

IN THE "SERVICE" OF HINDUTVA: WOMEN OF THE
RASHTRA SEVIKA SAMITI IN MUMBAI

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CERTIFICATE

Certified that the dissertation entitled '*In the "Service" of Hindutva: Women of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti in Mumbai*' submitted by Ms Namrata R. Ganneri in partial fulfillment for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy of the Jawaharlal Nehru University, is a bonafide and original work to the best of our knowledge and may be placed before the examiners for evaluation. This dissertation has not been submitted for the award of any other degree of this university or any other university.

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*Aadau sanghathayet rashtram
Tatah kaankshet samunnatim
Sanghshaktivina rashtram
Kuto va kut unnatim**

Initially, the nation must be created,
Thereafter, it is possible to wish for (its) progress;
(But) without the power of organization,
Wherefrom would originate the nation, and
Whither (its) progress?

The Hindutva project is the product of an all-male vision. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh¹ is an exclusively male organization to this day, presiding over, and guiding and directing the various manifestations of the Hindutva movement, converting huge swathes of population to its vision. The most prominent face of the feminine in the Sangh's discourse is that of Bharatmata, the Motherland, benevolent creator and nurturer, forever in need of her valiant sons to preserve her honour and integrity. There are a few feminine faces whose intervention makes them highly conspicuous in the politics of Hindutva: *Sadhvis* and a few women politicians. Nonetheless, the foundations of Hindutva in the world of women are nursed by the more enduring, quiet, "cultural" work of the women of its organizational affiliates.

The Rashtra Sevika Samiti², the first affiliate of the Sangh and exclusively composed of women, is the focus of this dissertation. The choice of the Samiti is conditioned by two factors. Firstly, it claims to be an independent parallel of the Sangh in terms of its function of *sangathan* of Hindu women. Secondly it assumes a pedagogic role, and all the new women's fronts formed by the Sangh, use women from the Samiti for training as well as for their ideological strength. Women's affiliates in general and the Samiti in particular has received marginal

* *Rashtra Sevika Sangathan Visheshank*, (Nagpur, Sevika Prakashan:2004); cover page

¹ Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh was founded in 1925 by Dr KB Hedgewar in Nagpur. It is the foremost proponent of Hindutva politics. Hereafter, referred to as the Sangh or RSS.

² Rashtra Sevika Samiti was founded in 1936 by Laxmibai Kelkar in Wardha. Hereafter referred to as Samiti.

attention in the academic literature published on the Sangh and its affiliates. There is a marked tendency in recent scholarly work³ to include women, among Dalits and adivasis as a *new* group that the Sangh has managed to mobilize in the recent years. This 'lumping' of all women together elides the fact that women, like men, have multiple identities. These explanations, based on women's visible and forceful intervention in the public sphere betray an inadequate understanding of the gender ideology of Hindutva. It clearly remains oblivious of the long, unbroken history of women's involvement in communal organizations. Any debate on women thus takes place at the intersection of gender, ideology and politics.

The focus of this study is, therefore, not just the institutional structure of the Samiti, but more importantly, an interrogation of the feminine discourse created by the Samiti that enables women's identification with, and activism in favour of the Hindutva agenda. The analysis begins with an investigation into the conditions that led to the formation of a women's affiliate and flows into the contemporary period, where its politics is commented upon.

The study is area specific in that the fieldwork is confined to Mumbai⁴ as this was, and remains a stronghold for the Hindutva brand of politics. Mumbai, the greatest of the metropolitan cities of India, has been open to several competing currents—a strong communist movement, labour movement, Dalit politics, and the chauvinism of regional-communal parties like the Shiv Sena. It has a good number of feminist groups as well. At the same time the specific Maharashtrian milieu in which the RSS rose ensures that the roots of Hindutva were struck deep into the Mumbai region. A simple head count of institutions (trusts, study groups etc) claimed to have been 'inspired from the RSS' reveals as large a number as

³ For instance, Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics 1925 to the 1990 Strategies of Identity Building, Implantation and Mobilisation (with special reference to Central India)* (New Delhi, Viking: 1996), p 426

⁴ Mumbai is used for Greater Mumbai that extends beyond the municipal limits of Mumbai and includes Thane city as well.

five hundred⁵ and this is excluding the direct affiliates and sub affiliates. In the recent years, Mumbai has been riven apart by communal conflict and has seen growing polarisation over the past few decades, indicating that the base of Hindutva is anything but expanding in the city.

This work thus attempts a micro study of a single women's organization that foregrounds "Hindutva" as its agenda and examines the conditions under which women could display an agency in founding this affiliate as well as in sustaining it through the decades.

Structure of the Work

A brief survey of the existing literature on the Sangh and its affiliates provides the context as the Samiti functions within the operational logic of Hindutva.

My frame of reference is the politics of the Sangh Parivar and the place of the women's affiliate within this structure. Thereafter, I note the significant trends in women's political activism, with particular emphasis on women's involvement in religious movements as well as on those with explicit right wing agendas. The literature questions traditional and essentialist understanding of women's passivity and low levels of politicisation. The insights obtained enable an understanding of women's activism in the cause of Hindu Rashtra, the aim being to make it possible for me to ask pertinent questions.

The founding of the Samiti is rooted in the politics of Hindutva and the historical trajectory of the RSS. From an analysis of the literature published by the Samiti and testimonies of older women who were the earliest sevikas, I demonstrate the agency displayed by women in the founding of this exclusive women's organization. I situate the founding of the Samiti within the general political and

⁵ Interview with Ashok Chowgule, VHP President, Mumbai and Goa , 25th June 2003, Mumbai, example, Rambhau Mhalge Probodhini, Hindu Vivek Kendra, Pitru Chhaya, etc.

social context of Maharashtra and also present a bird's eye view of the politics of women's organizations in western India, particularly Mumbai.

This chapter opens with the early history of the RSS, particularly its political activity in the decade of the 1930s and 1940s. The RSS struck deep roots in Maharashtra, the region of its origins, the rapidly changing political context and communal polarisation aiding the process. An exploration of the colonial records, which are a mine of information, offers insights about the expansion strategy and social base of the Sangh. These detailed records have not yet been explored by scholars. This segment demonstrates that the traditional base of the Sangh's expansion remained the same and in this phase it just proliferated within its restricted caste base though there were several efforts to reach out to other sections and groups. The founding of the women's affiliate thus ensured that its own caste base remained firmly secured.

The second chapter traces the organizational expansion and comments on the structure of the Samiti. The Samiti replicates the hierarchical structure of the Sangh, its shakhas are modelled on the Sangh's shakhas, and its overt face remains that of the women's wing of the RSS. However the fact that the organization is exclusively comprised of women and the chief ideologues being women ensures that there is no straightforward emulation. The women have their own ideals, their own heroines and manage with little help from the Sangh. In their everyday functioning, they are independent from the Sangh, though in the discourse of the Samiti, this autonomy is overstated. An attempt is made to analyse the internal dynamics, day to day working and special programmes of the Samiti.

Chapter three is an exploration of the models of womanhood in the discourse of the Samiti. Women are conceptualised as "Matrishakti" in the Sangh discourse - glorious and virtuous mothers. The sevikas however have recreated and

conceptualised motherhood so as to not only give direct agency to women but to see them as vital to ensure historical change, particularly in the cause of Hindu Rashtra. Self-effacing, docile womanhood is not celebrated. Episodes from history are refigured to give a central place to women, and the Samiti has its own Hindu heroines. In the Sangh, in contrast, there is an absence of heroines except, for an occasional Jhansi ki Rani.

Through an analysis of literature and their notions of participation and 'empowerment', there is an attempt to explore the worldview of the sevikas. The sevikas of the Samiti seek to craft an ideal womanhood for the Hindu Rashtra, and their own lives and lived experience of participation reflect the realisation of this vision.

The strength of this work lies in the extensive use and critical analysis of the Samiti's organizational literature as well as its focus on area level politics. Through a combination of archival documents, literature and interviews, I have sought to construct a picture of the women of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti and situate their activism in the cause of Hindutva.

Majoritarian Hindu activism has been given several names: Hindutva, Hindu Nationalism and Political Hinduism.⁶ The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is the main organization, disseminating Hindutva has a pan- Indian presence and affiliates and sub affiliates that form its 'family', the Sangh Parivar. Academic works began to take serious note of the organizational structure only from the last decade of the twentieth century; now, works with a plethora of perspectives abound. The various affiliates are held together in a complex formation and, therefore, any study on the RSS involves a study of its affiliates. Here, some are accorded more importance than others.

This chapter is divided into two sections: The first section is devoted to discussing works that exclusively focus on the politics of majoritarian Hindu activism and its powerful face, the RSS. In the second section I discuss women's political activism in religious as well as fascist movements the world over. This is followed by a discussion of existing literature on women's involvement with Hindutva. The rest of the section is devoted to providing the historiographical framework for women's involvement with Hindutva.

I make my presentation at different levels sub titling the conceptual categories separately in accordance with the major thrust of each category.

I

In the first section, there are three strands that I discern in the works published around the subject and therefore my discussion follows a similar schema:

- (a)The theme of Hindu nationalism and genealogy of Hindutva
- (b)Works that build around the organization, its strategies and affiliates .

⁶ Hindutva is commonly used to refer to the ideology of the RSS: it has as its aim the setting up of a Hindu Rashtra . Eva Hellman characterizes this movement as Political Hinduism. Eva Hellman, *Political Hinduism The Challenge of Vishwa Hindu Parishad*, (Uppsala University Press: 1993) p 10.Hindu Nationalism is increasingly used by academics to describe this phenomenon;Recent influential works being, Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, opcit, TB Hansen *The Saffron Wave Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*, (Princeton:1999) , Cnetan Bhatt,*Hindu Nationalism Origins Ideologies and Modern Myths* (Berg, Oxford University Press: 2001).I discuss this usage fully further.

(c) Works whose theme are the affiliates. Here the academic work remains concentrated on primarily two affiliates: The Bharatiya Jana Sangh and now the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad.

I propose to survey the literature thematically, eschewing the more traditional method of a strict chronological survey, as the literature spans several themes and a rigid chronological schema will not do justice to the multitude of conceptual questions raised. For this reason, a return to the same work in different subsections becomes necessary to do justice to the diverse strands in the works.

Communalism

Bipan Chandra⁷ has been a powerful influence in historiographical understanding of communalism by providing it with a linear three stage paradigm. In the first stage, a strong sense of religious community would emerge even among some liberal nationalists. In the second stage, middle class leaders work upon this communitarian consciousness and give it a tinge of mutual antagonism. In the third stage they circulate ideas of religious hostility among the common people, which can be described in the language of violence and war. While he does not periodize the first phase, he comments that the second stage began from the 1920s and is manifested in the careers of Lala Lajpat Rai, Madan Mohan Malviya and NC Kelkar, who are described as liberal communalists. The period after 1937 is described as that of extreme communalism, its representatives being the RSS and the Muslim League. The common people more or less in his discourse appear as mere dupes who mistake their socio-economic contradictions for

⁷ Bipan Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India*, (New Delhi, Vikas: 1987). The same argument appears in a set of three articles authored by Chandra in Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, KN Panikkar, Sucheta Mahajan, *India's Struggle for Independence*, (New Delhi: Penguin: 1989) pp398-442.

religious conflict. These forms were not rigid phases but individuals like Lajpat Rai Madan Mohan Malviya and Mohammed Ali were in different parts of their political lives communal nationalist and liberal communal, while Jinnah went through all three phases.⁸ This explanation is inadequate to explain the trajectories of organizations like the RSS. Surely, they have their origins in the period identified as liberal communalism but by no stretch of imagination can they be called liberal communalist organizations. It appears that Chandra sees trends/ facts and tries to fit these into a schema. His attempt to demonstrate that all conflict was always premised upon a clash of 'material' interests cannot explain massive mobilizations among a wide cross section of people across classes, for example, the Ramjanmabhumi movement.

Chandra's argument in its essence is best expressed thus, "Communalism was a modern phenomenon that arose as a result of British colonial impact and the response of different Indian social classes, strata and groups."⁹ He traces the roots of this ideology to the modern mass based politics of the elites competing for loaves and fishes under the colonial rule. The colonial state is a major player in this theory as first having created the socio-economic conditions of under development and second directly encouraging communal politics to further its own interests: a classic case of "divide and rule".

He describes communalism as representing backward and reactionary forces in all areas of life. So a communalist like Savarkar was also closely associated with Hindu princes and Syed Ahmed opposed the principle of democracy. The Congress leadership is also indicted for making compromises with elite leaders of communal organizations, thereby legitimizing their claims to be representative of "community" interests. He further censures the Congress leadership for failing to wage an ideological struggle that would have effectively countered communalist

⁸ Bipan Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India*, *ibid* p356. It is striking that he does not discuss the career of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a social conservative but uncompromising nationalist.

⁹ *ibid*. p8

ideology. For instance, the Congress failed to acquire a base among Muslim peasants and artisans because of its close links with middle class interests.

I see problems in this perspective which works with certain assumptions about "legitimate" nationalism which was always unsullied by primordial pulls of caste and community whereas there were equally clear cut strands within nationalism which were compromised by communalist associations. This is evident when he discusses young Muslim nationalists in the Muslim League between 1912 and 1924:he says that their participation in the Khilafat movement was "flawed" because it was motivated by religious and not fully nationalist urges. Even though in the short run it strengthened the anti colonial movement among urban Muslim, in the long run it entrenched religious motivation within Muslim nationalists.¹⁰ The significance of Chandra's work lies in the fact that it is the classic exposition of the Nehruvian discourse of secularism and it offers several points with which later scholars engage with.

Chandra's work assumes communalism as something "given" and it is this "givenness", Gyanendra Pandey¹¹ questions. He argues that nationalism, communalism, etc were constructed historical processes, arising over time out of diverse struggles of diverse peoples. Pandey is critical of the assumptions of a universalist bourgeois economic rationality that underlies Chandra's "economistic" explanations of communal conflict. His criticism of the modern scholarship of communalism is aimed at that segment that chooses to focus on elite politics and manners, assuming a sharp division between the two domains. Pandey recognizes the continuities between the colonialists and nationalists positions in their search for rational causes behind communal conflict. Both nationalists and colonialists would see communalism as a primordial throwback

¹⁰ Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, KN Panikkar, Sucheta Mahajan *India's Struggle for Independence*, opcit, p 420

¹¹ Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, (New Delhi, Oxford University Press:1990)

and the nationalists would identify authentic nationalism as inherently secular.¹² This deliberate attempt to excise religious affiliations from nationalism began from the 1920s and became the dominant credo of the Congress party.¹³ Concomitantly "Communalism" was the ideological adversary of "Nationalism" and the nationalists self consciously waged struggle against it from the 1930s onwards.

Pandey also suggests that the imperialists first developed a clear cut vision of India as an eternal abode of warring religious communities. This colonial discourse then gained a strong reception among large sections of Indians. The colonial term for describing conflict as "communal riot" planted itself in popular imagination and vocabulary. Pandey therefore sees the colonial discourse as the source of the colonial idea. In this sense he, ironically follows Bipan Chandra's similar indictment of the colonial state for furthering communalism even when he is critical of Chandra. At the same time, Pandey suggests that colonialists lumped together different kinds of social conflicts between Hindus and Muslims under the single rubric of "communal riot". Here again he comes close to the argument that a number of these conflicts would be extra religious based on material considerations.¹⁴

The intervention of the colonial state in fundamentally altering caste and Hinduism has been an acknowledged fact.¹⁵ Colonial state found it easy to reduce social complexities to simplified homogenous ethnic categories. The censuses furthered the process of enumeration and classification procedures hardening the fuzzy boundaries that used to exist between people of different faiths. By the 1870s and 1880s the era of modern, competitive, governmentally defined ethnic identities had arrived.

¹² *ibid.* see the introduction, pp1-23

¹³ *ibid.* p239. This is also a comment on Chandra's position of the necessity of privileging national interests over community interests, if one is a "true" nationalist.

¹⁴ *ibid.* The chapter, "The Bigoted Julaha" comes close to this position. pp68-107.

¹⁵ Dipesh Chakravarty, "Ethnicity and Nationalism in India", in J. McGuire, P Reeves, and H Brasted, *Politics of Violence From Ayodhya to Behrampada*: (New Delhi, Sage Publications:1996), pp207-218

Chakravarty however fails to explain why the British decided to classify the people primarily into religious categories rather than any other one. He comments that post colonial reliance on British classificatory principles led to the persistence of caste and religious categories in India. It seems that while Chakravarty rightly points out the novel intervention by modern official statistical computations, he exaggerates the capacity of the official documents in moulding the ideological beliefs of the Indian people. P K Datta in the first chapter of his *Carving Blocs*¹⁶ demonstrates how discrete elements of census figures were deliberately picked up, assembled and given a particular shape by Hindu ideologues in the early 20th century. The resultant discourse went far beyond what the censuses had stated. Distorted census figures influenced popular thinking through institutional mediation.

Coming to more contemporary manifestations of communalism, David Ludden¹⁷ argues that even in the modern world, communalism has become fundamental in the western world's perception of and in making sense of India. He places this in the larger context of Orientalism and the resurgence of religion in world politics. "Communalism in India thus became symptomatic of a new world order emerging from the Cold War."¹⁸ Ludden is critical of this modern day 'Orientalism' which like older 'Orientalism' assumes that third world nations are doomed to ethnic bloodbath. Ludden disagrees with this image of endemic ethnic violence and poses the question whether there are continuities between the older communalism and present day post 1980s Hindu majoritarian totalitarianism. He sees the latter as an entirely new phenomenon based on a

¹⁶ P K Datta, *Carving Blocs Communal Identity in Early 20th Century Bengal*, (Delhi, Oxford University Press: 1998)

¹⁷ David Ludden (ed), *Making India Hindu, Religion Community and the Politics of Democracy in India*, (Delhi, Oxford University Press: 1997)

¹⁸ *ibid* p3

particular historical conjuncture which cannot be dismissed as a perennial characteristic of Indian polity.

Van der Veer¹⁹ argues that communalism is only a form of extreme nationalism. Whereas in nationalism, common culture is imagined as the basis of common identity, in the case of communalism, it is common religion. This radical version relegates adherents of other religions to a secondary inferior status. He is critical of the theories of nationalism that presuppose a traditional- modern dichotomy, and are statist in their perspective. This is according to him particularly true of western theories of nationalism that presuppose a concomitant secularization of civil society and a production of homogenous culture through a centralizing state apparatus. He argues that nationalisms in India are derived from western models but only to a certain extent. They are combinations of discourses of modernity with discourses of religious community.²⁰

Van der Veer argues that what has been characterized as "Indian nationalism" was always fundamentally Hindu, be it Gandhi's popular syncretism or Nehruvian tolerance, which was a construct that developed from nineteenth century socio religious reform movements.²¹ In Van der Veer's argument, a consciousness of community identity is seen to transform itself into national identity. One is not quite sure however whether, community identity is not conflated with communal identity. There is a distinction between these, despite fluidity and mutability of one into another- a communal identity derives from community identity but is not coterminous with it.²² Further he does not reflect on the word Hindu. If Hinduism as a religion is defined as the basis of nationhood, the definition of "Hindu" is crucial.

¹⁹ Peter Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism Hindus and Muslims in India*, (Delhi, Oxford University Press:1996)p22.

²⁰ *ibid*, p197

²¹ *ibid*,pp65-70 and pp198-199

²²,P Bidwai,H Mukhia,A Vanaik, *Religion, Religiosity and Communalism*, (New Delhi,Manohar, 1996) p7

Hindu Nationalism

The term that is most commonly used in recent academic writings²³ to describe the ideology of an organization like the RSS is Hindu Nationalism. I will discuss how scholars have handled this concept in the following section. Actually the term was first used by Bruce Graham²⁴ to describe the Jana Sangh. From there it passed into general currency.

Graham defined Hindu Nationalism as the belief that an entire community is endowed with a single essential spirit which gradually realizes an ultimate form. Hindu Nationalism then is a theory of Hinduism which does not so much refer to religious texts or specific traditions as to the exposition of a historically derived doctrine of Hindu culture, in its potential and its ideal future form.²⁵

John Zavos²⁶ defines Hindu nationalism as,

“ Hindu Nationalism is defined as an ideology that seeks to imagine or construct a community (ie a nation) on the basis of a common culture- a culture configured by a particular notion of Hinduism”.²⁷ Further he explains that this ideology was largely developed as a middle class ideology by middle class Indians over a period coterminous with the development of elite led nationalist ideology.

To my mind, there are two central issues that scholars have grappled with in their works and have hypothesized all their works around:

(i) Explaining the ‘Hindu’ tinge in Indian nationalism as Chandra²⁸ would describe it: explaining the persistence of Hindu imagery in or the continuous drawing from elements from Hindu religious tradition in formulating nationalist ideology.

²³ Significantly, Jaffrelot, Hansen and Bhatt do not outline reasons for their naming the Sangh as “Hindu Nationalist”, though Zavos dwells upon this theme Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, Hansen *The Saffron Wave*, Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*. opcit

²⁴ Bruce Graham, *Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics: the origins and development of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh*, (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

²⁵ *ibid*, p75

²⁶ John Zavos, *The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in India*, (Oxford University Press: 2000)

²⁷ *ibid*, p5

²⁸ Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, KN Panikkar, Sucheta Mahajan *India's Struggle for Independence*, opcit p 436

(ii) The relationship of Hindu Nationalism with earlier socio- religious reform movements particularly the Arya Samaj and its forging of a militant Hindu identity.

Zavos²⁹ expends considerable energy in establishing the autonomy of Hindu Nationalism and dissociates this concept from the binary opposition between communalism and nationalism and the tendency to bracket Hindu Nationalism with Hindu Communalism. According to him, even Van der Veer is unable to extricate his explanation from this hyphenation. He questions the comparability of the concepts of nationalism and communalism. In fact the aim of his work is to conceptualize and distinguish Hindu nationalism as an ideology outside this dialectic. Communalism is more of a historical condition than an ideology.³⁰ Significantly, Jaffrelot, Hansen and Bhatt³¹ do not outline reasons for their naming the Sangh as "Hindu Nationalist", though Zavos dwells upon this theme.

Zavos, Bhatt and Jaffrelot argue that there was a significant change brought about in the character of Hinduism and a new political Hinduism was forged by the 1920s. Therefore modern Hindu nationalism was not born outside the ambit of the national movement nor can we ignore the fact that it had distinctly modern features.³²

Jaffrelot, in the first chapter of his book on the story of the Hindu nationalist movement focuses on the evolution of this ideology. The genesis is traced to the period between 1870 and 1920. He depends on Anthony Smith's model of ethnic nationalism to argue that Hindu Nationalism followed a trajectory that was different from that of territorial nationalism. Emphasizing the social background

²⁹ John Zavos, *The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism*, opcit. pp1-18

³⁰ ibid p 5

³¹ Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, opcit This is evident from the titles of their works.

³² Significantly the birth of Hindu Communalism is also traced to this period. Gyan Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism*, opcit p 233

of the leaders who shape ideologies he characterizes Hindu nationalism as an ideological ethnic movement of the upper castes, with its roots firmly embedded in the socio religious reform movements initiated by high caste Hindus such as the Arya Samaj, followed by Hindu Mahasabha and thereafter most powerfully by the RSS. The Hindu nationalist movement was built in stages where the RSS represented another higher stage.

One of the most original arguments advanced by Jaffrelot is regarding the strategies employed by Hindu Nationalism in the initial stages of its expansion- “ Stigmatization and Emulation of Threatening others”

“In the first phase, the dominating presence of these Others, often exaggerated, aroused strong feelings of vulnerability. There are other cases of majorities with a minority complex, and probably all ethnic nationalisms (the Herderian brand in Germany, for one) emerged from excessive feelings of vulnerability, but as far as Hinduism is concerned, its extreme differentiation into castes and sects was (from the Hindu nationalist perspective) an additional predisposition to such a feeling. The second phase was characterised by efforts to reform Hindu society through a selective initiation of those cultural traits from which the Other was believed to have gained its strength and hence its superiority. This borrowing did not develop openly but rather under the pretext of a reinterpretation of Hindu traditions. The cumulative process led gradually to the construction of an ideology of Hindu Nationalism”³³

The first phase was marked by the aggressive reformulation of Hinduism by Dayanand and founding of Arya Samaj. Jaffrelot sees Savarkar as a successor of Dayanand. He initiated a second stage in the development of Hindu Nationalism. It was set in motion by the political context of Khilafat movement and the subsequent round of communal riots. This was also the period of renewed vigor of Hindu Mahasabha and the publication of Savarkar’s magnum opus, *Hindutva*. Savarkar minimized the importance of religion as a criterion for Hindu Nationalism and instead focussed on geographical unity, racial features and a common culture. Demonstrating that MS Golwalkar, the chief ideologue of the RSS, drew from Bluntschli, Jaffrelot argues that it was the German version of the nation that is predominant in the RSS worldview.

³³ Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, opcit ,p76

Zavos is critical of Jaffrelot's explanation of the origins of Hindu Nationalism. He thinks Jaffrelot accords too great an importance to the instrumentalist strategy of the elites.³⁴ Chetan Bhatt³⁵, on the other hand, sees affinities between an earlier form of nationalism which was a "primordialist" view of 'national unity': that is, the belief that the unity was inherent in primordial ways. This belief also depended on the invention of an archaic Vedic Hinduism, which became paramount from the nineteenth century. In the early formulations, Aryanism was the ideological basis for either vedic or Hindu nationality. Bhatt delineates this process through the writings of Dayanand, the Bengal Renaissance, and Tilak's conflation of regional Maharashtrian with a reconfigured and politicized martial devotional Hinduism.

The more original arguments in Bhatt's work are concerned with tracing the intellectual origins and ideological content of Hindu Nationalism. He argues, notwithstanding the nineteenth and twentieth century forms notwithstanding, there is a convergence in the substantive ideological content if not the explicit political concerns of Hindu nationalists across this period.³⁶ Personalities and texts dominate Bhatt's account of the movement and therefore in his book we have personalities regarded as central by Bhatt from Dayanand, Tilak to Lajpat Rai to Savarkar Golwalkar and finally Deen Dayal Upadhyaya (credited with the RSS doctrine "Integral Humanism") discussed in detail. Instead of reading this movement as a fossilized, immutable ideology, there are constant reworkings, appropriation of older ideologues that may at times not even be remotely connected with modern day Hindutva. Further that Hindu nationalism is an expansive term encompassing several strands than merely hard core Hindutva, which certainly is its most hard, forceful and visible manifestation.³⁷

³⁴ Zavos, *The emergence of Hindu Nationalism*, opcit ,p6

³⁵ Chetan Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, opcit

³⁶ *Ibid* p2

³⁷ *Ibid*,p44

Hindu nationalism is said to have gradually unfolded itself in phases. The first phase was dominated by proto-Hindu nationalists, who saw the fundamental unity of India in its ancient civilization, which was unproblematically represented as essentially "Hindu". The next phase was initiated by Madan Mohan Malviya, NCKelkar, Lala Lajpat Rai and BS Moonje in the 1920s. This was the period that also saw the revitalization of the Hindu Mahasabha, the foundation of the RSS, and the publication of tracts that were, or became central for Hindutva ideologues, for instance, Shradhanand's *Hindu Sangathan* and of course Savarkar's, *Hindutva*.³⁸ In a full length chapter devoted to the career of Savarkar, perhaps one of the most intriguing of leaders on the nationalist scene, he demonstrates the metamorphosis that Savarkar's Hindutva underwent from the publication of *Hindutva* to the late 1930s: his nationalism having hardened, and a much stronger conception of Hindutva thus emerging, particularly influenced by extremist right wing ideologies emanating from Europe. Bhatt however fails to advance any reason for this transformation. In his role as the President of the Hindu Mahasabha from 1937, Hindu Nationalism became profoundly "aggressive" and "militaristic".³⁹

"Whereas his Hindutva of 1923 barely mentioned Europe, and was more concerned to define Hindu identity through the parameters of 'history', land, civilization, race and religion, his Hindu nationalism of the 1930s is strikingly fixated on war, militarism and minorities and draws consistently and heavily upon European examples, especially Nazi Germany."⁴⁰

Bhatt's makes a thought provoking analysis of the character of Hindu Nationalism and his comments on the writings of personalities like Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Savarkar does much to muddy the boundaries between Indian and Hindu Nationalism and problematize simplistic readings of the political activity of some of the tallest leaders on the contemporary national scene.

³⁸ Acknowledging that there was a new 'Hindu' identity being forged in Hindutva, Bhatt yet sees continuities with the older expressions of the same. Ibid pp43-44

³⁹ ibid p100. Chandra characterizes the period after 1937 as aggressively fascist. Bipan Chandra, Aditya Mukherjee, Mridula Mukherjee, KN Panikkar, *India's Struggle for Independence*, opcit p 399

⁴⁰ Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, opcit p106

While Bhatt's work delineates the growth of Hindutva as a slow evolving ideology over a period, Zavos work also based on a similar premise, departs in its understanding of the evolution of this ideology. The argument of Zavos is centered around the fact that the ideologies of Hindu Nationalism and Indian Nationalism developed simultaneously and were produced by the same class, the elite middle class, a predominantly professional class, arising from the developments of colonial rule. These ideologies were opposed to each other at the level of "mental frameworks" of the people.⁴¹ Thus instead of the standard opposition between communalism and nationalism we now have an opposition between Hindu Nationalism and elite Indian Nationalism.

Zavos demonstrates how "Sangathan" had developed as the defining principle of Hindu Nationalism. This emphasis on organization was not a part of traditional Hinduism or based on recognizable institutions of Hinduism. Though in this 'modern Hinduism' organization is seen to be linked with reform movements, especially the Arya Samaj, he forcefully argues that it was organization as a "colonial discourse" that resulted in this compulsive urge to organize. Organization was expressed here as a discourse of modernity, a tool that justified the colonial hegemony. It was the modern discourse of organization through which Hindus examined and debated the 'shape' of their religion and its objective existence in relation to other religions of the modern world. As a result of this process carried out in particular arenas, Hindu nationalism emerged in the early 20th century as a distinctive and politically influential ideology. In a fascinating documentation of the Shuddhi movement of the Arya Samaj and the cow protection movement of Sanatan Dharma Sabhas, he classifies them as examples of "vertical" and "horizontal" organization. The former was based on a fundamental text (the Vedas) and sought an overhaul of the caste system whereas the latter neither emphasized doctrinal infallibility nor restructuring the caste system. The continuities with "horizontal" organization were maintained by

⁴¹ *ibid*,p9. These ideologies are said to have blended and clashed on the same discursive terrain that of culture.

the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS in the 20th century whereas Arya Samaj's "vertical organization" became a lost cause after the communal riots of the 1920s and the death of its indefatigable crusader, Swami Shraddhanand. This view towards caste and doctrinal heterodoxy, characteristics of modern day Hindutva (and identified with the RSS) marks the crucial shift in projecting the genealogy of Hindutva back to the Arya Samaj. Significantly this marks the RSS's attitudes towards caste and gender injustices as well: these are relegated to a position of secondary importance, resolving themselves on their own and in any case subordinate to the task of *Sangathan*.

The RSS: fountainhead of "Cultural Nationalism" or Brotherhood of Hindutva

In this segment I comment on two monographs written in succession, the earliest of the works on the RSS but from vantage points that can best be described as opposite ends of the spectrum:

Anderson and Damle⁴² were the one of the first to work on the RSS giving a historical account of Hindu revivalism culminating into the founding of this organization. There are chapters on early history, the organizational hierarchy, the rise of the affiliates and discussion in detail of the rise of the BJS and then the BJP. The narration ends with the election of LK Advani as the BJP President.

