

## BOOK REVIEW

**The New Icon: Savarkar and the Facts, Arun Shourie, Penguin Viking, New Delhi, ISBN: 9780143474333, Rs. 659, pp. 560, 2025**

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Arun Shourie's *The New Icon: Savarkar and the Facts* (2025) arrived at a time when India in its attempt to rethink its history narratives faced not merely politicization but also fierce contestation. Within this turbulent climate, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar is one of the most polarizing men of modern Indian history who emerged both as a totem of Hindu Nationalism and was also targeted for being a divisive figure as well as ideologically extremist at the same time. Savarkar's legacy is far from resolved and it is in this controversial territory that Shourie, a veteran sympathizer of the Hindu Right and a seasoned journalist known for his polemical writings, diplomatic prose and investigative edge, presents a selective commentary on the subject which goes against his agenda-driven claim of presenting the “truth” concerning the Savarkar’s legacy. In this respect, instead of presenting a balanced reevaluation, Shourie's writing tends to slip into selective critique that is reminiscent of the very ideological biases it aims to criticize.

Whereas, this book claims to transcend the extremes of blind hagiography and outright demonization, it does not quite manage to do so. Shourie presents his work as a forensic examination of how a political myth is forged, but his handling of evidence is anything but always objective. Its attention to discredit the popular mythologization of Savarkar is a healthy one, but occasionally it slides into repetitive moral censure rather than continuous historical argument. In addition, while Shourie tries to question the iconography of Savarkar, he does so by using already famous documents and events like the clemency petitions and Savarkar's absence from the Quit India Movement without providing substantial new interpretations or debate over the deeper ideological underpinnings of Savarkar's appeal.

This review of *The New Icon: Savarkar and the Facts* will look at the book's central arguments, sources, and narrative tactics, with close attention to its selective employment of archival evidence, its methodological shortcomings, and its equivocal political position. By doing so, it also seeks to evaluate not

only the worth of Shourie's contribution to the Savarkar debate, but also the wider implications of his book for India's contentious historiography.

Arun Shourie's approach in *The New Icon: Savarkar and the Facts* is styled as methodical, investigative, and seemingly based on close familiarity with primary sources. His method takes a prosecutorial form, with Shourie setting out not as an objective historian but as a political and moral analyst of a person he believes to be dangerously misrepresented. Whereas, the book purports to deconstruct myth-making using forensic examination, the methodology grounding the book is itself very much riddled with incoherence, cherry-picking of sources, and a polemical agenda which frequently undermines scholarly objectivity.

One of the main pillars of Shourie's research methodology is his reliance on Savarkar's own statements his speeches, writings, and autobiographical narratives. On initial appearances, this would seem methodologically sound, for it enables Savarkar effectively to bear witness against himself. But his method soon becomes reductionist as Shourie habitually extracts quotes and statements out of original context and presents them as clinching evidence of moral or political failure. By following this methodology, he oversimplifies the nuances of historical experience and leaves little room for interpretation that serious historical scholarship requires. While primary sources are undeniably crucial in this regard, Shourie's hyper dependence upon them in isolation to the larger historiographical debates or other readings results in the creation of a narrow understanding where Savarkar is guilty by his own admission, leaving little space for contradiction and interpretation. Shourie's fixation to archival evidence, particularly documents related to British colonial era, raises another set of concerns as they were produced by a colonial regime who was highly invested in discrediting Indian nationalists. This uncritical acceptance of colonial archives and cynicism towards Savarkar's nationalist intentions reveals a glaring methodological contradiction and biasness. His claim of historical objectivity gets nullified with this case of selective skepticism.

The other striking characteristic of Shourie's approach is the use of comparative analysis of Savarkar's actions with other figures from freedom struggle like Bhagat Singh, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Gandhi. However, these comparisons did not serve the purpose of exploration of ideological divergences, rather this approach has been used by Shourie as blunt instruments of moral condemnation. This approach draws unflattering contrasts – such as cowardice versus courage and compromise versus defiance – which discredits the need to place Savarkar in the complex realities of his time and presents his stand in a negative light. This methodological rigidity leans more towards

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Savarkar's ideological indictment rather than genuine comprehension of his ideas.

Shourie's inquiry also carries a prosecutorial edge. His skepticism is almost bordering on cynicism and has a tone of personal indictment. His relentless addressal of incidents like Marseilles escape or the mercy petition leaves no room for alternative interpretation and ambiguity. Through this framing, it appears that Shourie's interrogation is very much focused on deconstructing Savarkar's moral standing, rather than exploring the contextual and historical analysis of his time which together became a driving force that influenced Savarkar to take certain steps in a specific socio-political context.

In the *New Icon: Savarkar and the Facts*, Arun Shourie makes a biting ideological critique of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, presenting him not just as a contentious historical figure but as a menacing ideologue whose worldview endangers the moral and democratic texture of India. Shourie positions Savarkar's variant of Hindutva as exclusionary, reactionary ideology—more focused on remaking the nation into a unified, majoritarian state than on freeing India from colonial rule. Although the ideological critique has persuasive force in its consequence, it is typically contaminated by rhetorical extravagance, selective presentation, and refusal to address the more expansive philosophical sources and mass appeal of Hindutva.

