

**“Mission in Asia”:  
Kita Ikki, V.D. Savarkar  
and  
Radical Nationalism in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century  
Japan and India**

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In the course of the decade spanning the late 1930s to the late 1940s, two men, one in Japan, one in India, were arrested and tried for murders it was known they did not physically commit. One was found guilty, the other was acquitted for lack of evidence. In Tokyo, Kita Ikki was found guilty of ideological contributions to the February Twenty-sixth Incident, the 1936 coup d'état attempt that resulted in the deaths of three leading figures in the Japanese government. He was executed by firing squad in 1937. Just over ten years later, in Delhi, lack of evidence led to the acquittal of V.D. Savarkar, tried for having made ideological contributions to the assassination of Mohandas K. Gandhi.

These men's lives contain many parallels. Not only do they share a birth year and notoriety for their “ideological contributions” to nationalist violence and murder, but both authored influential books whose ideas helped inspire violent action against the status quo and both were tried as “ideological accomplices” in political assassinations. More important, however, are their shared radical nationalist visions. Savarkar and Kita were controversial figures, and continue to be today; their ideas have been embraced by both left and right and they

have been celebrated as heroic nationalist revolutionaries and excoriated as fascists and thugs.

Although Savarkar's India was colonized and Kita's Japan was colonizer, both men and both nations confronted dominant Western imperial power and presence and both grappled with the question of how their nations should best assert themselves in light of this. Historian Brij Tankha has written that Kita, "needs to be located in the context of the dominance of Western imperialism and how in that environment Japanese intellectuals sought to confront the West and in doing so became supporters of a Japanese imperial mission." In India on the other hand, Savarkar's "mission" focused on independence from British colonial rule. Tankha has noted, "Kita and his contemporaries [Savarkar among them] were not traditional intellectuals grappling with the problems of modernity but were themselves a creation of the modern world. The problems they faced were not reducible to either the simple binaries of Western and indigenous, traditional and modern...."<sup>1</sup> These men's analyses of their countries' relationship with the West and Western imperial power, and their prescriptions for maintaining and asserting national identity in a changing world show striking similarities.

After a brief biography of each, this paper will focus on these men's overlapping ideas. Kita elaborated on the Japanese idea of *kokutai*, or "national polity," which described a superior and unique Japanese nation and state. Savarkar developed the concept of *Hindutva*, writing that it described a unique and superior group, the Hindus, who were, he argued, not merely demarcated by religious belief but more inclusively a group unified by a common religion, geography, blood and civilization. Both wrote of their nation's unique missions in Asian and world culture. Although their most influential books on these issues, Kita's *Plan for the Reorganization of Japan* and Savarkar's *Hindutva*, are very different, both display the radical nationalism that is at the core of their authors' thinking. While Kita's *Plan* laid out a specific program of political action designed to strengthen the nation internally and make it the leader of Asia, *Hindutva* was a wide-ranging and impressionistic argument

about the nature of the Indian nation, a cultural and spiritual rallying cry to “Hindudom” to assert itself against foreign domination and take its rightful place in world civilization. Most strikingly, both men have been called fascist, labeled (some might say libeled) as the “father of fascism” in their respective countries. This paper will examine the ideas of these two men, controversial nationalist icons in their respective nations.

### Biography

Kita (Terujiro) Ikki was born on Sado Island, Niigata prefecture, Japan, in 1883, the son of a prominent sake brewer. A bright and precocious student, his formal education ended in 1900 after he completed middle school. Moving to Tokyo, he attended lectures at Waseda University, developed an interest in socialism and fraternized with a variety of socialists, leftists and anarchists including Kotoku Shusui. In 1911, Kita travelled to Shanghai to observe China’s anti-Qing revolution and in 1915 published *A Private Account of the Chinese Revolution*. By the late nineteen-teens, however, Kita had abandoned his socialist roots, and a growing reputation as a pan-Asianist and critic of imperialism gained him the attention of some of Japan’s leading nationalists. In 1919, he was recruited from China by Okawa Shumei for membership in the newly formed ultranationalist *Yuzonsha*, an association that called for Japan’s national reorganization as a military state and promoted “pan-Asian goals abroad to rescue Asia from the grip of Western imperialism”.<sup>2</sup>