The book offers sketches of the first three leaders of the RSS, Hedgewar, Golwalkar and Deoras, and demonstrate the modalities of building a disciplined spread of well groomed cadres to the cult of the "family". The authors talk about a reformist RSS and a political RSS. The authors argue that the reformist RSS is committed to rebuilding the Hindus in the mould of patriotic warriors who are convinced that a united Hindu family can construct a strong invincible state free of the degrading vices of untouchability, worn out taboos and gross social

⁴² Anderson.W and S.D Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism*, (New Delhi, Vistaar Publications: 1987)

inequalities. RSS theoreticians maintain that the social body functions only when individuals perform their duty(dharma). The founders of the RSS concluded that the social body was weak and disorganized because "dharma" was neither clearly understood nor correctly observed while the disintegration of Hindu society was perceived as advancing at a rapid pace in the contemporary period. The malady was traced back at least to the Islamic invasions of India when its alleged creative thought ceased to respond to changing conditions. It appears that the authors have uncritically appropriated the discourse of the RSS without tracing the RSS account to a critical scrutiny. The authors locate the RSS within the rubrics of revivalism, tracing it to the revivalist movements of the nineteenth century.

The authors talk about the other RSS , the political movement which brought the organization into prominence. In the 1960s the RSS support to its political affiliate the Jana Sangh was evident. Thereafter the RSS experiences in party building and that of the BJS in politics is discussed. The Emergency and subsequent politics form the concluding chapters of the book.

An interesting point that the authors make is its unlikelihood of becoming a mass organization, as it was never meant to be so. Though the authors do not comment in detail on the social composition of its members, these words are an important comment on its strategy. Anderson and Damle seem to take the RSS self image of staying away from formal politics rather too seriously and the whole argument is advanced so as to present the RSS as non covetous of power and committed to its agenda of bringing about a fundamental transformation in society. The RSS's communal character is hardly commented upon. This book, published in 1987 has a Sangh sympathizer as a co author. This was the pre Ramjanmabhoomi agitation phase before the RSS achieved mass mobilization through its religious affiliate, the VHP, so as to polarize the country so strongly and result in large scale riots.

*Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*⁴³ (hereafter KSSF) written by a collective of left inclined academics, examines the politics of Hindutva, showing how a communalism that claims to represent a majority glosses over multiple identities of caste, sects, region, gender, class, etc. KSSF lays bare Hindutva's ideological, institutional and infrastructural underpinning. "The frequent representations of Hindutva as a spontaneous mass movement in search of a Hindu identity naturalizes and suppresses a whole history of meticulously organized efforts towards a Hindu Rashtra."⁴⁴ The book is based on the available works on the Sangh Parivar, on RSS and VHP publications, on a number of interviews with RSS, VHP and BJP leaders and activists and on interesting fieldwork covering the VHP campaigns in Uttar Pradesh in 1990 and 1991.

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The first chapter analyses the birth and gradual growth of the RSS into its present vast network of organizations. This chapter shows how the Parivar is held together by the "steel frame of the RSS"⁴⁵ as the authors aptly describe the RSS method of controlling the entire Parivar through the deputed RSS full timers who make up the backbone in all its subsidiaries. The other argument is that the present day success of the Sangh Parivar is a logical consequence of decades of disciplined, well managed organizational and ideological extension. The author's view is close to the way RSS likes to view its own history, without endorsing it of course, as an unbroken consistent and thus irresistible effort to "organize Hindu society" and "awaken the Hindu". The documentation of the work of affiliates and sub affiliates shows how the RSS has managed to penetrate civil society through its strategy of "social work" and "cultural ideology".

In explaining the origin of the RSS in Maharashtra with a relatively insignificant Muslim population, KSSF offers an insight into the deeply

⁴³ Tapan Basu, Pradip Datta, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, Sambuddha Sen, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags A Critique of the Hindu Right*, (New Delhi, Orient Longman: 1993)

⁴⁴ *ibid*, p1

⁴⁵ *ibid*. p40

problematic relationship with organized politics and caste shared by the RSS, explaining that the movement was more of an upper caste Brahmanical effort against the challenge of lower caste and Dalit assertions.

“ Organized Hindutva emerges right from the beginning as a upper caste reaction to efforts at self assertion by down trodden groups within the Hindu fold. The RSS from the inception down to today has been overwhelmingly middle class Brahmin or Bania composition, drawn together on the basis of a fear psychosis directed against other social groups; Muslims most overtly, but by implication also low caste Hindus.”⁴⁶

The strongest point of the book is the critique of RSS ideology. It provides insights into the centrality of the ‘Muslim’ as the “Other” and the deep running ambivalence in the RSS vis a vis modernity, insights conspicuously absent in Anderson and Damle’s work. Where both the works concur is on the relatively greater appeal of the RSS ideology in urban areas where there is a sense of greater alienation. This explains the relative lack of popularity of RSS in rural areas. Nevertheless, the RSS has come a long way and today has penetrated even the remotest of areas primarily through its affiliates. In that sense the works appear dated.

The authors also succumb in the ultimate segment of the chapter to an “economistic” analysis of the emergence of the Hindutva wave. Does this sort of combined historical and sociological determinism really help us to understand what the “ essence” of Hindutva is all about? Is it that the social base of a movement always in the final analysis determines its character and long term goals? How do we account for the fact that Hindutva is managing to break through class, caste and regional barriers and become a countrywide wave?

⁴⁶ ibid, pp 16-17

A changing India?

The structural transformations that the Indian polity and society underwent in the period after the 1960s, is said to have changed the political climate of the country. Public faith in the Congress disappeared by the 1980s, space being created for new forces meanwhile an audience was also being created for newer appeals. It has been argued that the Congress operated by building a system of alliances with local influential men in villages, towns and districts throughout India based on loyalties inherited from the independence movement and providing patronage on the return of votes. Local Congressmen in return ensured that the party had its share of votes from its cliques that voted on the basis of caste/ communal loyalties. Therefore the extent of changes that could be effected in the local power structures were limited despite the best slogans and rhetoric of socialism, the real power wielders remained the socially conservative Congress big men.⁴⁷

Certain facts brought to the fore in the decade of the 1980s were the obvious increasing potency of religious appeals in mobilizing large numbers of people⁴⁸, caste becoming an increasingly contentious issue in public life both of which influenced major political decision. The political scenario can be characterized as one marked by "fluidity"⁴⁹, increasing assertion by the hitherto marginalized groups, for example, the Other Backward Castes, Dalits and the crisis in the Congress: leadership as well as cadre, resulting in the fact that the polity is marked by intense instability as well. The language of Indian democracy was clearly undergoing changes.

Thomas Hansen⁵⁰ seeks to explain the growth of the Hindu Nationalist Movement, in terms of its following democratic procedures of governance to

⁴⁷D Ludden, *Making India Hindu*, opcit pp 17-18

⁴⁸ The Shah Bano and Roop Kanwar cases as a result of the state's mishandling came to be seen as issues of community identity, polarizing the Hindu and Muslim communities.

⁴⁹ P Bidwai, H Mukhia, A Vanaik, *Religion, Religiosity and Communalism*, opcit pp 15-20

⁵⁰ Thomas Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, opcit

capture power. Hansen traces the coming to centre a hitherto marginalized movement to the fundamental transformations in political culture. Middle class and dominant caste anxieties were fanned by "plebian" assertions and therefore "Hindu nationalist promises of order, discipline and collective strength" were readily embraced.⁵¹ In this sense, he raises fundamental questions about the political commitments of the real constituency of Hindu Nationalism, middle class "educated" Indians that readily receive the movement's xenophobic discourses.

It is argued, "India's new communalism has arisen during a struggle to reconstruct India politically."⁵² Further the ideology of Hindu Nationalism is said to provide a hegemonising and centralising ideology that can salvage the post colonial polity from what has been seen as the "crisis of the nation state".⁵³

Aijaz Ahmed⁵⁴ in an interesting piece discusses the excessive emphasis that Hindutva accords to national unity and nationalism, by stressing the need of a 'pan Indian identity', for which previous histories of the anti colonial movement no longer provide the ideological cement. The decline of Nehruvian social democracy and the apathy of the Left have been inadequate to bind the forces released in the process of capitalist development and state formation. That Hindu Nationalism has stepped into this vacuum is a point made by Ashutosh Varshney as well.⁵⁵

The religious affiliate- Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)

The VHP over the past two decades has emerged as the most militant face of the Sangh Parivar. However, relatively little academic work on the VHP exists. Eva

⁵¹ *ibid*, p5

⁵² D Ludden, *Making India Hindu*, opcitp18.

⁵³ Amrita Chhachhi, The State, Religious Fundamentalism and Women Trends in South Asia" in *Economic and Political Weekly(hereafter EPW)*, March 18, 1989, pp567-577,p569

⁵⁴ Aijaz Ahmed, Radicalism of the Right and Logics of Secularism,in P Bidwai,H Mukhia,A Vanaik, *Religion, Religiosity and Communalism*,opcit pp37-55, p43-44

⁵⁵ Ashutosh Varshney, Contested meanings: India's National Identity, Hindu Nationalism and the politics of Anxiety, in *Daedalus*, 122 (3), 1993, pp. 227-261.

Hellman⁵⁶, one of the earliest attempts to subject the VHP to a full-length study argues that the reason for the relative marginalization of the VHP was due to its non-recognition as a major political actor on the Indian scene. The ban on the VHP, subsequent to the demolition of the Babri Masjid, resulted in its being recognized as a key player in the Sangh Parivar. Hellman writes primarily as a historian of religion and describes her main task as that of providing a coherent analysis of the religious ideas propagated by the VHP. Deliberately avoiding the term "communalism" for its pejorative connotations, she prefers to use the term "Political Hinduism" for the VHP's brand of Hinduism. The origin of the VHP is explained as the necessity of forming a "non-political" world Hindu organization working for Hindu unity and strength in what was perceived as hours of crisis. In the VHP's discourse the notion of "hours of crisis" runs very deep, though the crisis is always left inadequately explained.

There were leaders from the RSS, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Congress and the Akali Dal, the Sanghatan Movement, modernist and reformist Hindu organizations like the Chinmaya mission and the Bharat Saadhu Samaj. The immediate context of the emergence of the VHP was formed by the Hindu Code Bill, the reform of the Hindu religious institutions, the cow protection issue and the question of Christian missionary activity. The context for the expression of nationalism was provided by the Chinese aggression in 1962. This burst of nationalism strengthened groups and political parties that equated nationalism with strong defense. The popularity of the RSS and the BJP grew. Thus, the VHP was born "in a climate of extreme and paranoid nationalism, of growing support for the pro-Hindu BJS, of a growing polarization between the Hindus and the Muslims, of the economic and organizational recovery of the RSS and the official recognition of the RSS"⁵⁷. The aim of the sixty delegates claiming to represent different *Matths*, *Panths* and *Sampradayas*

⁵⁶ Eva Hellman, *Political Hinduism*, Uppsala University Press: 1993

⁵⁷ *ibid*, p76.

(Hindu Religious and ecclesiastical institutions) was to bring about unity in the religious establishment of the Hindus.

In the first phase, which is referred to as the consolidation phase, the focus was on social welfare projects for the untouchables as well as '*parvartan*' (reconversion) of the untouchables and the tribals. This phase was however devoted to conferences and *sammelans*. The 'activist' phase was from the period from 1981-1990 when mass campaigns were organized to arouse Hindutva, beginning with the Ekatmata Yatra (1983) in the post Meenakshipuram conversion phase. The Meenakshipuram conversion of a thousand Hindu harijans to Islam was regarded as most threatening to the entire Hindu society. This spate of conversions was seen as a move towards Islamisation of the entire community and led to the growing polarization between the two communities. The period after 1991 is referred to as the period of tension between the more radical and the less radical elements within the organization. At the very peak of conflicts between the moderate and the hardliners, Hellman refuses to elaborate on the chronology of the VHP.

Hellman's original and useful argument lies in scrutinizing the claims of scholars like Romila Thapar who characterize the work of the Sangh Parivar as attempting to forge a "syndicated" community of the Hindus. While Hellman concurs that there is a new kind of Hinduism being forged, she argues that the focus is not on "One God One Book" (like the Semitic religions). People are allowed their '*ishtadevata*' and retain their *sampradayic* allegiances. Even in the case of Rama there is a multiplicity of images proffered (for example the cherubic child Ramlala as well as the martial Rama).⁵⁸

Manjari Katju⁵⁹ in her work on the VHP discusses VHP's militant confrontation of the Indian political institutions and secular structure of the state. Katju identifies two broad phases in the VHP's evolution (i) the period from 1964 to 1980 (ii) the

⁵⁸ *ibid*, p62-64.

⁵⁹ Manjari Katju, *VHP and Indian Politics*, (New Delhi, Orient Longman:2003)

post 1980 phase. She remarks that this period was marked by a lack of 'ideological coherence', primarily due to its heterogeneous leadership and lack of clear-cut agenda. The leadership was initially drawn from a wide spectrum of religious leaders and therefore common action became difficult.

With the Meenakshipuram conversions, the VHP entered into the phase of mass activism. The leadership passed into the hands of traders, bourgeoisie etc from the hands of religious leaders. The ascendancy of the RSS within the VHP is also not purely coincidental in this period. Katju suggests that MS Golwalkar deliberately allowed the VHP a low profile in the initial years to gain legitimacy. The secretary of the VHP was SS Apte, a dedicated pracharak. If this is similar to the strategy followed by Hedgewar during the foundational stages of the RSS it is not surprising. The activist phase, one must remember also owes much to the *sarsanghchalak* Balasaheb Deoras who did not shy away from politics. However in my opinion what remains unexplained by both the writers - Katju and Hellman - is the appropriation of the VHP by the RSS. With such a heterogeneous or eclectic leadership how did the character of the VHP undergo a considerable change? These questions are not raised by both these works.

Katju writes that in the initial phase of its activity the role of the VHP was confined to countering Christian missionary propaganda and forging links with the Hindus living abroad. Katju does not discuss in details as to what happened to this agenda in the later phase. She returns to the theme of Christian missionaries in the final chapter but it does not seem to be integrated in the overall plan of the book and appears to have been added as an afterthought. The missionary work of the VHP in remote tribal areas aimed to compete against the Christian missionary work and that can itself become an object of study. Area level studies would help to understand VHP and RSS backed 'vanvasi NGO schemes'.

Katju argues that the VHP played a key role in successfully transferring Hindutva from a verbal idea into a broad militarized and forceful social movement.

Through the Ramjanambhumi Movement, it succeeded in making Hindutva central to Indian politics, marginalizing more pressing social and political issues. I wonder how much this is due to the heightened 'communal consciousness', a result of consistent indoctrination by the Sangh Parivar and its influence on public debates. VHP's role in invading the private space through its *bhajan* cassettes, propaganda literature, building and management of temples, *bhajan mandalis* and *yoga kendras*, is also not marginal and can be the subject of area level micro studies.

The authors of *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*⁶⁰ discuss the VHP in considerable detail in their study of the Sangh Parivar. The second chapter of the tract is devoted to the VHP its growth and position within the RSS family itself. The chapter demonstrates how Hindutva has been popularized, the Ram agitation occupying the centre stage in RSS politics and therefore, in fact, marking a break with the RSS tradition.

The authors argue that the Sangh Parivar's project is to homogenize Hinduism and overcome its internal caste and region divisions in favor of a generalized, massified, simple and emblematic Hinduness. This is sought to be done through the creation of the "angry" Hindu', the overtly political agitating and attacking Hindu, which has been done by the VHP type mobilization and appropriated by the BJP in political and electoral terms.

The Political Affiliate: the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and the Bharatiya Janata Party

The biography of Jana Sangh by Baxter⁶¹ is an effort to present a historical picture of the Jana Sangh, a party, which following the 1967 elections matured

⁶⁰ Basu, et al, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, opcit

⁶¹ Craig Baxter, *A Biography of an Indian political party-Jana Sangh*, (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1971)

into a potent force on the Indian political scene. Baxter's study of the Jana Sangh poses two questions: its place in the Indian political system, and secondly to examine its strength in the "religio-political movements" in several Afro-Asian countries. There are two chapters describing briefly the history and developments of Hindu Mahasabha; the political ancestor of Jana Sangh and the RSS; its organizational forerunner. The other chapters deal with origin of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and its electoral performances upto 1967 general elections. For Baxter, Indian society and politics are influenced by several concurrent conflicts in the socio-political system. The first and oldest conflict on the sub-continent is between the older Dravidian culture and the newer Aryan culture. A second and more violent conflict was the rivalry between Hinduism and Islam. The third conflict was the struggle between modernization and traditionalism, between westernization and sanskritization. These themes are, however not developed further.

" The Jana Sangh resulted from a combination of a partyless leader, SP Mookerjee and a leaderless party; the RSS. The origin of the RSS was based largely on the RSS supplemented by a mixed bag of others and possessed but one nationally known leader, SP Mookerjee. Of course, the RSS was not the only source of membership for the Jana Sangh although it was the primary source of its organizational strength. The Jana Sangh stated its fundamentals "as one country; one nation; one culture and the rule of law". In its economic programme, both its land policy and industrial policy it tried to steer a middle course between conservation and radicalism. Pakistan and Kashmir were the focal points of the proposals on foreign policy which was to be guided primarily by enlightened self interests. The party proposed decentralization of administrative powers to local units."⁶²

The social base support to Jana Sangh was provided by Princes and *Jagirdars*; certain sections of industrialists and urban middle classes engaged in entrepreneurial activities or urban Hindu shopkeepers.

⁶² ibid p10

The Jana Sangh in 1967 elections entered into alliances on a much wider scale than in the earlier elections. It contracted alliances with Swatantra Party in Gujarat and Rajasthan and with other parties in Madhya Pradesh. In the 1967 elections the Jana Sangh appeared to be taking steps both towards alliances and moderation. The close of 1967 was for Jana Sangh a critical juncture. But Baxter does not explain why Jana Sangh lost the elections later.

Baxter in the end predicts that the future of Jana Sangh depends not only on the voter but on the party's position on alliances and policy changes. Baxter regards that the exclusive Hindu membership of party does not remain a source of strength. Secondly many of the tenets of the Jana Sangh were anathema to Muslims and Christians. But finally he makes it implicit that the Jana Sangh is not so rigidly Hindu as the Mahasabha was. There is a fine line between a communal party and a nationalist party. The Jana Sangh for him appears to straddle that line.

The analysis offered by Bruce Graham⁶³ uses the conventional tools of description of a political party, where social base and electoral analysis form significant chapters. The book covers the first sixteen years of its existence and concludes with the Jana Sangh's first taste of electoral success in gaining more seats and votes in the 1967. Bruce Graham poses the question as to why a nation with a "numerically dominant Hindu population" reject a party claiming to be their sole representative. This electoral and political failure of a political party espousing a 'majoritarian' Hindu nationalism is the focus of this study. His, then, is a story of decline. The party's policies have been discussed in two phases: in the first phase, its policies were guided by assumptions of decline of the Congress (that it would wither away in the wake of unpopularity caused by partition) and subsequently a more hard headed realistic analysis from the mid

⁶³ Bruce Graham, *Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics*, opcit

sixties began resulting in a strategy to form alliances with other parties. Graham points out that the Jana Sangh targeted the middle world of the rural towns, the provincial professions, small industry, and country trading and banking while ignoring social groups on the margins and these deficiencies in social strategy explain the comparative lack of success in the initial years.

Graham comments in detail on the succession crisis after the death of S P Mookerjee. Mauli Charan Sharma who succeeded Mookerjee was never accepted by the pro RSS faction in the party, that insisted on retaining the party's distinct links with the RSS and militant Hindu Nationalism . The real power wielders were those in the Central Secretariat under Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, and thus the office of the General Secretary became more important than the President. This alienated groups, attracted to a more democratic and responsive style of operation.

Graham says that the party failed to transcend the limitations of its origin. Its interpretation of Hinduism was both restrictive and exclusive and inspired by the values of Brahmanism rather than the devotional values of popular Hinduism. A simplistic dichotomy between adherents of "popular" and "brahmanical" Hinduism does not reveal any understanding of religious life in modern India. The party could not obtain substantial following in the southern states and its aggressive espousal of Hindi, cow protection, etc did nothing to enable it to transcend the limitations of its origin. In short, the party could not go beyond its "Hindi Hindu Hindustan" vision for India.

Bruce Graham feels that had the Bharatiya Jana Sangh been a moderate Hindu Party, it would have had a chance of coming to power. In coming to this conclusion, Graham seems to believe that such a party could have been the true inheritor of Patel's legacy. He further suggests that "it is well within the bounds of possibility that a moderate, more open and more democratic Jana Sangh could have established itself as the governing party in one or two of the large states of

Northern India and become a significant force in national politics in the 1970s and 1980s.”⁶⁴

Jaffrelot's⁶⁵ work is an important intervention in the academic literature on the RSS and its affiliates. It outlines the birth and evolution of the ideology of Hindu Nationalism, the electoral fortunes of BJS and then the BJP and reflects on the combination of strategies of mobilization that it has employed at various stages of its growth. The work is expansive in the scope of the period covered, in its variety of sources used and data collected from field work in the Madhya Pradesh. Written in the period after the demolition of the Babri Masjid and subsequent assembly elections. The work is rich in terms of political analysis. The epilogue fills in on the developments unto 1996, particularly the electoral fortunes of the BJP. The RSS, BJS (and subsequently BJP) and the VHP are the main actors discussed in what has been described as the Hindu Nationalist Movement.

The author is very sure that the movement has an intensely political project, that of the capture of power. In that sense, he dissects the more apparently apolitical stance of Golwalkar, arguing that Golwalkar desired “supra state” status for the RSS, almost that of the *Dharmaguru*. The RSS tried to settle into its role as collective “Raj Guru” in 1977, the period when Jana Sangh was in power allied with other parties.⁶⁶ However the moves to participate in the electoral arena did not mean a compromise with either the founding principles or its ideological purity, which was attempted by suggestions that the RSS give up its independent existence. This caused a break up of the Janata Experiment.

In the period of the 1960s' given Nehru's strong commitment to Secularism Hindu Nationalists could not gain success. The focus on socio economic issues ensured the marginalization of the movement's agenda in the following period. /

⁶⁴ Ibid, p258

⁶⁵ Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, opcit

⁶⁶ Ibid, p289

brief fling with power in 1970s was apparently due to erosion of Congress legitimacy, followed by aggressive ethno -religious mobilization around the Ramjanmabhumi issue that also propelled the BJP onto national scene as a significant player. The author argues that the success of the movement and its strategies depends on feelings of vulnerability amongst Hindus, the majority population in India. The Hindu Nationalist Movement could see the ruition of its strategies only in the special conditions of the 1980s.

"In 1985 the president of the AIMPLB compared the mobilisation of Muslims in the 'Shah Bano affair' to the Khilafat movement. From the early 1980s, this agitation, added to the conversion of Untouchables to Islam and the development of Sikh separatism, began to engender in ceratin areas of Hinduism a sense of vulnerability comparable to that which had been provoked by the Muslim mobilisation of the 1920s."⁶⁷

Jaffrelot argues that the reversion to militancy in the 1980s had the motive of "making of a Hindu vote" to capture power:the relaunch of the VHP and formation of the Bajrang Dal. Meanwhile BJP also swung from a moderate position as a legatee of the Janata Party to "militant" strategies given the changed political context. The electoral fortunes of the political affiliates form the staple of the book. The BJP, according to Jaffrelot, tries to balance its act of being a parliamentary party in quest of political power by pragmatically adopting populist programmes at times, simultaneously, remaining faithful to the ideology of Hindu Nationalism; choosing moderate and radical strategies according to political compulsions.

However the characterization of this type of politics as Hindu Nationalism does not seem to have been explained. The author clearly spells out that militant Hinduism is a modern construct. He avoids using the term communalism since it has pejorative connotations. That, combined with use of the term Hindu Nationalism, paradoxically repeats the RSS's self projection.

⁶⁷ ibid p338

Women and Political activism

In the recent larger theoretical literature on women's political activism, a number of erstwhile assumptions are being questioned. Apart from the way women 'do' politics, scholars, using approaches influenced by post modernism and post structuralism, see political action "as a struggle over dominant meanings, including dominant ideas of woman, and aiming to change those meanings."⁶⁸ There is, therefore, a trend to move away from 'measuring' women's political participation in terms of their presence in the highest echelons of power, to concentrating on other forms of political action which are of particular importance in the countries of the third world. There are, for instance, women's engagements with the state: to wrest rights for themselves, their struggle against arbitrary policy and authoritarianism, and even asserting their rights as mothers in the public sphere.⁶⁹ Women may, however, mobilise around those activities that are in defence of the status quo, that is, to preserve the existing social order, inimical to women or simply put, 'oppressive'. This issue has caused concern to feminists; and Deniz Kandiyoti⁷⁰ provides a useful way of explaining and analyzing the apparently contradictory reasons for and strategies behind women's political activism in defence of the status quo, in the form of a patriarchal bargain. In her words,

"Different systems may represent different kinds of "patriarchal bargains" for women with different rules of the game and differing strategies for maximising security and optimising their life options."⁷¹

This explains why women act in certain ways that can be seen as contradictory to their long term gender interests. In the absence of more empowering alternatives for women, they get a degree of protection from men. While this notion of patriarchal bargain offers a framework through which women's

⁶⁸ Georgina Waylen, "Analysing women in the politics of the Third World", in Haleh Afshar (ed), *Women and Politics in the Third World*, (London, Routledge:1996). pp7-21, p17

⁶⁹ *ibid*p10. Rohini Hensman's article in the same volume demonstrates this forcefully. Rohini Hensman, "The role of Women in the resistance to political authoritarianism in Latin America and South Asia", *ibid*.

⁷⁰ Deniz Kandiyoti cited in Georgina Waylen, *ibid*, p18

⁷¹ *ibid*.

complicity in patriarchal practices, for example, female support for arranged marriages, foot binding, etc can be explained, it does not adequately explain why women support such practices even when they have alternative options. Women, many a time, continue to choose to identify with and mobilise around issues that are inimical to their own long-term interests as women.

These long term interests of women are identified as "strategic" or "real" interests of all women. According to Maxine Molyneux⁷², these are real interests of women derived from an understanding of women's subordination and the structures that support it; and they require a feminist level of consciousness⁷³ to struggle for them. The women's movement relies on this sort of conscious mobilisation of women around these "strategic gender interests".

"Feminist movements can therefore be seen as movements of women coming together autonomously and self consciously as women, pressing gender based demands. They do not, on the whole, rely on the politicisation of women's social roles."⁷⁴

This again raises the fundamental question about the category "women". Identities are complex; comprising multiple interactions of class, gender, sexuality and in the Indian case, caste, which causes individuals to react in different ways at different times. Women react differently on the basis of a complex interaction of these several identities.

The question that repeatedly confronts feminists is as to why women privilege their other (community/race) identities over their identities as women. In the South Asian context, women have actively participated in religious right wing movements and are also seen as active perpetrators in the escalating political

⁷² Maxine Molyneux cited in Georgina Waylen, *ibid* pp19-20

⁷³ I use Gerda Lerner's definition of feminist consciousness to underline this point. Feminist consciousness consists (1) of the awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group and that, as members of such a group, they have suffered wrongs; (2) the recognition that their condition of subordination is not natural, but societally determined; (3) the development of a sense of sisterhood; (4) the autonomous definition by women of their goals and strategies for changing their condition; and (5) the development of an alternate vision of the future. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 1993), p274

⁷⁴ Molyneux cited in Georgina Waylen, "Analysing women in Third World Politics" in Haleh Afshar (ed) *Women and Politics in the Third World*, opcitp20

conflict in the region.⁷⁵ This question assumes greater relevance as politicised religion invariably gets entangled with gender issues. All right wing movements have elaborate programmes/ theorisation about women's roles and place in the broad social scheme of things. Religious ideology that is seen to legitimise patriarchal structures also plays a role in creation of identities. In the entire range of literature related to women, there is an attempt to go beyond simplistic analysis of "women and politics" or "women and religion" to the paradigm of identity politics.⁷⁶ Amrita Chhachhi⁷⁷, makes a case for a shift in perception by focusing on how and why people respond to and identify with religious/ ethnic identities rather than look at communalism as a form of 'false consciousness' or result of manipulation by State or interested parties. Arguing that men and women possess "multiple" identities, which manifest themselves in response to specific pressures, she rejects the notion of a stagnant monolithic identity that is impervious to history/context.⁷⁸ While some identities may be assumed by people to be a result of self-conscious choice in certain situations, there are no choices available and these identities thus assumed are forced, not necessarily implying coercion but a more general lack of choice. In the situation of riots, mobilisation automatically takes place around community identities and people are identified solely on the basis of their religion.⁷⁹ Women, particularly, have been subject to contrary pressures, and have been variously defined and have

⁷⁵ This 'activism' has caught the attention of scholars and feminists and is the subject of serious academic investigation. For example, Patricia Jeffery and Amrita Basu(ed). *Appropriating Gender Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*, (London, Routledge:1998).

⁷⁶ Zoya Hasan (ed) *Forging Identities Gender, Communities and the State*, (New Delhi, Kali for Women :1994), discusses the creation of Muslim identity, and especially focuses on the complicity of the State in legitimising this process.

⁷⁷ Amrita Chhachhi, "Identity Politics", in Kamala Bhasin, Ritu Menon, Nighat Said Khan(eds), *Against all Odds:Essays on Women, Religion and Development*, (New Delhi, Kali for Women:1994)

⁷⁸ Amrita Chhachhi, "Identity Politics, Secularism and Women:a South Asian Perspective" in Zoya Hasan (ed) *Forging Identities*, opcitpp74-95

⁷⁹ Amrita Chhachhi, "Identity Politics", in Kamala Bhasin, Ritu Menon, Nighat Said Khan(eds), *Against all Odds opcit pp6-7*

redefined themselves as women, members of a religious community or, of a caste group.⁸⁰

However Chhachhi admits that there is much more work to be done as to explain why women choose a communal identity over others and collude in the politics of communal organizations. There are vague answers as to why the assertion of this 'identity of affinity' takes place rather readily than assertion of a 'feminist' identity, which is yet another identity of affinity. She makes a case for interrogating and understanding the place religion has in the lives of women and the spaces that it provides to them against oppressive domesticity. She also makes a plea for feminist praxis to become self-reflexive and investigate feminists' attitudes to religion, to arrive at a clearer understanding of the meaning of religious assertion in the lives of many women.

One of the best documented cases of women's involvement with politicised religion has been in the case of Islamic Republic of Iran. Parvin Paidar⁸¹ argues that gender is situated at the heart of political discourses in Iran. Early feminism that arose in Iran was secular, and feminism was articulated within the ambit of nationalist concerns. Reza Shah and his successor, however, imposed "women's emancipation" through state-sponsored activities, and ended women's autonomy. Despite this, there were no changes in the family laws and in the strong assertions of cultural nationalism, that began from the 1960s, there was a space for Islamic activism for young women who were alienated from state-sponsored feminism. The Islamic State that came to power initiated Islamist

⁸⁰ Chhachhi cites the case of two Muslim women in India, Shehnaaz Sheikh and Shah Bano who had initially privileged their gender identity in demanding rights as divorced women outside the Muslim Personal Law but were forced to foreground their identities as Muslim women in the face of community pressures, and campaign of vilification launched by a few Hindu communal organizations. Clearly, assertion of identities takes place in the context of power relations. Notably assertion of rights by women was perceived as a threat to community identity. Ibid

⁸¹ Parvin Paidar, "Feminism and Islam in Iran", in Deniz Kandiyoti ed. *Gendering the Middle East Emerging Perspectives* (Ib Tauris & Co :1996) pp51-67

Feminism, defining women as mothers and citizens. "It stressed that the establishment of an Islamic nation was dependent on the Islamization of women and constructed the ideal Islamic woman in opposition to Western values of womanhood. The constitution attempted to create harmony between the Islamic family and nation by advocating a set of patriarchal relations to strengthen male control over women in the family, on the one hand, and granting women the right to be active citizens, on the other."⁸²

To counter the programmes of secular feminists, the State also encouraged Islamist Feminism, or feminism based on Islamic principles as against 'western' ideas. However these feminists were marginalised by the hard-liners and now they seek to build alliances with secular feminists. Ziba Mir-Hosseini,⁸³ however, argues that there is a shift in the positions of even scholars like Haleh Afshar and Fatima Mernissi⁸⁴ in their perception of the impact of the Revolution on women. While earlier catastrophic predictions about fundamentalism and its agenda dominated, there are now attempts to arrive at a more sensitive understanding of women's place in Islam after nearly quarter a century of the Revolution. She argues that women's political participation has increased and, with the veil, the women have made their presence felt in the public sphere. Mir-Hosseini argues from the perspective that neither gender roles nor gender rights are fixed, and therefore are and can be negotiated, debated and changed. She further argues that there is a new discourse on women, feminist in tone, emerging from the clerics and Islamic intellectuals wherein women's aspirations are seen not as contrary to Islam. Mir-Hosseini thus argues in favour of a rapprochement between feminism and Islam; the growing realisation that they are not inherently contradictory and Islamic texts can be subjected to feminist readings that can become a source of feminist action.

