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## THE EVOLUTION OF HINDUTVA IDEOLOGY: FROM SAVARKAR'S INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATIONS TO POLITICAL PRAXIS IN THE HINDU MAHASABHA LEADERSHIP

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Article Received: 15 March 2026, Article Revised: 04 April 2026, Published on: 24 April 2026

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DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.3145>

### ABSTRACT:

This paper examines how Hindutva ideology evolved from Savarkar's intellectual foundations into a politically actionable programme under Hindu Mahasabha leadership. It argues that Savarkar supplied a conceptual blueprint for nationhood by redefining "Hindutva" as a civilizational and ethno-cultural identity, thereby reframing belonging as a boundary-making political principle rather than a merely cultural disposition. While this theoretical redefinition laid the ideological groundwork, Hindu Mahasabha leadership transformed Hindutva into political praxis through organizational consolidation, electoral strategy, and mass mobilization. In this process, identity-based ideology was translated into institutional contestation: it shaped leadership networks, legitimized claims to represent "the nation," and influenced the terms on which authority and public policy could be negotiated. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that the shift from conceptual nation-making to organizational power-building enabled Hindutva to move from ideological discourse to durable political practice.

**KEYWORDS:** Hindutva, Hindu, Savarkar, Akhand Bharat.

### INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of his career or more particularly during his stay in England Vinayak Damodar Savarkar was more inclined towards nationalism and wrote many books against the British Government in India. His famous book *First War of Independence* was one of them. But when he was jailed in Andaman and Nicobar Island a new ideology of Hindutva developed in his mind and he duly materialized the same after his release from the prison. Writing in the aftermath of World War I and the Khilafat Movement, he observed what he

perceived as the growing influence of pan- Islamic sentiment among Indian Muslims. This concerned him because he believed it demonstrated divided loyalties among Muslims, who seemed to prioritize religious solidarity over national unity. In response, Savarkar sought to create a unifying ideology that would bind Hindus together not just as a religious community, but as a distinct nation.

Savarkar's most significant contributions to Indian political thought was his clear distinction between Hindutva and Hinduism. He argued that while Hinduism referred to the religious and spiritual aspects of Hindu life, Hindutva represented a comprehensive cultural and political identity that transcended religious boundaries. According to Savarkar, an individual could be a Hindu in the Hindutva sense without necessarily being religious. Conversely, someone could practice Hindu religious rituals while lacking the true Hindutva consciousness if they didn't identify completely with the Hindu nation. This distinction allowed him to include non-religious Hindus, atheists, and even followers of other Indian religions like Buddhism and Jainism within the Hindutva fold.

This conceptual separation also served a political purpose. By arguing that Hindutva was cultural rather than religious, Savarkar could present it as a legitimate basis for political organization and national identity, rather than mere religious sectarianism. This argument continues to influence contemporary debates about the relationship between religion and politics in India.

### **Childhood of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar**

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (born May 28, 1883 -February 26, 1966) was born to Damodarant Savarkar and Radhabai at Bhagur, a village near Nasik. He was a hard-core Hindu and a leading figure in the Hindu Mahasabha, a Hindu nationalist organization and political Party. He was a born nationalist and Hindutva propagator and had an anti-Muslim and anti-British feelings right from his childhood. His intense patriotism, youthful enthusiasm, and the influence of political events left a long-lasting effect on the minds of the children during that era. During his childhood Savarkar and his friends organized a mock attack on a deserted mosque in their village to express their resentment following communal riots reported in newspapers.<sup>1</sup>

Savarkar began his political activities as a high school student and continued at Fergusson College in Pune. Vinayak Savarkar and his brother Ganesh Savarkar started *Mitra Mela*, a revolutionary secret society in Nasik in 1899. It was one among several such *melas*