Although the *Yuzonsha*’s activities were limited and it disbanded in 1923, in his most significant work, the 1918 *Plan for the Reorganization of the Japanese State*, Kita developed upon *Yuzonsha* ideas, laying out detailed plans for a military coup after which the Emperor would enact political and economic reforms, suspend the constitution, and take direct control of the country. Japan would then fulfill its mission of liberating Asia from Western control. Kita’s plan inspired the failed coup d’etat of February 26, 1936, undertaken by young officers in the Imperial Army and resulting in the deaths of three governmental figures. Two days after the coup was launched, and prior to its being put down by the authorities,

Kita was arrested. He was imprisoned, tried in camera, and, “[t]hough no convincing evidence was produced against him he was sentenced to death and executed in [August], 1937.”<sup>3</sup>

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar was born in 1883, the second son of a Maharashtrian landowner. Two boyhood events motivated him to devote his life to the cause of Indian independence: as a ten year-old boy, he led a gang of friends in an attack on a mosque in response to Hindu-Muslim rioting, and later, as a teen, he reacted to news of the hanging deaths of two pro-independence terrorists. In 1906, an Indian expatriot in England funded Savarkar’s travel to London, where he studied law. There he helped organize the group, “New India,” which engaged in various terrorist training activities and advanced plans to assassinate Lord Curzon. Arrested in 1910 for suspected involvement in the killing of an official in the India Office, he was extradited to India for trial. En route to India, he jumped ship in Marseilles, seeking asylum from the French authorities. Denied asylum, he was repatriated and in 1911 was sentenced to imprisonment in the Andaman Islands, where his elder brother was already serving time for terrorist activities of his own.<sup>4</sup> Released from prison in 1924, Savarkar’s activities continued to be circumscribed by the authorities until 1937, at which time he reentered the political arena and was elected to the first of seven consecutive terms as president of the Hindu Mahasabha.

Savarkar’s 1909 book, *The Indian War of Independence of 1857*, offered one of the first interpretations of the 1857 Mutiny as a unified nationalist uprising aimed at expelling the British from India. Regarded as seditious and inflammatory, the book was banned in India until after independence. With his 1924 book, *Hindutva*, which, deprived of pen and paper, he allegedly first scratched into his prison walls, Savarkar endeavored to empower and unify the Hindu nation, sounding notes against the Muslim minority in India and implicitly calling for unity against British rule. Savarkar was arrested in 1947 and stood trial for complicity in N.V. Godse’s assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Accused as Godse’s “ideological mentor”<sup>5</sup> and of ideologically contributing to the assassination, Savarkar was acquitted due to a lack of evidence linking him directly to

the crime. He subsequently retired to Bombay where he died on February 26, 1966 (the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Japan's February 26<sup>th</sup> Incident).

### **Comparative Ideas: Fascism**

Japanese historian Christopher Szpilman writes, "Some condemn Kita as an ultra-nationalist, the symbol of Japanese fascism; others see in him the first authentic Japanese revolutionary."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the writing on Savarkar is either laudatory—"Veer ('Hero') Savarkar"—or denunciatory, stating that Savarkar was "obsessed with violence, revenge, retribution and bloodshed....[and that his] ideological-political legacy is best left where it belongs: in the dustbin of history"<sup>7</sup>

Just as striking as the parallels in their life trajectories are the parallels in their ideas. I will focus on the ways in which both Savarkar and Kita can be described as fascists, with particular emphasis on their views about their nations' roles and "missions" in Asia and the world. Though India was not a fascist *state* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and Japan arguably was, both men's ideas show a distinctly fascist bent.<sup>8</sup> Many American scholars have now abandoned "fascism" as a paradigm for 1930s Japan but the concept continues to animate discussions, and it appears repeatedly in the literature about both Savarkar and Kita. Acknowledging that a concise and universally accepted definition of fascism is elusive and contentious, I will offer a more or less standard definition of fascism. Fascist systems and ideologies are typically characterized by extreme, chauvinistic nationalism; they emphasize race and racial superiority as a unifying factor, exalt racial and national myths, reject communism, individualism and pacifism, agitate against real or fictive enemies, advocate territorial expansionism, and glorify military build-up and war.<sup>9</sup> Using this general definition of fascist ideology (if not of the fascist *state*), we can assess how both Kita's and Savarkar's ideas fit the fascist mold. From that somewhat more "universal" standpoint, the article will examine the two men's ideas about their nations' *missions* in Asia and the world.