⁸² *ibid* p58

⁸³ Mir- Hosseini, Ziba, *Islam and Gender The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (New York: I. B. Tauris:2000)

⁸⁴ *ibid* pp 5-6

Claudia Koonz's⁸⁵ pioneering work discusses women's participation with Nazi State's policies. It broke new grounds as it showed female complicity at several levels of society with the Fuhrer's policies, and it pushed female guilt into homes where women colluded as Nazi mothers and homemakers, apart from their more obvious positions as lower level functionaries in the Nazi state. The popular perception remains that the women overwhelmingly supported Hitler and aided his rise to power. Koonz explains that this has to be understood against the backdrop of the problems of the Weimar Republic and post World War I problems. After the First World War, problems of marriage were urgent as a lot of young men died in the war. A number of women who were forced into employment, now longed to return to their homes. There was anxiety about the "New Woman", a product of the emancipation laws ushered in by the Weimar Constitution. Both men and women feared moral decadence. Hitler capitalised on all these fears.

Koonz argues that Nazi Germany did not involve an uncritical appreciation of the category of motherhood. The emphasis on motherhood expanded and contracted according to the needs of the Nazi State. These early women were noted for their militancy and radical espousal of the Nazi cause.

The second phase began when National Socialism came to power and the Nazis began paying attention to women as their constituency. Hitler now needed a different kind of woman - as reproducer of a 'superior' race. This was a logical consequence of the Nazi separation of society into the masculine and feminine spheres and the agenda was primarily to reverse the falling birth rates. A concomitant development was a professionalisation and elevation of the role of the housewife. Women's organizations were purged of their militant outspoken leaders and got bureaucrats recruited by the Nazis as their leaders. In the period after 1940, women were asked to return to work and aid in the war effort. There were propaganda drives to integrate women into the Nazi war machine, though

⁸⁵ Claudia Koonz, "Mothers in the Fatherland Women in Nazi Germany", in Claudia Koonz and Renate Bridenthal (eds) *Being Visible Women in European History*, (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1987), pp445-473.

women continued to remain loyal to their primary responsibility as mothers and bear and rear children.

It is clear from Koonz's analysis that in all the three phases the role of women remained ancillary to Nazi policy formulation, yet crucial to the Nazi cause. Women were part of the horrors of Nazi Germany as mothers, wives and daughters and she uses the terms "heroines" "traditionalists" and "opportunists" for women in the above three phases. The choice of these terms is left unexplained and the use of the term "opportunists" for women in the last stage of Nazi era is rather problematic. There is no comment on the women's lived experience of participation and whether this led to an enhancement of self worth.

Gisela Bock,⁸⁶ in view of the equality versus difference debate questions this simplistic understanding of an uncritical glorification of motherhood and pro natalism. In her understanding, motherhood moved from the private sphere into the direct control of the state, with childbirth and abortions brought under state regulation. The Nazi State wanted children but only racially worthy children. She further goes on to argue that subsidies for bearing children were given to fathers and not even to mothers and, therefore, the specific gender dimension of Nazi birth policy did not consist of pro natalism. A cult of motherhood co- existed with anti natalism and a cult of fatherhood and masculinity. The question of the racial basis is further highlighted in the fact that women of 'inferior' races and 'quality' were denied the right to motherhood and the state's policies were, in fact, based on a denial of motherhood to many women.

⁸⁶ Gisela Bock, "Equality and Difference in National Socialist Racism", in Joan W Scott (ed) *Feminism and History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press:1996).

The issue of racism and elitism is also dealt with by Birgit Rommelspacher⁸⁷ She defines women's participation in Nazism as "radical right wing feminism". She argues that participation in Nazi activities enabled an enhancement of female self worth by an identification with a larger social unit. The individual's range of activity was expanded through an alternative to dependence on the family and a husband; assignments for the nation meant women could transcend their domestic roles. Women experienced their involvement as emancipatory through a new kind of work. The line between the public and the private was redrawn for women. This piece explains to an extent why women eagerly participated in the Nazi agenda, though Rommelspacher's characterisation of this as radical right wing feminism is left unelaborated.

Rebecca Klatch⁸⁸ in her article on the Women of the New Right in America bases her arguments on her extensive interviews with women. She says that all such Right Wing women cannot be treated as homogenous and that, in fact, there are considerable differences in the women of the New Right. The New Right⁸⁹ is itself a motley group of people and organizations that came into prominence in the mid 1970s, working against issues like abortion, gay rights, and pornography. Arguing against viewing right wing women as a monolithic group, she distinguishes between "social conservatives" and "laissez faire conservatives". The social conservatives view society primarily through the lens of religion and give primary importance to the family. In this scheme, moral decadence is looked at with abhorrence and, faith, morality and decency are looked upon as ideals to be revived. Laissez faire conservatives view the world through the lens of liberty and see the individual as an autonomous rational

⁸⁷ Birgit Rommelspacher "Right Wing 'Feminism': a challenge to Feminism as an emancipatory Movement" in Nira Yuval Davis and Pnina Werbner (ed) *Women, Citizenship and Difference*, (London: Zed Books: 1999), pp54-64.

⁸⁸ Rebecca Klatch, "Coalition and Conflict among Women of the New Right" in *Signs*, Vol13 No4 Summer 1989

⁸⁹ The Old Right in America refers to conservative positions adopted on several issues since 1790. Klatch does not elaborate on this any further. She however says that there are social as well as economic issues on which the Right has historically articulated conservative positions. Ibid.

actor. The erosion of liberty, rather than moral decay, is their primary concern. They deny any intervention by the state for purposes of changing the status quo. The social conservatives believe in a complete demarcation of gender roles worshipping biological difference, whereas, for *laissez faire* women, the subservience of women remains unacceptable. An interesting question that she raises is whether women's activism and politics cause a change in their personal lives, and her interviewees come close to this position. In the final analysis, she argues that despite their differences, both these groups can be categorically called anti feminist as they refuse to recognise gender roles as discriminatory, and shy away from collective action in the cause of gender justice.

Women and the Hindu Right

In this segment I consider works that have engaged with the issues brought to the centre-stage as a result of women's activism within the Hindutva movement. Academic work really got off the ground with the visible presence of numerous women in the Ramjanmabhumi movement, and then in the campaign of demolition of the Babri Masjid and women's advocacy and complicity in violence. Tanika Sarkar's early article⁹⁰ one of first to grapple with the theme, showed the constitution of the woman as a communal subject. By focussing on the women of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, she laid bare the communal agenda of this low profile women's affiliate of the Sangh Parivar. It was clear that their subservience to the Hindutva cause enabled a limited emancipation to women from conservative backgrounds.

Sarkar refrained from characterizing them as fundamentalist. Indeed, she offered arguments to the contrary, claiming that a limited amount of 'emancipation' was offered in terms of action and mobility in the public sphere, albeit in the service

⁹⁰ Tanika Sarkar, *Woman as a Communal Subject*, in *EPW*, August 31 1991

of the communal agenda.⁹¹ In a later article⁹² she however, anticipates a reinforced conservatism, which comes close to fundamentalism. That shift relates with the period of the late nineties. This shift is seen because the Samiti, in post Ramjanmabhumi campaigns, withdrew from active work, the number of regular shakhas shrank and women were again confined to the quiet ideological campaigning of earlier, pre-Ramjanmabhoomi times. That this was a changed political context is to be noted. There was now a Right dominated coalition government at the Centre. Sarkar notes that it was in this context that the Samiti was given the task of maintaining the ideological purity of the Sangh tenets. However, in this article what comes across is the absence of agency displayed by the Samiti women themselves in charting their course. Therefore, towards the end of the article, when she hastens to add that the organization does not seem to be directed from above, it goes against the whole tenor of the work. This opens up possibilities of the interrogation of the dynamics of the women's fronts of the Sangh Parivar. The internal dynamics, the tussle with the all-male Sangh, offers immense possibilities for understanding the gender ideology of the Sangh.

In an influential book edited by Sarkar and Butalia, *"Women and the Hindu Right"*,⁹³ the politics of women's involvement with the Right is extensively surveyed. The articles are seen to orient themselves around three themes,

- (i) Women's complicity in communal organizations and in actual acts of violence.
- (ii) The presence of women leaders.

⁹¹ Bacchetta makes a similar point in Paola Bacchetta, "All Our Goddesses are Armed: Religion, Resistance and Revenge in the life of a Militant Nationalist Woman, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 25(4) October-December 1993, pp 38-51

⁹² Tanika Sarkar, Pragmatics of the Hindu Right Politics of Women's Organizations, *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 31, 1999, pp2159-2167.

⁹³ Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia(ed) *Women and the Hindu Right A Collection of Essays* (New Delhi, Kali for Women:1995).

- (iii) The challenge posed to the secular women's movement, assumptions of cross community solidarity of women and implications of identity politics.

There is a discussion⁹⁴ on the receding of the secular women's movement in the period after communal riots, as feminist solidarities, built through patient hard work, are suspended almost immediately, and there is a return to the status quo, and consolidation around communitarian identities. There are practical challenges as well, in that, many issues put forth by the women's organizations have been co-opted by the women's wings of these right wing parties, and sometimes their rough and ready methods of dispensation of justice erode the credibility of the women's movement. Flavia Agnes⁹⁵, elsewhere makes the point that the Indian women's movement must be self reflective and consciously adopt "secularism" as an intrinsic principle of the movement. The Indian Women's movement being invariably led by Hindu middle class women had their cultural expressions for example, Kali, etc adopted as symbols in the movement to the neglect of cultural idioms of other communities, alienating a number of minority women. She points out that in moments of riots, women are forced to identify with their community interest.⁹⁶

The question of the women of the "other" community assumes critical significance in riots and riot like situations, as women are treated as symbols of community honour, the instrument of rape being used to demonstrate the inability of men to 'protect' their women as well as prove the machismo and virility of the rapists themselves. Women's bodies are seen as sites of community struggle. Purshottam Agarwal's article⁹⁷ in the same volume makes this point very effectively.

⁹⁴ Sikata Bannerjee, "Hindu nationalism and the Construction of women" and, Teesta Setalvad, "The Woman Shiv Sainik and her Sister Swayamsevika", *ibid*

⁹⁵ Flavia Agnes, "Redining the Agenda of the Women's Movement Within a Secular Framework", J. McGuire, P. Reeves, and H Brasted, *Politics of Violence From Ayodhya to Behrampada*, *opcit*, pp95-109

⁹⁷ Purshottam Agarwal, "Savarkar, Surat and Draupadi *Legitimising Rape as a Political Weapon.*", in Sarkar and Butalia (ed) , *Women and the Hindu Right*, *opcit*

Amrita Basu⁹⁸ focuses on three women leaders projected by Hindutva, Vijayraje Scindia, Sadhvi Rithambhara and Uma Bharati, and the issues foregrounded by their presence in the movement. She argues that they seek to advance their personal agendas through their participation, while for Hindutva movement, their presence aids the movement's electoral fortunes, and demonstrates the ubiquitous appeal of the movement.

The book set out with an ambitious agenda,

"We needed to identify the social bases of the women's contingent, the domestic ideology and gender notions as well as the larger social interests with which they have been mobilised, the changing forms of their mobilisation and activism over time and space; the directions into which such activism was going to lead both in terms of gender politics and the politics of the Hindu Right in general."⁹⁹

The book is a commendable contribution but it does not really live up to the ambitious agenda that it had set out for itself. A number of these questions, particularly those about the social bases and changing forms of mobilisation, are hardly commented upon. However the book retains its significance as being one of the first in the field.

Paola Bacchetta¹⁰⁰, in a significant article argues that women's activism is supported by a specifically Hindu nationalist discourse. It is recognised that the Sangh's ideology leaves little space for women actors to exist and, therefore, women have crafted their own understanding of the Hindu nation, to be able to relate to it. She draws from the published works of the Sangh and the Samiti. Though for the Sangh she uses only Golwalkar's texts, for the Samiti she uses more recent publications.

⁹⁸ Amrita Basu, "Feminism Inverted The Gendered Imagery and Real Women of Hindu Nationalism, in Sarkar and Butalia, *ibid*

⁹⁹ *ibid*, introduction

¹⁰⁰ Paola Bacchetta, "Hindu Nationalist women as Ideologues" in Kumari Jayawardane and Malathi de Alwis (ed.) *Embodied Violence Communalising Women's Sexuality in South Asia*, (New Delhi, Kali for Women: 1996)

In the story of the Hindu nation, Hindu disunity, Muslim invasions and British colonisation are discussed chronologically in the Sangh's discourse. The Samiti, in its version, makes women visible and central. The 'fall' of the position of Hindu women in terms of extreme forms of gender oppression, for example, sati, purdah, etc. is counterposed to her glory in the earlier periods. In some places, it departs from the Sangh's discourse, for example in ascribing the fall in the status of women to inter-marriage among Aryans and non-Aryans. The Sangh, for obvious reasons, cannot accept the "Aryan as invader" thesis. Similarly in the Sangh's discourse the women are absent while for the Samiti the "Hindu People" are a bi-gendered entity.

Bacchetta argues that Hindu nationalist women have managed to create a space for themselves that was never available to Italian and German fascist women, primarily due to their ability to draw from a wider range of representations of femininity in the Hindu tradition. Nonetheless what comes out clearly from her own argument is that women present a more conservative and orthodox line on issues as caste and social injustices. This is so, because the constituency of women does not come from as wide a background as that of the Sangh.

This makes me wonder if Tanika Sarkar's argument about women in the Samiti retaining the task of ideological purity of the Sangh's tenets has a significant logic. If the Sangh, through its various affiliates tries to create a mass base, is it the women who are to preserve and nurture brahmanical and pure tradition?

If that is so, since the most important programme of the Sangh is "cultural-ideological", is the message for women, then, just to bask in the glories of ancient womanhood, and forget gender exploitation in the present?

Chapter one

Sangh purushon ka sangathan hee hai* (The Sangh is a *sangathan of men*)

The chapter traces the founding of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, the first and the oldest affiliate of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in 1936. I situate the birth of the Samiti within the social and political milieu of the Maharashtra region particularly commenting on the politics of women's involvement with militant Hinduism. The Samiti claims to be an independent organization. But it is founded on the political logic of Hindutva. Therefore, its immediate context is provided by the politics of the Sangh.

In the opening segment of this chapter, I discuss the evolution of the Sangh using primarily archival sources. The significance of archival records in reconstructing the early history of the Sangh has not been explored. Even works that extensively focus on the early history of the Sangh have not tapped into this immensely rich reserve of data.¹⁰¹ This segment centres around Sangh's history in the area presently called Maharashtra (includes parts of erstwhile Central provinces, Berar and Bombay presidency). In the second segment of this chapter, I discuss the genesis of the Samiti.

The chapter is marked by a certain unconventionality. While the first segment relies heavily on colonial records, the second segment relies primarily on organizational literature. Despite this disparity, I hope to align the insights obtained by the different sources to reconstruct the story.

The RSS: Early years

The arms of the colonial information gathering mechanism stretched far and wide. The general aura of secrecy that surrounds the Sangh, caught the

* Interview with RSS pracharak, VG Deshpande, Thane, 23rd May, 2003

¹⁰¹ For instance, C Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement opcit*, Basu et al *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags opcit*, Chetan Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism, opcit*

administration's eye and therefore information began to be collected on the Sangh. However, in the story that I seek to reconstruct, there are gaps, as I rely on archival records primarily to supplement the excellent literature that already exists on the Sangh.¹⁰² This segment is conceptualised as a peek into the early history of the Sangh primarily through the colonial lens.

An Intelligence report¹⁰³ describes the RSS thus:

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (Hindu Volunteer Corps), The Hindu counterpart of the Khaksar Movement. Founded by Hedgewar (secretary of the All India Hindu Mahasabha (1926-31)). In 1927 the corps was reorganised in the four Marathi Speaking districts of the Central provinces by Dr Moonje, the Hindu Mahasabha leader to defend the Hindus during communal outbreaks. In 1932 it was accorded official recognition by the All India Hindu Mahasabha and became an all India organization. At the end of the same year the CP government debarred government servants from joining or taking part in the activities of the Sangh.¹⁰⁴

The major observations refer to its communal nature, ties with the Hindu Mahasabha as well as to its all India aspirations. The connection with Hindu Mahasabha is very clearly noted in this account. According to this account, Hedgewar was the secretary of the All India Hindu Mahasabha (hereafter AIHM) for five years. The prominent Mahasabha leader, BS Moonje, closely monitored the organization's growth and the organization was also given official recognition by the Hindu Mahasabha. Significantly, Moonje and Hedgewar were instrumental in inaugurating a Nagpur branch of the Hindu Mahasabha in protest against the

¹⁰² Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, Basu et al *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, Chetan Bhatt *Hindu Nationalism*, TB Hansen *The Saffron Wave*, W Anderson and S D Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron*, *opcit*

¹⁰³ A note on the organization, aims etc of the RSS in Home Political Department, 1942 File no. 28/8, National Archives of India (hereafter NAI)

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*. Significantly the colonial records do not mention the names of the other four founders- BS Moonje, Babarao Savarkar, BB Thalkar and LV Paranjpe. Perhaps the obliteration of the Mahasabha connection was begun much earlier and the cult of personality around Hedgewar began developing. This is evident from the statement of Ram Rakha Mal an important member of the RSS Punjab, recorded in the above file, "Doctor worked in Congress and AIHM to conclude only the solidarity in the Hindu community could deliver goods to India. It is said that he was a staunch Hindu who even went to the length of burning a mosque in a spirit of vengeance. He started a branch at Nagpur in the first instance with his family members as sewaks.

restrictions on music in front of mosques.¹⁰⁵ However, it is not very clear whether its becoming an all India organization meant it expanded beyond the Central Provinces or that its expansion had already begun.¹⁰⁶ That this organization was founded to be active in riot/ riot like situations is very clear. In fact, one academic account comments extensively on the first public intervention of the RSS in the Nagpur riot in 1927 where the Hindus could emerge as "equals" in the face of Muslim aggression, the main role in defending Hindus played by the RSS.¹⁰⁷ A newspaper report is important in this context. It argued that showing respect for Muslim feelings by not playing music before mosques was interpreted as a sign of weakness. Dr Moonje's resistance in Nagpur was lauded as a show of strength and as a sign of resisting Muslim aggression.¹⁰⁸

There is a consensus about the fact that the RSS arose in the communally charged atmosphere of the post Non cooperation movement.¹⁰⁹ Jaffrelot particularly refers to the feelings of vulnerability created in Hedgewar and among certain Hindu circles despite the scanty numbers of Muslims in Nagpur.¹¹⁰ A significant variation on the theme of the founding of the RSS is reading it in terms of challenges from lower caste assertion. This is suggested by Basu et al, though Bhatt develops this further.¹¹¹ The strength of the non Brahmin movement and their political weight in the legislatures caused anxiety in the Brahmin circles, and the Mahasabha leaders from the Poona area are said to have followed strategies of cooperation with the colonial state to protect Brahmin interests in the public services. Dalits were also asserting themselves

¹⁰⁵ C Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, opcit, p117

¹⁰⁶ Basu et al, makes the point that it was decided at this session to expand RSS activities throughout India. This then points out that at least in the initial stages the Mahasabha had a commanding influence in deciding the political trajectory of the RSS. Basu et al, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, opcit, p23

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*, pp18-20.

¹⁰⁸ Karamvir, 27th January, 1928, *Report on the Native Newspapers in Bombay Presidency*, January –July 1928, Maharashtra State Archives(hereafter MSA)

¹⁰⁹ Walter Anderson. and S.D Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron*, opcit pp33-34. Basu, et al, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, opcit p10, C Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, opcit, p117, Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, opcit p87

¹¹⁰ C Jaffrelot *The Hindu nationalist Movement in India*, opcit, p 34

¹¹¹ Basu et al, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, opcit p10, C Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, opcit p117

under B K Ambedkar and there was a Depressed Classes Conference in Nagpur in 1920. The threat to Brahmin political and caste hegemony was palpable.¹¹²

In the RSS accounts of its origins, we find this:

“1925 ki vijayadashami par sangh sthanapna ke samay bhi Dr Hedgewar ji ka uddeshaya rashtriya swadheenta hi tha.”¹¹³(When Dr Hedgewar launched the Sangh on the Vijayadshami (Dussehra) of 1925, the aim was national independence)

Significantly this booklet was a part of the *Rashtra Jagran Abhiyan* of 2000. This was an expansion cum mobilisation drive launched by the RSS and media products, books, cassettes, posters, etc about the RSS and its affiliates were distributed. This was almost the first attempt by the RSS to openly cultivate public opinion. In this account, the RSS is said to have laboured in the Civil Disobedience, Quit India movement etc and the sacrifices of *swayamsevaks* are lauded. This is a complete and blatant inversion of history and the RSS has obviously invented this past to keep its image as the “true nationalist” organization in the country. Hansen notes in the context of a similar RSS publication that this represents, RSS’ “quest for recognition” –by the Indian elite, the West and others-which remains a driving force among the provincial, vernacular-speaking intellectuals who have always provided the backbone of the movement.¹¹⁴ The RSS as an organization, however, was explicitly kept aloof from any anti imperialist movement launched by nationalists, and in fact it was Hedgewar the founder, who had taken a decision in the initial period.¹¹⁵

The earliest glimpse of the founder’s vision is a rare abstract of his speech made at Nagpur during the Dussehra celebrations of 1932,

“Hindustan is the country of the Hindus and they are the only persons to stay and rule India, and added that no two communities

¹¹² C Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, opcit pp116-117

¹¹³ *Rashtriya Andolan aur Sangh*, (New Delhi, Suruchi Prakashan: 2000), p1

¹¹⁴ Hansen *The Saffron Wave*, opcit, p87

¹¹⁵ C Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, opcit pp115-116, Basu et al, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*. opcit, pp21-22

could rule a nation." He cited the instance of Germany Japan and England who were of one blood "the aim of the Sangh is to encourage the spirit of the youth and develop Hindu culture".¹¹⁶

The founder's speech clearly draws from militant xenophobic Hindutva which had gained considerable currency by this time. In many academic works, the 1920s are seen as the period of the crystallization of the currents of militant Hindu nationalism. Its organizational expression can be seen in the renewed vigor of the Hindu Mahasabha and the foundation of the RSS.¹¹⁷ In fact it is clear that there is a continuity between the views of the founder and the principal ideologue and second *Sanghchalak*, M S Golwalkar, as is revealed from an excerpt of a speech given by Golwalkar in Nagpur on 26th April 1942,

Sangh was established for creating a body of marshal minded Hindu elements against Islam for retaliating the Muslim aggression for time being but for completely extirpating that disease. They had to organise and awaken the fighting classes who should not care for their wives and children like Rajputs and if this was achieved they were sure to succeed in the achievement of their goal. Weak form of nationalism was no good and those who exploit this form of nationalism should be considered as an enemy and whipped. He went a step further and said that whoever, severing traditional connections, joined hands with the enemies should be killed even if he were their own brother because the real brother was he who followed and stuck fast to their principles. Democracy was useless. Dictatorships like those of Germany, Japan and Italy should be their ideal.¹¹⁸

These views can be aligned with those of someone described as "a keen madras worker"¹¹⁹ who declares the aims of the RSS as helping

"our nation, society, culture and land to attain the position of highest glory. Unless we meet, play, talk and think together daily and feel for each other as a brother from North to South(sic), the idea of unity is a dream."¹²⁰

The *Sangathan* principle in its most innocent form is reflected in the above words. It has to be noted that that this comes from beyond the traditional base

¹¹⁶ RSS in Home Special Department, 1943. File no 822 (iii) (MSA)

¹¹⁷ C Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, opcit, p100

¹¹⁸ RSS in Home Special Department, 1940-41. File no. 822(ii) (MSA). I comment on the changed political context in the following pages.

¹¹⁹ ibid

¹²⁰ ibid. The records provide no context of this statement.

of RSS, that is from the South. Another reason could be that this region has no long standing tradition of animosity vis a vis the Muslims. The aim is, simply to "unite" different parts of the country into a vision of the Hindu Rashtra. It is evident that the leaders talk in the language of war and denial of personhood to all enemies, whereas the ordinary *swayamsevaks* see their work as a quiet "cultural" task of instilling unity among its diverse peoples. That this focus on the unity of all Hindus was ultimately meant to be used against the Muslims, is however, clear.

A 1941 report that described the RSS as a "pan Hindu Boy Scout movement with physical training, discipline and public service as its objects",¹²¹ was dismissed by the colonial authorities, as there were already sufficient hints of the "long term objectives" of the RSS. This phrase recurs in the records and the authorities clearly did not accept RSS's self representation.¹²² The Buldana District Deputy Commissioner¹²³ clearly records that he was convinced that Sangh did not want a conflict with the Government or even to oppose it but it was conserving its power for two purposes:

- "(1) to seize power, if need be by violence, in the event of anarchy in the country,
- (2) to defeat the Muslim power in the event of a civil war or at least to give a threat to the Muslim organization to avert the possibility of a civil war."¹²⁴

Certain features noted in the records are that of its being : anti muslim,¹²⁵ fascist¹²⁶ with a marked emphasis on violence¹²⁷ and of being the Hindu answer

¹²¹ A note on the organization, aims etc of the RSS in 1942, File no. 28/8, opcit

¹²² ibid.

¹²³ "Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh Organization and Development in Each District of C.P. and Berar at the End of the Year 1942" in RSS 1940-41. File no 822(ii)1940-41,p43

¹²⁴ ibid p43

¹²⁵ RSS, 1940-41, File No.822(ii), pp 30 ,75

¹²⁷ RSS 1940-41 File No 822(ii) The non violent strategy was particularly deplored by its leaders like BSMoonje. There was a huge cache of arms(spears, battle axes etc) that was discovered from the houses of RSS sympathisers.

to Khaksar movement¹²⁸. It has to be noted that there are repeated references to their martial spirit, military training, build up of physiques and character and formation of a strong and disciplined militia.

Military training or militant mobilization ?

Significantly, the attempts to impart compulsory military training, rifle practice and physical to Hindu youth were high on the agenda of Mahasabha leaders like B S Moonje and M S Aney. Chetan Bhatt¹²⁹ notes the significance of militarization in the agenda of Savarkar in the period just prior to the war. He cites as evidence Savarkar's demands for the same in 1938 submitted by the AIHM for compulsory military training for all Hindus in high schools and colleges. There were pressures on schools to initiate rifle clubs all over India. Bhatt points out the reasons for this in the context of the typical militaristic mood of the war period. However, evidence exists that this plan predates even the militant situations of the war period. A bill demanding those inputs was mooted as early as 1928, though it was refused by the Viceroy even to be moved in the Legislative Assembly,¹³⁰ though subsequently there were efforts to establish the Bhonsle Military School. Moonje started Provincial Rifles Association of CP and Berar to provide military training to the Hindu youth.¹³¹ Moonje was a member of the Mahasabha's "Hindu Militarization Boards" and founded the Central Hindu Military Education Society in Nasik, north western Maharashtra in 1935. The Bhonsle Military School was eventually established in 1937 and now exists as

¹²⁸ The comparison with the Khaksars is interesting and can be interrogated closely to understand how communal movements and organizations feed into each other. The Khaksars were founded among Punjab Muslims in 1931 by Inayatullah Khan Mashriqi, Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, (New Delhi, Macmillan India: 1983) p357

¹²⁹ C Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, opcit, p103

¹³⁰ Report in Mahratta dated 29th January 1928, *Report on Native Newspapers*, (MSA) January to June 1928. The same decision was deplored by another paper Swadhrama, 26th January, 1928, ibid

¹³¹ "Mahasabha Resolution on Need for Military Training" Extract from resolutions passed at the Working Committee meeting at Nasik, 28-29 May 1938. BS Moonje Papers, File No 47 [NMM] Basudev Chatterji (ed), *Towards Freedom Documents on the Movement for Independence in India 1938 Part I*, (New Delhi: ICHR / OUP: 1999) p 265

the Bhonsle Military Academy.¹³²Significantly, the school had the blessings of the Viceroy Linlithgow, though there were concerns among other colonial officials due to its exclusionist character.¹³³

The exaggerated emphasis on military training can be understood only if we realize that militant Hindutva operated with the *Kshatriya* notion of masculinity. There was an exaggerated emphasis on the manliness of Hindus to counter the colonial charge of femininity and with concerns about producing a strong and healthy race. Gyanendra Pandey writes that the urge to militancy is a marked feature of the Hindutva discourse.¹³⁴

There was a considerable emphasis on using the situations of the war to emphasise military training of Hindus and they were encouraged to join the army, navy and air force and train themselves in the art of modern warfare. This was in the context of an extreme paranoia about threats from Muslims and a pan Islamic conspiracy. That this was an article of faith among the Sangh leaders can be garnered from the excerpts of speeches delivered at Sangh meetings.¹³⁵

Subsequently, by the start of the Second World War the idea of military training really caught on as can be discerned from the local press reports. These demands were made on the grounds of aiding the British and filling up the ranks of the army.¹³⁶ The war years were of tremendous tumult. In the early 1940s there was the formation of the civic guards in order to maintain peace and here the RSS *swayamsevaks* were coveted for they were disciplined and militarily trained. An earlier colonial order requiring forfeiture of membership of any

¹³² Bhatt, opcit,p122

¹³³ "Zetland's concern Over Bhonsala Military School 43 A Extract from Zetland to Linlithgow, 10 May 1938 Zetland Papers, Microfilm Reel No.142 (NMML) Basudev Chatterji (ed), *Toward. Freedom Part I*, opcit,p 265

¹³⁴ Gyanendra Pandey, "Which of us are Hindus?", in Gyanendra Pandey(ed) *Hindus and Others: the Question of Identity in India Today* (New Delhi, Viking Penguin:1993) p258. He further points out that Gandhian politics with its emphasis on non violence and privileging of femininity over masculinity was abhorred by the militant Hindu theorists, p264

¹³⁵ "RSS Organization and Development in Each District of C.P. and Berar" , in RSS 1940-41, File No822(ii), opcit, p84 Speech by Jayant Lele of Lucknow presented a picture of pan Islamic conspiracy and a spectre of half the world being converted to Islam.

¹³⁶ Report in Navayug dated 13th September 1938, *Report on Native Newspapers*, opcit

organization on joining the Civic Guards was modified to accommodate RSS members, the condition now being only that of owing primary allegiance to the British, to which the RSS consented. The RSS members but not allowed continued participation in their own organizations on a day to day basis.¹³⁷

Here I would like to argue that there was a definitive increase in the number of paramilitary organizations and a renewed emphasis on voluntary organizations from the 1930s, which multiplied in the next decade.¹³⁸ The political activity of these times resounded with what has been called the "Volunteer Movement".¹³⁹ The fact that this theme had been prepared in the period prior to the war, tentatively suggests that the prospect of the war was not the only reason for its genesis. There is not enough research on how this 'movement' appeared on the national horizon. I first make some general comments drawing upon the colonial reports. The Congress and the Muslim League were recognised as the strongest organizations in terms of numbers of their contingent, though the Muslim League's organization was regarded as more disciplined and more firmly under central control. The United Provinces were perceived as the stronghold of both the Congress and the Muslim League. The most important feature was the focus on military and para -military training. It was noted that the volunteers wore distinct uniforms, carried *lathis* and had their own flags. Another feature of significance was the "training camp". There is no specific mention of the functions of the volunteers except that they kept order at meetings and were used for picketing. The government characterised the activities of these volunteer bodies as uncoordinated and their growth as sporadic. Though the government would not see them as any "threat of country

¹³⁷ RSS question about volunteer organizations In Home Special Department 1940, File no 382 (MSA).