(revolutionary societies) functioning in Maharashtra at that time, which believed in the overthrow of British rule through armed rebellion. In 1904, in a meeting attended by 200 members from various towns in Maharashtra, Vinayak Savarkar renamed it *Abhinav Bharat*. The aim and object of the society was an action against both Muslims and British rule.<sup>2</sup>

In June 1893, serious riots broke between Hindus and Muslims in the Azamgarh District of the United Provinces and in August of the same year in Bombay. The news of the atrocities then perpetrated on the Hindus in the United Provinces and Bombay fired his blood and he resolved to avenge the woes and deaths of his coreligionists. The boy Savarkar led a batch of selected school-mates aged twelve or thirteen in a march upon the village mosque. The battalion of these boys showered stones upon it, shattered its windows and tiles.<sup>3</sup> They destroyed the mosque and ran away after completing their act, following the guerrilla war tactics of Shivaji. This incident gives the first hint of the anti-Muslim attitude and hatred against the Muslim community and their religious places.

In another narrative Savarkar told to his childhood friends to start a mock military battle, which would increase discipline and prowess. Soon they started fighting fake battles. One party became Muslim or British and the other Hindu. The Nimbu (lemon) became the cannonball, the mango fruit became the bullet. A boundary was fixed, and the one who snatched the flag of the Nimbu-lemon from the middle or took the cannonball to the other side's bay was considered victorious. Savarkar's Hindu party was victorious most of the time. If it ever felt like the non-Hindu party was going to win, Savarkar would appeal to patriotism and tell them to turn back themselves.<sup>4</sup>

### **Vinayak Damodar Savarkar as a Nationalist**

At the beginning of his career or even during the time of his study Savarkar had his strong leaning towards nationalism. Before leaving for England to study law, Savarkar had been a member of a secret society, *Mitra Mela*, which was subsequently, renamed *Abhinav Bharat*, a militant organization. Its goal was to overthrow the British through violent methods. During his stay in England, the British were celebrating the Golden Jubilee of their victory of 1857 Revolt, on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1907, Savarkar declared the Revolt of 1857 as the First War of Independence and celebrated the anniversary at India House. His quote became very famous, "The war began on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 1857 is not over on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 1908, nor can it ever cease till a 10<sup>th</sup> of May to come sees the destiny accomplished". In 1909, Savarkar also wrote a book "The Indian War of Independence 1857" on the rebellion of 1857.<sup>5</sup>

On December 29, 1909, Anant Kanhere shot dead Jackson, district magistrate of Nasik. Kanhere was arrested and from his accomplices, whom the police arrested, were discovered Savarkar's letters. The Browning pistol used in the assassination was linked to Savarkar, who was accused of sending 20 such weapons to India from England. A telegraphic warrant of arrest was sent to London, and Savarkar surrendered to the police on March 13, 1910. He was brought to India. For his role in the assassination of Jackson and for waging war against the King, Savarkar was sentenced to transportation, for two terms of 50 years each, to the Andamans. He arrived in Port Blair on July 4, 1911.<sup>6</sup>

In 1911 itself, Savarkar petitioned the authorities for clemency. The text of the 1911 petition hasn't been found. But Savarkar referred to it in his petition to the British on November 14, 1913, seeking mercy and requesting a transfer to a jail in India. He wrote, "The Mighty alone can afford to be merciful and therefore where else can the prodigal son return but to the parental doors of the government?" In return, Savarkar offered to serve the "government in any capacity" as it thought fit. He declared that he no longer believed in violence, justifying his conversion to constitutionalism because of the reforms the British Government had introduced. Savarkar said his conversion to the constitutional line would bring back "all those *mised* young men in India and abroad who were once looking up to me as their guide". The British Government was not convinced, but his cringing petition did help alleviate his plight. He was made a foreman in the Cellular Jail.<sup>7</sup>

In May 1921, Savarkar was transferred from the Andamans to the Indian mainland. Three years later, in 1924, the government put forth conditions to Savarkar for his release from the Yerwada

