

Savarkar's Hindutva, Indian Nationalism and Italian Republicanism, 1905–1912

Ole Birk Laursen

February 26, 2017

In a recent piece in the *Times of India*, Pankaj Mishra pointed out that ‘the origins of Hindu nationalism are more accurately located in the emotional and psychological matrix of exiled 19th-century Europeans. [Vinayak] Savarkar and many other upper-caste Hindus derived from these Europeans their obsession with identifying a common fatherland or motherland, blood, civilisation and holy land’ (22 January 2017).

The contemporary Hindu right’s fascination with Savarkar’s Hindutva ideology is deeply problematic and historically inaccurate. As Mishra and others have pointed out, the intellectual, philosophical and political connections between Italian *Risorgimento* leaders such as Giuseppe Mazzini and Giuseppe Garibaldi, on the one hand, and Indian nationalists such as Surendranath Banerjea, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, on the other, relied on a limited understanding of Mazzini’s ‘deeply Christian ideas of sacrifice, martyrdom, resurrection and redemption’ and re-interpretations of Mazzini, Garibaldi and Cavour (Bayly & Biagini 2008; Chaturvedi 2010; Chaturvedi 2013; Fasana 1999).

However, at the same time, it is rarely pointed out that these affinities led to more substantial exchanges between Indian nationalists in Europe and the Italian Republican Party (IRP), which had its roots in Mazzinian thought but was located in the left-wing lineages of European socialism at the time. What this line of inquiry risks masking is the way in which Indian nationalists in early twentieth century Europe engaged in transnational revolutionary networks across the world at the time. Moreover, while Savarkar often allowed his ‘anti-Mahomedan feelings to run away with him in his speeches’ at India House in London, as one intelligence report notes, to situate his philosophy and politics of Hindutva in his four-year sojourn in Europe requires some qualification.

To be clear, during his tenure at India House (1906–1910), Savarkar – with the assistance of other tenants at the hostel – translated a biography of Mazzini into Marathi (*Josepha Mējhinī: ātmacaritra ni rājakāraṇa* (1946)), and his nationalist manifesto *The Indian War of Independence of 1857* (1909) relied heavily on Mazzinian ideas of war, liberation and unification. Similarly, Savarkar’s mentor and sponsor Shyamaji Krishnavarma, editor of the propaganda organ *The Indian Sociologist*, often included quotes and passages from Mazzini and Garibaldi in the ‘Thoughts for the Month’ section of the periodical. Lala Har Dayal, too, writing for both *The Indian So-*

ciologist and *The Bande Mataram*, quoted from Mazzini in his articulation of Indian nationalist anti-colonialism.

Looking closer at these connections between Indian nationalism (and Savarkar's philosophy of Hindutva) and Italian *Risorgimento* nationalism, the Weekly Reports of the Director of Criminal Intelligence (held in the British Library, London) open a window onto a more complex story than admitted by Mishra. In fact, they show that, while both Savarkar and Har Dayal often drew on Mazzinian nationalism and vented anti-Muslim sentiments at the weekly Sunday meetings at India House, Savarkar also understood the need for Hindu-Muslim unity in the struggle for independence. Actually, a report from October 1908 shows that, as Har Dayal claimed to be 'working for a Hindu India', Savarkar deprecated 'Har Dayal's strong remarks as dangerous to the National movement'. Savarkar's programme of Hindutva, in other words, was not fully developed during his time in London.

By contrast, in the pages of *The Indian Sociologist*, Krishnavarma, a Hindu from Saurashtra, often emphasized the need for unity among the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians of India in the independence struggle. Furthermore, Krishnavarma fostered contacts with European socialists, Marxists, anarchists, and republicans at the time, although he defined himself as a 'Spencerian. Not a socialist' (in reference to Herbert Spencer).

The Savarkar Affair and the European Left

On 8 July 1910, en route to Bombay where he was to stand trial for his involvement in the Nasik Assassination Conspiracy (and, by proxy, his involvement in the assassination of Sir William Curzon Wyllie on 1 July 1909), Savarkar jumped ship outside Marseille where the SS *Morea* was docked for the night. He swam ashore and managed to run about 400 yards onto French soil where he approached a policeman and claimed asylum; however, the policeman handed him back to the British authorities on the vessel.

Savarkar's imprisonment and escape at Marseille, though, led to an almost heroic elevation of him within the European left. Even before Savarkar reached Mumbai on 22 July 1910, the Indian nationalists in Britain and France rallied up support from their revolutionary networks and claimed that Savarkar's return to the British authorities on the *Morea* was in breach of international law. Indeed, at the International Socialist Congress in Copenhagen in August 1910, which Krishnavarma and V.V.S. Aiyar attended, a resolution condemning Savarkar's arrest was adopted. The case ended up at The Hague in October 1910 but in late February 1911 the tribunal decided in favour of the British. Deported to the Andaman Islands, Savarkar abandoned his former calls for unity among Hindus and Muslims in the struggle for Indian independence and developed his ideology of Hindutva as articulated in *Essentials of Hindutva* (1923).

However, agitation for Savarkar's release continued among the French socialists, where Jean Jaurès and Jean Longuet were the strongest advocates, but it also caught the attention of Pierre Khorat, a French anti-imperialist and author of *Le problème politique dans l'Inde anglaise et dans l'Indochine française* (1911). Khorat's article on Savarkar in *Larousse Mensuel* (1911), moreover, was read by the Italian professor F.M. Zandrino, a member of the Executive Council of the Federated Association of the Italian Press, who brought the Savarkar affair to the attention of the Italian Republican Party – a left-wing party with roots in Mazzini's thoughts.

Noting Savarkar's Mazzinian inspiration – calling him 'dell'agitatore mazziniano indiano Savarkar' – Cesare Briganti and the Central Committee of the Italian Republican Party resolved to agitate for Savarkar's release and establish closer contacts with the Indian nationalists in Paris in October 1912. However, while Krishnavarma sent his heartfelt thanks to the IRP and

hoped to rally more support for Savarkar's release, the party was also embroiled in the mire of the Italian-Turkish war and seems to have abandoned any further contact with Krishnavarma and the Indian nationalists in Paris. Condemning and challenging Italy's imperial ambitions in Turkish-held Libya, in other words, weighed more than transnational solidarity with the Indians, despite shared roots in Mazzinian ideology.

Nevertheless, the ways in which the Savarkar affair translated from politico-philosophical inspiration to actual contact between Indian nationalists and Italian republicans suggests a much more complicated development of transnational revolutionary networks operating across Europe and the colonial world in the early twentieth century than often assumed. Indeed, Mishra's assessment that 'Hindu nationalism is more Italian, and Christian,' requires some attention to early twentieth-century Italian republicanism located in the left-wing lineages of European politics and, at the same time, an admission that Savarkar's Hindutva programme developed principally after his four-year stint in Europe. I write more about Indian nationalists and Italian republicans in my forthcoming book *The Indian Revolutionary Movement in Europe, 1905–1918* (Liverpool University Press)

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Ole Birk Laursen
Savarkar's Hindutva, Indian Nationalism and Italian Republicanism, 1905–1912
February 26, 2017

Retrieved on 31st March 2021 from olebirklaursen.wordpress.com

usa.anarchistlibraries.net