At the heart of Shourie's ideological analysis is his assertion that Savarkar's politics were motivated by in-depth anti-Muslim prejudice and a psychopathological loathing of the Indian National Congress, often to the neglect of any principled opposition to British colonial rule. Shourie's critique claims that Savarkar tactically aligned himself with colonial rule and other actors to disempower national unity, not for political astuteness but because of an abject devotion to building the narrowly conceptualized Hindu identity. He looks upon Savarkar's ideological scheme as a fundamental perversion of Hinduism an aggressive, ethnonationalist reshaping that sacrifices ethical self-reflection for the politics of fear and separatism. However, while Shourie is unsparing in his denunciation, he leaves little scope to comprehend the social fears and past hurts that lent Savarkar's ideology its appeal, particularly in a colonized and divided society. Another major axis of Shourie's criticism is the ideological comparison of Savarkar with that of Mahatma Gandhi. While Gandhi preached ideals such as non-violence, tolerance, and moral politics, Savarkar is framed as someone having contempt for these values—by referring to Savarkar's famous remark of Gandhi as regarding him as a "walking plague" and dismissing his approach as effeminate and weak in the context of Indian freedom struggle.

Shourie employs the ideological divide and presents both not just as rivals but as proponents of two strikingly exclusive and opposing visions of India. In doing so, Shourie oversimplifies the complexities of the socio-political environment of India's freedom movement in which both the figures performed. This framework presents a non-reliable binary which presents Gandhi as a moralist and Savarkar as a militaristic bigot, which in its own way risks flattening of the different strands of Indian nationalism and simplifies a multifaceted ideological landscape into a binary opposition.

The most pressing concern that Arun Shourie draws is the connection of Savarkar's philosophy to that of contemporary Indian politics. He argues that the growing efforts in contemporary political and intellectual landscape of India to revitalize Savarkar presents a societal drift towards intolerance, majoritarianism, and authoritarian leadership. He believes that Savarkar's legacy is not just a matter of historical memory but a living legacy that has permeated the daily functioning of Indian democracy through acts of violence and institutional exclusion. This link descends into moral alarmism as it leans more towards unqualified claims rather than on a nuanced exploration of how the idea of Hindutva is evolving in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Indian politics.

In distinguishing between Hinduism and Hindutva, Shourie takes a key intervention portraying the former as a spiritual, inner-focused tradition and the latter as a politicized instrument of state domination and ideological hegemony. He alerts us to the fact that Hindutva wishes not only to shape the State but to take over and remake it in its own image, undermining the pluralist and democratic values of Indian civilization. This is a useful element of Shourie's criticism, but one which other liberal and secular intellectuals have expressed previously. What is needed is a more theological and cultural examination of how and why this shift from spiritual Hinduism to political Hindutva has attracted large sections of Indian society.

Arun Shourie's *The New Icon: Savarkar and the Facts* has generated heated controversy in India's intellectual, political, and academic communities. Admired by a few as a corrective to hagiographic readings of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the book has also attracted severe criticism for its methodological flaws, ideological realignment, and polemical nature.

This book has been criticized for the one-sidedness in opinion and ideological re-alignment. Shourie's move from being a former prominent voice supportive of the Hindu Right to a trenchant critic has raised eyebrows. Numerous scholars contend that the book substitutes previous apologetics with novel ideological fanaticism. The end product, they argue, is a book that frequently strays from objective historiography into prosecutorial diatribe,

inspired more by political discontent than academic detachment. Critics allege that Shourie is guilty of exactly same kind of selective quotation and context expunging which he has long castigated others for practicing. By picking and choosing quotations and minimizing contrary evidence, the book threatens to replace one skewed portrait of Savarkar with another.

Another serious criticism is that the book fails to deal with the more profound cultural and political currents that account for Savarkar's current popularity. Shourie says little about why there has been a revival of Savarkar in Indian public and political life. In addition, Shourie's writing has been attacked as repetitive, overbearing, and analytically one-dimensional. Many of his readers and critics note that his single-minded concentration on specific issues particularly the "mercy petitions" creates a soporific rhythm that disempowers him in the end. Shourie's critics contend that he seems less intent on examining the broad range of Savarkar's intellectual development than on destroying his symbolic reputation. This begs uneasy questions about the integrity of Shourie's ideological agenda, particularly in light of his own former complicity in the same discourse he goes on to deconstruct. The transformation, while intellectually important, appears to others as opportunistic a move away from a political movement whose excesses he had helped to mainstream.

Arun Shourie's *The New Icon: Savarkar and the Facts* presents itself as a polemical and controversial addition to the current debate surrounding Indian nationalism, historical memory, and ideological heritage. By closely excavating archival evidence and placing Savarkar's own representations against the framework of fact, Shourie tries to strip away the mythic layers that have made Savarkar a nationalist icon. But for all its virtues, the book is by no means impeccable. Its accusatory tone, tendentious presentation of evidence, and the author's sudden ideological about-turn make it vulnerable to attack. His practice of boiling down multi-layered historical decisions into ethical dichotomies can tend to oversimplify the past instead of enlightening it. While the book is not up to providing a complete reevaluation, it is at least successful in reopening the argument and in an age of politicized remembrance, that is no small thing. Shourie's book demands greater and more complex reckoning with the past one that neither glorifies nor demonizes, but interrogates unceasingly.

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