¹³⁸ This is elaborated upon in a newspaper article, the paper being *Muslim*, Excerpt in RSS in Home Department Special, 1943, File No. 822(iii)(MSA)

¹³⁹ Notes on Volunteer Movement in the Provinces Extract from Home Department's notes on Voluntary Movement in India, part I and II, undated, July / August, and December 1938. Government of India, Home Department, Political Section, File no: 4/2/39-Poll. [NAI] Basudev Chatterji (ed), *Towards Freedom Documents on the Movement for Independence in India 1938 Part II*, (New Delhi: ICHR / OUP: 1999), pp 1103-1113. The following discussion, unless otherwise stated, is exclusively based on these reports.

wide marshaling of nationalist forces , particularly, because the movement aroused little interest in Punjab, Bengal and Madras, yet it insisted on keeping a close watch. However it is acknowledged that the idea had really caught on in UP, Bombay and CP. It is significant to note that the colonial records have identified volunteer bodies across the whole spectrum of political activity- "Congress, Muslim League, Hindu/ communal, Muslim communal organizations, Communist, Socialist and Labour, Students, *Zamindars*, Scouts and Revolutionary"-with representative organizations of each of these political trends. Thus there were sufficient indications of the volunteer movement having emerged as a feature of all political activity.

There are considerable instances of women mobilizing as well with formation of women's fronts. The Stree Sevika Dals and the Rashtriya Stree Sabha had considerable following. Lady Linlithgow organized the Women's Volunteer Service with explicit instructions that the uniform could not resemble a military uniform.¹⁴⁰The war climate had a far ranging effect and even the imperialist women insisted on learning rifle shooting. There were moves to form a women's organization under the District War Committee but it was training in rifle shooting that was uppermost on the agenda. The war created in women desires to learn to use firearms though this permission was denied.¹⁴¹

Though the information in the records about these organizations is rather sketchy it can be concluded with a fair degree of certainty that paramilitary training and voluntary organizations were a part of the general political spectrum.

Peculiarly there is no significance accorded to the fact that the Congress volunteer corps with their agenda of rifle training and physical culture had the

¹⁴⁰ *Women's Volunteer Service* , in Home Political Department 1942. File No. 28/4.(NAI)

¹⁴¹ *Women's Organization under the District War Committee*, in Home Police Department 1940 File No. 21/58.(NAI)

blessings of the non violent Congress.¹⁴² Sumit Sarkar¹⁴³ notes the growth of paramilitary communalist bodies as an “omnious” development, while Hansen notes the popularity of uniformed corps all over India by the beginning of the 20th century¹⁴⁴. The whole country was pulsating with political activity of different kinds. There were front organizations among almost all the major political parties and these operated as armed militia or social service wings of the respective parties. This sort of volunteer activity had begun much earlier. The Home Rule Movement in Bombay offers us the first glimpse of the volunteer model. There are, therefore, forerunners of the volunteer model of the 1930s. The Seva Samiti,¹⁴⁵ described as essentially a ‘Hindu’ organization was formed in 1918 to popularise the ideals of social service. It was controlled by the Malviya faction and became a political weapon in its hands. The agenda was described as the uplift of people and physical culture, though it was reported to advance “communal” and anti government views. The Home Rule Volunteer Corps¹⁴⁶ was formed in 1917 to keep order at political meetings and processions. Significantly, they wore uniforms and the government viewed them merely as the “riff raff” of the Home Rule League and as youths without employment. They were unpaid and aspired to a little status by virtue of their participation. One of the earliest known voluntary organizations that had considerable influence was the Hindustani Seva Dal founded by Dr Hardikar in 1923. It assisted the Congress and was particularly dominant in the Bombay Presidency. Its object was to train people for national service and raise the standards of physique of the volunteers by training them in physical exercises. This was revived in the 1930s and sought recognition from the Congress as its official volunteer body. It

¹⁴² There were, however also peace brigades formed primarily with a view to maintain communal harmony. These were modelled on the Red Shirts. Gandhi took special interest in organising them.

¹⁴³ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, opcitp357

¹⁴⁴ Hansen, writes that after 1920, uniforms, drills and paramilitary schemes began to proliferate. The Hindu Mahasabha, Khaksars used uniforms and the volunteers in the Congress wore uniforms, as did the volunteer organization, the Rashtriya Seva Dal. Hansen, *the Saffron Wave*, opcit, p92

¹⁴⁵ *Seva Samiti*, Home Political Department. 1941 File no. 74/2 (NAI)

¹⁴⁶ *List of Political and quasi political and religious associations, societies and sabhas, etc for Bombay Presidency year ending 30th June 1920*, Home Special Department. 1921 File no. 355(74) (MSA)

is to be marked that there is a remarkable similarity in the descriptions offered of the volunteer model in the first quarter of the twentieth century and their descriptions in 1938.

Volunteer activity in Bombay and Central Provinces¹⁴⁷

Bombay saw a plethora of voluntary organizations in this period. A marked feature of the volunteer activity here was the presence of women as well as exclusive women's organizations. Rashtra Seva Dal founded in Poona in 1936 had a significant presence in Bombay. Bombay city had a Bombay Seva Dal founded in 1938 with fifty women out of a total one hundred and fifty volunteers. The Gandhi Seva Sangh was a purely female organization founded in 1934. Bombay also had a Bombay Students Union whose objective was to organise students. The Bombay Girni Kamgar Union was in existence since 1928, had fifty members and its function was to collect funds and picket during strikes. The Congress Volunteer Corps naturally had considerable support. In the Central Provinces, the Congress Volunteer Corps did not make much headway though there were some organizations providing training in physical culture.¹⁴⁸

The RSS was particularly active in the Bombay Presidency and had twenty-nine branches and eleven centres in Bombay city alone.¹⁴⁹ It was also recorded that the largest collections for the RSS were made in Bombay, followed by Delhi and then Lahore.¹⁵⁰ The Home member of Bombay in fact suggested a scheme of military training to satisfy the "urges of the youth" and counteract the purely communal influence of organizations like the RSS.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ Notes on Volunteer Movement in the Provinces Extract from Home Department's notes on Voluntary Movement in India, part I and II, undated. in Basudev Chatterji (ed), *Towards Freedom*, opcit.

¹⁴⁸ ibid

¹⁴⁹ ibid

¹⁵⁰ "RSS Organization and Development in Each District of CP and Berar at the end of the Year 1942", in RSS File no.822(ii), opcit

¹⁵¹ Notes on Volunteer Movement in the Provinces Extract from Home Department's notes on Voluntary Movement in India, part I and II, undated in Basudev Chatterji (ed), *Towards Freedom*, opcit

It can be seen that Bombay was the hotbed of volunteer activity with a number of organizations being founded and flourishing exclusively in Bombay. The Hindu Rashtra Dal was a militant body explicitly devoted to Savarkarvad with its headquarters in Bombay. ND Apte was its supreme commander and it had a following of two hundred in the city.¹⁵² The Rashtriya Seva Dals were involved in welfare activities. There are claims that the Congress Seva Dals were formed to counter the RSS propaganda and cut into their traditional bases.¹⁵³ There was also the formation of the Bhim Kranti Dal by Ambedakrites in Mumbai. This sort of activity got an impetus during the period of the Second World War and the extremely volatile situation prevailing in the period.

Of considerable importance was the cult of physical culture promoted by the RSS. The RSS simultaneously drew from a number of pre existing nationalist traditions as well as initiated a marked departure from a number of established political practices. Christophe Jaffrelot christens the *shakhas* as "ideological akharas"¹⁵⁴. There were a number of organizations that seem to have drawn from *akhara* of the Bengali revolutionary secret societies to the Congress *prabhat pheris* but what distinguished the RSS, Jaffrelot tells us, was its, "ideological character and style of physical exercise" The fact was that going to the *akhara* was already a part of the tradition of upper caste maharashtrian males, who saw in the *shakha* the additional possibilities of cultivating the mind. Many (and this includes guardians) were attracted by the games and the chance for physical exercise, and Jaffrelot draws this conclusion from a number of oral testimonies of swayamsevaks.¹⁵⁵ Interestingly a similar observation is made in the colonial records.¹⁵⁶ Another cause of appeal to the youth was identified as "the secrecy

¹⁵² *Activities of Hindu Rashtra Dal* in Home Department, 1943-45 Special File no 382 (MSA)

¹⁵³ I owe this opinion to Mr Mahajan, husband of a Sevika I interviewed in December 2003 in Dombivli, Thane

¹⁵⁴ Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, opcit, p35

¹⁵⁵ *ibid*, pp36-40 and p68

¹⁵⁶ "RSS Organization and Development in Each District of CP and Berar at the end of the Year 1942", in RSS File no.822(ii), opcit

surrounding its activities"¹⁵⁷The RSS apparently owed its appeal to youthful "swash -buckling, flag waving" instincts.¹⁵⁸Though the RSS ideally begins work with adolescents, in the initial phases, it sought recruits among the youth so that they could proselytise through school and university campuses.

In the colonial records, there is a plethora of views that are enlisted about the aims of the organization. There was much confusion due to its secrecy. The RSS has on principle avoided documentation,¹⁵⁹ and one of the earliest acts on becoming a member was to take an oath of secrecy. This fact has been commented upon in the archival records as well and remains a characteristic feature of the Sangh. The police were sometimes denied entry to its training sessions and there is one instance of a plain-clothes policeman being assaulted on his insistence to witness the shakhas.¹⁶⁰ That this caused considerable chagrin to the local authorities also comes across in the records. There is no mention of the action taken, however, to punish the RSS for its defiance and impunity. There are repeated references to the potentially dangerous nature of the organization, particularly as the government saw the growth of this trained militia under its very noses and harboured fears of its being used against them. The government was watchful of its activities and was eventually assured that they were not anti colonial in the least sense. Therefore, despite repeated pleas from local authorities it was never proscribed.¹⁶¹There were real possibilities of some RSS members getting carried away with the mood of the times to drive out the British.¹⁶² However the organization and the leaders firmly reined in the enthusiasm of the volunteers from giving their activities any anti British accent

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.* Students were said to have been attracted by this in Tirora.

¹⁵⁸ RSS, Home Special Department, 1940-41, File no 822(ii), (MSA)

¹⁶⁰ *ibid*

¹⁶¹ This is a point also made by Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, opcit, p115. There are records of NG Abhyankar, a symapathiser of the RSS being in constant touch with the British assuring them of RSS' s support in the war effort. RSS in Home Special Department 1943. File no 822(iii), opcit. I comment on the political situation fully in the following pages.

¹⁶² This was the content of the speeches made in Saugor(CP) RSS Organization and Development in Each District of CP and Berar at the end of the Year 1942", in RSS File no.822(ii), opcit

and kept them on the immediate task of *sangathan* instead of dissipating their energy in fighting the British. Therefore there were continuous injunctions to stay away from politics (naturally meaning nationalist politics) and it is also stated that these injunctions were observed and not many took part in the 1942 congress movement.¹⁶³ It has to be noted that the organization as a whole always remained aloof from nationalist activity. Basu, et al, significantly note that RSS did not want to make an early demonstrative break with the nationalist movement and therefore its members were allowed individually to participate in the Civil Disobedience movement.¹⁶⁴ It has to be noted that while there were at least some individual instances of participation in the Civil Disobedience movement, by the 1940s the break was complete. It appears that the Sangh had clearly excluded itself from Congress activities and the crystallization of Sangh identity and programme was complete. Perhaps it was for this reason that Golwalkar denied permission to swayamsevaks to attend guerilla warfare tactics at the Bhonsle Military school at Nasik, despite Moonje's invitation.¹⁶⁵ The fact that Moonje had been one of the earliest supporters of the RSS as well as Hedgewar's mentor is well known. Military training was his pet project. Golwalkar's decision to decline this invitation was to assert the ideological autonomy of the RSS. The RSS presumably now saw a larger more independent role for itself. This tension with the Mahasabha is also a subject of comments in the records. The Mahasabha leaders were the early nurturers of the RSS. They provided the RSS with support and funds. The expansion of *shakhas* was enabled due to building upon Mahasabha connections.¹⁶⁶

The affiliation with Hindu Mahasabha is continuously denied, though the links are commented upon in great detail by the records. The RSS was accorded

¹⁶³ *ibid.*(exception being Saugor)

¹⁶⁴ Basu et al, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, opcit, p22. The non involvement of the RSS in the mainstream nationalist movement has been commented upon by a number of academic works. Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, opcit, p62 Jaffrelot notes that RSS focuses on long term programmes rather than immediate capture of the State. Similarly Basu et al notes the RSSs aloofness from all nationalist agitations in the tumultuous decades of the 1940s, pp29-30

¹⁶⁵ RSS in 1940-41 file no 822(ii), opcit

¹⁶⁶ Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, opcit pp73-74

recognition by Mahasabha in 1932. RSS volunteers helped to keep order at the Mahasabha annual session in Nagpur in 1938. It has to be noted that they did so individually without involving the organization.¹⁶⁷ Basu, et al, note that the relations of the RSS with the Mahasabha kept fluctuating but during the 1930s they were fruitful, with the Mahasabha taking a special interest in the expansion of the RSS.¹⁶⁸ That members floated from one organization to another is certain, the famous example being that of Nathuram Godse, who was alienated from the RSS and joined the Mahasabha. The colonial records also mention that on the death of Dr Hedgewar, Savarkar asked all members of the Hindu Mahasabha to observe mourning.¹⁶⁹ These links with the Mahasabha proved to be of immense importance in the spread of the RSS beyond Maharashtra and the Central Provinces. The records on the activities of the RSS also simultaneously document the Mahasabha nexus in the region. There is clear evidence of RSS members working in close association with the Mahasabha leaders.¹⁷⁰ The two organizations started to grow apart from the period of presidentship of Savarkar of the Hindu Mahasabha and by the time, Golwalkar took over the reins of RSS, the breach was complete.¹⁷¹ Basu, et al, also note the "cultural-political" tension¹⁷², that drove apart the leaders of the two organizations. The Mahasabha by the 1940s self Consciously began to project itself as a political alternative to the congress, seriously contesting elections and getting involved in ministry making. The RSS, however, shunned "politics" and insisted on pursuing its long term goals of organizational work. The Mahasabha however wanted RSS support in the light of the war conditions and the changed political context.

¹⁶⁷ RSS in 1940-41 file no 822(ii), opcit.

¹⁶⁸ Basu et al, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, opcit p23

¹⁶⁹ *Activities of Hindu Rashtra Dal* in Home Special Department 1943-45, File no 382(MSA)

¹⁷⁰ "RSS Organization and Development in Each District of CP and Berar at the end of the Year 1942", in RSS File no.822(ii), opcit, pp 67-70 and 72-73

¹⁷¹ Hansen makes the point and states that tensions began after the election of Savarkar's as President, Hindu Mahasabha in 1937. TB Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, opcit, p 94

¹⁷² Basu et al, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, opcit ,p24.

The final years of the last decade of the 1930s were spent under the shadow of the war. A number of political strategies of the nationalists were based on considerations of the war. Similarly the imperialists also began cultivating the communalists organizations as they saw no help coming from the Congress. In the 1930s there were several forces that sought ascendancy in the Congress. There was evidence of Left militancy backed by a Kisan Sabha unrest as well as by student radicalism. The Muslim League had begun to adopt a confrontationist stance from 1937. It has to be noted that the 1930s were also the period of the emergence of the "Pakistan demand" that slowly became more strident and the Muslim League became vocal about it. The Congress strategy of intransigence on negotiation on the question of the war, and the resignation of the Congress ministries pushed the Muslim league into the arms of the British. Sumit Sarkar writes that an encouragement to the Muslim League became an important war time imperialist strategy.¹⁷³ The RSS took a leading part in the Civic Guards that were created to maintain order during the war.¹⁷⁴ By 1941, world politics had taken on a new turn with Japan's invasion of South East Asia and Germany's invasion of Russia. The war now presented the possibility of the capture of large number of countries by fascist forces.

An account of the nationalist activity in Bombay shows that the region was one of the storm centres of the movement. The maximum number of arrests happened in Bombay, and it was also the main centre of revolutionary terrorist activity. In some pockets of the Bombay Presidency, there was peasant guerilla war and the revolutionary terrorist activity of urban Bombay is legendary. The Socialists ran an effective underground movement from Bombay city, which was controlled by leaders like Aruna Asaf Ali. The Quit India movement brought the British close to a transfer of power, firmed up the prestige of the Congress and seriously discredited the Left alternative. With the prospect of a transfer of

¹⁷³ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, opcit.

¹⁷⁴ RSS in 1943. File no 822(iii) opcit

power in sight and the communal holocaust of 1946-47, the RSS felt that its time had arrived. This period is regarded as its "finest hour".¹⁷⁵ Thereafter in the deteriorating communal situation, the RSS found an ideal ground for proselytisation and the riots and the partition ensured that the roots of RSS were struck deep in the region.

The survey has primarily drawn from colonial records in the period from 1938 to 1944. There are no records either in the National Archives of India or the Maharashtra State Archives in the subsequent period. This seems curious as the RSS would possibly have been documented in the communally charged years of 1946-47. However, it has also to be noted that in the early 1940s there were a number of changes in the RSS strategy and these were a result of the new *Sanghchalak* Golwalkar as well as of the war climate. The prospects of independence accompanied by partition gave the organization an element of volatility and also kept its policy in a state of flux.

Mobilizational Strategies

There was an intense mobilizational drive in the early 1940s¹⁷⁶. The records state that the reason is not definitely known.¹⁷⁷ One explanation was that this was in accordance with the dying wishes of Hedgewar that three percent of Hindus living in towns and one percent of Hindus in villages should be enlisted as members. The targets were "villagers"¹⁷⁸ and particularly "Harijāns"¹⁷⁹. Significantly the moves to go beyond its narrow upper caste base had begun much earlier. There are interesting descriptions as to how this was achieved. There are references to propaganda work being carried on cycles in the villages

¹⁷⁵ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, opcit

¹⁷⁶ Jaffrelot refers to this as the expansion of the *shakha* network. C. Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, opcit p65

¹⁷⁷ RSS File no 822(ii), opcit, pp40-41

¹⁷⁸ Basu et al, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, opcit, and Anderson and Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron*, note that the RSS was centred in urban areas

¹⁷⁹ "Organization and Development in Each District of CP and Berar at the end of the Year 1942", in RSS in Home Special Department 1941-43 File no.822(ii) p72 and p74

in Akola.¹⁸⁰ The most important strategy was sending committed swayamsevaks from Nagpur into different parts of the country,¹⁸¹ that of inviting speakers on its functions and use of festivals for its expansion.

Jaffrelot notes the northward expansion of the shakha network in the period of the 1940s. The RSS also found new patrons in the Punjab where Muslim separatist demands and possibilities of violence and combat with the Muslims in the future, made the RSS ideology popular among Hindus. The records describe the strategy of Dharam Vir, the *Sanghchalak* of Lahore, who had sway over entire Punjab. Here Paturkar, an important representative of the Sangh was to supervise and advise Dharam Vir. Clearly in the initial days Nagpur held the reins of organization very tightly in its own hands. The description is worth quoting in full,

“Wherever he goes he approaches the moneyed Hindus and talks to them in such a persuasive manner as to win them over as sympathisers of the sangh. Their sympathy means additional financial help and the recruitment of their sons and relatives in the sangh. He addresses bodhaks to inculcate the spirit of sacrifice by narrating tales of the past heroes of India. He also selects suitable members of the sangh and induces them to undertake tours in those parts of the province where they are capable of exercising influence through their friends or relatives either to increase the number of the sevaks or to set up branches where they do not already exist. He induces important Sevaks of different branches in the Punjab to arrange inter branch contacts for establishing deeper relations between the sevaks of different places of the province. In short he works as a link among the different branches in the Punjab for bringing about compact solidarity in the ranks of the sangh.¹⁸²

The excerpt offers insights about the strategies adopted by the Sangh in the early stages of its expansion. The points to be noted are the cultivation of moneyed Hindus (this explains the *baniya* base) and use of stories to involve and win over men. The Sangh owes its success to the simplicity of its messages

¹⁸⁰ RSS Organization and Development in Each District of CP and Berar at the end of the Year 1942 in File no. 822(ii), opcit p41

¹⁸¹ Jaffrelot also comments on this strategy, C. Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, opcit pp 66-68

¹⁸² A note on the organization, aims etc of the RSS, 1942 File no 28/8 opcit

couched in idioms that people can understand. In times of communally charged atmosphere as well as polarised regions it naturally had many takers.¹⁸³ Initially confined almost entirely to Maharashtra, it spread all over India, with branches in the North West Frontier Province, Punjab, Delhi, United provinces, Madras, Bihar, Bombay, Sind, Bengal, Central provinces and Berar, Gwalior, Indore, Hyderabad, Mysore, the Deccan States and elsewhere. It was a custom of the Sangh to announce publicly each year the number of branches and the number of members the organization claims to possess, but no other details were ever given.¹⁸⁴ In 1936, 200 branches and 25,000 members were claimed. By 1938 the figures had risen to 350 branches and 40,000 members. Thereafter the yearly claims were 1939: 500 branches and 60,000 members; 1940: 700 branches and 80,000 members and 1941: 700 branches and 150,000 members. The official estimate of the strength of this organization made in November 1941 placed the membership at 17,015 in the Central Provinces, 1,360 in the united Provinces, 3,000 in the Punjab and 13,577 in Bombay Province.¹⁸⁵

Social Base¹⁸⁶

There exist detailed records of the Sangh organizers and supporters and in this sense the contention of Jaffrelot that it is difficult to know the social composition of the early Sangh is untenable.¹⁸⁷ However, there is a lacuna in the very logic of the records. Since this is a compilation of intelligence reports gathered from various areas, the reports are marked by a certain element of heterogeneity. The Intelligence records in each area were naturally compiled according to the reports received and therefore there are different emphases in the records of

¹⁸³ Jaffrelot comments on the northward expansion of the Sangh in the 1940s, C.Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, opcit, pp67-69

¹⁸⁴ "RSS Organization and Development in Each District of CP and Berar at the end of the Year 1942" in File no.822(ii), opcit p77

¹⁸⁵ *ibid* p77

¹⁸⁶ The discussion on the social base is entirely based on the intelligence report, "RSS Organization and Development in Each District of CP and Berar at the end of the Year 1942" in File no.822(ii), 1940-41 Home Special Department (MSA).

¹⁸⁷ C.Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, opcit, p47

each district. In some, extreme care is taken to differentiate the caste composition, leadership; there are comments on classes, sympathisers as well as on supporters, whereas in others, such meticulous care has not been taken. Since my analysis draws extensively from this single document the picture that I present is a reflection of the record. I note silences in the records as well. Of the nineteen districts¹⁸⁸ of CP and Berar in the records, it was reported to be strongest in the Marathi-speaking districts of the province; Nagpur and Wardha were the leading districts with 7,000 and 4,000 members, respectively. Chanda followed these with 2,343 members, Amraoti with 3,750 members, Akola with 3,330 members, Buldana with 3,222 members, Hoshangabad and Raipur with roughly 1000 members each. Apart from these districts the Sangh was seen as a political menace in other districts despite its membership being fairly small, the districts being Saugor which had 400 members, Jubbulpore which had 950 members and Balaghat with 200 members. The only districts where Sangh activity was entirely negligible were Drug, Betul and Mandla.¹⁸⁹

A survey of the records reveals that in almost all the districts it was the local maharashtrian communities that were the biggest supporters. There is a preponderance of Brahmin surnames that appear as the chief organizers of the Sangh.¹⁹⁰ In larger districts (especially those with non Marathi speaking people as well, for example Raipur) the lead was invariably provided by maharashtrians. Ashis Nandy points out the attractiveness of the militant Hindu ideology for maharashtrian Brahmins. Because of their martial valour and history of struggle against Muslim rulers of India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they saw themselves as traditional upholders of Hindu hegemony against Muslim

¹⁸⁸ Nagpur, Wardha, Chanda, Chindwara, Betul, Jubbulpore, Saugor, Hoshangabad, Nimar, Mandla, Raipur, Bilaspur, Balaghat, Drug, Bhandara, Amraoti, Akola, Buldana and Yeotmal are the nineteen districts.

¹⁸⁹ "Organization and Development in Each District of CP and Berar at the end of the Year 1942" in RSS File no. 822(ii), opcit, p64

¹⁹⁰ "Maharashtrian brahmins" is the phrase categorically used for leading organisers of the Sangh in different districts. Ibid, p64

incursions.¹⁹¹ Gandhian non violent strategy was therefore not very appealing to upper caste brahmins in Maharashtra.

However, local support was very essential for the Sangh. This is evident from its stagnation in the Drug district where it was reported that there was an enthusiasm among the locals. There were constant attempts to proselytise here. Dr Moonje's visit to the place did not yield dividends. Support, on the other hand, was forthcoming from influential men as in Raipur, the district president was the ex Diwan and the Town President, a leading advocate. In the case of Mandla proper, not much headway could be made, the leading organizers being "ordinary men".¹⁹² This reveals that growth was a product of two factors: the zeal of local maharashtrian as well as the support of influential and moneyed people.

As regards the internal organization, there existed, apart from the *sanghchalak*, a President: the functions are not clearly spelt out but he would be the leading patron looking after the overall management of shakhas in his district. Though the institution of the pracharak seems to have been in place by 1930¹⁹³, the name apparently stuck only much later, as the records do not note the word. I cite here for instance,

"The more zealous members of the sangh are encouraged to devote their lives for the cause of the sangh and Paturkar and Bawa Ji Kalyani belong to that type. Such sewaks work in various provinces to buttress the sangh organization."¹⁹⁴ The reference being made here is probably to the full time workers, the pracharaks.

In a majority of the districts it was the pleaders and school teachers who occupied posts of importance. So the 'educated castes' seemed to have been its

¹⁹¹ Ashis Nandy, *At the Edge of Psychology: Essays in Politics and Culture*, (New Delhi, Oxford University Press: 1980), pp77-78

¹⁹² This can be interpreted as either people with less political or economic clout.

¹⁹³ C Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement, opcit*, p 35

¹⁹⁴ *A note on the organization, aims etc of the RSS*, File no 28/80pcit

chief organisers.¹⁹⁵ However there were also instances of *malguzars* as the leading patrons of the Sangh in some areas. In the case of Wardha, of the thirty seven names listed as supporters, fourteen were pleaders; in the case of Amraoti, eight of the twenty one supporters were pleaders. Similarly pleaders also occupied posts of responsibility, apart from being the *sanghchalaks*. Of the six office bearers in Saugor, two were pleaders; in Jubbulpore of the seven office bearers, two were pleaders. The top-level membership in Hoshangabad and Balaghat districts comprised overwhelmingly of pleaders. Another profession that was over represented was that of the schoolteacher. In Bhandara, for instance, of the twenty one leading men, eight were teachers in a local school (the rest being pleaders). Teachers made up almost the entire membership in the area called Sakoli, more importantly; they came from a particular school. In the Sangh hierarchy, teachers most commonly held the position of the Instructor. The most common method of recruitment in the Sangh up to now has been through schools and universities. This was the *modus operandi* in those times as well.¹⁹⁶ However what is remarkable is that the Sangh was supported by local notables in almost all the districts of CP and Berar. This was a group that was fairly eclectic and extended support to the Congress and the AIHM as well. The ties with AIHM were fairly well established, especially in Buldana district as almost all the local men were also AIHM supporters. Clearly the contention that the Sangh used the Mahasabha links for its own expansion stands substantiated. Another interesting fact about the district is that a lot of ex congressmen took to the Sangh. Perhaps local politics played a part. Peculiarly, the records do not point out any reasons for this, neither do they mark this as exceptional. It is to be noted that the Congress banned its members from holding membership of the Muslim League

¹⁹⁵ - Organization and Development in Each District of CP and Berar at the end of the Year 1942" in File no.822(ii) opcit , p22 Basu et al, makes an interesting point about the need for physical training as the dependence of the literate upper caste Hindu on the lower castes in times of actual combat, Basu et al, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, opcit, p16

¹⁹⁶ Sangh infiltrated the leading universities. Golwalkar himself was recruited when he was a student at BHU and a number of leading men in then sangh have been school/ university teachers, for instance, Rajendra Singh, Yashwant Kelkar (founder of ABVP) and MM Joshi.

and the AIHM and the RSS in 1934. The intelligence reports say *goondas* also were Sangh sympathisers.¹⁹⁷

In districts like Jubbulpore, Saugor, Nimar, Buldana and Raipur, the support base was more heterogenous in terms of caste and class composition. For instance, in Saugor the supporters came from a whole range of castes: kayasths, bania, Barai, Lodhi, teli, darji (in Jaisinagar an area within Saugor the ins ructor was a Darji), Rajput, Jain, Panwala, etc. The leadership also reflected this heterogenous character. What is even more striking about this district is that a number of office bearers were in jail in the Quit India movement. However, in the case of Bhandara, it is categorically mentioned that non-brahmins do not take any part in the Sangh. In Yeotmal, the leadership was said to be exclusively maharashtrian Brahmin, while the lower ranks were filled in by other castes.

On the basis of this a few tentative suggestions can be made. The Sangh found it very difficult to mobilise support from all castes. It tried to expand the base of its pyramidal constituency by propaganda amongst a range of castes, but clearly in some areas, it remained unsuccessful. The traditional support base being brahmins, the dominant positions in the Sangh hierarchy were held by them and this remains true even today. That the Sangh was struggling to encompass wider sections of population is evident from the way the Harijans were targeted. This, perhaps, had to do with the increasing Dalit assertion and militancy under Ambedkar in the 1940s. It is in the light of this, the note Golwalkar's speech given in Lahore in November 1943, where he declared that "removal of Untouchability" was the main objective of the Sangh.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ This is an important reference as this means that the local authorities saw the Sangh as composed of criminal elements. There is no explanation given for this characterisation and this word is not used anywhere else in the record. RSS Organization and Development in Each District of CP and Berar at the end of the Year 1942 in RSS File no. 822(ii) pp43-46

¹⁹⁸ RSS in File no 822(ii), opcit

Jaffrelot argues that hindutva nationalism has features that belong “almost entirely to brahmanical culture”¹⁹⁹ Despite several attempts, it did not seem to have been able to transcend this limited support base in the initial years.

RSS, gender and the Rashtra Sevika Samiti

The vocabulary that dominates the Sangh is that of the *parivar*, the family, and no family can exist without its female members. The RSS, on principle, has been founded on the exclusion of women and remains so even today. There is little space for women political actors to exist in the Sangh’s discourse. Chetan Bhatt remarks that the key texts of the Hindu nationalist movement from Savarkar’s Hindutva to Golwalkar’s tracts celebrate Hindu masculinity in its violent forms, virtually ignoring women, and familial relationships.²⁰⁰ The valorization of the masculine and an obsessive fear of the feminine characterise Sangh’s pronouncements. Similarly, Basu et al notes that MS Golwalkar assigned a purely domestic role to women.²⁰¹

An RSS pracharak outlined the Sangh’s *vichardhara* (ideology) in exactly the same terms, “*yeh poore samaj ke problem hain: hum mahilaon ka problem alag, daliton aur savarnon ka problem alag... (hum)aise nahi dekhte.*” And further, “*stree hamari matrudevta hai, pehle se kahi jati hai. Wah vyakti nirman karti hai –isliye uska samman hona chahiye.*”²⁰² (We do not see different problems separately. They are all part of the whole for us, be they problems of men or women or those of dalits and caste Hindus. Women are our mothers. We value them thus since eternity. They fashion human beings. They must be respected) The central elements are carefully repeated: exalted position of women in Hindu civilization, respect and honour due to them, and a categorical refusal to recognize gender oppression. The significance of the statement that “all women

¹⁹⁹ Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, opcit, p78

²⁰⁰ Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, opcit p138

²⁰¹ Basu et al, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, opcit, p42

²⁰² Interview with Deshpande, RSS Pracharak, opcit

are mothers” is that its subject as well as intended object or addressee is a male- the woman is present only as a wife or mother. Thus the Sangh discourse demarcates a definite space- in the domestic sphere- to women. Honour and respect are concepts evolved to legitimise sexual divisions and they reestablish women’s place in the household.

