and (re)awakened Indian national self-consciousness. Importantly as well, secret cells were a necessity to confront the British colonial regime, which had established loyalties, an intelligence network and repressive laws, and had an overwhelming military advantage over

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41 Savarkar wrote a book on the life and writings of Mazzini: *Joseph Majhini, atmacharitra ni rajkaran* (“On the life and work of Joseph Mazzini”), published in India in 1908. The figure of Mazzini as a revolutionary exemplar for Indians owes its early development to a series of lectures given by Surendranath Banerjee (1848-1925) at Calcutta in the late 1870s. Banerjee learned of Mazzini when he studied for the Indian Civil Service examination at London during 1874-75. Mazzini’s influence upon Banerjee was apparently so great that he established the Indian National Association (1876) along the lines of “Young Italy.” Banerjee wrote later in his autobiography, *The Nation in the Making* (1925): “The idea that was working in our minds was that the Association was to be the center of an all-India movement. For even then, the conception of a united India, derived from the inspiration of Mazzini, or, at any rate, of bringing all India upon the same political platform, had taken firm possession of the minds of the Indian leaders in Bengal.” See S.N. Banerjea, *The Nation in the Making: being the reminiscences of fifty years of public life* (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), 41. Savarkar, like Banerjee, was inspired by Mazzini’s concept of national identity, such as the national self-education movement, that he hoped would lead to Indian self-rule (*swaraj*). Banerjee, unlike Savarkar, objected to Mazzini’s emphasis on the need to organize secret societies (such as the *Carbonari*, an Italian secret society) for violent anti-colonial resistance. See also Giuseppe Flora’s discussion in “The Changing Perception of Mazzini within the Indian National Movement,” *Indian Historical Review*, v. 19, n.1/2 (1992): 58-59.
presumed rebel forces. About the secret organizing for the war, which was most active in
March and April of 1857, Savarkar wrote: “This work of preparing for revolutionary
rising was done so cautiously and secretly that not much inkling of what was going on
could reach even such cunning people as the English, until the explosion took place.”

Logistics to the covert operations in the lead up to the conflagration involved a
coded communication system, infiltration of garrisons and villages by men and women
disguised as maulvies, pandits, fakirs, and sannyasis, and tours of important centers
(Agra, Delhi, Umballa, Lucknow, Kalpi) for the rebellion by, for example, Nana Sahib
and his trusted Muslim assistant, Azimullah Khan. Symbolic modes signaling the start of
the war were spread in the form of chapatis and red lotuses. Once native troops and
villagers received the signal, the war of independence would begin. In March 1857, the
first skirmish in that war erupted.

On March 29, 1857, the first episode occurred in the “eruption” of the war of
independence. The “martyr” (shahid) Mangal Pandey, a sepoy in the 34th Regiment,
Bengal Native Infantry, stationed at Barrackpore, led a one-man armed revolt. During his

42 Savarkar, Indian War of Independence, 67-68.
43 Savarkar, Indian War of Independence, 77, 79-80. See also Ranajit Guha, “Transmission” in Elementary
Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in India (1983; repr., Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 239-
246; and Homi Bhabha, “By Bread Alone,” in The Location of Culture (1994; repr., London: Routledge,
2004), 283-302. Savarkar obtained the description of the red-lotus from Thomas Frost, Complete Narrative
of the Mutiny in India, from its commencement to the present time (London: n.p., 1858), 4. George Dodd,
who wrote a history of the mutiny contemporary with that of Frost, described the use of the lotus prior to
the uprising in this way: “It was a common occurrence for a man to come to a cantonment with a lotus-
flower, and give it to the chief native officer of a regiment; the flower was circulated from hand to hand in
the regiment; each man took it, looked at it, and passed it on, saying nothing. When the lotus came to the
last man in the regiment, he disappeared for a time, and took it to the next military station. This strange
process occurred throughout nearly all the military stations where regiments of the Bengal native army
were cantoned.” It was believed that chapatis were distributed in villages and the red lotus among native
troops. See George Dodd, The History of the Indian revolt and of the expeditions to Persia, China, and
Japan, 1856-58 (London: W. and R. Chambers, 1859), 36. Some two decades after the “mutiny,” an
American botanist reported in an American gardening magazine that lotus seeds, “concealed in native
cakes,” had been distributed to signal the revolt. See William T. Harding, “Glimpses of the Amazon, Nile
and other rivers,” The Gardeners’ Monthly and Horticulturalist (January 1884), v. 26, n. 301, 3. Thomson
reported it was lotus leaves. See Mowbray Thomson, The Story of Cawnpore (London: R. Bentley, 1859),
24.
revolt Pandey “[called] upon his comrades to join him, and strike a blow for their religion, and threaten[ed] to shoot the first European whom [sic] he saw.”

