

“Biography of a Fundamentalist: Hinduism, Nationalism, and the Other side of Gandhi’s India.”

Janaki Bakhle

Columbia University

Friday, April 12th; AGR Room, Alumni Center

Time: Reception 5:30 pm

Lecture: 6 - 7:30 pm

Open to the Public

Between 1922 and 1924, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966), viewed primarily as a revolutionary “terrorist” by the British colonial police, and ubiquitously considered to be the founding father of “Hindu Fundamentalism” by post colonial historians, wrote an extended essay in English entitled “Essentials of Hindutva.” The pamphlet, like his other works, was immediately banned but circulated surreptitiously, and established him as Gandhi’s polar opposite in the struggle for Indian freedom. “Essentials of Hindutva” is also one of the few texts written by an Indian nationalist that links the present 21st century Hindu moment of Indian history to the pre-independence anti-colonial period. Not even Gandhi’s own writings from the period of the 1920s can claim such a time span of influence. Hindutva’s influence hovers balefully over the political landscape of contemporary India. Five decades after it was written, this small and unpleasant text has become the de facto Bible of militant and exclusionary Hindu nationalism, taking as its chief enemy the minority Muslim community, and as its chief interlocutor, Gandhi.

For this reason, and for his association with Gandhi’s assassin, Nathuram Godse, Savarkar is the single most controversial Indian anti-colonial nationalist. Worshipped fiercely by some, he is equally reviled by many. And yet, between Savarkar and Gandhi there are striking parallels and similarities, more indeed than between any other nationalist and Gandhi. Both travelled much of the same road before separating in the two directions that India constantly chooses between. Using Gandhi as my foil, in this talk I will use the unholy and non-religious author of Hindu fundamentalism to ask what it might mean to write an intellectual history of a distinctly non-monotheistic fundamentalism.



About the Speaker

Janaki Bakhle is Associate Professor in the department of history at Columbia University. She is the author of “Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of a Classical Tradition” (Oxford, 2005), and several articles including “Music as the Sound of the Secular” (Jan, 2008), “Country First? Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and the Writing of Essentials of Hindutva” (Public Culture, Feb, 2010), “Putting Global Intellectual History in its Place” (Oxfar, 2012). She is completing a manuscript called “Hindu Fundamentalism? An Intellectual History of Religion, Politics, and Place in Modern India.”