

February 11, 2022

To: The President of the Royal Historical Society

Re: Plagiarism by recently elected fellow, Dr. Vikram Sampath

Dear Dr. Griffin,

We write in alarm to inform you that we have found a pervasive, long-standing pattern of plagiarism in the work of a recently elected fellow of the Society, Dr. Vikram Sampath. As a world-renowned and venerable institution devoted to representing history as a discipline and historians as a group, these blatant violations of the stated ethics of the Society by a member subverts the very aims and principles of the Society. We draw your attention to the relevant sections of your Statement of Ethics, which even our cursory survey of Dr. Sampath's published work has shown that he has repeatedly violated in spirit and in letter.

- understanding and following copyright laws;
- being mindful of intellectual property issues...
- eschewing plagiarism, fabrication, falsification and deception in proposing, carrying out and reporting the results of research;
- following the most rigorous procedures for the citation of sources, including materials obtained from the internet

Our suspicions of plagiarism were aroused when, upon reading his essay, "The Revolutionary Leader Vinayak Damodar Savarkar," *India Foundation Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (July-August 2017): 37-42,¹ some of the phrases struck one of us as remarkably similar to the work of Dr. Vinayak Chaturvedi. The essay in question, "A revolutionary's biography: the case of VD Savarkar," was published in *Postcolonial Studies*, a leading and widely read journal, fully four years earlier.² While Dr. Sampath does cite this essay, he does so in passing without acknowledging that the central thesis is largely borrowed from Dr. Chaturvedi's earlier (and pioneering) essay. He also lifts some sentences verbatim (without attribution) and uses larger chunks of barely paraphrased material, in a manner we are familiar with from callow undergraduate students who seek unsuccessfully to evade plagiarism detection software and our own expertise. Even then, when we ran this essay through plagiarism detection software, we

¹ Available online: <https://indiafoundation.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/India-Foundation-Journal-Jul-Aug-2017-final-290617-without-adv.pdf> Accessed February 8, 2022.

² Vinayak Chaturvedi, "A revolutionary's biography: the case of VD Savarkar," *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2013): 124-139

found a roughly 50% mark for plagiarized content, borrowed largely from Dr. Chaturvedi’s essay and that of Dr. Janaki Bakhle, also mentioned in passing but from whom he has liberally plagiarized.³ For comparison, here are some noteworthy and egregious examples, starting with the very first line of the essay, which is nearly identical to Dr. Chaturvedi’s work:

<p>Original works:</p> <p>“As an intellectual founder of Hindu nationalism, V D Savarkar has emerged as one of the most controversial Indian political thinkers of the twentieth century. His writings on Hindutva have generated a great deal of attention for many decades now.” p. 124</p> <p>“However, in this article, I examine Savarkar’s contribution to the history of an idea that is generally overlooked in the historiography: namely, the ‘revolutionary’. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to examine the impact of Savarkar’s interpretation of the revolutionary on modern political thought in India.” Chaturvedi, “A revolutionary’s biography,” p. 124</p> <p>“Despite his declaration as a revolutionary, Savarkar never wielded a weapon; instead, he argued that writing histories was a necessary step in overthrowing colonial rule.” Chaturvedi, “A revolutionary’s biography,” p. 128</p> <p>“On 13 March 1910, Savarkar was arrested on multiple criminal charges, including ‘procuring and distributing arms’, ‘sedition’, and ‘waging war against the King Emperor of India’. Chaturvedi, “A revolutionary’s biography,” p. 131</p> <p>“The unspoken fear in all the surveillance documents is that sedition and its effects were</p>	<p>Vikram Sampath:</p> <p>“As an intellectual fountainhead and founder of what is termed as “Hindu nationalism,” Vinayak Damodar Savarkar has emerged as one of the most controversial Indian political thinkers of the 20th Century. His writings on Hindutva have generated a great deal of attention for long...” p. 37</p> <p>“In this paper, I explore the role and contribution of Savarkar as a revolutionary figure and briefly interpret the impact of his philosophy and writings on India’s revolutionary movement.” p. 37</p> <p>“He never wielded a weapon himself, but argued instead that writing histories was a necessary step in overthrowing colonial empires.” p. 37</p> <p>On 13 March 1910, Savarkar was arrested on multiple criminal charges, including ‘procuring and distributing arms’, ‘sedition’, and ‘waging war against the King Emperor of India’. The unspoken fear in all the surveillance documents is that sedition and its</p>
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³ The essay in question is: Janaki Bakhle, “Savarkar (1883–1966), Sedition and Surveillance: the rule of law in a colonial situation,” *Social History*, Vol. 35. No. 1 (2010): 51-75. Note that half of the plagiarized material detected by software in Dr. Sampath’s essay came from this source.