Unsuccessful in his endeavor to organize a mutiny among fellow Native troops, Pandey shot at his commanding officers, wounding one of them seriously (Lt. Baugh). In recounting the incident, Savarkar misleadingly claimed that Pandey had killed Sergeant Major Hewson: “Not only did no Sepoy move to arrest Pandey at the orders of his officer [Hewson], but a bullet killed the officer, and his corpse rolled on the ground.”

Pandey then attempted to kill himself before he was disarmed and placed under arrest. On April 6th, a military court tried and convicted Pandey of mutiny and violence. He was hanged on the next day. Pandey became the first “martyr,” who was, according to Savarkar, “a valiant young soldier” (he was twenty-six years of age), “Brahmin by birth, Kshatriya by heart.” The immediate cause for Pandey’s outburst was accredited to the introduction of greased cartridges. Although some have attributed Pandey’s violence to the influence of drugs (bhang and opium) or as a result of an epileptic fit. For Savarkar, the greased cartridges represented the spark that lit the fire; the assault on religious sensibility was yet another British insult on Indian traditions. The immediate disbanding of the 34th Regiment (and the 19th before that) failed however to stem the tide of disenchantment.

The Barrackpore mutiny, or the first spark, was followed several weeks later with the commencement of the full-scale “revolution” at Meerut. That day, May 10, 1857, stands equal with the dates of two other significant world historical revolutions: April 19, 1775, and July 14, 1789. They are all dates in history at which point the ancien regime or


45 Savarkar, Indian War of Independence, 87.
foreign ruler crumbled and the revolutionary fervor of independent-minded people united to form a new nation.\textsuperscript{46} The exuberance Savarkar displays for the date, May 10\textsuperscript{th}, as the dawning of new possibilities and eventual independence, reveals the patriotic zeal that lay beneath the entirety of his historiographical project. The historical narrative proceeds forward, from the Meerut uprising and essentially concluding with the capture of Tatya Tope in April of 1859, chronicling the heroic struggle of the martyrs who had been unified for the cause of independence and the purpose of establishing a modern Indian nation.

On the road to Delhi, the “rebels,” led by Nana Sahib, marched to reestablish “native” rule in the old Mughal capital. Their apparent success of the initial stage of the rebellion was accomplished for this reason:

The chief cause for this extraordinary success of the Revolutionaries in five days was the ardent desire among all classes of the people to get rid of English slavery. From the women of Meerut to the Emperor of Delhi, there was a string desire in every heart to achieve \textit{swaraj} and protect religion.”\textsuperscript{47}

Thereafter, Savarkar details the key “eruptions,” noting that the two “great principles” (\textit{swadharma} and \textit{swaraj}) of the revolution remained the unifying feature throughout the war. Frequently, Savarkar reiterates the unity of the revolutionaries, regardless of class, caste, gender, religion, or region. They all were joined against the “tyranny” of a common and foreign enemy, and they all fought for the “highest ideal of freedom,” in order that the “nation should not die.” Savarkar explained the conception of national unity and its manifestation during the war this way:

Not [only] one individual, not [only] one class, alone had been moved deeply by seeing the sufferings of their country. Hindu and Mahomedan, Brahmin and Sudra, Kshatriya and Vaisya, prince and pauper, men and women, Pandits and

\textsuperscript{46} Savarkar, \textit{Indian War of Independence},

\textsuperscript{47} Savarkar, \textit{Indian War of Independence}, 104.
Moulvies, Sepoys and the police, townspeople and villagers, merchants and farmers—men of different religions, men of different castes, people following widely different profession—not able any longer to bear the sight of the persecution of the Mother [Bharat Mata], brought about the avenging Revolution in an incredibly short time.\textsuperscript{48}