Jail in Pune. The conditions were that Savarkar was to reside in Ratnagiri district; he could not go beyond the district's limits without the government's approval; he was not to engage in political activities publicly or privately; these restrictions were for five years, subject to renewal at the expiry of this period. Savarkar accepted these terms and gave an additional undertaking to the government. Savarkar declared he had a fair trial and just punishment. He also wrote: "I heartily abhor methods of violence resorted to in days gone by, and I feel myself duty-bound to uphold Law and the Constitution..."<sup>8</sup>

### **Savarkar and Philosophy of Hindutva**

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966) was a politician and a leading Hindutva champion.

At the beginning of his career, he was a true nationalist but as the time passed, he joined the Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha and focused on Hindutva, a term coined by Bengali conservative Chandranath Basu and created by Savarkar himself. The term “Hindutva”, derived from the Persian word “Hindu” with the suffix Sanskrit word “-tva” meaning “essence” or “quality.” Vinayak Damodar Savarkar is called the ‘Father of Hindutva’ for his anti-Muslim and Hindu promotion and mobilization works. Savarkar deliberately chose this neologism to distinguish his concept from traditional religious Hinduism, emphasizing that Hindutva represented something broader and more encompassing than mere religious practice or belief.

According to Savarkar, Hindutva rests on three fundamental pillars that define Hindu identity: common race (Rashtra), common culture and vision of Akhand Bharat. Savarkar argued that all Hindus share a common racial ancestry, tracing their lineage back to the ancient Vedic people who settled in the Indian subcontinent. He believed this shared genetic heritage created natural bonds between Hindus, regardless of their regional, linguistic, or caste differences. This concept of racial unity was meant to transcend the divisions that plagued Hindu society, creating a sense of biological kinship among all Hindus. While modern genetics has debunked many of Savarkar’s racial theories, his emphasis on common ancestry reflected his desire to create a scientific basis for Hindu unity. He drew inspiration from European nationalist movements of his time, which often emphasized racial homogeneity as a foundation for national identity.

The cultural dimension of Hindutva encompasses shared traditions, languages, customs, and historical experiences that Savarkar believed united all Hindus. He argued that despite regional variations, all Hindu communities participated in a common civilizational heritage rooted in Sanskrit literature, Vedic traditions, and shared historical memories. This territorial requirement had profound implications for how Savarkar viewed different religious communities in India. While Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs could claim both *Pitribhu* and *Punyabhu* in India, Muslims and Christians, according to his logic, had their holy lands elsewhere (Mecca and Jerusalem respectively). This distinction became central to his argument about the questionable loyalty of these communities to India.

Savarkar’s Hindutva ideology naturally led to his vision of Akhand Bharat (undivided India),

which encompassed the entire Indian subcontinent before partition. He believed that the geographical boundaries of Hindustan, from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean and from the Indus to the Brahmaputra, represented the natural homeland of the Hindu nation. This

territorial vision had several implications. First, it provided a basis for opposing the partition of India, as Savarkar viewed the entire subcontinent as inherently Hindu territory. Second, it influenced his views on Kashmir, which he saw as an integral part of the Hindu homeland. Third, it shaped his approach to foreign policy, particularly regarding Pakistan and Bangladesh, which he viewed as temporarily separated parts of the Hindu nation. The concept of Akhand Bharat also reflected Savarkar's belief in the civilizational unity of the subcontinent. He argued that despite political divisions, the entire region shared common cultural and historical roots that made it naturally suited for political unity under Hindu leadership.

### **Formation Hindu Mahasabha and the Leadership of Savarkar**

The formation of Hindu Mahasabha was not the result of any immediate eruption but the result of a continued process of many decades. The seed shown by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Tilak, inflamed by the formation of the Muslim League, the separate electorate for the Muslims, regular process of the Hindu conferences, led to the foundation of Hindu Mahasabha in 1915.