The politics of the founding of a women’s affiliate is revealing of the pressures and compulsions under which the brotherhood operates. Women claim to be one half of the society²⁰³, a claim not quite untrue and the Sangh cannot ignore them.

The Origins of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti

The Samiti was formed in Wardha by Laxmibai Kelkar in 1936, launched on Vijayadashami day. The existence of the women’s wing was acknowledged in colonial records. The Samiti was referred to as the women’s branch of the Sangh or Rashtriya Swayamasevika Sangh.²⁰⁴ The increase in the number of women members from 500 to 800 was also recorded.²⁰⁵ Therefore peak periods for the Sangh’s growth were also those that swelled numbers in the Samiti. The reasons for the founding are not mentioned in the records.

In reconstructing the story, I largely rely on the material produced by the Samiti itself as well as interviews of Sevikas. Though the organizational literature outlines the reasons of founding of the Samiti, I privilege Laxmibai Kelkar’s account all over other versions. It is significant that scholars writing on the Samiti have ignored this source altogether.²⁰⁶ The founders of organizations are

²⁰³ This was the most quoted argument for participation in all activities, by all sevikas and apparently also by the founder, Laxmibai Kelkar.

²⁰⁴ RSS in 1943, File no 822(iii), opcit s

²⁰⁵ *ibid*

²⁰⁶ For instance Bacchetta does not use this source in her account of the founding of the Samiti. Paola Bacchetta, “Hindu Nationalist women as Ideologues” in Kumari Jayawardane and Malathi de Alwis (ed.) *Embodied Violence*, opcit

often credited with vision statements. The unfolding of the story comments on the worldview of the founder.

The founder and her vision

The Samiti's version of the life of its founder Laxmibai Kelkar is characterized by a dense hagiographical orientation in which she is virtually sanctified and described only in effusive tones.²⁰⁷ She has a position similar to that of Hedgewar in the Sangh. This can be interpreted as an unspoken claim to equality with the Sangh's founder that the sevikas accord to the founder of the Samiti. She is referred to as "*vandaneeya*" (revered) and to emphasise the ties of affection that she shared with all the sevikas, she is called "Mausiji".²⁰⁸ The older sevikas who were associated with her spoke of her loving nature as well as of her zeal. There are booklets of anecdotes with contributions by sevikas, which describe their brief encounters with Mausiji and how inspiring these were, apart from highlighting the sheer brilliance of her character. She is practically worshipped in the Samiti and her photograph is garlanded in every Samiti function. The older Sevikas also have her photograph in their homes. A number of the older sevikas were initiated into the Samiti by Kelkar herself. She resided in the houses of sevikas whenever she was in their cities.²⁰⁹ I did not see the photograph in the room of Chanda Sathe, a young pracharika I interviewed in Thane. She had never personally interacted with Kelkar and I presume that as a result of this, the affinal bonds were absent here.

The biography published by the Sevika Prakashan shows her sitting on the floor in the characteristic manner of a high caste maharashtrian woman with her leg

²⁰⁷ Rajani Rai, *Life Sketch of Vandaniya Mausiji* (Sevika Prakashan, Nagpur, 1996)

²⁰⁸ The use of kinship terms is not very common for the highest of Sangh leaders, though the first two Sarsanghchalaks have been affectionately called 'Doctorji'(Dr KB Hedgewar) and 'Guruji'(M S Golwalkar). The fourth Sarsanghchalak, Rajendra Singh was, however, called Rajju bhaiyya.

²⁰⁹ Senior leaders of the Sangh and the Samiti, pracharaks and pracharikas do not reside in hotels when they are touring. The houses of trusted swayamsevaks/ sevikas are used for this purpose.

folded below her, in the traditional white saree worn by widows, with a smile on her face. None of the other published photographs/ portraits captures her in this pose.²¹⁰

Laxmi (Kamal was her name before marriage) was born in a Chitpavan Brahmin family of Nagpur and was the daughter of Bhaskarrao Date and Yashodabai. She is represented as an exceptional woman, sparks of brilliance evident from her childhood. She was “no ordinary girl”, she enjoyed playing “boyish” games and never complained even if she hurt herself. This emphasis on her enjoying ‘masculine’ games is remarkable as the Samiti exalts domesticity. This perhaps is also reflective of their privileging the ‘masculine’ as an appropriate model for exceptional womanhood.

The elements forming her story are all the major Hindutva virtues, for example, participation in Gorakshan²¹¹(cow protection) and hostility to the missionaries²¹². She studied upto standard four in *Marathi Mulinchi Shala* (Marathi Girls School), established by what are described as “pro Hindu elements”, and vowed to marry without dowry after reading about the infamous Kusumbala case . She is said to have thus got married “on her own terms”²¹³ at the age of fourteen to a lawyer who was pro British in his political leanings. Purushottam Rao of Wardha was a widower and a father of two daughters. Perhaps the reiteration of her “own choice” is significant in that it minimizes the possible adverse reactions that are naturally drawn in the case of a young woman’s marriage to a widower and to a much older man. He was considerably westernized, though the household was orthodox, and he did not allow the entry of women into public spaces.

²¹⁰ Her standard portrait printed on all Samiti literature, is not a full-length portrait. It is marked by her serene expression

²¹¹ She accompanied her aunt for cow protection rallies.

²¹² She was first admitted to a missionary school. She was caught with her eyes open during the prayer. When questioned, she is said to have counter questioned the teacher, as to how had the teacher known if her eyes were closed during the prayer. The teacher slapped her, after which Kamal decided never to attend this school.

²¹³ *Preface Rashtra Sevika Samiti An organization of Hindu Women* (Nagpur, Sevika Prakashan: 1988)(hereafter referred to as Preface).

Despite the conservative family background, she is said to have “adjusted” herself to the family. The hagiographies particularly underline this. The message to all newly wed women cannot be clearer. However, there is at least one instance where even she stood up to her husband.²¹⁴ Her husband did not like her venturing out of the house, but then “she managed everything so beautifully that gave nobody any cause of complaint”.²¹⁵ Significantly the necessity of maintaining harmony in the family is a red thread that runs through the life sketch of Laxmibai Kelkar. She was a dutiful wife and when her husband fell ill, she performed several rituals. Nonetheless, she was widowed at the age of twenty seven and was left with her own six sons and two daughters from her husband’s earlier marriage. After his death she looked after all the property, while her sister in law managed the household.

Kelkar’s public activities commenced thereafter and she learnt cycling, swimming and travelled alone for Samiti work. Many sevikas recount instances from her life and seem to see her life as an exemplar for their own. Her greatest act of “courage” was travelling to Pakistan to comfort her sisters (sister sevikas?) in Sindh in 1947. This journey to Pakistan given the volatile and dangerous situation of the partition riots are the staple of Hindutva heroics and without these no story about her can ever be really complete. Ram was central to her (and also to the whole Hindutva project²¹⁶) and after a dream she began lecturing on the Ramayana. These have now been published by Sevika Prakashan, the publication wing of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, and many sevikas and pracharikas admitted to possessing a copy. Kelkar is said to have overcome her fear of public speaking and become an extraordinary orator. Till then Kaku

²¹⁴ Her husband did not like women wearing flowers and in deference to his wishes she gave this up. She however continued to decorate her daughters’ hair with flowers. When Purushottam chided her, she is said to have reminded him that she this was their daughters’ house and they ought to be allowed to do as they please. This expression of ‘choice’ was certainly not possible once they were married. However this articulation also underlines the taken for granted subordinate status of women in a patrilocal marriage.

²¹⁵ *Preface, opcit, p15*

²¹⁶ Basu et al *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, pp.12-13

Ranade, a trusted sevika would lecture in the meetings of the Samiti. This was because she realized that none could articulate her ideas as well as she herself did.

The incidents of her life are to impress upon the readers that while she has all the qualities of a good ritual bound Hindu woman she also has special qualities that mark her out as a woman far ahead of her times, as well as capable of bringing "what were supposedly affairs of the male domain , firmly under her control"²¹⁷, if the need arose.

In the story of the founding of the Samiti recounted by Kelkar²¹⁸ there is an attempt to present this as a result of a personal crisis as well as of intense mental and ideological churning. She explains that the death of her husband in 1932 had brought her face to face with the "harsh realities of life". She is probably alluding to financial troubles and practical problems in managing her husband's property. She saw no help coming from the women's organizations she was associated with though she does not elaborate on their names or nature. This was a cause of disillusionment in her personal life. Thereafter she claims to have been upset by the innumerable cases reported in newspapers of rape and abduction of women. One that had a lasting impression on her was the rape of a young Bengali woman in front of her 'educated' husband by *goondas*. They openly mocked at the law, while he could not do much. (There are no further details provided of the case.) This is said to have triggered two ideas in her mind: the fact that women are always dependent on men²¹⁹ and that such instances could happen in Maharashtra as well. She contemplated on the weakness of men and concluded "*ve apna sanrakshan karne mein bhi asamarth*

²¹⁷ Preface, opcit, p17

²¹⁸ *Amritbindu* a collection of lectures Sevika Prakashan, Nagpur, 1991. This is a collection of twenty one lectures given by Kelkar from 1953 till her death. The first lecture is entitled "Samiti ka Janam Vritant"(An account of the birth of the Samiti)The lecture was delivered in 1953.

²¹⁹ Interestingly she refers to Manu's famous words on the dependent state of women, first on fathers, then their husbands and thereafter their sons.

hain. Phir hamara samrakshan kya karenge?" (They are unable to protect themselves. How can they protect us?)²²⁰

The next significant development was her visit to Gandhi's ashram in Wardha. She went to the ashram in Wardha with some of her relatives who were staying with her. She claims that her aim in accompanying her relatives was the desire to spend some time with the *mahapurush* (great man). This point needs to be noted in view of the traditional hostility of the Sangh to Gandhi and his notions of non-violence.²²¹ His lecture on Sita as a role model for all women had brought her to the Ramayana. Subsequently, she read the Mahabharata and was inspired by Draupadi. During each stage she claims to have been going through intense mental churning and was not clear as to how she could resolve this dilemma.

The story makes a few things clear: widowhood freed her from the restraining influence of her husband and there were first stirrings of political action, personal crisis and societal developments that sensitized her to the vulnerability of women. Further, the physical dependency of women on men was also seen as problematic, more so in the face of the inability of men in 'protecting' their women. She equated the "protection of women" as "protection of their chastity", which is described as *sheel*. "From Seeta's life we learn that we will live for chastity, from Draupadi we will fight for chastity and from Rajput women that we will die for chastity."²²² Clearly, this emphasis on "chastity" is particularly tied to Hindu upper caste norms of womanhood, where a whole range of institutions have been created to control women's sexuality; pre pubertal marriages, enforced widowhood and so on. Since patriarchy operates not through violence

²²⁰ *Amritbindu*, p6

²²¹ C Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, opcit. Jaffrelot discusses the culture of Maharashtrian Brahmins, who formed the core constituency of RSS, as a mixture of Brahmanical and martial values. Gandhi's principle of Ahimsa was disliked because of its emphasis on non violence, his devotional Hinduism excluded many Brahmanical values and his mobilization of lower castes threatened the hegemony of the high caste Brahmins. pp45-46

²²² *Amritbindu*, p6

alone , women's internalization of these norms go a long way in ensuring the hegemony of patriarchal structures and practices.

She next described her fateful meeting with Dr Hedgewar. Her sons told her that Dr Hedgewar had invited the (male) guardians of the swayamsevaks to the shakha for a lecture. She insisted on seeing him as the guardian of her sons though her sons refused her, saying that women were denied entry into the Sangh. However she claimed to have insisted on seeing Dr Hedgewar as the guardian of her sons. This is clearly out of the ordinary since such claims could not be made for women even till the recent times. She was given special permission and came back impressed by the speech. It was then that she sought a private meeting with Dr Hedgewar which was arranged at the residence of Appaji Joshi(Sanghchalak of Wardha district). She apprised him of the need for including women in the Sangh. Apparently even Hedgewar was not convinced in the first instance. It is significant that in this account there is no reference of Laxmibai Kelkar's prior contact with the Sangh. There is also no mention of the reason of why she refrained from nationalist politics, or was convinced that only her participation in the Sangh could provide resolution to all her problems. More importantly there is no reference to the traditionally hated enemy, the Muslim. Rather, there is a recognition perhaps that all men are potentially dangerous. She remained persistent and argued that women were as important part of the nation as they were of the family, and therefore their participation was central to any project of national importance. ²²³There is no reference to the RSS's exclusivist conception of the nation nor does she dwell on the exact nature of this "nationalist" project. Interestingly she uses the analogy of the family which itself is very dear to the Sangh. Hedgewar consented only to the founding of a women's organization on the lines of the Sangh on the condition that Kelkar took responsibility for this task. There were several meetings between the two in

²²³ *ibid*, p7

the following two months. Laxmibai visited a Sangh camp to understand its working. It is to be noted that in this account she does not clearly spell out the dates/ period of the specific events in the story. Since the account begins after her husband's death in 1932, the intervening period till the founding of the Samiti in 1936 is to be understood as consisting of the above developments.

In this story Laxmibai presents the formation of the Samiti as a result of her personal untiring efforts. In another piece she describes her relationship with Hedgewar as that with a guide and mentor.²²⁴ The zenith of this political discipleship was cut short by his untimely death in 1940.

The name of the organization as well as its character seem to have been determined as a result of discussions between the two. Hedgewar apparently told her that the two organizations must remain separate but there should be considerable ideological affinity between the two.²²⁵ There is thus the obvious anxiety to retain patriarchal control over the ostensibly independent Samiti. He even told her that the word "Hindu" was not to be used as Hindu had now become synonymous with Rashtra and thus Rashtra was used.²²⁶ Another practical desire was to let the initials of the two organizations remain the same (RSS). Bacchetta comments that in the case of the Samiti's sevika, the 'swayam', Self (of the swayamsevak) is absent. The man is an individual while the woman's self is always relational.²²⁷ Sarkar points out, "the sense of autonomy and self choice that are associated with the word 'volunteer' are notably missing."²²⁸

²²⁴ *ibid* pp38-40

²²⁵ *ibid*, p8

²²⁶ *ibid*, p11

²²⁷ Bacchetta, "Hindu Nationalist Women as Ideologues", in K Jayawardane M De Alwis(ed) *Embodied Violence*, *opcit*

²²⁸ Tanika Sarkar, "Heroic Women, Mother Goddesses" in Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia (ed), *Women and the Hindu Right*, *opcit*, pp184-185

The launch was on Vijaya Dashami (the Sangh was also started on Vijayadashami) which marks the victory of goddess Durga over demons. On 25 October 1936 in the courtyard of Shri Pathak of Wardha ²²⁹ and the function was presided over by Buldana's historian and writer Yadav Madhav Kale. The earliest teachers were two boys in their early teens from the Sangh. Laxmi writes that they initially sang Savarkar's " *Hindu Paneech maj mar karal kala*" (If I were a Hindu I would have done ...) as a prayer. After a month with the help of Wardha's Sanghchakr Krishna Raghunandan Chauhan they had their own prayer. This was a Marathi prayer. ²³⁰ In 1937 on the traditional New Year Day they started the worship of the Bhagwa Dhwaja and thence began the celebration of the five festivals. ²³¹ The absence of mention of any Sangh leaders is to be marked.

The story told by the Preface and her life sketches have slightly different emphases. Significantly in the other accounts of the Samiti's founding, while the central elements of the story remain the same, there is no linear sequence as is outlined by Kelkar in her account of the Samiti. Her life sketch ²³² for instance talks about her prior participation in Congress activities. There is also a reference to her being acquainted with the work of Dr Moonje, the Hindu Mahasabha leader. ²³³ But she herself describes her visit to Gandhi's ashram only as accompanying certain guests who had visited her house. One work acknowledges the Gandhian mobilization of women in the nationalist movement ²³⁴ (though Kelkar herself has nothing to say about the nationalist

²²⁹ He asked for rent of Rs 25 for letting out his courtyard and the women went home to home canvassing to recruit girls. Every girl was charged a monthly fee of two annas. The incentive was therefore clearly physical training. *Amritbindu* p7

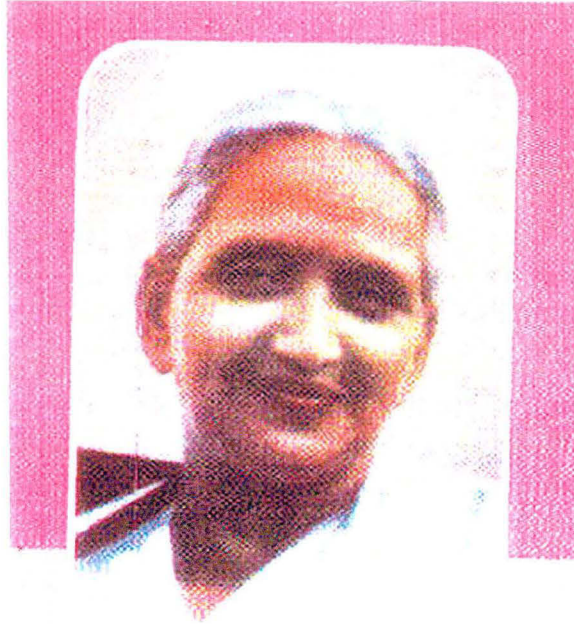
²³⁰ Now the Samiti like the Sangh has a Sanskrit prayer. This was translated into Sanskrit by a sevika Kusum Sathe. For the prayer see chapter two.

²³¹ The Sangh and the Samiti recognize the Bhagwa Dhwaj (saffron flag) as the Guru. For a detailed discussion of the five festivals see chapter two.

²³² Rajani Rai, *Life Sketch*, opcit p 19

²³³ *ibid* p20-21 The context is the exploitation of poor orange seller women by Muslim brokers and the women not being "accepted" in society despite the ceaseless efforts of Dr Moonje. This is the first reference to the Muslim as "harasser" or "abductor", an image that is most common in all Hindutva accounts.

²³⁴ *Preface*, p30



वंदनीया मौसीजी

Laxmibai Kelkar, Founder of the *Rashtra Sevika Samiti*



Laxmibai Kelkar in Sindh (Pakistan) assuring sister *sevikas* of help on their arrival to India.

The *Bhagwa Jhanda* is etched clearly behind Laxmibai Kelkar. A mosque and the Pakistani flag can also be seen in the background.

movement). Perhaps Kelkar wanted to obliterate the Congress connection and the impact that it had on her own politicization. This can be attributed to later developments in the Sangh's political strategy where differences with the Congress became marked and sharp. In the beginning there were a lot of members floating in and out of the Congress but later as the Sangh created its own identity, it became extremely exclusionist.²³⁵ Gandhi's murder by an ex swayamsevak and the ban on the RSS made any mention of affiliation with the Congress anathema to the Sangh and perhaps this holds for the Samiti as well. In the other literature produced by the Samiti, Hedgewar's role is considerably minimised.²³⁶ Kelkar is said to have resolved all doubts on her own. The dependence on the Sangh and the borrowed features are hardly noted. These silences are significant to establish the Samiti's autonomy in the Sangh hierarchy.

Significantly in the booklet "*Preface*" there is an attempt to present the story of the founding of the Samiti very much in the light of how the RSS presents the reasons of its origins. The Sangh justified its existence in the colonial period as addressing the real cause of 'weakness and decline' of the 'nation' (and this meant the Hindu nation): disunity and therefore its organizational goal was *sangathan*. This was also the reason for non participation in the mainstream nationalist struggle.²³⁷ The Samiti also describes the state of the nation in similar terms,

".. the defiance of law which was being used as a means of resisting foreign power may take an undesirable turn to lawlessness in independent Bharat. Obtaining political freedom was a top priority, but it was also essential to channelise the thoughts and actions of the people with respect to their social and national duties at the same time abiding by the laws and rules of a free country."²³⁸

²³⁵ see my chapter one

²³⁶ For instance *Rashtra Sevika, Preface, Rashtra Sevika Samiti ek parichay*

²³⁷ CBhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, opcit p122

²³⁸ *Preface* opcit, p31

There is a marked emphasis on the concerns of lawlessness in society resulting from the anti colonial struggles and a not too benevolent view of the national movement.²³⁹ At the same time, there is an attempt to distance the Samiti from the mainstream women's movement which demanded "equal rights and economical freedom"²⁴⁰ a threat to ideals of self sacrifice, devotion etc. qualities that "glorify" Hindu women.

" they(women) were fascinated by the idea of equal rights and economic freedom. This unnatural change in the attitude of women might have lead to disintegration of family, which has been the primary and most important unit of society for imparting sanskaras. This worried Laxmibai."²⁴¹

It is evident that the Samiti recognizes the threat posed by Feminism and Indian women's movement to Hindu femininity. Bhatt argues that the Samiti was explicitly formed in opposition to the Indian women's movement.²⁴² Bacchetta links this account to the period of the appearance of this particular text when the Indian women's movement was at its zenith. Therefore in retrospect the women's movement is seen as "western" and "wrong".²⁴³ Clearly the Samiti history has to be rewritten in a conscious articulation of its position within the Hindutva domain as well as that of current politics. A conscious denial of continuities and contemporary influences is essential if the Samiti has to maintain its position as "the unparalleled Akhil Bharatiya women's organization,... the only one of its kind in the entire world".²⁴⁴ In describing itself in such self glorificatory terms, it marginalizes and elides any affinities with the Indian Women's Movement. It is to be remembered that this account appears in an English language text (one of the very few published by Sevika Prakashan in English) for

²³⁹ Bhatt points out that this characterized RSS's different aims during the colonial period. Bhatt easily slides into a denunciation of the Sangh from a text published by the Samiti without realizing that in the Samiti's discourse it could be performing a slightly different function. Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism, opcit* p 137 .

²⁴⁰ *Preface* ,opcit, p31

²⁴¹ *ibid* p31

²⁴² *ibid*,p137

²⁴³ *ibid*pp 131-132

²⁴⁴ Publisher's blurb, Rajani Rai, *Life sketch*, opcit

public consumption and is presented as an authoritative account of the Samiti and its activities²⁴⁵.

The politics of participation

One academic work²⁴⁶ points out that women were incorporated in view of the crisis faced by the social base of the Sangh from a variety of assertions. Sarkar explains the founding of the Samiti in view of the deep crisis being faced due to several pressures (lower caste assertion, communist activism and peasant working class unrest and from women's associations) for the social base and mobilization strategies of the RSS. Thus its own women were allowed a non-domestic existence and organization. Further the involvement of women is explained as being in line with what she describes as a "totalitarian conquest of the existing base, rather than on a thinly spread-out numerical expansion. An active mobilization of women was also a priority, since even among socially privileged castes and classes, women have a relatively insecure and tenuous location."²⁴⁷

This explanation outlines the reasons as a result of which the Sangh allowed the Samiti to come into existence and rendered all possible help to it. That the women had their own reasons for activism is rather clear. Nonetheless, in this segment, I wish to underline the agency displayed by women in the founding of the Samiti. Fashioned as an ideological parallel to the all-male Sangh, it has none of the latter's organizational strength. Yet the ideological autonomy and its tenacity displayed over the years is a testimony of the strength of its women members.

My research indicates that the cult of having strong bodies has a continuous tradition in uppercaste maharashtrian homes. Most of the older women

²⁴⁵ Chanda the pracharika recommended this booklet to me as being the most authentic account of the Samiti.

²⁴⁶ Tanika Sarkar, Heroic Women, Mother Goddesses in Sarkar and Butalia (ed) *Women and the Hindu Right*, *op cit*

²⁴⁷ *ibid.* p187

interviewed admitted to having a training in lathi wielding and ,martial arts and seemed to have enjoyed the Samiti's *shakhas*. Having a strong body, taking care of it and keeping it fit seems to have become a part of the traditional Maharashtrian upper-caste culture by the middle of the twentieth century.²⁴⁸ Women saw the advantages of cultivating strong bodies in warding off unwelcome advances from the opposite sex.²⁴⁹ One of the most significant versions of the reasons of the founding of the Samiti has been that of the rape of a married woman in front of her husband and therefore the inability of men to protect women comes across very clearly. Significantly the threat of rape and abduction of their women haunted the Hindu nationalist men more than anything else especially if one briefly surveys the newspaper reports and content of speeches at the meetings of RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha.²⁵⁰ The task of protecting 'their' women was a challenge for the Hindu males and to masculinity, but then this initiative on the part of women demonstrates the appropriation of agency by the women.

The theme of 'abductions' of women in the 1920s led to mobilization in Bengal, much earlier.²⁵¹ PK Dutta discusses the formation of the Women's Protection League that began the physical training of women, primarily to protect them from violence. This marked the entry of women into the male preserve of physical culture.²⁵² The period of the 1930s and 1940s was when a number of self protection groups were being formed and in this context, physical training of women was being organised even by the Congress volunteer bodies.²⁵³ This explains the popularity of the Samiti and the attractiveness of Samiti ideology.

²⁴⁸ Sarkar also points out the advantage of having a strong healthy body from the eugenic point of view.

²⁴⁹ Bakultai Devkule recalls that boys were scared of her and never harassed her.

²⁵⁰ RSS in File no 822(ii) of 1940-41, opcit

²⁵¹ PK Dutta, "Abductions and the Constellation of a Hindu Communal Bloc in Bengal of the 1920s" in *Studies in History* 14, 1, 1998

²⁵² Significantly the rape that set Kelkar thinking also occurred in Bengal.

²⁵³ Gandhian Organizations had already come into existence by this time. There were also Women's volunteer bodies.

The early history of the Samiti is marked by the zeal and commitment of its earliest members as well as its founders.²⁵⁴ While the founding myth has been commented upon by several academic works²⁵⁵ what I need to add here is the fact insufficiently acknowledged, that the women belonging to RSS households imbued with the ideology of their menfolk had already started organizing themselves on similar lines. Laxmibai also refers to organizations in Satara and Bhandara.²⁵⁶ What inspired them was a combination of factors, from a belief in Hindutva to a need to have strong well cultivated healthy bodies. When I asked Bakultai Devkule, as to why she joined the Samiti instead of participating in Congress activity, she admitted to have been inspired by Savarkar and said "*hum hinduon ke liye bhi ti koi hona mangta hai na*"²⁵⁷ (we Hindus needed someone). Veena Bodes said that there was no possibility of their being part of the Sangh, and joining the Gandhian movement was out of question. These women admitted to having attended political meetings, seen the Congress as well as Communist activity and 'chose' to associate with Hindutva. Undoubtedly their initiation was most often through a male kin who was also a part of the Sangh as it was in the case of the founder, but in the case of Bakultai Devkule, it was an informed choice. She attended political meetings, listened to Savarkar's speeches and claims to have discussed the Sangh and its ideology with Mr Apte, the leading Sanghchalak of Poona. Bakultai Devkule joined the Samiti through a female friend and was a close associate of Saraswati Apte, in some ways the co-founder of the Samiti. The incorporation of women to the cause of Hindutva was by appeals very similar to those made to men. Clearly Savarkar and Hindutva had its converts among women as well.

²⁵⁴The story goes that Saraswati Apte had started a similar Shakra based programme for young girls in Poona around the same time that Laxmibai started the Samiti. Later these organizations were merged in 1938. Apte became the second Pramukh Sanchalika after Laxmibai's death.

²⁵⁵ For instance, Basu et al p43 and P Bachetta, "Hindu nationalist women as Ideologues" in Kumari Jayawardane and Maathi de Alwis(eds)*Embodied Violence*, opcit,p133

²⁵⁶ *Amritbindu*, p11, opcit

²⁵⁷ Interview with Bakultai Devkule, sevika aged 82, 22nd April, 2003, Thane

A Separate Existence -the Politics of Separation?

Women it seems were never addressed as a constituency at all. In this context I quote the views of an RSS pracharak whom I happened to meet in the house of The VHP Women's wing President, Mumbai unit, " *Sangh teen vastuon se door raha hai: kanak kirti aur kamini.*²⁵⁸ (Sangh has stayed separate from three things, wealth, fame and female sexuality) The President herself explained the decision thus, *Aadmi aur auraton ke beech mein lafde na hon is liye inko alag rakha.*(emphasis added)²⁵⁹ (They were kept separate to avoid affairs)

However other women had interesting insights to offer. Prerana Kshirsagar argued that it was in women's interests that the separate organizations were formed as they had the autonomy to plan and organize their programmes on an individual level. She argues that even now in case of meetings etc it is the man's convenience that is really looked into and therefore these are scheduled late in the night making it next to impossible for women to attend. On being asked if this did not reflect the skewed distribution of power with the men having a greater say, she did not have a counterargument.²⁶⁰ Other views that were forthcoming on this issue was the traditional male accusation levelled against women that they could not work in groups and always ended up squabbling amongst themselves. The women apparently wanted to disprove men on this front as well. ²⁶¹And they do so with considerable pride.

Laxmibai comments on the relations between the Sangh and the Samiti arguing that just as the roles of man and woman are complementary in the family with the home the woman's domain and the world the man's domain, the functions of

²⁵⁸ Interview with Deshpande, the fear of women's sexuality runs like a red thread in all the conversations I had with swayamsevaks. They gave example of the decline of the Buddhist Sangha after the entry of women. This is one of the most misogynist views advanced as an explanation for the decline of the Sangh. It has to be noted that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh shares the last part of its name with the (Buddhist?) Sangha.

²⁵⁹ Interview with Laxmi Bhide, head women's wing of the VHP, 7th June, 2003, Mumbai

²⁶⁰ Interview with Prerana Kshirsagar, Head, VHP Sanskar Kendras, 13th March, 2004, Mumbai

²⁶¹ This was routinely emphasized by almost all the sevikas I interviewed.

these organizations are not completely disjointed but form separate spheres.²⁶² The fact remains though that to serve Hindutva women had decided to step out of 'their' domain, even if they were to work with women alone. This private domain was increasingly being redefined. In this way they extended the world of the home to the Shakha as well. Hindutva ideology perceived no contradictions even when the women of the Samiti transgressed the world of the home by performing physical exercises in open spaces, as long as the overall project remained that of *sangathan* of Hindu women. That women had wrested the initiative to "organize Hindu women" is clear.

If we look beyond the paradigm of Hindutva politics, and consider contemporary women's organizations and women's involvement in contemporary politics, interesting contrasts and continuities emerge. I now turn to discuss women's political activity in the twentieth century, which manifested itself in a variety of movements.

Women's Contemporary Political Activity²⁶³

In this segment I discuss the early history of women's political activity followed by a discussion of the same theme in western India and particularly in Bombay city. However, before discussing this, there is a brief analysis of the conditions that made it possible. These determined the course that women's politics took in the subsequent years. This is significant because in the Indian case the pre condition was enabling women to move out of the segregated domestic sphere. The male directed social reform movement demonstrated its class character in the issues that were taken up; for example, the end of female seclusion, women's education and property rights. Yet it did create an ideology that legitimised women's movement out of the domestic space. The creation of the extended space enabled women's participation outside the domestic domain.

²⁶² *Amritbindu*, opcit, p11

²⁶³ I focus on broader trends in political activity. This discussion is drawn from Leela Kasturi and Vina Mazumdar(eds), *Women and Indian Nationalism*(Delhi, Vikas: 1994)

Women's political activity began with middle class women's involvement and their coming together with a desire for organised action to improve the lot of women. There were numerous local women's associations, organizations, clubs, societies, samities and institutions (hostels, rescue homes shelters schools) founded and social work and philanthropy dominated. Thus women's involvement in the public sphere began as an extension of their nurturing roles outside the kin group. The metaphor of the extended family assisted women in extending their concerns beyond the kin group.