Subsequent to the “liberation” of Delhi from British subjugation in May 1857, the “revolutionary” forces returned Bahadur Shah Zafar to the Mughal throne. The restoration of the deposed Emperor was apparently not a retrograde action. Rather, in Savarkar’s view, the self-governing revolutionaries elected to restore Bahadur to the seat of Emperor. Savarkar, constantly derisive when evaluating the Mughal Dynasty (and other Islamic states), dismissed all notions that the “liberation” of Delhi and the resurrection of Mughal power was in fact a return to the \textit{ancien regime}. Instead, Savarkar wrote:

\begin{quote}
The Mughal dynasty of old was not chosen by the people of the land. It was thrust upon India by sheer force, dignified by the name of conquest, and upheld by a powerful pack of alien adventurers and native self-seekers. It was not this throne that restored to Bahadur Shah.\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

Bahadur Shah’s restoration was the consequence of a nationalist reawakening—“it was the declaration that the longstanding war between the Hindu and Mahomedan had ended”—represented symbolically, the brotherhood between Muslims and Hindu.\textsuperscript{50}

The remaining chapters describe the pitched battles between tyranny and liberation, although rebel retreat constitutes the bulk of the last sections of the book. However, the retreat, as we soon learn, would only be temporary. Despite British victories at Delhi, Lucknow, and Jhansi, the revolutionary leaders receive a heavy dose of adoration. Savarkar offers encomiums to Nana Sahib, Lakshmi Bai, Moulvie Ahmad

\textsuperscript{48} Savarkar, \textit{Indian War of Independence}, 227.
\textsuperscript{49} Savarkar, \textit{Indian War of Independence}, 233.
\textsuperscript{50} Savarkar, \textit{Indian War of Independence}, 234.
Shah, and the Singh brothers (Kumar and Amar) for their valor, bravery, courage and patriotism. The martyr who receives the most elaborate praise is Tatya Tope.

Savarkar traces Tatya Tope’s retreat from the advancing British native troops. Tope is described as a “Mahratta hero” who followed in the footsteps of the “great warrior tradition” embodied by Shivaji and the Bhonsle rulers. The only reason Tope’s guerilla tactics failed was because the British intercepted secret communications between the retreating rebels. In the end, Tope was captured and executed by the British in April 1859.

Savarkar’s conclusion is brief; perhaps defeat makes a less palatable patriotic tale. Nevertheless, the spirit of independence survived, and the inevitability of Indian nationhood, he believed, would result in a future, and second war of independence. Savarkar made this clear in “Oh Martyrs” (1908):

For the War of 1857 shall not cease till the revolutionary arrives, striking slavery into dust, elevating liberty to the throne…. The war began on the 10th of May 1857 is not over on the 10th of May 1908, nor shall it cease till a 10th of May—tome sees the destiny accomplished, sees the beautiful Ind crowned.51

What then shall we make of Savarkar’s IWI today? Does it reveal a composite perspective of Indian national identity as some have argued, most recently by Advani.52 Amalendu Misra seems to agree with the analysis that Savarkar’s IWI evoked a recognition of unity between Muslims and Hindus against the British colonial regime. That unity was one of brotherhood, in terms of a collective national identity. Rightly, Misra, as well as Suresh Sharma, read VDS’s IWI as a vieled account of Hindu

52 Advani wrote: “[Savarkar] brilliantly chronicles how 1857 brought the two communities together and made them fight shoulder to shoulder for national liberation.”
resurgence over Islamic tyranny.\textsuperscript{53} For Savarkar, it was only because of British colonial intervention in the Indian sub-continent that the incipient Hindu nation-state was unable to come of its own. The events of 1857 then witnessed a movement in the history of the Indian nation in which Hindus and Muslims organized to fight British rule. The aftermath of the immediate ‘liberation’ of Delhi, that of the installation of Bahadur Shah to Emperor (of Hindustan), was not indicative of the restoration of Muslim rule, but rather was a short-term, and importantly, symbolic establishment of native rule over that of foreign conquest.\textsuperscript{54} In the end, one can imagine that had the rebellion been a successful one, the resultant state formation would have been along the lines of sub-national or a regional basis: Maratha, Rajput, Mughal.\textsuperscript{55} Such an imagining was evident in Nana Sahib, the self-proclaimed Peshwa of the Maratha confederacy, and his overtures to establish alliances with France and Russia. Savarkar makes clear that Bahadur Shah’s power was emblematic of an independent India, emphasizing throughout the text the valour of regional rebels such as Nana Sahib and Lakshmi Bai. Remnants of the Maratha confederacy remained the last forces to be defeated and represented the true national heritage of an independent India, past, present, and future.\textsuperscript{56}