the real threat the colonial police had to contain, and to illustrate this I turn now to the story of the surveillance of Savarkar.” Bakhle, “Savarkar,” p. 61

“ In 1911, the government opted to send Savarkar to India for his trial, rather than holding it in Britain. However, when the ship carrying Savarkar temporarily docked at Marseilles, France, Savarkar escaped, jumping off the ship and swimming to shore.” Chaturvedi, “A revolutionary’s biography,” p. 131

effects were the real threat the colonial police had to contain. In 1911, the government opted to send Savarkar to India for his trial, rather than holding it in Britain. However, when the ship carrying Savarkar temporarily docked at Marseilles, France, Savarkar attempted to escape, jumping off the ship and swimming to shore.

The sheer number of lifted sentences and ideas in a five page essay was alarming enough that we then decided to see if Dr. Sampath’s recently published two-volume biography of Savarkar included similar lapses of academic ethics. In this case, we found that apart from established scholars like Dr. Chaturvedi, deceased eminent historians like R.C. Majumdar, Dr. Sampath did not spare even the work of a deceased undergraduate from his predations. The first paragraph is from the award-winning undergraduate thesis of Paul Schaffel, submitted to Wesleyan University in 2012 and written under the direction of Dr. William Pinch, while the second is from Dr. Sampath’s first volume of his biography of Savarkar, on the basis of which he was admitted to the Society.

Mr. Schaffel (2012): “A.M. Shah describes the *Indian Sociologist* as only ‘mild in its criticism of British Rule,’ pointing to Krishnavarma’s common statement that “India and England should sever their connection peaceably and part as friends.”⁶¹ The *Indian Sociologist* appears to have circulated widely, both in Great Britain, India, and the United States, even after the British authorities attempted to stop the import of the paper to India in September of 1907, and was read by individuals of all political leanings, including Dadabhai Naoroji and members of the India Office.” p. 28-29

Dr. Sampath, *Savarkar: Echoes from a Forgotten Past, 1883–1924* (Penguin, 2019): “A.M. Shah describes the *Indian Sociologist* as only ‘mild in its criticism of British rule’ and points to Shyamji’s statement that ‘India and England should severe (*sic*) their connection peaceably and part as friends’.⁶⁷ It circulated widely in Great Britain, India, and even the United States of America, even after the British tried to prohibit its import from 1907 onward.” p. 214⁴

⁴ Dr. Sampath cites the thesis incorrectly as a PhD dissertation in his bibliography, but does not attribute this section to Mr. Schaffel, in a familiar pattern.

This particular instance of academic predation is doubly unconscionable since Mr. Schaffel wrote this work while struggling against lymphoma. As the obituary in his undergraduate institution noted, “His thesis remains a contribution to academic discourse and a tantalizing “what if” to the scholarship he could have offered his field. His loss creates a heartbreaking absence to all who knew him, just as his life was an inspiring story of courage and determination.”⁵ To have the words of such a fine young student stolen by Dr. Sampath without any consequence would be a lasting shame upon us as researchers, and as teachers and mentors.

We have other examples of similar violations but wanted to share our preliminary findings in hopes that your Society will revisit the membership of Dr. Sampath and subject his body of work to the scrutiny that he has thus far evaded from academics, in part because his publications are largely in non-peer reviewed venues. While popular historians are a vital part of our profession and discipline, plagiarists cannot be. Dr. Sampath’s predations against other academics, including members of the Society and against vulnerable unpublished student scholars, is in breach of both the letter and spirit of the Society’s stated ethics.

Sincerely,

Dr. Ananya Chakravarti
Associate Professor of History, Georgetown University

Dr. Audrey Truschke
Associate Professor of History, Rutgers University

Dr. Rohit Chopra
Associate Professor of Communication, Santa Clara University

⁵ Cynthia Rockwell, “Scholarship, Tenacity, Brilliance: Remembering Paul Schaffel ‘12,” *UpFront Wesleyan University Magazine* Issue 1, 2013. Available online: <https://magazine.blogs.wesleyan.edu/2013/09/18/scholarship-tenacity-and-brilliance-remember-paul-schaffel-12/> (accessed February 11, 2022)