### ***Ideological Overlap***

Kita's *Plan for the Reorganization of Japan* and Savarkar's *Hindutva* reveal the similarities in Savarkar's and Kita's thinking, if not necessarily in their concrete approaches. These books delineate the general parameters of their authors' fascism, closely following the brief description provided above. Both men adopted and adapted ideologies with which they attempted to define and describe their nations' identities, enabling them to grapple with the question of "What is Japan [or what is India?] and what should its role be in Asia and in the world?"<sup>10</sup> While Savarkar's focus is on "*Hindutva*," or "Hinduness," one of the central elements in Kita Ikki's writings (indeed in the writing of many Japanese intellectuals of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century) is the concept of *kokutai*, usually translated as "national polity." Roy Andrew Miller writes, in a passage also apropos of *Hindutva*: "*Kokutai* had become a convenient term for indicating all the ways in which they [the Japanese] believed that the Japanese nation, as a political as well as racial entity, was simultaneously different from and superior to all other nations on earth." Again reminiscent of definitions of *Hindutva*, *The Cambridge History* suggests that the term *kokutai* "captured in a single verbal compound the entire range of ideological virtues that defined what it meant to be Japanese, as opposed to the 'other'."<sup>11</sup>

Kita and Savarkar both rejected mystical elements in their conceptualization of *kokutai* and *Hindutva*, instead focusing their definitions on concrete elements. Kita viewed *kokutai* in concrete terms, distinguishing himself from many Japanese ultranationalists of the Showa period who trumpeted the Japanese spirit. Kita's *kokutai* followed the lines laid out by Ito Hirobumi, who held that the *kokutai* "was a general name for the land, people, language, clothing shelter, and institutions of a state...."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, "Hindutva," Savarkar wrote, "embraces all the departments of thought and activity of the whole Being of our Hindu race." Four central qualities comprised Savarkar's formulation of *Hindutva*, of which "Hinduism," he wrote, "is only a derivative, a fraction, a part..." These qualities were a

shared geography, a shared race, a common culture, and common law and rites.<sup>13</sup> For both Kita and Savarkar, *kokutai* and *Hindutva* embodied the essential elements or expressions of the nations' identities.

An emphasis on race, and race as a primary basis for national unity, a hallmark of fascist ideology, runs throughout Savarkar's writings on *Hindutva*. According to Savarkar, it was race—*jati*—or “blood,” not religion, that was the foundation of Hindu unity: “We, Hindus, are all one and a nation, because chiefly of our common blood. All Hindus,” he maintained, “claim to have in their veins the blood of the mighty race incorporated with and descended from the Vedic fathers, the Sindhus.”<sup>14</sup> This imparted an unassailable unity to the race which was underscored by their shared culture.

Kita, too, viewed race as a basis for national unity, as evident, for example, in his arguments on the annexation of Korea. Korea, he wrote, disregarding the coercive and exploitive nature of Japan's rule in Korea, was “neither a vassal nation nor a colony of the Japanese,” but instead was “like a part of Japan, just as Hokkaido is.” This was because the Koreans were the “closest among all races to the Japanese.”<sup>15</sup> “The Korean problem,” Kita argued, “is not a problem of racial discrimination, since we belong to the same race.”<sup>16</sup> Kita used race as the basis for national unity in his somewhat ironic argument in favor of Japan's colonial control over Korea.

Racially-based national unity was reinforced by an emphasis on the group over the individual, and a strong anti-individualist strain was evident in both men. While neither called for an end to private property, both viewed individualism as dangerous to national unity. Private interests, they believed, should be “subordinated to the requirements of the nation.”<sup>17</sup> Savarkar called on his nation to “strengthen ... those subtle bonds that like nerve-threads bind you in one Organic Social Being,” and to consolidate themselves until they were “individualized into one Being.”<sup>18</sup> In similar fashion, Kita “...dismissed [individualism] as a negative force in modern history because it weakened the living body of the state.”<sup>19</sup> Instead, he wrote,

the Japanese people believed “that a nation is an organic, indivisible, great family, a modern social organism...”<sup>20</sup>