Thomas Pantham, like many commentators, perceives a noticeable shift in Savarkar’s nationalist ideology and conception of citizenship evident in \textit{IWI} (1909) and

\textsuperscript{53} Misra, 182-185. Misra also cited Suresh Saharma’s unpublished paper, “Savarkar’s Quest for a Modern Hindu Consciousness.”
\textsuperscript{54} Misra notes Golwalkar’s viewpoint on the restoration of Bahadur Shah to the throne that ran contrary to that of Savarkar. Golwalkar
Pantham wrote that it “went through a process of change in the 1920s” and that during the first decade of the twentieth century, especially after the publication of *IWI*, “he stood for a common Hindu-Muslim revolutionary patriotism/nationalism.” Pantham however falls a bit short in showing Savarkar’s universalist conception of Indian national identity depicted from his reading of *IWI*. Unlike Misra, Pantham sees unity rather than a sense of Hindu superiority in his interpretation of *IWI*.

In 1924, with the publication of Savarkar’s *Hindutva*, expressions of a seemingly unified national spirit, evident in *IWI*, gave way to a conception of Indian identity that was predicated on a historical contingency in which the Indian nation (rendered as Hindu) had secured its national identity (*Hindutva*) and putative nationhood in the struggle against Muslim and other perceived foreign invaders. The two texts, *IWI* and *Hindutva*, are linked by Savarkar’s sense that Indian nationhood was predetermined. The break occurs when Savarkar reinscribed the meaning of Hindu identity so that it became synonymous with national identity, or more precisely, Hindutva. In *IWI*, Indian national self-consciousness at the time of the rebellion was clear: “[The] meaning of Hindusthan [sic] was thereafter to be the *swadesh* of the adherents of Islam as well as Hinduism.”

58 Pantham, 226.
Hindu and Muslims were “brothers by blood.”\textsuperscript{60} Savarkar’s primary concern in \textit{Indian War of Independence} seems to be two-fold: to contest the colonial interpretations of the events of 1857 and to inspire in Indians with a “burning desire” to rise again and wage a second and successful war to liberate \textit{matavarsha} (the Motherland).

In \textit{Hindutva}, Indian national identity is articulated in narrow terms. Savarkar appeals exclusively to a Hindu past, a past defined by a monolithic Hindu identity, linked geo-culturally to a mythical and ageless Hindu nation, without regard to history, to the role and place of historical change, context, and contingencies, most of all, to the impact of British colonialism and the struggle for Indian independence, in the development of Hindu national identity, or Hindutva. Savarkar’s \textit{Hindutva} is at one level a significant departure from his earlier work, such as the biography of Joseph Mazzini, \textit{IWI}, and the leaflet-pamphlets written between 1908 and 1909: “Khalsa,” “Oh Martyrs,” and “Choose! Oh Indian Princes.” In his early writings, specifically \textit{IWI}, one can glean a glimmer of hopeful expectations for positive social relations between Muslims and Hindus. This despite the intense hatred expressed by Savarkar toward Mahmud of Ghazni and Aurangzeb. For Savarkar, the “mutiny” was in fact a war of national independence, inspired by Indian national consciousness. The “war of independence” garnered support from all Indians. Religion was of little importance—rather, it was a matter of devotion to the defense of the nation. About the “common” bond of loyalty to the nation against British tyranny, Savarkar wrote:

Their [Hindus and Muslims] present relation was one not of rulers and ruled, foreigner and native, but 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.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{60} Savarkar, \textit{Indian War of Independence}, 62, 63.
\textsuperscript{61} Savarkar, \textit{Indian War of Independence}, 63.
However, in *Hindutva*, Hindu civilization became the referent of an advanced and independent Hindu nation, “forty centuries if not more, had been at work to mold [Hindutva] as it is.”\(^{62}\) Muslims are no longer to be accommodated; they are no longer “brothers by blood.” Hindus, on the other hand, are “bound together” by a “common fatherland and by common blood.” Hindus are “one because we are a nation, a race, and own a common civilization.”\(^{63}\)

However, it is important to consider the vaulted position of Hindu civilization, and the submissive role played and to be played in the future Indian nation by Muslims, garnering the necessary national self-consciousness to combat the *feringhi* British regime. Despite what some see in Savarkar’s *IWI* as a conceptualization of a composite Indian national identity, I see instead a sense of Hindu superiority that less than twenty years later was transparent and entirely chauvinistic.