The women operated in a segregated sphere, a separate world of women and demonstrated no serious threat to the established social order by projecting their special and biological difference from men. Thus they expanded the scope of their activity, while still remaining separate from the world of men and extending the female space in the public sphere. The women's organizations that they formed slowly expanded the range of their activities. It was the female intelligentsia, a group of elitist women, that mediated between the separate female world and the world of public affairs and facilitated the politicisation of women.

The first arena in which women as a group began to be involved in political action was that of nationalist struggles.²⁶⁴ Feminist consciousness arose in the course of struggle for democratic rights against the colonial state and within the national agenda as well.²⁶⁵ The beginnings of provincial and national associations are traced to the period after 1910. These associations were elitist, bourgeois and urban and consisted of women of education and privilege, but they were motored by a desire of service to women. The Women's India Association (WIA) was formed in 1917 in Madras, the National Council of Women in India (NCWI) was formed in 1925, and the All India Women's Conference in

²⁶⁴ Jayawardane, *Nationalism and Feminism in the Third World*(London, Routledge:1986) p258 The movement against partition of Bengal(1905) saw women's participation on a substantial scale.
²⁶⁵ *ibid*

1927. By mid 1930s the WIA and AIWC claimed a membership of over 10,000 women. Women political rights increasingly became the agenda of these associations though they began as apolitical bodies. The WIA and AIWC were caught up in the nationalist movement and there were greater dilemmas as the national movement itself became mass based.

Among the nationalist positions I wish to focus on the views of Gandhi as his understanding of the women's question was unique and enabled a whole range of nationalist participation for a large number of women. Gandhian mobilisation of women is important not only in the scale of women mobilised but because of his distinct political and social vision. Gandhi's position on the women's question is difficult to discern, not least because it went through certain shifts. Gandhi's basic ideas on women's rights were equality in some spheres and opportunities for self-development and self realization.²⁶⁶ There was a critique of child marriage though he was against the remarriage of adult widows. He argued for the education of women but that was not to be for economic independence. Thus there were certain ambivalences. However his thoughts and programmes enabled a whole spectrum of women to add meaning to their lives, as well as, identify with the nationalist cause. His programme of khadi had an economic dimension. It served the interests of poor peasant women and enabled middle class women to recognise the virtues of manual work as well as empathise with their poorer sisters. His plea for women's participation was on the basis of their being equals in the nationalist project. However the involvement was cast in the idiom of a religious duty that on one hand, enabled greater participation, but, on the other meant that politicisation did not lead to a fundamental questioning of gender roles or sex segregation.

²⁶⁶ *ibid*, p95

Women's Political Activity in Bombay²⁶⁷

The beginnings of political activity were made by cross community middle class associations like the Arya Mahila Samaj(1882)Hindu Ladies Social and Literary Club(1894) with broad social reform aims. Thereafter through community based associations, public performance of ceremonies, etc women were drawn into the extended public female space from the household. There were caste-based associations, for example, Pathare Prabhu, Bene Israel, Sarawat Mahila Samajes. These changed the composition of the members of these clubs as more homebound women were part of their activities. General social reform associations were also founded, for example, Bhagini Samaj and Seva Sadan were founded in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Hind Mahila Samaj (started by Avantika bai Gokhale) brought in full time trained celibate life members to women's associations and in 1931 residential sevikas were allowed to function. But the primary aim of the women's associations was "social service". At the time of the Non Cooperation Movement, the Rashtriya Stree Sabha was founded. During the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Desh Sevika Sangh, a volunteer body of the Rashtriya Stree Sabha was formed and controlled by the Congress. The most tightly organised of volunteer bodies was the Hindustan Seva Dal organised by NS Hardikar in 1923. Significantly even during the Civil Disobedience movement, there were several women's groups that were established and continued with their social reform work without joining nationalist politics.

²⁶⁷ Pearson, *Women in Public life in Bombay City with special reference to the Civil Disobedience Movement*, JNU, 1979, Ph.D. Thesis. I acknowledge the work done by Gail Pearson for the data that it has offered me for my work on early women's organizations in Bombay. Her argument centres around on the creation of a female intelligentsia in this period. The social reformers had envisaged the working of women in a separate sphere, which was then enlarged to work in an extended common space of women's community based associations and finally some women came into their own in the common space. However it was this female intelligentsia that subsequently got transformed into the female elite that indeed elided the condition of the masses of women that remained within the segregated sphere. It was the female intelligentsia's role as the mediator between the man's world and the segregated female sphere that was the cause of their inability ever to fundamentally question the patriarchal social order.

Pearson demonstrates that the massive mobilization of women during the Civil Disobedience Movement could take place because of this tradition of social reform activity that had been built over the decades in Bombay. However she returns to the same question of women's inability to address their gender concerns even after their politicisation.

The Rashtra Sevika Samiti marks a departure as it was neither formed for the explicit purpose of social reform nor participated in the national movement. Though the nationalist mobilisation of women generated its own strategy of subordination, it also allowed a broader vision of women's identity and nurtured a nascent feminism. Interestingly the women of the Samiti also demanded to be equal partners in the Hindutva project, they claimed to be equal participants in the nation and as wives and mothers, they saw their sphere of activity, as a service in the cause of the "Hindu Rashtra". Laxmibai Kelkar's injunctions to women are worth quoting in full,

"Sewa or service is the primary duty of a woman. So far the woman have served the family. Now you have to widen the horizons of your service. You have to dedicate yourself for the service of the nation. Service is a difficult task. It calls for sacrifices, dedication and utmost devotion towards duty. The service has to be done selflessly. The nation means the society, its traditions and its culture. You have to conserve it strengthen it and nurture it. No single person can do this task alone. So we have to be united under the auspices of the Samiti, follow its ideology and discipline".²⁶⁸

But the Hindutva movement, with its emphasis on self protection and service in the cause of Hindutva alone, offered no other course of action for women but as sevikas for the Hindu Rashtra.

²⁶⁸ Rajani Rai, *Life Sketch*, opcit, p27

Chapter Two

Hamare alag adarsh hain* (We have different ideals)

This chapter draws a profile of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, the premier organization of militant Hindu women. I begin with a discussion of a few general points about the Samiti, its all India status and some organizational details. With Mumbai region as the area of my field work, I attempt to analyze the internal dynamics, the day to day functioning and the programmes as well as the sociological profile of the members of the Samiti. I show that the formula of mixing social service with organizational work is the most enduring feature of the Samiti's activity.

The Samiti borrows its organizational structure from the Sangh. Its internal order is rigidly hierarchical. For its mode of functioning, it has adopted *ekchalikanuvartitva* (following one leader), which, however, is defended as "perfectly decentralized and democratic"²⁶⁹ The method is described as the *parivar* (family) mode of functioning and an analogy is drawn from the head of the family who takes decisions, keeping everybody's interests in mind.²⁷⁰ The Pramukh Sanchalika is accepted as the head of the *Sangathan*, "the motherly head of this big family"²⁷¹, acting in the interests of the organization, while other sevikas lovingly accept her decisions. This is in line with an uncritical admiration of the patriarchal joint family system, which is commonplace in the Sangh. These themes resonate with the general tenor of literature published by the Samiti. To this day, all office bearers are appointed and not elected. This holds true for the Sangh as well.

* Interview with Sunanda Devsthal, Thane, 28th December 2003

²⁶⁹ *Preface*, opcit, p74

²⁷⁰ *ibid*, p74

²⁷¹ *ibid*, p4

The highest office, that of the Pramukh Sanchalika, was occupied by the founder Laxmibai Kelkar till her death in 1978. Thereafter, Saraswati Apte, a committed sevika, widow of the Pune Sanghchalak, Vinayakrao Apte, became the Pramukh Sanchalika, according to the wishes of Laxmibai Kelkar. The present Sanchalika, Ushatai Chati,²⁷² took over in 1994 according to the written wishes of Saraswati Apte. Chati is a trained teacher and is the widow of Guntant Chati, who was in charge of the "ghosh" (possibly the RSS musical band) at the national level. All these women are maharashtrian brahmins and were married. Apte and Chati were married to staunch RSS workers and began their work in the lifetime of their husbands, but assumed greater responsibilities after the death of their husbands. Many of the sevikas that I interviewed have similarly continued to work even after the death of their husbands. The withdrawal from public life that usually accompanies widowhood in traditional Hindu upper caste families does not seem to have worked here.

They divide India into eight anchals and thirty-five pradeshas which are subdivided further into vibhags and zillas. Shakhas in the whole country number three and a half thousand.²⁷³ Beginning in Maharashtra, the work spread to Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh and now extends all over India including the North East. The Samiti also functions in fifteen countries all over the world particularly those countries with significant diasporic populations, for example, the USA, the UK, Australia and Kenya. It is called the Hindu Sevika Samiti abroad and there are parivar shakhas (family shakhas) registered under the Sangh.²⁷⁴

²⁷² .Significantly in 1991 she was selected to the position of one of the central trustees of VHP. Given the mass mobilization of women achieved in the Rajanmabhumi movement, this does not seem to be an innocent choice. *Preface*, *ibid*, p43

²⁷³ *Rashtra Sevika Samiti ek parichay* (Mathura, Sevika Prakashan, nd), p3. Since I purchased this pamphlet from the RSS bookstore at Jhandewalan, New Delhi, in 2003 I presume that it is a recent publication and is up to date. The information was corroborated in the course of interviews.

²⁷⁴ *Rashtra Sevika Sangathan Visheshank*, *opcit*, p16

At the all India level, the working committee called the Akhil Bharatiya Karya karini, consists of the following organs²⁷⁵ :

Vandaniya Pramukh Sanchalika
Mananiya Pramukh Karyavahika
Mananiya Sah Pramukh Karyavahikas
Mananiya Bauddhik Pramukh
Mananiya Shikshan Pramukh
Mananiya Nidhi Pramukh
Mananiya Karyalaya Pramukh

Office bearers of the Samiti at the level of the prant (district)²⁷⁶:

Karyavahika –The head of the shakha responsible for over all coordination and consolidation of the organization.

Pramukh Shikshika – The chief instructor, who plans and executes all sorts of physical education training and holds shakhas.

Baudhhik Pramukh – The chief instructor responsible for executing bauddhik (ideological training) programmes

Utsav Pramukh – The sevika responsible for planning and organizing the festivals of the Samiti.

Nidhi Pramukh – The treasurer, who maintains the accounts of Gurudakshina (funds collected on the foundation day anniversary) and allocates funds for various activities.

Gata Pramukh – The sevika in charge of shakhas in a particular locality.

Karyalaya Pramukh – The sevika who maintains records and reports and is in charge of the Samiti office.

Geet Pramukh – The sevika who composes songs and teaches them to other sevikas.

²⁷⁵ *Preface, opcit, p76*

²⁷⁶ *ibid. pp74-75*

The institution of the pracharika was formally put in place after the year 1980.²⁷⁷ There are vistarikas, who voluntarily work full time for the Samiti for a certain period. This terminology is common throughout the Sangh Parivar.²⁷⁸ The pracharikas, like the pracharaks of the Sangh, are celibate women who have completed three years of training and have dedicated themselves fully to the expansion of the shakha network. At present there are thirty pracharikas and twenty vistarikas in India.²⁷⁹

The Samiti's basic unit is the shakha, which now almost everywhere meets weekly or at the most on weekends. The shakhas were organized on a daily basis earlier. Members are divided into: bal (children), tarun(youth) grihini(housewives/ adult married women) and prauddh(elderly).The shakha is modelled on the Sangh's shakha with ideological indoctrination and games. Considerable importance is given to games for the purpose of sangathan: "*sangathit hone ke liye shaam ko ek ghanta aakar khelna ek mahatvapoorna bindu hai. Pratidin khelne se ek doosre ke prati hote hue prembavna ka nirmaan hota hai.*"²⁸⁰(It is necessary to play for an hour everyday to be organised. Playing everyday results in developing bonds of love) Kelkar apparently was concerned about the impact of games on women's child bearing capacities and therefore physicians were consulted and yoga was incorporated after 1953.²⁸¹ Paramilitary training consists of lathi wielding, karate, rifle shooting, etc. Ideological training is completed in the vargas (camps) that are modelled on the lines of the Officer Training Camps of the Sangh.²⁸² The first varga (prathama) is an eight day camp, the second varga (dvitiya) is a fifteen day camp and the third

²⁷⁷ *Rashtra Sevika*, opcit p15. Sindhu Phatak and Pramila Medhe had been working as pracharikas since the 1950s.

²⁷⁸ For instance, Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad, the students affiliate of the Sangh also has full time workers who work for a certain period towards a certain project/ movement. They are called vistarakas. The term comes from Vistaar, which means expansion.

²⁷⁹ *Rashtra Sevika Samiti ek parichay*, opcit, p3

²⁸⁰ *Aao Khel Khelen* (Nagpur, Sevika Prakashan: nd), p3

²⁸¹ *Rashtra Sevika*, opcit, p28

²⁸² The RSS organises OTCs for swayamseaks every year. There are three levels and the pracharaks have attended all three of them.

which is held only in Nagpur is a month long affair of intense mental training (bauddhik) as well as physical training (sharirik). Only those sevikas who have completed the tritiya (third) stage become pracharikas.

Festivals

The main 'utsavas' are five in number²⁸³:

"Samiti intends to inspire a sense of pride and devotion towards Hindu Dharma through certain occasions of national, social importance. Through constant celebrations, we Hindus will be reminded of the great heritage which glorifies us all."²⁸⁴

- Varsha Pratipada: The Hindu New Year's Day, which marks the victory of Vikramaditya over the invaders, the Shakas. This period is described as the golden age of India.

"The Shakas inflicted insulting conditions, like demanding them every year 1000 young, beautiful, unmarried girls (sic). *We women should specially be grateful to Vikramaditya*"²⁸⁵ (italics added) This resonates with the traditional Samiti concern with the invaders' violation of the chastity of Hindu women.

- Guru Purnima: The day of worship of the Guru. In the Samiti, puja is offered to the Bhagwa Dhwaja, which is regarded as the Guru and money(gurudakshina) is collected.²⁸⁶ The women come to salute the flag and submit donations into a box kept at the base of the Bhagwa Dhwaja.
- Raksha Bandhan: This festival celebrates the love between brother and sister. Sisters tie rakhis (silken threads) on the hands of their brothers. In the Samiti, sevikas tie rakhis to the Bhagwa Dhwaja and to each other.
- Vijaya Dashami: This festival marks the tenth day of victory at the end of Navratri, the day Durga killed the demons. The Samiti was started on this day.

²⁸³ Preface ,opcit, pp67-71

²⁸⁴ ibid, p67

²⁸⁵ ibid, p 68

²⁸⁶ ibid, p7

- Makar Sankaramana: The date on which the Sun enters Makar Rashi. Til and Jaggery are distributed to wipe out bitterness. The message for the sevikas is to work hard to achieve their ends.

Bacchetta writes that each of these festivals correspond to a Sangh festival in terms of its "signifier", but the Samiti assigns them different "signifieds".²⁸⁷ *Janmotsava* (birthdays) of Rama and Krishna and similar other festivals which enable greater participation of people are also celebrated, they being seen as occasions of "*jansampark*" (forging contacts with people).²⁸⁸

The Samiti largely replicates the Sangh's festivals, which are themselves traditional festivals invested with new meanings. Though these are described as "national festivals", none of the 'National Festivals of Independent India' feature on the Samiti's or the Sangh's itinerary. These, obviously, do not hold any importance in their scheme of things. The Raksha Bandhan festival has been completely reinvented and given new meaning. Similarly, from the women's point of view, the New Year Day is supposed to hold a special significance; a deliverance from threatened chastity. The significance of Makar Sankaramana can be wholly attributed to the significance of this festival for the maharashtrian calendar. This festival is particularly important to maharashtrians as this marks their New Year Day. Thus the festival which is originally Maharashtrian is elevated to national status.

These five festivals are declared as national festivals and their functionality in the Samiti's discourse consists of aiding the dissemination of its message.

²⁸⁷ In the case of Vijaya Dashami, for the Sangh it marks the victory of god Rama over Ravana whereas for the Samiti, it is goddess Durga slaying the demons. Evil is personified as masculine in both cases but in the former case its elimination is due to masculine agency while in the latter it is due to feminine agency. So in the Sangh's account femininity is absent whereas in the samiti's masculine and feminine elements coexist. Paola Bacchetta, "Hindu Nationalist Women as Ideologues" in K umari Jayawardane and Malathi De Alwis (ed) *Embodied Violence*, opcit, p135

²⁸⁸ *Rashtra Sevika*, opcit, p1

Idol

The Samiti accepted Devi Ashtabhuja as its idol in the year 1950. Bakultai Devkule narrated as to how and why the Devi was incorporated.²⁸⁹ In the wake of the ban on the Sangh after Gandhi's murder, they discontinued their daily exercises in open grounds in front of the Bhagwa Dhwaja as this would draw attention and public censure: the women would practise in front of the Devi's idol. Ashtabhuja encompasses qualities of " strength, intellect and wealth"²⁹⁰The Devi has been accepted as the "*adarsh stree*" (ideal woman). In the words of Bakultai²⁹¹ Ashtabhuja, significantly, is revered only by the Samiti. She takes the place of gods in the Hindu pantheon. Sunanda Amravatkar, a sevika who is now in charge of the VHP women's wing, pointed out her war-like qualities. She also said that the devi was crafted out of the Devi Mahatamya.²⁹² When I asked the pracharika Sathe as to why there was no pictorial image of gods/ goddesses in her room, she countered this by saying that "*aap kehti hain koi photo nahi hai prantu mujhe to devi Ashtabhuja yahan dikhai deti hain*" (why would you say so when the devi's photograph exists in my room) pointing towards the Devi's photograph in her room. (This was the only photograph adorning her room.) The Devi carries weapons in two hands²⁹³, the gita, the agnikunda, the rudraksh, the lotus and the bell in the remaining hands while the last hand is raised in blessing.²⁹⁴ Women are exhorted to draw inspiration from the Devi and her eight arms symbolize her infinite capacity to handle several tasks, just as actual women have to juggle with several responsibilities. This representation can be read as an affirmation of female power. This has to be seen, however, in

²⁸⁹ Interview with Bakultai Devkule, Thane, 30th March, 2004

²⁹⁰ *Preface*, opcit, p4

²⁹¹ Interview with Bakultai Devkule, opcit.

²⁹² Interview with Sunanda Amravatkar, Thane, 2nd January, 2004.

²⁹³ Bacchetta seems to suggest that the devi carries weapons in all her eight hands which is factually incorrect. See Bacchetta, "Hindu Nationalist women as Ideologues" in K.Jayawardane and M De Alwis (ed) *Embodied Violence*, opcit.p153

²⁹⁴ The Devi's portrait's however show a saffron flag in her hands.



Ashtabhuja Devi
The *Samiti's* chief idol and goddess

contrast with the Sangh's constant attempts to marginalise and devalorise the feminine.²⁹⁵

Ideals

Matrutva, Kartutva and Netrutva (Enlightened leadership, efficient execution of work, and benevolent leadership)²⁹⁶

Jijabai, Ahalyabai Holkar and Laxmibai of Jhansi

It is critical to pay attention to language in the production of history and of politics. The history that is being prepared by the Samiti gives a paramount importance to the role of women. It is not a mere coincidence that all the three are maharashtrian, Kshatriya women from warrior families. All these women were widowed but did not become Sati. This, however, is presented not as due to any independent volition on the part of the women. Rather, they were on persuasion by their male kin that their services were needed by the State/ sons and they would be performing higher duties in the interests of the nation by remaining alive.

It is important to ponder as to why Sita, the heroine of the Ramayana, who has been the ideal of inspiration for its founder, has not been accepted as the ideal by the Samiti. Doesn't she represent perfect wifedom? Sita is, perhaps too much of a model of suffering wifedom and, interestingly, in my interviews, the women were not particularly willing to talk about Ram's injustice towards Sita. That Laxmibai Kelkar stopped her lectures on the Ramayana with Ram's coronation and did not give discourses on the Uttar Kanda can also be interpreted as such. However, Sita is acknowledged as the perfect model of chastity that can ever be proffered. Docile, self effacing, chaste and devoted, she still remains the perfect model of Hindu womanhood in popular discourse within the Samiti.

²⁹⁵ Bacchetta, "Hindu Nationalist women as Ideologues" in K. Jayawardane and M de Al'vis(ed) *Embodied Violence* opcit, p 144.

²⁹⁶ *Preface*, opcit, pp4-5

Interestingly, Gail Pearson argues that the women in the Civil Disobedience movement were inspired by the Jhansi Rani ideal rather than by the ubiquitous Sita ideal, despite Gandhi's deep reverence for the Ramayana.²⁹⁷ Perhaps service to the nation lends itself to an invocation of warrior qualities, supposedly latent in all womanhood, and that are best personified in the Jhansi ki Rani.

This opens up possibilities of the interpretation that the Samiti recognizes that wifehood is fraught with tensions that motherhood is not. So,

“soorya ke pehle abhivadan karen poorva disha ko
shivba se pehle abhivadan jijamata ko”
(worship the direction east before the sun
and worship Jijamata before Shivaji)²⁹⁸

While men can be errant (as in the case of Shivaji's father who took a second wife, was fond of wine and women, and worked for Muslim masters or Holkar's husband who was a womanizer and debauched), the women are expected to retain their chastity. However, they are expected to submerge their sexuality in the service of their families/ sons and then motherhood becomes the source and the rationale of their survival.

Jijabai was instrumental in the reconversion of Balaji Nimbalkar to Hinduism. Ahalya Holkar was a prolific builder and got several temples repaired (including the famous Somanatha temple) and new ones constructed. These women have then been very carefully chosen so as not only to appeal to traditional or conservative womanhood alone. There are also elements in their life stories that can be interpreted as pro- Hindutva militancy. This reinforces Hindutva, which is the primary agenda of the Samiti.

²⁹⁷ Gail Pearson, *Women in Public life in Bombay city*, opcit.

²⁹⁸ *Matrutva ka mahamangal adarsh Jijau*(Nagpur, Sevika Prakashan:1999)p29 Jijabai was Shivaji's mother. According to Samiti tradition, Shivaji was trained in Hindutva by Jijabai.

Organizational Structure and History

The Samiti begun by Laxmibai Kelkar in Wardha was accepted as the premier organization amongst various similar organizations ²⁹⁹and upto 1947 there were 240 daily shakhas in Maharashtra, Vidarbha, Madhya Pradesh, Sindh, Punjab, Jammu Kashmir, Andhra Pradesh. The first *varga* (camp) took place in 1938 in Wardha. The annual conferences began in 1945, the first of these was held in Bombay. Now there are biennial conferences, the first held in July in Nagpur while the second takes place in February in different regions. As before, the method of expansion remains the dispersal of women through marriage.³⁰⁰ While a number of sevikas find it difficult to sustain their work after marriage, for several others, it works the other way round and marriage results in the altogether challenging work of starting a new shakha. This was the case with my eighty two-year-old respondent, Bakultai Devkule who came to Mumbai after marriage and took the lead in starting a number of shakhas all over Mumbai (then Bombay).

The first roadblock that the Samiti hit was the ban on the RSS after Gandhi's assassination. Significantly this is referred to as Gandhivadh³⁰¹, the term *vadh* is used only for the slaying of demons by gods. Though there was no ban on the Samiti, Laxmibai decided to suspend its activities and in that sense the Samiti is said to have suffered a setback. However, Bakultai Devkule said that the Samiti was kept alive through *Bhajan Mandalis* and Kelkar's Ramayana lectures. The women, led by Bakultai, led a huge march of five thousand women and met the then Bombay chief minister, Morarji Desai, petitioning him for the release of the

²⁹⁹ see chapter one of this dissertation

³⁰⁰ Basu et al point out that marriage can also mean an end to participation in the Samiti and in such cases a correspondence course is provided. Basu et al, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, opcit,p42

³⁰¹ *Rashtra Sevika* ,opcit, p6

When several RSS workers were interned.

The Samiti runs thirty-five trusts³⁰³ all over the country of which two are in Mumbai. The first trust was started in the year 1957 in Nashik called the Rani Laxmibai Smarak Samiti. Thereafter in Nagpur, the Ahalyabai temple was built near the Samiti's head office. Thus began a chain of trusts, temples, etc., all over the country, for example the Rajamata Jeejamata Trust and Bhartiya Stree Jeevan Vikas Parishad in Mumbai and so on. A very important aspect of the Samiti's activities are residential hostels especially those meant for girls from the north east regions. In Nagpur its task is clearly spelt out: they are the means to inculcate in them " Hindutva Sanskar"³⁰⁴. The Sangh Parivar has an old agenda of proselytisation amongst the Hill tribes (the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram was founded for this reason, this was also the focus of early VHP activity). A residential hostel for the uninfected daughters of leprosy patients functions in Bilaspur³⁰⁵, in Jallundhar there is a hostel for girls from Leh and Ladakh. There are plans to start hostels for girls from Manipur in Bangalore and for girls from Meghalaya and Mizoram in Nanded. The agenda of these hostels is clearly to counter missionary proselytisation in these areas and claim these girls into the folds of Hinduism. The Samiti has also built temples, four Ashtabhuja³⁰⁶ temples and one Ram temple. The Samiti claims to have been active in providing relief in times of natural calamities, for example, in the times of Latur earthquake and the more recent Gujarat earthquake. It claims to have adopted the village of Mayapur in Gujarat and provided funds for its reconstruction. It runs "Sanskar Kendras" in vanvasi areas, which basically are fronts to spread Hindutva propaganda among tribals.

³⁰² ibid, p6 . Interview with Bakultai Devkule, opcit

³⁰³ ibid p9

³⁰⁴ ibid , p10.

³⁰⁵ Tanika Sarkar points out the marked difference in attitudes of the murdered missionary Graham Steines and the sevikas towards supporting leprosy patients. Tanika Sarkar, "Pragmatics of the Hindu Right Politics of Women's organizations" in *EPW*, opcit , p2164

³⁰⁶ *Rashtra Sevika* , opcit, p9

Apart from this, the pet themes of Hindutva have seen active propagation by the sevikas: cow protection in 1955, anti conversion rallies after the Meenakshipuram conversions of 1981, Kashmir Bachao Andolan in 1990. Further it claims to have been a part of campaigns for Uniform Civil code, Swadeshi and Kar Seva.³⁰⁷

Sevikas in Mumbai³⁰⁸

Yogini Joglekar, the famous Marathi writer, who had come to visit her brother in Mumbai from Pune, started the first shakha in Mumbai. This was in 1940, nearly four years after the founding of the Samiti in Wardha. This is a part of the traditional folklore of the sevikas in Mumbai. In the beginning there were only three shakhas in Mumbai: Dadar East, Dadar West and Girgaum. It has to be noted that Dadar shakhas were held in the vicinity of the Dadar Hindu Colony and while Girgaum is proximate to the Parel mill area. The Samiti received an impetus when Bakultai Devkule came to Mumbai to live with her husband after her marriage.

Bakultai Devkule began holding regular shakhas in Mumbai and it was college going girls from Science and Arts colleges that were the first recruits. In this sense, the early method of recruitment of the Sangh was replicated in the case of the Samiti.³⁰⁹ The shakhas began spreading and, thereafter, the first shakha in the suburbs was held in Kurla and Sion. The areas beyond Dadar are called suburbs and this can be read as a mark of true expansion. Subsequently, she decided to hold a fifteen-day varga for the girls. Her younger brother, who was a swayamsevak, was roped in as a *shikshak* (teacher), she being the *pramukh shikshak* (main teacher). Her mother took care of Bakultai's six-month-old son, and Bakultai managed to hold this varga. The varga had six to eight girls, not all

³⁰⁷ *ibid*, p14

³⁰⁸ The Samiti's early history has been entirely reconstructed on the basis of testimonies of Bakultai Devkule and Veena Bodes interviewed on 30th March, 2004 and 2nd April, 2004.

³⁰⁹ C Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, opcit, pp 66-67

of them college students. In those days there were no residential vargas and the girls brought their tiffin boxes to the camp. Veena Bodes had similar things to say about her experience at the varga in Pune. In fact, Veena's mother had come to the varga to see the kind of training being imparted and became a member of the prauddha shakha. The women were under constant surveillance in those times. The attractiveness of the Samiti in those times is said to have consisted in the time in the fact that it offered avenues to middle class girls, who formed the crux of its membership, to move in public spaces. "Newly independent India ignited the spirit of adventure in young hearts", are Bakultai's words.

The work grew in fits and starts and in times of the ban after Gandhi's assassination, the sevikas kept in touch through *Mangalagaur* and *Hartalika* and such other fasts and festivals. Community celebration of festivals have for a long while acted as the main avenues through which women have sought to act in the extended female space. In the times of the Emergency, similar tactics were employed, though Veena Bodes lamented that such communitarian celebrations are a thing of the past.

Growing from modest beginnings, the sevikas now have a *Karyalaya*, the head office of the Samiti in Mumbai in Thane city. This area is a BJP stronghold and there are ubiquitous signs of the saffron brigade in this area. The local corporator is from the BJP and the banners of VHP as well as of the Bajrang Dal greet passersby. The locality is strictly middle class with old housing societies predominating; though there are a few new high rise apartments as well.

There are two buildings set up by the Samiti, each of which functions as two separate trusts, the Stree Jeevan Vikas Parishad and the Jijamata Trust. Funds were collected through donations while for construction of the building of Jijamata; a contribution of one rupee was collected from each of the Sevikas. Bakultai Devkule narrated the story of how construction was stalled in between

by the lack of funds, and, thereafter, was resumed with generous donations that came from the Congress MLA, S K Patil. The buildings house a Sanskar Kendra run by Sevikas (significantly this Kendra has children from middle class families, and not slums, and they are taught the Gayatri Mantra, the Surya Namaskar, etc.), a hostel that can house twenty four single women, a library, a marriage hall that is rented out at concessional rates to sevikas and to underprivileged families, a meeting hall for Samiti members, and rooms are available for full time sevikas passing through Bombay. There is a school for deaf-mute children called the Kumolini Karna Badheer School that is run by a trust formed of sevikas. In addition there are Karate classes for children and a "Soorya Namsakar Mandal" that function during vacations in the Laxmibai Kelkar hall. The Samiti Karyalaya also functions as a distribution centre for home made food products made by women from low-income families. The two buildings also house a Ram temple as well as a temple of Ashtabhuja Devi.

In 1953, the Stree Jeevan Vikas Parishad started a Grihini Vidyalaya scheme, a diploma course in Domestic Science, which was however discontinued because of competition from a similar degree course run by the SNTD, the women's university set up by Maharishi Karve. The Thane Samiti has also established a Purohit Varga that train women purohits. The women priests are called for minor poojas like the Satyanarayana and, of late, also for Griha Pravesh ceremonies.³¹⁰

The latest programme started by the Thane Samiti is to train tribal girls from the Vikramgad area (which is a tribal area) so as to enable them to become self employed. The programme was inaugurated on Ramnavami 2004. Accordingly, four girls in the age group of sixteen to twenty are to stay in a room of the Jijamata Trust. Training in sewing began almost immediately. There were plans to give training in other crafts like candle making, baking and so on. At the same

³¹⁰ Interview with Sunanda Devasthali, opcit

time classes in Sanskrit and Samiti prayers were going on. Bakultai Devkule said that they were to start shakhas once they returned home. Plans began with the training of batches of four girls every six months. This programme is modelled on the work being done by the Ahalyadevi Mandir in Wardha. The welfarist orientation of the Sangh's propaganda machinery is replicated here as well, the attempts to expand into tribal areas dividend.

The Samiti's base has remained more or less homogenous in that, the majority comes from upper castes particularly maharashtrian Brahmin families. This was admitted in the course of the interview as well, even Vile Parle, a predominantly Gujarati locality, had fewer Gujarati women participating in the shakhas and the programmes. Whatever be the claims made about the Sangh, the Samiti has not been able to reach out to too many women outside the RSS milieu.