Both Savarkar and Kita believed racial unity and the precedence of the organic social whole over the individual contributed to the cultural superiority of their nations. Savarkar asserted that early in its formation, India became “the very heart –the very soul–of almost all the then known world.”<sup>21</sup> The Hindus, Savarkar wrote, “. . .can build on this foundation of Hindutva, a future greater than what any other people on earth can dream of–greater even than our own past...”<sup>22</sup> Kita strongly believed in Japan’s cultural superiority, predicting a “renaissance” of Asian thought, which would be “Japanized and universalized, [and would] . . .enlighten the vulgar, so-called civilized peoples.”<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, Kita linked Japan’s cultural superiority to India’s, writing of the “great belief of the Japanese people seeking to open . . .the unlocked treasure [Buddhism] of the Indian civilization....”<sup>24</sup>

Savarkar and Kita both asserted their nations’ cultural superiority over other peoples, reinforcing these claims by pointing to an external enemy. For Savarkar it was the Hindu-Muslim antagonism: his was an “attempt to unify the majority under a *homogenized* concept, ‘the Hindus,’” and to foment a “sense of cultural superiority vis-à-vis . . . an excluded minority [the Muslims].”<sup>25</sup> Savarkar clearly recognized the utility of an external enemy, and throughout *Hindutva* he persistently beat the drum of animosity and antagonism toward Muslims. The arrival of Islam in India marked the beginning, Savarkar wrote, of “the conflict between life and death.”<sup>26</sup> “Nothing can weld peoples into a nation and nations into a state as the pressure of a common foe. Hatred separates as well as unites.”<sup>27</sup>

Kita also recognized the function of an external foe and identified Japan’s enemies repeatedly throughout his *Plan*, denouncing the international community for its “hectoring of Japan.” “Britain,” he maintained, sits “astride the world. . . , and Russia is landlord of half the northern world.” “The time to debate about whether to go to war with England to protect China has long passed,” Kita asserted.<sup>28</sup>

Both men espoused strong messages of their nations' missions in Asia and the world. In their conceptions of national mission, both argued that the existence of external enemies necessitated the build-up of military power. In his famous slogan, Savarkar called on his countrymen to "Hinduize all politics and militarize Hindudom."<sup>29</sup> Savarkar urged Hindus to join the military, writing during WWII, "[S]hall we lose this golden opportunity to acquire military strength...?" If we don't work in the British factories, he warned, the Muslims will, thus "strengthening a second enemy."<sup>30</sup> Kita wrote at length on the military's role in Japan's future, asserting Japan's "right to initiate a war," and declaring, "If all the people in Japan desire as apostles of the Heavenly Way to follow the road, then it is necessary to have a militarist organization..." Kita even linked Japan's militarism with India's quest for independence: "Militarism will be a title for Japan and she will be the Jehovah of Indian independence."<sup>31</sup>

Military power would be used not merely for defense, but for territorial expansion, enabling the nations to fulfill their missions of spreading their cultures throughout Asia. In *Hindutva*, Savarkar wrote:

Thirty crores of people, with India for their basis of operation, for their Fatherland and their Holyland with such a history behind them, bound together by ties of common blood and common culture, can dictate their terms to the whole world. A day will come when mankind will have to face the force.<sup>32</sup>

"Nothing," continued Savarkar, "can stand in the way of your desire to expand. The only geographical limits of Hindutva are the limits of our earth!"<sup>33</sup>

Kita advocated territorial expansion to advance Japan's mission in Asia. Kita's was a more specific plan, calling on Japan to liberate Asia by advancing into Australia, the Pacific, Manchuria and Mongolia, thus fulfilling its destiny in Asia: "...[resulting in] the real awakening of the 700 million people

of China and India...; on the road to Heaven there is no peace without War.”<sup>34</sup> “Japan, with true kindred love, will, in a short period, carry out its moral destiny, and for this it must destroy the policy of the white people who want to profit from other races through the so-called colonial policy....The sovereign people themselves will ... sweep away the original rich white settlers, then it will become possible to lay the foundations of a true paradise for world brotherhood.”<sup>35</sup>

Both men looked to Buddhism (Savarkar regarded Buddhism as a permutation of Hinduism) as a basis for that pan-Asian and global unification. Savarkar wrote, “[w]henever the Hindus come to hold such a position when they could dictate terms to the whole world—those terms cannot be very different from the terms which the *Gita* dictates or the Buddha lays down.”<sup>36</sup> More stridently, Kita called on Japan to “lift the virtuous banner of an Asian league and take the leadership in a world federation that must come. In so doing let it proclaim to the world the Way of Heaven in which all are children of Buddha, and let it set and example that the world must follow.”<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

