

AMIT SHAH AND THE RE-WRITING OF INDIAN HISTORY

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The Telegraph, 1st November 2019

History, we are told, is invariably written by victors. We are not certain whether this is what prompted Amit Shah, undoubtedly India's second most powerful person in India, to declare that "there is a need to rewrite the Indian history from India's point of view". Shah claims that had VD Savarkar, the founding father of 'the Hindu nation' not described the events of 1857 as the 'Indian War of Independence', Indians would still be calling it by the British term 'Sepoy Mutiny'.

True, Savarkar is the first Indian to use this phrase, but historians cannot also deny that Karl Marx was the first to draw international attention to British barbarities in India, repeatedly, as the events unfolded in 1857-58. Savarkar published his bold version in 1909, which is when Khudiram and Prafulla Chaki had just sacrificed their young lives for freedom. 1909 is when Aurobindo and Barin Ghosh were facing trial for sedition, punishable with death. But Savarkar tactfully camouflaged his identity under a pseudonym, for he was, indeed, an intriguing multifaceted person. He is in great demand now, as he is the only noteworthy Hindu ultra-nationalist who suffered for participating in the national struggle, and thus fills a fraction of a gigantic void. But history is a brutal, empirical discipline and, as Shah hints, historians need to seriously re-examine the prevailing narrative. Even with 'revising history', facts like Savarkar's insistence that Indians must be less obsessed with religion, myths and superstitions to catch up with advanced Europe are hardly publicised. Savarkar was also against vegetarianism and severely criticised cow worshippers and 'rakshaks'. He found many a Hindu belief, like in 33 crore gods, and several rituals to be ridiculous and he ruthlessly attacked many Hindu traditions. The real Savarkar also damned the caste system and demanded that untouchables be allowed to enter temples.

But the Savarkar who spewed venom against non-Hindus is also the real Savarkar, as is the prisoner in Andaman's Cellular Jail who grovelled for mercy before the British. History has hard records of this pusillanimous act and not only was he released, while countless patriots rotted and died in prison, he also offered to collaborate with British imperial power. After the proposed revision of history, one hopes we will have detailed data that may substantiate that the majority of prisoners taken by the British after the Indian War of Independence and sent to die (or were executed) in the Andamans from 1858 onwards was actually Muslim. This may eventually help prove their patriotism and their questionable citizenship. What historians know but hardly ever publicise are 'contra-facts' that may upset people.

How many are aware that Aurangzeb, a bigot no doubt, appointed the first Hindu after Todarmal as Diwan of the Mughal empire? After Akbar's demise and Man Singh's recall, it was Aurangzeb who promoted the first two Hindus as Governors (Subhadars. We hardly know that the valiant Hindu ruler, Shivaji, employed several Muslims in his army and that the Marathas continued to do so, long after his death. In fact, at the Third Battle of Panipat in 1761, the Maratha army was led by Ibrahim Khan. In 1818, the Muslim regiment of the Marathas defied overwhelming British forces for a month at the Battle of Malegaon, long after the Chhatrapati and Peshwa had surrendered.

But what may surprise many is that exactly two hundred years ago, most Indians had no clear idea of much of their own 'glory'. The spade of the British archeologist unravelled what Brahmanical civilisation had chosen to forget. In 1819, a British army captain chasing a deer stumbled by accident into the Ajanta caves. But we had to wait till 1897, to get a proper glimpse of its unique art and sculpture. Again, in 1919, Colin Mackenzie made a formal presentation of the archaeological finds he had made (again, by accident) of the exquisitely carved Buddhist remains at Amaravati, long since forgotten. The ancient town of Taxila was rediscovered in 1830 and, in fact, over the next half century, Alexander Cunningham unearthed many more Buddhist splendours right from the 3rd century B.C.. The unique Buddhist stupas at Sarnath and Sanchi, that had been wiped off our memory, were 'restored', thanks to his untiring efforts. Even the tall Bodh Gaya temple had to be 'found' and re-excavated. What is more amazing is that before 1837, when young James Prinsep deciphered so painstakingly the hitherto-forgotten Old Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts on Ashokan inscriptions, we had no conclusive evidence that an emperor called Ashoka had actually ruled India.

The point is that India had to strain much more than others to overcome amnesia and then retro-fit a linear history. And it is this treasure that nationalists and national historians utilised during the freedom struggle to construct the present narrative — "the Indian point of view". Many romantic valorisations that crept in then really need re-examination, but who will bell the cat? Far from it —obscurantists are habitually misusing these very materials to mix fact with fantasy. A supra-nationalist machine attributes every great invention to the genius of ancient Hindu India and disseminates this daily through the universities of WhatsApp and Facebook. "Our glory was destroyed by dreadful Muslim and Europeans conquerors and so their 'foreign' progeny has now to pay" — this cannot surely be an agenda. Will Amit Shah please clarify?