The involvement of women in communal organizations reveals a long unbroken history, and therefore our long-standing assumptions about women's low levels of politicization and traditional pacifism are challenged. For an organization as old as the Samiti, its members, full time workers- pracharikas (30 as compared to 2500 *pracharaks* of the RSS)³¹¹ and funds at its disposal are abysmally poor as compared to that of the Sangh. This is particularly important as the Samiti claims to be an independent parallel of the Sangh in terms of its function of the *sangathan* of Hindu women. It also assumes a pedagogic role in that all the new women's fronts formed by the Sangh use women from the Samiti for training in ideological orientation. The women politicians of the BJP, for example, Sumitra Mahajan and Rajmata Scindia were trained in the Samiti. The Samiti proclaims to do quiet 'cultural' work like the Sangh, and shuns the flamboyance of the more militant of the front organizations of the Sangh Parivar, claiming this to be its strength.

³¹¹ Interview with Chanda Sathe, 3rd January 2004, Thane

There is no doubt that despite a long history of service to Hindutva the women of the Samiti are not given their due recognition. When I telephoned at the Sangh citadel, Pitru Chhaya, in Dadar, Mumbai, I was told that the Samiti had no office at all. There was a marked ignorance about the Samiti and its work among the members of the Sangh. When I questioned Shubhangi Mahajan about this, she just wished it away saying that the junior members of the Sangh do not know much. Remarkably, in the course of the very same interview, she said that in a meeting of the affiliates of the Sangh Parivar, she thought aloud as to while it was expected of the women to send the men to shakhas, the men never took it upon themselves to do the same for women. She further remarked that the Sanghchalak acknowledged this but said no more. Thus the women realize that there is a left-handed treatment that is imparted to the women's wings but they cannot do much about it.

Bakultai Devkule said that there were a few occasions where they sought the help of the Sangh but that was all. She also said that there was no competition with the Sangh. She claimed to have not visited the Sangh office even once. Most of my respondents claimed to being not bothered about the fact that the Samiti did not wield power and claimed to be happy with their quiet cultural work.

This also explains as to why many women choose to move out of the Samiti and make independent careers in Hindutva politics: such as Vijayraje Scindia and Sumitra Mahajan did. There are several women that now work for Sanskar Vargas of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad or the Durga Vahini. The younger women either work with mixed organizations or have formed independent fronts.³¹²

³¹² Women students work with the ABVP and a number of women have formed the Stree Shakti Sangathana (founded in 1988, Mumbai) which though owes allegiance to Sangh Parivar, carries out a number of programmes on the lines of women's organizations doing voluntary work.

Despite denials, there is a grudging admission of the fact that the Samiti does not enjoy a privileged position in the Sangh hierarchy. This appears as early as in the time of Hedgewar as is recounted by Laxmibai Kelkar in her lectures.³¹³ Apparently he visited the Samiti shakha only once, on which occasion Laxmibai Kelkar said, "*Pujya doctorji ki prerana aur margdarshan se hi samiti ka prarambh hua hai. Parantu mujhe lagta hai ki unka dhyani apni kanya se putra ki or adhik hai*". (The Samiti was started taking inspiration and guidance from Doctorji. However it appears that he cares for his son more than he does for his daughter). Hedgewar refuted this by giving all the credit for the founding of the Samiti to Laxmibai Kelkar.³¹⁴ One way of reading this anecdote is seeing the autonomy of the Samiti as firmly established, while on the other it can also be seen as abdication of responsibility by the patriarch. This certainly points to a recognition of the neglect that the Samiti faced right from the days of its birth.

The marginalisation assumes critical significance as the Samiti was conceptualized in the form of an ideological parallel of the Sangh; the two railway tracks that never met.³¹⁵ It is quite evident that the two tracks were not equal in strength or importance. Is the marginalisation of the Samiti natural in the patriarchal and authoritarian Sangh Combine?³¹⁶

An aging Samiti?

Increasingly, sevikas are finding it difficult to recruit new girls into the Samiti. Hansen, whose fieldwork is based in the same area as mine, makes a similar point.³¹⁷ It is interesting to note that all my respondents accepted the fact that

³¹³ *Amritbindu*, opcit pp37-40

³¹⁴ *ibid*, p40

³¹⁵ *ibid*, p40

³¹⁶ see my argument, chapter one

³¹⁷ T B Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, opcit, pp99-100

the Samiti was finding it difficult to retain young girls. There are absolutely no daily shakhas, the number of evening shakhas have remained stagnant for a long time. In some places there are joint shakhas of all the age groups put together. In other testimonies what came across was the disillusionment with attending shakhas because of the monotony that it produced. The Samiti was seen as traditional and its work as something away from the masses.

In the course of my field work at a very general impressionistic level, it appeared that the majority of sevikas are middle aged or even older, these being the more dedicated sevikas who were not employed outside their homes and found time to involve themselves in the Samiti work. Curiously, daughters of even the more active sevikas are not involved with the Samiti. This strikes one as strange as mothers play an important role in the creation of active sevikas by sending their young daughters to the Samiti. When I probed this perplexing issue further, I was told that these women definitely insisted on their daughters attending the shakhas in their youth but their interest thereafter petered out. Here the class caste background works against this logic of expansion. Maharashtrian Brahmins are one of the most upwardly mobile groups in terms of availing of educational opportunities and the majority of Maharashtrian women now work outside their homes. This is particularly so in a city like Mumbai. The women enlisted reasons like tuitions and classes that were peculiarly the preoccupations of girls from middle class households. They also lamented the fact that parents were keen to turn their children into money spinning machines but there was nobody to give them "sanskaras". Sunanda Devasthali³¹⁸ held her own generation responsible for this state of affairs and said that the leadership need to have arranged good "programmes" to ensure that young girls remained attracted. As for the reasons as to why their daughters did not remain a part of the *shakhas*, the answer can be found in the testimony of Prachi Kale³¹⁹, Padmaja Kale's daughter, a

³¹⁸ Interview with Sunanada Devasthali, opcit

³¹⁹ Interview with Prachi Kale, Mumbai, 6th April, 2004

Chartered Accountant by profession. She could not go to the Samiti, as she said that time a was factor. Throughout her life it had been academics that took centre stage, even though she conceded that she was proud to see her mother work for the Samiti. As for her taking up similar work, she saw no such possibility of that in the near future. However, she also confessed that if she ever decided to work for an organization involved in "social work" it had to be a Sangh backed organization. Life is becoming tough, personal ambition paramount, and young women are not hesitant in admitting so. At the same time, a basic commitment to the Samiti remained alive, if not active.

In the year of Laxmibai Kelkar's birth centenary (2004-2005), there is a major expansion drive that has been inaugurated by the Samiti at the national level. The programme in Maharashtra plans to reach out through proselytisation into at least five mahila mandals (women's organizations), five schools (teachers are targeted), at least one slum, five nagarsevaks/ corporators/ MPs / MLAs, Sangh Pramukh and at least one rural township or vanvasi area. Meeting doctors, lawyers, and other professionals and creating a public profile of the Samiti is also a part of this programme. There will also be efforts towards forging contacts with former sevikas (who have become inactive). In the programmes there is an attempt at using the traditional Sangh methods of expansion as well as go beyond its strictly middle class upper caste base, into lower caste and tribal areas.

The targets are *sampark* (establishing contact) with at least one-lakh houses in the year of the birth centenary. The programme includes traditional Sangh agendas for example, teaching the whole of the Vande Mataram hymn, all its five stanzas and presenting this as the true national anthem vis a vis Jana Gana Mana which is misrepresented as being written to honour George V. The hymn is sung in Sangh and Samiti shakhas in toto as this hymn that sings the glory of

an undivided motherland is regarded the real national anthem of the country.³²⁰ This method of expansion on the centenary of the founder is a standard practice in the Sangh Parivar.³²¹

A disenchanted Sevika?

Padmaja Kale³²² is an atypical sevika. She is forty seven years old, married, a maharashtrian brahmin by caste. She holds a Bachelors degree in Microbiology as well as a diploma in Food Technology and worked till her marriage was arranged by her parents. Her husband coordinates the work of RSS shakhas in Mulund. Her husband's family is fairly politically active, her father in law being a one time Communist and her brother in law working with the Moral Rearmament Army. She is associated with the Left women's organization, Stri Mukti Sangathana and works actively with their programme of organizing rag pickers. She is volunteer at the two-day workshops that teach women about savings, health, hygiene and sexual and reproductive health. She is on her housing society's 'Cleanliness and Maintenance committee'. She is a committee member of the Stree Jeevan Vikas Parishad and the Sahavibhagpramukh (associate general secretary) of the Kumolini Karnabadheer Vidyalaya, run by the Thane Samiti. She is disenchanted with the work of the Samiti, which according to her has been unable to break out of its specific class background. She says "*Samiti ka kaam actual kaam nahi hai, Concrete results nahi dikhta hai*" (The work being done by the Samiti cannot be called real work, there being no visible results). She said that there was no work in the slum areas and of this even the sevikas are aware, but that nothing was done. She categorically stated that the work of the Samiti was confined to the middle class and she was herself fond of "root level work" (work at the grass roots?) like that of the Stri Mukti Sangathana. On

³²⁰ Tanika Sarkar argues that this signifies the divinity and integrity of the land, the territorial boundaries perpetually threatened, whereas in Jana Gana Mana this homogenised wholeness is 'unpacked'. Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, (New Delhi, Permanent Black:2001)pp278-279

³²¹ C.Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist Movement*, opcit,p383

³²² Interview with Padmaja Kale, Mumbai, 6th April,2004

the work of the pracharikas, she said that their task was limited to the expansion of the shakhas and that they operate within the given structure.

She does not regard herself as part of the Samiti any more. Nonetheless she accords considerable importance to the Samiti "*sanskaras*". Further, the remuneration received from the Stri Mukti Sangathan, for her work at the workshops is donated to the Samiti. Thus her primary allegiance to the Samiti remains.

It was Padmaja's mother who sent her to the Samiti and her father was a RSS worker. She recalls that even in the 1970s there were only four or five girls in the Sion shakha (Mumbai) that she attended. Padmaja reminisces that the shakhas were monotonous and her sister apparently attended on the condition that she would not hear the bauddhik, the ideological fare being dished out at the shakha. This bauddhik constitutes the core of the shakha purposes, the games really being a means to lure young, adolescent girls. The Samiti's prime motive is indoctrination of young minds and the games are also so designed that they contribute to the broader ideology of Hindutva, demonstrate the benefits of *Sangathan*, and inspire confidence in and unquestioning allegiance to the leader.³²³ A note of dissent, expressed at an early age, on this count is to be read therefore very carefully. Padmaja further said that there remained a generation gap between the Shikshika (teacher) and the children and that children were not particularly enamoured by "ideology" at that age. *Ekchalak anuvartita* that was uncritically accepted in the time that her mother was a sevika is now accepted with great difficulty. Today, girls need freedom and like to think for themselves. The emphasis on freedom and independent thinking goes against the traditional tenets of the Sangh that is bent on producing regimented lifestyles and homogenous culture through its pedagogy. This testimony says a lot about the kind of crisis faced by the Samiti, yet it has to be

³²³ Basu et al, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, opcit, pp34-35

noted that Padmaja has not completely severed her links with the Samiti, and attributes her orientation towards social work to the Samiti's "Sanskaras".

The Samiti has created a relatively autonomous space for women in the Sangh Parivar. Though theoretically subordinate to the RSS, the women of the Samiti enjoy hegemony over other women's fronts of the Sangh Parivar. That the Sangh's aid is sought in times of need is clear enough. The Sangh perhaps treats them as sister sevikas rather than as their ideological parallel. The Samiti functionaries are not accorded mention in official Sangh hierarchy, nor are they invited to all major functions. Nevertheless, they retain their institutionalised existence and seem to be content with their quiet cultural work. The concerns about its marginalisation though muted are voiced. It is my contention that one of the greatest strengths of the Samiti as well as the Sangh Combine are their strategies of "social work" that is enabling for the sevikas. A certain amount of functional autonomy as well as choice to move into allied spheres ensures that allegiance to the Hindutva agenda can find expression in different forms.

The Sangh has not relegated its women's affiliate into a lower order of existence in perpetuity. In its more flamboyant and public moments it presses into service the sevikas in the cause of Hindutva.³²⁴ In the remaining moments the Samiti remains content with performing its goal of "*sangathan* of Hindu women", preserving the ideological core of the Sangh.³²⁵ However the very same article points to tensions within this binary, under pressure from younger sevikas. Age being a critical marker of consciousness, it remains to be seen as to what course the Samiti will take, once the old guard crumbles.

³²⁴ Tanika Sarkar, "Pragmatics of the Hindu Right", opcit,p2161. The case being the Ramjanmabhumi campaign.

³²⁵ ibid,p2162

***Striyan agar Sita banengi, to purush Ram
ban sakte hain****

(If women become Sita , men will become Ram)

This chapter reflects on the representations of womanhood in the discourse of the Samiti as well as locates women's activism in the cause of Hindutva. I hope to show that though the Samiti is a part of the network of the Sangh Combine, women, by virtue of their gender, occupy a special position within the complex and are particularly compelled to address the concerns important to women ³²⁶, for instance, home, family etc. At the same time, like the Sangh, they are positioned within the Hindu symbolic: among the diverse range of representations of the feminine within Hindu traditions, the ideologues draw upon some and assign new interpretations to them to craft an ideal womanhood for the Hindu Rashtra. It is my contention that in the course of their involvement, they create several models of femininity.

The motives of my own research are guided by curiosity as well as by alarm about Hindutva's constituency among women. How has this conservative movement retained and added on new adherents to its cause was the primary question that I went to the field with. It was very important for me to see the women's perception of their work and mobilization in the cause of Hindutva. My fieldwork aimed at looking at the lives and concerns of communal women's organizations in the immensely changing social context of a metropolitan city. A related question was how far had their active involvement altered domestic lives and existence?

* This statement recurred in the course of my interviews. This statement is attributed to Gandhi. Gandhi apparently asked women college students to emulate Sita. When they asked him why men were not given models, he is said to have made this statement. Women had the 'power' to turn men into Ram.

³²⁶ I recognize that characterizing the house and family as exclusively women's domains is 'essentialist' and assumes that men do not exercise any power in this domain, which is questionable. Vandana Joshi emphatically makes this point in Vandana Joshi, "The role of women in Nazi Germany" in *Studies in History*, 18, 2,(2002)pp209-230

I

First, a note on the literature taken up for analysis followed by a brief statement on the interview techniques and methodology. I use material not only published by the Sevika Prakashan but also that printed and published by the various allied printing presses of the Sangh Parivar; for instance the Archana Prakashan (Bhopal). The reason that I have picked these up as well, is due to the fact that these were stocked and presented for sale in the Samiti office and at various programmes organized by the Samiti. The Sangh office, however, does not stock the publications of the Sevika Prakashan.³²⁷ Another reason is that the authors of these tracts are senior sevikas like Susheela Abhyankar and, therefore, their views are an indication of the official position of the Samiti. Here I take up for discussion those that pertain to the themes of family, marriage, women and the domestic sphere. The literature, which has been in active circulation for the last three years, has been discussed. The tracts do not bear the dates of the standard Gregorian calendar alone but those of the Vikram Samvat era as well.

There are tracts discussing various aspects of the Samiti, there are biographies of the founder, there are anecdotal pieces on the founder and her successors, the Pramukh Sanchalikas occupying the highest position in the Samiti hierarchy, short histories of inspirational figures, for instance Nivedita, Shree ma, Jijamata and so on. There is a preponderance of literature pertaining to the life of Laxmi Kelkar, the founder. A collection of her lectures has also been published. A calendar, Digdarshika is published every year with themes like, India's rivers, saints etc. Unlike the Sangh, no account of the resolutions passed at the Samiti conferences, meetings, etc is published. This can be attributed to mere indifference or secrecy or to the fact that a very rigid institutionalization has not marked the Samiti as yet.

³²⁷ Sevika Prakashan was started in 1953 in Nagpur. It publishes in Hindi, English, Marathi and Gujarati, exclusively for the Samiti.

There is a particular mix of religion and mythology here that is the most significant characteristic feature. In fact, the repetitiveness of it all makes one weary and the monotony of it all makes one wonder if there is anything new that is being offered in the various tracts. It is difficult to account for the reasons for which very much the same material is churned out. Would the readers want repeated affirmation of the same basic points, or is there nothing else on offer? Almost the same quality marks the interviewees on certain questions. While this can be a comment on the kind of homogenization produced by the power of the discourse, yet one has to be sensitive to the subtle shifts and the subversion produced thereby.

The Sevika Prakashan routinely publishes in Marathi, Hindi and Gujarati and it has to be kept in mind that Maharashtra, Gujarat and North India are the traditional bases of the Sangh Parivar. There are hardly any tracts in English. The Hindi is Sanskritised and the handful of tracts in English can be called stylistically poor and filled with grammatical errors. It is clear that the writing subjects are the Samiti ideologues and they are addressing sevikas or potential sevikas. They are therefore for internal consumption. The easy accessible style, reference to traditional myths and examples from Hindu everyday existence, make the literature intelligible to middle class literate women. This also gives the impression that the constituency does not consist of highly educated women. As far as the writers are concerned, they are, without exception, Maharashtrian. The ideologues are Brahman women: Kusum Sathe, Susheel Abhyankar, Sindhu Patankar, Pramila Medhe, etc

The cover designs of the tracts published by Archana Prakashan are more colorful and graphic whereas those that are published by the Samiti are austere, simple and have standardised images; for example the *bhagwa dhvaj* or a map of undivided India. The covers are invariably white or, at the most, bear a single colour and refrain from garishness. There are hardly any embellishments on the cover and this perhaps is a statement on the austere existence.

The literature focuses on recreating themes essentialized by Hindutva history. The feats of Hindu heroines are extolled, the motive being to create an inspirational history. This is a queer assortment of women culled from mythology and history, warrior queens, dutiful wives, exceptional mothers, women revolutionaries active in the freedom movement and so on. The discourse is also highly moralizing. A conservative stance is adopted on most questions concerning women, particularly if one chooses to view these through a feminist lens, and the vocabulary seems to be extraordinarily regimented and restricted. There are no explicit religious injunctions offered on any of women's roles and responsibilities, and no religiously grounded texts are privileged. A characteristic feature is the use of *Bharateeya* (Indian) for Hindu women. Thus there is an attempt to elide the differences between the two. However, discourses are dynamic and tend to escape fixity. I attempt to resolve the problems this creates for the analysis by giving emphasis on points of repetition.

II

Though I initiated contact with the sevikas through a visit to the Samiti office, and I also spoke to a couple of office bearers, my respondents were subsequently picked on the basis of their involvement in the Samiti's functions and activities. For instance, I met Veena Bodes in the Ramnavami function and I noted her appearance, her age and chose her for information on the early history of the Samiti. I tried to draw my respondents from varied locations, or in terms of their age groups and class backgrounds. The senior sevikas were chosen for their association with the earliest of shakhas and the early history of the Samiti in Mumbai. I spoke to middle aged women as well as to young women. However, all my respondents are actively involved with the Samiti's activities and identify with the Samiti very clearly. There are also testimonies of activists who no longer work solely for the Samiti but associate with other activities and programmes floated by the VHP and the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram. However, this, as I hope to

argue, can be regarded as an integral part of the Samiti's activities since the Samiti acts as the pedagogic wing for the women of the Sangh Parivar. It trained women for all the other wings Sangh Parivar.³²⁸ In fact, this was but natural, because of the fact that this was the first and the only women's organization that has been allowed to exist within the Sangh hierarchy.

What struck me as remarkable was the high level of coordination among the women; channels of communication were unilinear as I subsequently realized that all my meetings with the sevikas, even when I had trespassed the official chain of command, had the sanction of the top leadership. Veena Bodes, an older sevika that I interviewed, was very apprehensive about the interview and had not slept the previous night. This anxiety was about the questions that I would ask. She also confessed that she had had discussions with the other older sevikas as to what issues could be discussed and the type of information to be divulged. My demeanor appeared perhaps to be non-threatening and she relaxed after some time. She talked about her own household, her relations with her grand daughters and even let me have a glimpse into her family crises that arose out of the conduct of her grand daughters. This interview turned out to be very different as the interviewee turned into the interviewed, when she took upon herself to give me advice over my marriage and my conduct in my future household. This was the most exceptional of my interviews and a perfect example of the power inherent in the subject in subverting the process.

The conversations were in the nature of semi-structured interviews. I was looking for answers for some specific questions, but the chronology and format were guided largely by the informant. The older sevikas at times drifted from one issue to another, guided by their memory and recall. I did interrupt occasionally

³²⁸ Tanika Sarkar "Pragmatics of the Hindu Right Politics of Women's Organizations, in *EPW*, opcit

for clarifications or to ask other questions but my general attitude was accommodating.

I conducted interviews to suit the convenience of the informants though I preferred to interview them in their homes as this would enable me to make a clearer estimate of their class background and personal lifestyles, apart from an understanding of the interpersonal relations. All my interviewees come from uppercaste middle class backgrounds and reside in similar class localities. Though there was the unmistakable stamp of the urban Bombay lifestyle, it could easily be discerned that these were middle class maharashtrian households from the type of furniture, living arrangements, kitchens and the strict spartan lifestyles.

I was repeatedly asked about why I researched into this topic. I was also asked if I had a relation with the Sangh Parivar. I stated clearly that my work was purely academic and my respondents would remain perfectly anonymous. How and where had I heard of the Samiti was another question that haunted them. My reply that I read about it only in academic works, made me see a flush of disappointment pass over the faces of my respondents. I spoke about my personal life and family when asked, and my knowledge of a smattering of Marathi drew comments. However, I was not a completely alien creature to them, and most women obliged me by speaking in Hindi, a language I am most comfortable with.

There were a few cases when I was told to keep certain parts of the interview off record. There were issues that were greeted with silence and others that were not addressed despite constant prodding. However my attempt was not to antagonize my respondents. When there was disagreement, I preferred not to get into arguments with my older/ aged respondents as a mark of deference for



Sevikas offering the typical *Samiti* salute to *Ashtabhuj Devi* at the conclusion of *The shakha* - held in closed premises due to unavailability of open grounds.

(Mulund, Mumbai, 3rd April, 2004)

their age. However with the younger women I felt freer to argue and also asked a wider range of questions, and counter questioned more often.

I have visited the Samiti Karyalaya (office) several times, have been a part of the Ramnavami utsav (Ramnavami Festival – 30th March 2004) which was a day long programme. Sevikas from all over Thane attended. There was a classical song recital followed by a worship of the infant Ram lala and lunch, which was strictly a brahmanical fare. The occasion also saw the launch of the Samiti's programme of training girls from tribal areas.³²⁹

I have also attended an evening shakha of women and girls and a praudhha shakha (for older women). The evening shakha³³⁰ was similar to the textbook description of the shakha with a prayer to start with, followed by games and Baudhik sessions. The shakha concludes with a dhwaja pranam (Salute to the flag). The praudhha shakha had no physical exercises or games but there was a lecture on the Gita by a non-sevika. The attendance in the praudhha shakhas was more or less consistent over the weeks. However for tarun shakhas for young women, the schedules have to be adjusted according to schedules for exams, tutions and so on. The shakhas therefore are marked by a thin attendance and this explains the drives for expansion into new areas. In Delhi, I had the opportunity to attend a Sangh shakha (all male) in JNU as well as accompany a friend who was collecting data on schools run by the RSS.

Involvement with the Samiti activities does not mean the same thing to all women who regard themselves as sevikas. Some women are pracharikas for life, some till they are married (this means that they delay their marriage by some years), there are others that continue to work after marriage, whereas some others come only occasionally after marriage to special functions when invited.

³²⁹ Details discussed in chapter two.

³³⁰ Interestingly apart from the slogans like *Bharat Mata ki jai*. The feminist slogan *Hum bharat ki nari hain, phul nahi chingari hain* was used in the shakha.

These women, in the course of their participation, have redefined domesticity and a purely domestic existence for women and challenged the home-world dichotomy at the same time. The testimonies, therefore, enable me to look at women's experience of participation and delineate how women harbour different attitudes and opinions on the basis of their consciousness and age.

Crafting the Feminine

The Rashtra Sevika Samiti not only offers an institutionalized structure for women's participation but also constructs appropriate models of femininity. There are militant and flamboyant leaders who are foregrounded during spectacular moments, while the sevikas provide their physical labours to sustain the movement in 'quieter' times. Their activism is made possible within the notion of an "empowerment" that accrues to them: "Shakti", that is supposed to reside specially in the female.

Here the feminine is conceptualized as the mother and this is the sole basis for greater possibilities for the women. All women are potential or actual mothers, this seems to be the contention of Hindutva's discourse. The sole possibility of existence for women is as mothers in the 'Hindu Rashtra'. Except for this relational existence, individual personhood is not visualized. What the female ideologues and the Samiti do, is to craft motherhood that itself is immensely invested with potentialities to bring in change. This extends not only to the private domain where they fashion sons for the Hindu Rashtra but also outside, through participation in the Samiti as the creators of Hindu Rashtra. It has been pointed out that in revivalist movements women were constructed as "mothers of the Nation" and their biological roles as reproducers of the nation was highlighted.³³¹This instrumentalized women's reproductive functions and bodies

³³¹ Kumari Jayawardane and Malathi De Alwis, *Embodied Violence*, opcit, Introduction , px

in the interests of the nation. Further, the woman-mother symbolized the sacred inviolable borders of the nation.³³² The Hindutva project seems to have carried forth this agenda of revivalism but the female creators of this discourse have not accorded supremacy / agency to the masculine. Women as mothers seek to be the real actors and agents. The most powerful exposition of the above appears in the prayer³³³,

1. "Motherland, Holy Land, we, your daughters who have been brought up by you with good sanskaras, bow to you O, affectionate, auspicious land of Hindus. We voluntarily dedicate our lives to your cause.
2. O, Supreme power of the Universe, we bow to you again, as you have created this great Hindu Nation. We are ready to tread this glorious path unitedly because of your grace only.
3. Please bestow upon your loving daughters the immaculate character regarded as ideal and always honoured by the whole world.
4. Please cultivate within us power divine which can destroy all evil and negative thoughts and deeds and will inspire our father, brother husband and son to follow the path of righteousness.
5. We, your united daughters having pure character courage, and also firm faith in the path of duty, seek your blessings so that we can make this Rashtra glorious in future.

Bharat Mata Ki Jai

The prayer is said to be the foundation of the Samiti and the women are exhorted to understand the prayer and follow its ideal. The prayer is addressed to the motherland and the women hope to be fashioned as mothers in this image. The women pray to imbibe the same qualities as the mother.

The prayer is in Sanskrit, "medium of expression of Bharateeya Sanskriti. *All the knowledge has been treasured in this language only.*³³⁴ (italics mine). This eulogisation of Sanskrit is a marked feature of the Hindutva discourse.

³³² ibid

³³³ *Preface*, opcit, p 48. The prayer is in Sanskrit. Its English translation given in the Preface is reproduced above.

³³⁴ ibid p49

It is to be noted that one of the primary aims is to lead father, brother, husband and son on the path of righteousness and this is a task that has been assigned paramount responsibility. The four aspects of the relational existence of Hindu women: daughter, sister, wife and mother correspond to ashrama/ stages of life theorised in upper caste Hinduism associated with men: bramacharin, grihastha, vanaprstha and sannyasin.³³⁵ It is well known that patriarchal hegemony controls sexuality and disciplines women by operating through defining women in terms of their familial relations and subordinate positions. Nevertheless, this also allows space for action within these relationships. Of these phases, the greatest of potentialities are invested in motherhood as I hope to show in the course of this chapter.

Wifehood and motherhood are the two primary identities of women and in this sense, in the Samiti's prayer, the emphasis on Satitva needs to be commented upon as this is related to wifehood. While satitva is exalted as an ideal this is not read simply as burning on the pyre. The booklet that provides an explanation of this emphasises this point very strongly.³³⁶ In the present times, devoting oneself to a cause during widowhood is also read as Satitva. The Sati in traditional Hindu mythology overcomes the inauspiciousness that is inherent in widowhood by immolating herself. In this way, she perpetually remains a "sumangali" (the auspicious one). Satitva is also equated with virtue. The Samiti interprets Sati as deriving from sat i.e. astitva (existence). The discourse juxtaposes satitva and stritva (best translated as femaleness) though satitva has a wider meaning. In this scheme even unmarried women can become Satis. By maintaining "shuddhta" (chastity) in thought and action all Indian (read Hindu) women are sati.³³⁷ Thus satitva is now extended to all Indian women.

³³⁵ I owe this point to Paola Bacchetta, "Hindu nationalist women as Ideologues" in KJayawardane and M de Alwis(ed), *Embodied Violence*, opcit. In caste Hinduism, women were denied education. The ashrama system which held true only for the twice born males was not possible in the lives of even twice born women.

³³⁶ *Maa ki pavan pooja mein*, (Nagpur, Sevika Prakashan:nd)pp16-17

³³⁷ *ibid.* p18

The Samiti chief ideologue, Laxmibai Kelkar, visualized a unique view of conjugal existence; "*grihasthiroopi rath ka purush rathi evam stree saarthi hai*"(in the chariot of conjugal existence the charioteer is the woman while the man rides this chariot)³³⁸Thus it is the responsibility of the woman to steer domestic life safely through its ups and downs. In this conception the pride of place as well as the dominant responsibility for a smooth domestic existence is given to the woman.

Wives slide into mothers. No distinction is seen between the two. Wifeness automatically entails motherhood and once the wife becomes a mother her husband regards her so as well.³³⁹However, this theme is not central to the discourse and appears only in relation to certain exceptional cases like Ramkrishna Paramhansa and Jayaprakash Narayan, who refused to establish conjugal relations with their wives.

Eternal, Empowered Motherhood: "Matrishakti":

The RSS pracharak Deshpande said that *Bharateeya Sanskriti* conceptualized all women as mothers and they should, therefore, be respected.³⁴⁰This may mean that women do not deserve respect in any other capacity. Exalted and pure motherhood is supposed to be a characteristic of Indian women as well as a way of distinguishing them from the western women who are just seen as a "upbhog ki vastu"(an article for consumption). In this way, all Hindu women are essentialised as chaste and pure; Hindu men are presented as somewhat higher than their base western counterparts who have remained oblivious of pure womanhood/motherhood. Thus, in this discourse the superiority of Indian/ Hindu men to the West and to all other religions is reinforced.

"A Hindu woman is an eternal mother, a symbol of love, sacrifice, dedication, fearlessness, sanctity and devotion. The tender-hearted woman becomes bold and aggressive, if time demands."³⁴¹

³³⁸ *Rashtra Sevika Sangathan Visheshank*, opcit, p 8

³³⁹ S Abhyankar and G Kate, *Matrushakti*, (Bhopal, Archana Prakashan:1999),p4

³⁴⁰ Interview with Deshpande, opcit

³⁴¹ *Preface*, opcit, p5

Matrishakti is the shakti that resides in the mother goddess and, by extension, in mothers. The simultaneous coexistence of the tender and the aggressive is a theme oft repeated in the Hindutva discourse. The sweet child Ram and the angry Ram, the inherently tolerant Hindu (male) provoked into violence by demonic Muslims; Sarkar argues for a nuanced reading of a movement between tranquil Hinduism and violent Hindutva. The Hindu woman, the mother essentially 'tender hearted' can become 'aggressive', riding the peak of the violence she is capable of unleashing. I argue that a certain amount of ambiguity is deliberately introduced here. It is not clearly spelt out whether women will themselves resort to violence or do so by giving birth to sons who are aggressive. This is in contrast to the angry awakened motherhood as conceptualised in another instance of violent Hindutva when women are exhorted to give birth to "masculine violence", conceive and nurture *sons* as instruments of revenge, the actual acts of violence being reserved for men.³⁴²

The Hindi version of the explanation of the Samiti's prayer cites their primary aim as " *tejasvi rashtra ka nirmaan*"(producing a brilliant [Hindu] Rashtra).³⁴³ There is however no vision of this Hindu Rashtra that is elaborated upon in the literature except for the return to a golden age of the past. There is no critique of the existing social system or injustices in society, about the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised. They are not even remotely close to the Samiti's frame of reference.