Neither Savarkar nor Kita have been relegated to the “dustbin of history,” though Kita’s ideas have been less durable than Savarkar’s. A fervent devotion to Kita’s ideas animated the Japanese, particularly those in the military, until the end of the Pacific War. Since then, his ideas have belonged to the fringe groups of ultranationalists, occupying a position well beyond the mainstream of contemporary Japan. Just as Savarkar outlived Kita, so, too, have his ideas had a longer life in India. Savarkar’s *Hindutva* remains central to the saffronized political ideologies of the Sangh Parivar, the group of political parties, including the Bharatiya Janata Party, that carry forward the ideas of the Indian nationalist group, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Both men have been icons of radical nationalism in their respective countries.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Brij Tankha, *Kita Ikki and the Making of Modern Japan: A Vision of Empire*, (Global Oriental, 2003) xv; 158.
- <sup>2</sup>Wilson, 94.
- <sup>3</sup>Szpilman, 472.
- <sup>4</sup>W.M. Theodore deBary, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. 2, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958) 327.
- <sup>5</sup>Sukumar Muralidharan, "Understanding Savarkar," in *The Savarkar Controversy*, (New Delhi: Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT), 2004) 6.
- <sup>6</sup>Szpilman, 467.
- <sup>7</sup>Praful Bidwai, "Savarkar—Great Patriot of Rank Traitor?," *Navhind Times*, 9 September, 2004, reprinted in *The Savarkar Controversy*, (New Delhi: Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT), 2004) 64-5; 66.
- <sup>8</sup>Peter Duus and Daniel Okimoto rejected the use of the term "fascist" in relation to prewar Japan on the grounds that "the Japanese case is so dissimilar [from European fascism] that it is meaningless to speak of Japan in the 1930s as a 'fascist' political system." Peter Duus and Daniel Okimoto, "Fascism and the History of Pre-War Japan: The Failure of a Concept," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. XXXIX, no. 1 (November, 1979) 65.
- <sup>9</sup>Maruyama Masao, "Ideology and Dynamics"; Also, Maruyama Masao, "Nashonarizumu, gunkokushugi, fuashizumu," ("Nationalism, Militarism and Fascism") in *Gendai seiji no shiso to kodo*, 1963.
- <sup>10</sup>Tankha, viii.
- <sup>11</sup>Roy Andrew Miller, *Japan's Modern Myth*, 95; Cambridge History, XXX.
- <sup>12</sup>Ito Hirobumi quoted in Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths*, (Princeton, 1985) 145.
- <sup>13</sup>Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Hindutva*, (Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, Fifth ed., 1969), 3; 82-99 *passim*.
- <sup>14</sup>Savarkar, 4; 39; 84.
- <sup>15</sup>In Brij Tankha, 208.
- <sup>16</sup>Eiji Oguma, *A Genealogy of Japanese Self-Images*, David Askew, translator, (Trans-Pacific Press, 2002) 140.

- <sup>17</sup>V.S. Patwardhan, "Savarkar's Economic Thinking," in Grover, *Political Thinkers of Modern India*, (Deep and Deep Publications, 1990-1992) 422.
- <sup>18</sup>Savarkar quoted in SIT, 334-5; *Hindutva*, 45.
- <sup>19</sup>Szpilman, 474.
- <sup>20</sup>Kita in Tankha, 216.
- <sup>21</sup>Savarkar, 17.
- <sup>22</sup>Kita in SIT, 333.
- <sup>23</sup>Kita in Tankha, 229.
- <sup>24</sup>Kita in Tankha, 219.
- <sup>25</sup>Prabhat Patnaik, "The Fascism of Our Times," *Social Scientist*, 21:3-4 (March-April, 1993) 69-70.
- <sup>26</sup>Savarkar, 42.
- <sup>27</sup>Savarkar, 43.
- <sup>28</sup>Kita in Tankha, 217; 221; 224.
- <sup>29</sup>Savarkar in SIT, 328.
- <sup>30</sup>Savarkar quoted in Patwardan, 328.
- <sup>31</sup>Kita in Tankha, 221; 223.
- <sup>32</sup>*Hindutva*, 141.
- <sup>33</sup>*Hindutva*, 119.
- <sup>34</sup>Kita in Tankha, 229.
- <sup>35</sup>Kita in Tankha, 212; 215.
- <sup>36</sup>Savarkar, 141.
- <sup>37</sup>Kita, *Plan*, quoted in SJT, p. 961.