To work on the process of its foundation, the first initiative was taken in 1909, when Punjab Hindu Conference was held at Lahore, in which all the important Hindus of Punjab took part. Punjab Hindu Conference was founded by Lala Lajpat Rai, Shadi Lal and many other right-wing leaders. The Chairman of the Reception Committee Lala Lal Chand said that the times we live in are characteristically of communal struggle and survival of the fittest. He expressed that communal consciousness is like oxygen for human life. He said that the decrease in the number of the Hindus signifies a decay in the vitality of the community and numerical strength forms, as it were, the pulse, for adjudging its warmth and vital resources.<sup>9</sup>

After its formation, the Hindu Conference or Hindu Sabha began to be held each year in different cities of the country. They were annoyed with the formation of All India Muslim League in 1906, and the British announced separate electorates for Muslims under the Morley Minto Reforms. As a result of these developments, Hindu leaders realized the need to come together to form an organization that would safeguard their interests. Over the years several small Hindu sabhas were formed in Punjab, United Provinces, Bihar, and Bombay Presidency. The core leaders of these Hindu organizations were intended to form an All India Hindu Mahasabha as was expressed in a meeting at Allahabad in 1910.

It also must not be forgotten that all the members of the communal organizations were also a member of the Indian National Congress. They were rather upset to the leanings of the

Congress towards the Hindu-Muslim unity. To protect the rights of the Hindu community, Madan Mohan Malviya and his associates formed Sarvadeshak (All India) Hindu Mahasabha in April 1915 at the Kumbh Mela at Haridwar. At that occasion, many hardcore Hindu leaders were present including Swami Shraddhanand. Almost all the Hindu regional organizations brought under it. In April 1921 it changed its name to Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha. In 1920s Balkrishna Shivram Munje, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and Bhai Parmanand boosted this organization when it was weakened by the split of an organization Rashtriya Swayaksevak Sangh formed by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar in 1925.<sup>10</sup>

It also may be said that the Hindu Mahasabha was an organization split from the Indian National Congress by the unsatisfied communal Hindus. The Hindu Mahasabha not only opposed the Hindu-Muslim unity policy of Congress but also opposed the Lucknow Pact signed between Congress and Muslim League in the Lucknow session of 1916. Under this pact, Congress and Muslim League agreed with joint electorate, unity and friendship. This pact was also very historic as Mohammad Ali Jinnah was branded as a symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity and Bal Gangadhar Tilak and his extremist party made his entry in the mainstream of the Indian National Congress. Initially, Hindu Mahasabha was an all-India Hindu organization and in 1933, it was recognized as a right-wing political party and began to contest the elections.

### **Savarkar and his Policy of Hardcore Hindutva**

During his imprisonment, Savarkar fully made his vision clear that he would devote his energies in strengthening the power of the Hindus against the Muslims. His books, *Hindutva*, *Who is Hindu*, *Hindu Pad-Padshahi*, *Hindu Rashtra Darshan*, etc. were enough to create the Hindu-Muslim animosity and hatred.

He expressed his views in his book, *Hindutva, Who is Hindu*, which was written by him during his imprisonment in India. In this book, Savarkar defines a new term Hindutva and made essential for all Hindus to inculcate. Savarkar says that Hindutva is not a word but a history. Not only the spiritual or religious history of our people as at times it is mistaken to be by being confounded with the other cognate term Hinduism, but a history in full. Hinduism is only a derivative, a fraction, a part of Hindutva. According to Savarkar, Hindutva is not a particular theocratic or religious dogma or creed but it embraces all the departments of thought and activity of the whole being of the Hindu race.<sup>11</sup>

