

# A GROWING DISENGAGEMENT WITH GANDHI'S IDEAS

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A tampering with memory and knowledge | Photo Credit: R. Shivaji Rao

The [June 2022 issue of \*Antim Jan\*, a magazine published by the Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti \(GSDS\), stood out for a reason](#). The issue was dominated by Vinayak Savarkar, a central figure in Mahatma Gandhi's assassination trial. Savarkar was let off for lack of adequate corroborative evidence, but the Jivanlal Kapur Commission set up in the 1960s concluded: "All these facts taken together were destructive of any theory other than the conspiracy to murder by Savarkar and his group". No further inquiries about Savarkar's role were made as he was dead by then.

In an article in *Antim Jan*, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Vijay Goel, the vice-chairman of GSDS, tries to place Savarkar on the same footing as Mahatma Gandhi — "Savarkar's place in history and stature in freedom struggle is no less than that of Gandhi." The chairman of the GSDS is Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Prime Ministers have always chaired the GSDS ever since it was set up in 1984.

The point is not to express outrage but to recognise that people (beyond those who call themselves Gandhian), need to be concerned about this odious undertaking, which clearly has top official sanction. The lionising of Savarkar and the diminution of Gandhiji have implications in terms of the essence of India's future.

Continual appreciation of Gandhiji's assassin Godse by public representatives espousing Hindutva ideology has grown much louder in the past four years; at least two Members of Parliament from the ruling party are examples of this. Popular hatemongers abuse Gandhiji and praise Godse in the media without any fear of the consequences. This recrafting of our past is one of a piece, with Hindutva's attempts to reshape the narrative on the Gujarat riots in 2002. The recent arrests of civil rights activist Teesta Setalvad and former Gujarat Director-General of Police R.B. Sreekumar, along with a scrubbing of textbooks to eliminate references to the violence of 2002, are a part of this effort. The control over new networks of communication (social media and television channels) and the older more formal ones (school textbooks, the Archaeological Survey of India and a majority of newspapers) facilitate this tampering with memory and knowledge.

The non-violence of Gandhiji was a powerful idea and a weapon, and not cowardice as Savarkar and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) caricatured it. In a prayer meeting in September 1947, Gandhiji invoked the epic, the Mahabharata, in ways starkly different from an invocation as a battle cry. He said; "It is said that in the Mahabharata period the Pandavas used to stay in this Purana Qila." Just like the Pandavas, said Gandhiji, the Muslims "are under your protection, and under my protection". His invocation of the Shanti Parva — part of the Mahabharata that involves a deep rumination on the futility of conflict after the war — has Bhishma teaching Yudhishtira the *raj dharm* of nurturing people, holding them together and practising non-violence.

In March 1931, while moving the Resolution on Fundamental Rights at the open session of the Congress in Karachi, Gandhiji emphasised religious tolerance and religious neutrality of the state. Gandhiji's message was not about Hindu reform but of an interpretation of high ideals as the soul of Hinduism itself, putting it on a higher pedestal — not as something bound by an adversarial relationship to any Abrahamic faith or hostage to hate.

This was directly at odds with how M.S. Golwalkar, the RSS or Savarkar interpreted Hinduism. Golwalkar was explicit in his appreciation of the way Germany of the 1930s handled the “minorities problem”: the need to get them to “either merge themselves in the national race and adopt its culture, or to live at its mercy so long as the national race may allow them to do so and to quit the country at the sweet will of the national race”. Shruti Kapila in *Violent Fraternity: Indian Political Thought in the Global Age* (2021) recounts that Savarkar’s idea of the virile and masculine and his desire to claim India’s history and space, saw the nation as a battleground which makes violence the only desirable means to meet supremacist goals.

A discourse which seeks to diminish Gandhiji will have grievous consequences on the diversity among Indians, and all those who share the Indian dream because it offers them rights, liberation and space. If the nation is now only about one faith and a permanent line between two identities that Hindutva politics obsesses about (Hindu and Muslim) then the entire larger India project would be in jeopardy, even if that is not visible just yet. This was a framing Gandhiji opposed vehemently and paid for, with his life. Now, to take down Gandhiji and to cut out vital parts of India’s plural past from its memory so everything can then be framed to cast the Hindu as victim and the Muslim as the oppressor, will have implications.

India’s education system will be immediately impacted by this twisted alt-history. The Indian education system, with all its drawbacks, has led to Indian students being able to compete at the highest levels globally. But what will be the status in another few years if social science is about skipping empires in India between the 12th century and the 17th century? Or the learning of ancient India is without its many cultures, religions and contradictions, on rich debates that still leave a mark? It will be akin to the Islamisation of Pakistani textbooks, with social studies becoming ‘Islamic studies’, and where vast and rich aspects of the subcontinent were left untaught. With over 60% of India younger than 26 years of age, ideas drilled down now will stay for the lifespan of this now young population. In short, for a long time.

Book excerpt | [Gandhi’s Assassin: The Making of Nathuram Godse and his Idea of India](#)

But the more serious consequences of trying to arrange India’s reality as a nation in the Golwalkar-Savarkar framework concern the very nature of India itself. The Golwalkar-Savarkar framework is, by self-admission, rooted in a now discredited and failed idea of states in the European imagination of the 1930s. This can only widen social distances. Communal incidents are on the rise. Even the pandemic year saw 857 communal incidents, which was a 96% leap in incidents from 2019. India was never incident-free, but top leaders explicitly called for harmony and peace. Today, what we hear loudly instead is a complete silence from the top leader. The estrangement between Hindus and non-Hindus is sought to be widened by everyday acts, and differential treatment accorded by those in power to the place of religion in public life, whether it is namaz, hijab or acts by groups aligned with the ruling ideology or by ruling party leaders when nationalism is equated to Hinduism.

The majority of Indians remain subjugated and in need of assistance in order to bridge and make up for inequities and injustices that are products of history and also of the recent past. Even a constitution could not wish away structural rigidities sanctioned by scriptures. The attempt is to use Savarkar and push Islamophobia such that there is only one understanding of the ‘majority’. The axis of this subjugated majority in India is not a function of faith. The majority, or Bahujan, including Hindus, minorities, tribals and Dalits, comprise millions of the poor, the marginalised, the deprived and who are evaluated by several metrics. The attempt in the Hindutva world to cement them in a permanent box by faith is to not allow India’s real oppressed majority to form solidarities.

Data on economic inequality (on the socially deprived and the Sachar Committee Report on

Muslims), have clearly established the extent of backwardness and oppression suffered by a majority of our countrymen and women. A push towards a worldview promoting deeply divisive ideas from the days of the two-nation theory ensures that real issues — that modern politics deals with and answers — are not posed at all. This means that there is a setback for not just Muslims but also India as a whole.

Taking away the soul of Gandhiji and replacing it with Savarkar has implications on the future of the most downtrodden — Dalits. There can be no justice to India's most grievous victims over millennia if the misdeeds of the millennia are not acknowledged and a move made to "annihilate" the system that fostered egregious social and economic oppression. The systematic bid to make it 'Hindu versus Muslim' has a sinister subproject of burying the call for social justice which via electoral politics, has resulted in significant social change especially in north and western India.

Gandhiji's glasses have been extricated to prop the Swachhta Abhiyan, as a call to cleanliness. But without his empowering and revolutionary companion call to battle untouchability in Hinduism, this is about burying Gandhiji's real message. Amputating Gandhiji's symbols of their substance has been underway for a few years. But with Savarkar on the cover of *Antim Jan*, we may have entered a darker stage of disengagement with Gandhiji's ideas even as stated ideals.

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