After his release from the jail, Savarkar devoted all his energies towards creating animosity between Hindus and Muslims, for which there was an adequate atmosphere in India. The

movements like Shuddhi, Sagathana, Tabligh, Tanzim, and moreover, the foundation of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) by Hedgewar created extreme hatred between Hindu and Muslim communities. How it's possible that Savarkar like activist could desist himself from such burning moves? After his release from jail, he joined the Hindu Mahasabha founded by Madan Mohan Malviya in 1916. At that time Mahasabha was facing the internal trouble and its hardcore member Baliram Hedgewar drifted away and formed a new organization as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in 1925. The joining the Hindu Mahasabha by Savarkar and Moonje gave the Sabha a new impetus but Savarkar's active participation was limited as was confined to the district Ratnagiri until 1937 when he was freed from restrictions by the Bombay Presidency Government of Indian National Congress. Immediately after his release from restrictions he presided over the annual convention of the Hindu Mahasabha in 1937 at Karnavati-Ahmedabad.

Savarkar always promoted his self-coined term Hindutva. He defined Hindutva as, "Everyone who regards and claims this *Bharatbhoomi* from, the Indus to the Seas as his Fatherland and Holyland is a Hindu. Here I must point out that it is rather loose to say that any person professing any religion of Indian origin is a Hindu because that is only one aspect of Hindutva. The second and equally essential constituent of the concept of Hindutva that it is not enough that a person should profess any religion of Indian origin, i.e., Hindusthan as his Holyland, but he must also recognize it as his Fatherland as well."<sup>12</sup>

He wrote an inflammatory article in the English newspaper, *Maratha*, against Muslims when, in March 1925, a communal riot erupted over *Rangeela Rasool*, a scurrilous booklet on Prophet Mohammad. The communal conflagration soon spread to parts of Punjab. The government communicated to Savarkar that any such writing in the future could lead to a reconsideration of his release. The warning had Savarkar foreswear that he would have no truck with the idea of Swaraj.<sup>13</sup> However, Savarkar could not leave his communal agenda or promotion of anti-Muslim hatred.

His floating of new theories of 'Hindutva' and 'Hindu Rashtra', through which, he painted Indian Muslims as villains. Moreover, the Two-Nation theory was floated by Savarkar first in 1937 at a convention of the Hindu Mahasabha. Savarkar says about the Muslims that their love towards India as their motherland is but a handmaid to their love for their Holyland outside India. Their faces are ever turned towards Mecca and Madina. A Muslim is often found to cherish an extraterritorial allegiance, is moved more by events in Palestine than what concerns India as a Nation, worries himself more about the well-being of the Arabs than the well-being of his Hindu neighbours and countrymen in India. Thousands of Muslims could be

found conspiring with the Turkish Khilaphatists and Afghans with an object to bring about a foreign invasion of India if but a Muslim rule could thus be established in this land.<sup>14</sup>

While addressing the All India Hindu Mahasabha Session at Nagpur in 1938, Savarkar warned the Muslims that they could meet the same treatment that Jews were getting in Germany. Alleging that the Muslim League was threatening to play the role of Sudeten Germans, he says, 'if we Hindus in India grow stronger, in time these Muslim friends of the League type will have to play the part of German-Jews instead'.<sup>15</sup> The two-nation theory was given by Savarkar was later picked up by Mohammad Ali Jinnah in 1940 and acted upon by the British seven years later, leading to the country's partition.

When Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated on 30 January 1948, by Nathuram Godse, Savarkar was also taken into police custody on February 5. Seventeen days later, he wrote a letter to Bombay's Commissioner of Police, "I shall refrain from taking part in any communal or political activity for any period the government may require in case I am released on that condition." It was this gratuitous offer, which had the government suspect him of having a central role in the assassination of Gandhi. But his role could not be proved in the court. It subsequently came to light because of the depositions his aides made, years later, after Savarkar's death.<sup>16</sup>

After Gopal Godse's release in 1964, a new thing disclosed of certain involvement of Savarkar in the Gandhi murder case. It led to the setting up of new inquiry commission, regarding the murder of Mahatma Gandhi, under Justice J. L. Kapoor in March 1965. In February 1966, Savarkar voluntarily courted death, by stopping all consumption of food and water. But the question arises that whether Savarkar took this decision because he wanted to evade the prospect of the commission inflicting ignominy on him late in life? After all the enquiries, Justice Kapoor summarized his report, "All these facts taken together were destructive of any theory other than the conspiracy to murder by Savarkar and his group."<sup>17</sup>

### **Critiques and controversies**

Savarkar's Hindutva ideology has faced substantial criticism from various quarters. Secular critics argue that his framework inherently discriminates against religious minorities by questioning their loyalty to India based on their religious identity. They contend that his distinction between Hindutva and Hinduism is artificial and that his ideology ultimately promotes religious majoritarianism.

Many historians have also challenged Savarkar's claims about racial unity and common

ancestry among Hindus. Modern genetic research has shown that Indian populations have complex ancestral origins that don't support his simplistic racial categories. Additionally, critics argue that his emphasis on cultural unity overlooks the tremendous diversity within Hindu traditions and practices. From a constitutional perspective, critics contend that Savarkar's Hindutva ideology conflicts with India's secular framework, which guarantees equal treatment for all citizens regardless of religion. They argue that implementing his vision would undermine the pluralistic foundations of Indian democracy.

Today, Savarkar's Hindutva ideology continues to influence Indian political discourse, particularly in debates about national identity, secularism, and minority rights. Understanding his framework is essential for comprehending contemporary political developments in India, from the rise of Hindu nationalist parties to debates about uniform civil codes and religious freedom. The ideology also influences India's approach to international relations, particularly with Pakistan and Bangladesh. Savarkar's vision of Akhand Bharat continues to shape how many Indians view the partition and India's relationship with its neighbors.

## CONCLUSION

Savarkar provided the ideological core by redefining "Hinduness" primarily through an ethno-cultural and civilizational lens, and by arguing that national unity required a specifically Hindu identity. This move was not merely descriptive; it was programmatic. By framing Hindus as a people with a distinctive sacred geography and historical destiny, Savarkar turned cultural inheritance into a political claim—one that could justify hierarchy, boundary-drawing, and mobilization.

Once these ideas circulated inside the Hindu Mahasabha, they increasingly took the form of political strategy. Leadership within the party began treating Hindutva less as a philosophical vision and more as an instrument to compete for mass loyalty, electoral legitimacy, and influence over public policy. Ideological framing- through public speeches, propaganda, and selective reinterpretations of history- worked to normalize the idea that the state and public institutions should reflect a Hindu civilizational identity.

By the time Hindu Mahasabha leadership adopted Hindutva in practice, the ideology showed clear signs of institutionalization: it became compatible with campaigning, faction-building, and coalition politics, and it offered a ready-made vocabulary to define allies and opponents. In this phase, Hindutva's emphasis on identity boundaries translated into political action—mobilizing communities around shared grievance and aspiration, and converting cultural difference into a mobilizable "national question." Savarkar's intellectual work supplied the

theoretical blueprint, while Hindu Mahasabha leadership transformed that blueprint into political praxis. Hindutva's trajectory therefore reflects a broader ideological pattern: once ideas of identity and belonging are articulated strongly enough, they do not remain in the realm of thought—they become the basis for organizing institutions, contesting authority, and reshaping what “nation” is supposed to mean in practice.

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7. *Ibid.* (Savarkar sent his first apology letter from Cellular Jail in 1911 (which has been destroyed, but its references mentioned in second apology letter); the second was in 1913 in which he himself mentions his first apology letter; the third was sent in 1914 (wherein Savarkar offered to volunteer from the British side in World War I); the fourth was sent in 1919; the fifth apology letter was presented to the British by him in 1920; the sixth apology letter sent by his wife Yamunabai on April 18, 1921. After being bombarded by so many letters, the British decided to rehabilitate Savarkar and save themselves the trouble of reading more cringing apologies.
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