Motherhood in these schemes is assigned onerous responsibilities:

"Sachet mataon ki sankhya kam hone ke karan hi mumbai mein saikon quintal visfotak utar sakta hai, purulia mein shastra utare jatehain, shatru ka hawai jahaj itne andar tak aa sakta hai,

³⁴² Tanika Sarkar argues that Rithambhara in her audio cassette exhorted women to become mothers to avenge wrongs inflicted upon Hindus. Motherhood is emptied of all emotional content and has become an agent of directing male violence. Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*,(New Delhi: Permanent Black:2001)p284

³⁴³*Rashtra Sevika*, opcit, p80

*vilasita ke karan paise ko hi sarvasa mana ja raha hai. Bacchon ko maa ka sneh nahi milne ke karan ve aatankvadi, kroor upbhogvadi ban rahe hain.*³⁴⁴

(It is due to fall in numbers of conscious mothers that quintals of explosives can be unloaded in Mumbai, armaments dropped in Purulia, enemy airplanes come deep into our territory, and money has become paramount due to excessive commercialization. As children do not get mothers love, they are becoming terrorists, cruel and crass materialists.)

In this argument inadequate mothering is held responsible for the proliferation of terrorism and for anti national activity. The country would, as it were, be freed of all such acts only if we had better mothers. The role of mothers is not only to make enlightened citizens but also 'conscious' citizens of the Hindu Rashtra.

*stree rashtra ki aadhar shakti hai. Is prabal aatmashakti ko jagrit kar ' jaage aari jaage desh' ka sanket dena aavashyak hai."mein ek samanya grihini mata kya kar sakti hoon" aisa sochkar niraash hone se baat banegi nahi." Main to shakti swaroopini durga ki kanya hiun.Paristhiti ka Saamna kar sakti hoon aisa sankalp karna hai. Kewal samaj ka, rashtra ka nahi apitu sampoorna vishwa ke maanav samaj ka bhavishya pita ke mastishka se bhi mataon ke hridaya mein adhik surakshit reh sakta hai yeh pehchaan kar apni divyatva ki chingaari ko prajawalit rakhna yeh hamari parampara yugon se hai ...*³⁴⁵

Woman is the basis of the nation. With this self confidence one may say 'Awakened woman, awakened country'. It is not necessary to get disillusioned by thinking as to what I as a simple housewife mother can do. I am the daughter of Shakti personified; Durga; and can face all challenges. The future of the whole society, of the nation, as well as the world is safer in the hearts of mothers rather than in the heads of fathers, and it is important to recognize this, particularly as this has been our tradition since ages.

In this segment there are a number of messages that are being put forth. At one level, it is simply affirmative of the feminine and locates power within the structure of domesticity. The discourse enables homebound women to conceive of themselves as a part of the Hindutva project and give meaning to their mundane existence. This echoes the 'Start with the cradle and ladle' strategy of

³⁴⁴ ibid, p56

³⁴⁵ ibid p56 -57

Gertrud Stolz Kling, chief of Women's Bureau under Hitler that sought to validate the lives of common women.³⁴⁶ At another level, the woman is visualized as a daughter of Shakti, her claim to power is due to this location. In this sense, she is dissociated from even her primary identity as mother and housewife, real power accrues to her in this relation. Significantly, *sevikas* in the Samiti's prayer also desire power by virtue of their position as daughters of the motherland. Shakti is conceived as a female force. The father is not even invoked. Further, more obviously, the usual binaries are reproduced, the mother with her heart and the father with his head, essentializing the masculine and the feminine within the rational/ emotional dualism. However, motherhood is invested with greater potentialities than fatherhood. The usual privileging of the rational/ head over the emotional/heart is inverted in this scheme, and mothers are exhorted not to take themselves lightly. There is also an attempt to transcend space, from safeguarding the future of the nation to that of the world.

Beyond the symbolic dimensions of motherhood, there is the actual act of mothering itself. Mothers of the nation are literally so, conceiving and producing male progeny for the nation. Motherhood is an important duty to be performed for the Hindu *Rashtra*. Bakultai Devkule believes that one must have at least four children. This is more so for the upper caste educated people. In the face of Muslim demographic proliferation, the urgency is particularly pronounced. That the intelligentsia deserves to produce more of their kind was an advice tendered to me as well. There is thus no uncritical worship of motherhood, as is typical of racism.³⁴⁷ There is a denial of motherhood to the Muslim, *vanvas* (tribals) and even *ashikshit* (uneducated) women. That there is a privileging of some women and their progeny is very clear from this testimony. However, it is a solitary view and, mercifully, not advanced by any other *sevika*. Nonetheless, it is revealing of

³⁴⁶ Sucheta Mazumdar "Women on the March: Right Wing Mobilisation in Contemporary India", *Feminist Review*, 1995: 1-28

³⁴⁷ Gisela Bock, "Women and National Socialism" in Joan Scott (ed) *Feminism and History*, opcit.

the deep existing tensions and fears within the core constituency of the Sangh Combine; the fear of the growing numbers of the racially defiling lower orders.

Mothering the nation creates real dilemmas for mothers. Real women recount several instances when there are conflicting demands. Laxmibai Kelkar had to attend a meeting when her daughter Vatsala was down with a fever and leaving her unattended would mean her being regarded as a “careless” mother. She eventually left Vatsala with her sister in law and returned early from the meeting to tend the ailing child.³⁴⁸ Thus the Pramukh Sanchalika could not afford to neglect actual mothering even though she was involved in the task of mothering the nation. Similarly, Bakultai Devkule recounts several instances of how she brought her children up and juggled the demands of mothering and of the Sangathan work. She recounted a specific instance of how while traveling on the local train her young daughter almost slipped out of her hands. Child rearing itself, in her case, was accomplished with the help of young Sevikas who stayed in her house to baby-sit for her younger children. Domestic work was shared with her sister in law in the joint family. Her frequent travelling caused minor altercations with her husband who chided her of neglecting her four children, but she “managed”. She vividly recounts the constant struggle to bring her children up and simultaneously living upto the standard of a good mother. Neglect of the actual task of mothering is seen as too serious a problem, and so biological motherhood remains of paramount importance. For many mothers, motherhood is the only existential reality. Bakultai Devkule’s mother was a victim of domestic violence but put up with her husband, “for her children’s sake”, for he was a loving father. Similarly Prearna Kshirsagar admired putting up with domestic violence for the sake of the children in the family. Motherhood thus required an abdication of the right of self preservation.

³⁴⁸ Rajani Rai, *Life Sketch of Vandaniya Mausiji*, opcit, p36

Daughters have been obliterated from the Sangh as well as the Samiti discourse in their biological conception and existence. In most of the tracts the word used is categorically *putra*³⁴⁹. Mothers are constantly praying for sons and it is the valiant sons that perform feats for the Rashtra. *Bharateeya parampara mein mata ka parichay putra ke naam se hota hai.*³⁵⁰ (Mothers are recognized by the name of their sons according to Indian culture) With no mention of the mothers praying for daughters at all, one begins to question as to whatever happened to the daughters.

Real daughters are daughters only of the motherland, praying to become enlightened mothers.³⁵¹ Even here the word that is used is *kanya* and not *putri* and this is to be marked, whereas in the English version they are categorically mentioned as daughters. A *kanya* is a female unmarried child whereas the word *putri* is definitely relational in its meaning.³⁵² Is it due to the realization that they can be accepted as daughters only of the motherland and not of any other human conception? There is no glorification of biological daughterhood. Daughters in not being welcomed have no mothers in the strictest physical sense of the term. (Daughters when born are not welcomed in a number of Hindu families, and ideally, they are not desired at all) There are, then, naturally, no brave daughters who are imagined. Ideally all the exceptional women fashion sons, but these women themselves are not credited with exceptional mothers. And the daughter prays to become a mother herself. To top it all, even the young girls are turned into mothers in "*bharatiya sanskriti*". There is no place for innocent girlhood. All girls are geared to produce sons for the Hindu Rashtra: bearing sons and turning them into potential swayamsewaks. In fact that was

³⁴⁹ This is invariably the case in the tract *Matrushakti* where there is an occasional use of the bigendered "santaan", though mothers are praying to conceive sons, exhorting sons to perform acts of bravado, forgiving sons for their sins, etc. S Abhyankar and G Kate, *Matrushakti*, Bhopal, Archana Prakashan: 1999

³⁵⁰ *ibid*, p13

³⁵¹ see prayer, *Preface*, *opcit*

³⁵² Significantly the Sanskrit version uses the term *Suta* which is similar to *putri*. It is unclear why the Hindi version translates this as *kanya* and not *putri*, *ibid*

the task carved out by Golwalkar in his injunctions to women: making men with the capital M for the Hindu Rashtra.

Women's participation in the Samiti is then the practical means of turning their femininity into empowered motherhood in the service of the Hindu Rashtra. The perception of participation thus offers interesting insights. The most important phrases that were repeated in the sevika's representation of the function of the Samiti was, "*Samiti aa ke hum taiyar hote hair'*" (we get prepared on coming to the Samiti). Sunanda Devasthali who is a teacher in a local government school, said that participation instilled self confidence and "*apni baat keh sakte hair'*" (we can put our own views). The significance of this posturing for women from extremely conservative patriarchal households is truly immense. Sunanada Amravatkar said that attending the Samiti's *shakhas* was like going to school. The women could labour in any part of society after they had been prepared by the Samiti. In the context of the denial of the passive to the female and her powerful reconstitution as "*matrishakti*" this state of preparedness can be mobilized for violent agendas as well.³⁵³

Bakultai Devkule emphasised that "*man taiyar hota ha'*" (hearts are prepared). She further explained that learning to wield the lathi, knowing self-defence, inspires confidence in a woman. Thus the very primary objective of the Samiti in *swasarakshanam* (self protection) is fulfilled. One way of reading this is the confidence to ward off unwelcome sexual advances. Tanika Sarkar³⁵⁴ points out that in the specific middle class milieu that the Samiti operates this also means that women can challenge violence within the family. Significantly, Bakultai Devkule chose not to answer my question when I asked her what would she

³⁵³ Women from the Samiti trained karsevikas during the Ramjanmabhoomi movement. Durga Vahini, which is the women's counterpart of the Bajrang Dal adopts an aggressive confrontational stance on most issues.

³⁵⁴ Tanika Sarkar, "Woman as a Communal Subject, Rashtrasevika Samiti and Ramjanmabhoomi movement", *EPW*, August 31, 1991.

have done if her husband beat her.³⁵⁵ Veena Bodes argued that for her an *Adarsh Stree* (ideal woman) would be that who refused to put up with oppression.

The most important task of the Samiti is "*manushya nirmaan*" (creation of humans) and in this sense the sevikas saw their participation as an important part of character building and value education. Women as mothers in this scheme were creators par excellence. Not only were they mothering their children but also mothering the nation. In fact, the women see clear disjunctures when working for other outfits of the Sangh Parivar and when working for the Samiti. They see the work of the Samiti as more enduring, one of man moulding and therefore invested with greater possibilities of bringing in change.³⁵⁶ Invariably, they further the Samiti agenda even after remaining allied to their new affiliates; for instance Kundatai started a shakha in the Adivasi School where she worked as a full time volunteer with the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram.

Other words that were bandied about were that Samiti instilled Deshbhakti³⁵⁷ (patriotism). Sarkar³⁵⁸ argues that communalism inserted itself into and drew its life from two new forms of devotion: the new deshbhakti and the older tradition of Rambhakti which itself was imbued with several meanings during the anti colonial movement. She further argues that deshbhakti had as its core the idea of the *desh* which was subsequently iconized and deified. This *desh* cannot be conflated with the modern nation state, and similarly in the Hindutva discourse the country is regarded as a holy mother with a sacred geography and inviolable boundaries. Territoriality is important in the discourse of the Sangh and the

³⁵⁵ This question was asked when she told me that her mother took beatings from her husband in the interests of Bakultai and her brothers. He was a good father and this was all that Bakultai's mother needed.

³⁵⁶ The Hindutva agenda was explained through an interesting example. Heavy rains did not percolate the soil and make it moist. On the contrary slowly dripping water has a greater effect. The *Shakhas* taught Hindutva in a similar manner. Interview with Shubhangi Mahajan.

³⁵⁷ This was also repeated by a number of sevikas.

³⁵⁸ Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, opcit

Samiti; this focus on *deshbhakti* translates directly into “love of the land”. That “people”, meaning the inhabitants of the land, were absent from their imagination never struck my respondents. They realized this only after considerable prodding. To this, when I qualified *all* people inhabiting the land, there was visible discomfort on their faces.

In this sense I would argue that *Hindutva* has powerfully redefined Hinduism for the *sevikas* and *swayamevaks*. Most of the *sevikas* that I interviewed did not believe in the elaborate religious ritual, so typical of classical Hinduism. The religious beliefs of the *pracharika* Chanda Sathe for instance are very revealing. She has no cherished deity and worships only *Devi Ashtabhuja*. In fact, she argued that Hinduism was a *Dharma* and not a religion. *Hindutva*, for her, was a way of life, a day-to-day practicing of good behaviour. For Sunanda Devasthali, Hindus were all those who belonged to *Bharat*. In this scheme even Muslims were Hindus. Sathe also referred to a non-anatagonistic definition of *Hindutva*. However, Prerana Kshirsagar argued that the meaning of *Hindutva* was a contested domain and that there was a struggle going on over its meaning and character. Interestingly, this interview began with her questioning me about *Hindutva*. She argued in favour of slogans of the sort “*garv se kaho hum Hindu hain*” that is said to have removed fear from Hindu minds. Her definition of *Hindutva* was blatantly exclusivist. Sunanda Amravatkar saw the VHP’s role as a protector of *Dharma*. When I suggested the intensely political nature of the movement, I was met with silence.

However, what was anathema to the *sevikas* was any reference to electoral politics. It was constantly reiterated by my respondents that their aim was to stay away from politics. Almost all my respondents expressed a distaste for electoral politics. It was constantly reiterated that their organization was not interested in the petty squabbles of parties, things like contesting elections were thus completely out of question. Prodded further, they talked about the corruption and venality associated with politics and therefore the necessity of

staying away from such corrupting influences. There was distaste for the Shiv Sena's brand of politics and it was identified as 'lumpenism'.³⁵⁹

Apart from the fact that politics was narrowly constructed as electoral politics I also came across an understanding that the world of the political was far removed from that of ordinary middle class Indians, who had neither money nor muscle power. This is a common-sense understanding an assumption that has been foregrounded in public life in the present³⁶⁰. Padmaja and Prachi said the same thing about politics and about the fact that even the BJP was showing all signs of having succumbed to that pressure. My respondents visibly winced at any suggestion that their work be termed political and identified their work as "samajik kaam"(social work)

Fundamentalist notions of women's empowerment

One of the difficulties that one encounters in this discourse is how to make sense of the notion of empowerment of women. Jasodhara Bagchi³⁶¹ argues that the image of this empowered womanhood actually has its origin in the revivalist phase of the national movement, in the face of an intense crisis that the upper caste Hindu male elite was faced with, apart from the debilitating effects of colonialism which was a challenge to their masculinity. Instead of the earlier phase of social reform through juridical change, the nationalists now sought to project the icon of empowered womanhood, with the "heroic woman/ good woman/ mother syndrome". They described women as mother goddesses and heroic women conceived entirely in mythological Hindu terms. Here the focus on

³⁵⁹ Shiv Sena is primarily a regional "sons of the soil" party that increasingly began to play the Hindutva Card and won a number of seats in the Municipal Elections in Mumbai. Thereafter it spread all over Maharashtra and is now the main opponent of BJP in the region for Hindutva votes. Its overt readiness to violence and use of terror tactics do not find ready acceptance in all constituencies of voters.

³⁶⁰ Hansen notes a similar perception of the decline of the political system and corrupt polity in his field work among middle class families in Pune. Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, opcit,p116-122

³⁶¹ Jasodhara Bagchi, "Ethnicity and Empowerment of Women The colonial legacy " in Kumari Jayawardane and Mde Alwis(eds) *Embodied Violence*,opcit pp113-125

chastity etc also meant the ethnicisation of the feminine.³⁶² She argues that a distinct gender edge thus emerged within Hindu nationalism that fed the later fundamentalisms and communal divisions. In this sense, therefore, there are continuities from the nationalist phase into present day communalism.

Women are drawn to such organizations because of the so-called cultural authenticity that is supposed to reside in them as well as because they are made to feel empowered. Bagchi interestingly calls it "surrogate empowerment of women through denial"³⁶³. In this mythified empowerment, which is presented as an indication of the truly high status of women, all mention of gender injustice that women suffer is dismissed as a western import.

The gender question was central to national identity. The chastity of women is the proverbial means of protecting the male community. Veena Das points out that women play an important role in protecting the purity of a group and are seen as points of entrance, as "gateways to the caste system". She further describes this as a "supernatural fear of female sexuality or reproductive functions."³⁶⁴ The Samiti prayer presents this thus,

"There is something peculiar this nation possesses that makes the whole world bow humbly before it. It is the traditional chastity, purity, virtuousness, service and sacrifice of her daughters. It is more valuable than any material wealth. Due to heavy impact of western culture, there are chances that we may deviate from these qualities. The nation's top industries, administration, science, technology and wealth lack the eternal quality of Hindu woman - her motherly attitude, a centre of respect and honour."³⁶⁵

These words reveal the deeply ambivalent ideas towards modernity. While earlier the women had to fortify themselves as spiritual repositories against colonialism,

³⁶² A national model of womanhood that was being forged, was based on Sanskrit tradition. Amrita Chhachhi in Zoya Hasan (ed) *Forging Identities*, opcit, p 78

³⁶³ *ibid* p121

³⁶⁴ Veena Das, "Indian Women: Work, Power and Status" in BR Nanda(ed) *The Indian Women: From Purdah to Modernity*, (New Delhi, Vikas: 1976)

³⁶⁵ *Preface*, opcit, p58

the present task is of retaining the purity³⁶⁶ of the inner world against westernization. There is a clear attempt to marginalize the significance of the material conditions in determining the nation's significance in the hierarchy of nations. It is the country's daughters whose qualities enable a realization of this position. At the same time, the threat from the western hegemonic power is real. It automatically invites emulation. And, therefore, the nations' daughters as well as mothers need to be constantly reminded of their "fundamental" difference and their responsibility.

It is well known that constructs of modernity and femininity are modified in accordance with political ideology and the changing requirements of the movement and its leaders. The simple critique of "westernization" is not clearly spelt out. There is no comprehensive questioning of the "development paradigm" which itself is a gift of modernity. When I asked Chanda Sathe, the pracharika, what her dream was, she declared that she wanted to proudly say that she lived in a "developed" country. This thirst for recognition from the West marks the ambiguity in the Samiti's discourse as well.

Motherhood has been powerfully redefined and in that sense is the greatest contribution of the Samiti. Women do not borrow uncritically either from the Sangh's discourse or from traditional Hindu mythology. Symbols are powerfully deployed and redeployed. Women are allowed to transcend their domestic roles and this has been the greatest achievement and in that sense they see their roles as beyond that of the "career" woman who is just earning money but in serving *Rashtra*.

³⁶⁶ Bagchi qualifies the material/ spiritual dichotomy popularised by Partha Chatterjee in his celebrated essay, further by arguing that even here the fundamental binary that was operating was the pure/ impure. Jasodhara Bagchi, *Ethnicity and Empowerment of Women* in K Jayawardane and de Alwis (ed) *Embodied Violence*, opcit.

Mothers: Warriors, Teachers....Inciters?

Mothers are also universal teachers, teaching their young children as well in the teaching profession says the tract " *Matrushakti*".By virtue of their mothering qualities they are a part of professions like "nursing" that come naturally to them. This vision however does not see them as doctors. Awakened motherhood is said to have struggled against foreign invasions and when the need arose took to arms. Curiously all descriptions of war are against Muslim invaders. But most importantly their role remains that of inspiring their fathers,husbands, brothers and sons to act.³⁶⁷ There are plenty of examples where women as mothers inspire their sons to perform feats in the battle field, as wives incite their husbands and send them to exert themselves for the nation, if need be kill themselves as Queen Hada did. The queen cut off her own head as her husband could not bear to fight the enemy for fear of losing her. In a more recent example, women are reported to have written to their male kin imprisoned during the Emergency not to beg for forgiveness in which case they would not be allowed entry to their houses. Similarly, the Karsevaks, were questioned as to how they had returned without building the temple and were asked to return and perform this task.³⁶⁸

The task of women as teachers is fulfilled best in the Sanskar Kendras of the VHP. My field work indicates that most of the teachers in the Sanskar Kendras are sevikas.The aim seems to be turning bored housewives into teachers for Sanskar Kendras .I met Prerana Kshirsagar in the Mulund shakha for middle aged women. After the shakha, she got busy teaching children on the same premises that are used as Sanskar Kendra. The premises houses a library and reading room run for local residents from a RSS backed trust. She refused to speak to me there and I took an appointment with her subsequently and met her

³⁶⁷ This is in line with the prayer of the Samiti.

³⁶⁸ *Rashtra Sevika* , opcit,p56

in her house. She has been working with the VHP run Sanskar Kendras for the last four years on a full time basis and is in charge of the Sanskar Kendras in Mulund areas. She argued that social work was the best vocation for women, a career being necessary only in the case of financial requirement.

Significantly pedagogy is seen as one of Samiti's most important functions. Sevikas manage to translate this vision into reality. Sunanda Devasthali, a teacher of mathematics in a government school, pointed out that she used Samiti songs and stories in the functions of her school.

Tanika Sarkar's important article based on field work in Delhi Schools highlights the function performed by RSS run schooling network in disseminating Sangh ideology and making of the "patriotic Hindu".³⁶⁹ The thrust of the article is to show how the Sangh manages to leave its own unmistakable brand of Hindutva while operating within the mainstream education system.³⁷⁰ Significantly though work in the field of education began in the first phase of expansion of Sangh activity in the post partition milieu, the structure was formalised with the setting up of the Vidya Bharati in 1977 and since then the work has only been expanding and spreading to newer areas with newer pedagogic tools.³⁷¹ Vidya Bharati also operates non formal structures of education the Sanskar Kendras which primarily exist in the marginal areas as sources of Hinduisation of the tribals and dalits in remote areas. Prerana, who is in charge of Sanskar Kendras, admitted that there were problems in retaining children from middle class homes, which she attributed to several alternatives being available. This was not the case for children from slums. She also said that for children from slums different strategies were used, for instance, promising them food, snacks,

³⁶⁹ Tanika Sarkar, "Educating the children of the Hindu Rashtra: Notes on RSS Schools in Bidwai, Mukhi, Vanaik, ed. *Religion, Religiosity, and Communalism*, opcit, pp237-247

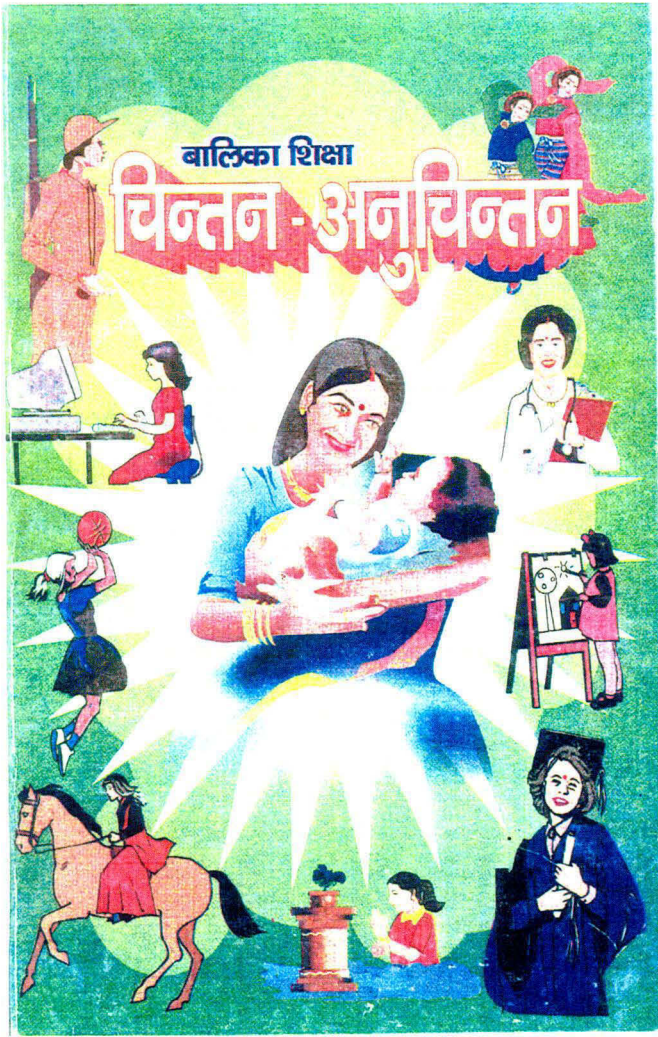
³⁷⁰ Visit to RSS school in Delhi, Hari Nagar. The trust is called Saarthi Shiksha Samiti in Delhi.

³⁷¹ Vidya Bharati coordinates RSS run schools at the all India level and claims to be running the second largest chain of schools in the country next to only those run by the government.

sweets. That the children are enticed into attending Kendras is fairly clear. While it was games and physical exercises that lured young men and women into attending shakhas, children from the slums are lured into the Sanskar Kendras through a different strategy.

A reference to the Sangh's preoccupation with pedagogy also comes across in the course of my interviews, as more than one respondent referred to a massive two and a half acre new educational project being set up in Bombay coordinated by the Keshav Srushti. The targets are sanskriti starved NRI children. Similarly Prerana Kshirsagar showed me a book on the Ramayana, which the VHP has managed to make a part of the value education classes in School. The book is a simplified version of the Ramayana, the epic being so central to the Sangh Combine, its significance therefore obvious.

Prerana explained that women preferred not to venture into areas that involved a "tussle" and therefore they stayed away from the work of the VHP because of its aggressive posturing on several issues. It was the quiet cultural work of "sanskar kendras" that appealed to them the most. It was then that I broached the subject of women like Sadhvi Ritambhara who incited violence and were foregrounded as ideals of "Aggressive awakened Matrishakti" exhorting men to come forth with her, "*Birbhaiyon jago*". I also added that there was a definite emphasis on violence and that her views about the non-violent character of women did not hold. She refrained from commenting on the issue. Further she was again silent when I referred to the marked anti Muslim rhetoric in the speeches of the leaders of the VHP.



Women's Education: Reflections

A pamphlet describing the *Rashtra Sevika Samiti's* activities in Maharashtra.



The Home and the World

The cover page of a tract *Bharateeya Parivar* (Indian Family) ³⁷²is telling . It shows a traditional Hindu joint family with old grandparents, women busy with household work and *tulsi puja* while the men go out to work. There are equal numbers of adult males and females but amongst children there are two males and one female. Images powerfully convey messages and the message here for womanhood is loud and clear: that of making Hindu families.

Prerana Kshirsagar proudly said that her family was regarded as a Hindutva family, her sons attend shakhas and also devote a part of their time to organizational work. She also paraphrased the famous saying about educating a woman and educating the whole family by referring to educating a woman in Hindutva and thereby ensuring that the whole family believes in the cause. However, in Padmaja's case, neither her son nor her daughter were formally attached to any outfit of the Sangh Parivar though even they characterized their household as a "hindutva" family.

Active sevikas have invariably had late marriages, and they can clearly be called self-choice marriages. Their choice of partners was increasingly guided by factors that they be allowed to continue their work for the Samiti even after marriage. Bakultai Devkule married her husband despite her father's disapproval and all the expenses for the wedding were borne by her husband. Her case remains all the more remarkable in that her husband was not a Sangh sympathizer at all. Similarly Veena Bodes married at the age of twenty-four that was very late by the standards of those times. For Bakultai Devkule marriage meant juggling with responsibilities and continuing with her Samiti work neatly dividing household chores with her sister in law. However what came across in Sathe's testimony was a grudging admittance that marriage could also mean a brutal chopping off

³⁷² *Bhrateeya Parivar* (Bhopal, Archana Prakashan:2000)

of all connection with work and deviating oneself solely to domestic responsibilities. Therefore she decided to stay unmarried. Similar is the case with Kundatai, a nurse by profession and a Sevika now wholly devoted to the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram.

The Samiti's work is increasingly seen as *Samajik kaam* (social work) and the sevikas took pride in the fact that they were involved with the Samiti out of social concern. In the course of my interviews I was repeatedly told by the women that pursuit of a "career" is not important, social work being a greater and nobler profession. Working outside the home is seen as a compulsion arising out of inadequate household income. The bargaining power that financial independence brings to women is particularly seen as a cause of marital discord and disharmony. However there are inconsistencies even with this discourse as younger women, even the daughters of sevikas do not subscribe to these views. Working outside the home is seen as a natural concomitant of education and personal and professional ambitions are not seen in negative light.³⁷³ The younger women also pointed out the need of double incomes to sustain a good standard of living in cities like Mumbai.

Prerana Kshirsagar, is a highly articulate woman. She spoke with a lot of conviction. She is an active woman, managing her home and assisting her husband in his work as the *swayamsevak*. Holding a doctoral degree in mathematics, she decided not to work as this was a condition made by her husband before marriage. In her case there was a complete about-turn in that she had decided on making a career and not getting married at all. She married at age of thirty at the insistence of her father and has no regrets about her decision today, despite having become the butt of ridicule having abandoned her career for a homebound existence. She argued that her current work has given her status and prestige that her career path as a lecturer or at the most a

³⁷³ Prachi in fact told me that if assertiveness is read as aggressiveness then nothing can be done.

principal would not have given. What was paramount in her case was a reference to prestige and an acute consciousness of her middle class background. She cited the instance of her Doctor friend in Akola who was beaten up by her Doctor husband everyday but refused to speak up as this would put her at par with the slum dwellers who were 'unlike' them. Prerana's sister also put up with domestic violence from her alcoholic husband for the sake of children as well as for her husband who was dear to her. When I asked her as to what was her counsel to her sister, she said that there were practical problems in moving out of her house and supporting herself. On this, I questioned her about her stand against working outside home, to which she had no answers. She remained highly critical of the women's demands for rights and argued that fighting men, particularly the husband was something she could never fathom. She said that she was against "breaking families", an idea, according to her, that was fundamental to any notion of *Stree mukt*(women's liberation)

Feminists have been arguing that the "personal is political" and therefore family cannot be seen as a site of private oppression, but is the fundamental site of patriarchal subjugation. This refusal to acknowledge oppression in the terrain of the family is based on an aggressive assertion of community identity. The Samiti recognizes overt forms of discrimination in the public sphere, even campaigns against them (for example against sexual harassment at the workplace and in public places). In fact women are located in a peculiar position in that their assertion of unclear democratic rights, by definition denies them a space in the community.³⁷⁴ Their true community shrinks to the community/caste. In the course of my interviews, most sevikas reiterated that the purpose of their organization was "*hindu mahilaon ka sangathan karna*" (sangathan of Hindu women) with a special emphasis on the word Hindu. Sathe in fact told me that

³⁷⁴ V Kannabiran and K Kannabiran, "The Frying Pan or the Fire? Endangered Identities, Gendered Institutions and Women's Survival", in Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia (eds) *Women and the Hindu Right*, opcit

the guiding principle of their organization was Hindutva and that they were not a feminist organization. In the context that it operates, its conservative position and submission to patriarchal structures does not strike as improbable. Tanika Sarkar argues that the limited emancipation that these women manage to enjoy in their personal lives owes to their consent to complicity in communal violence.

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In the Hindutva discourse, the feminine is crafted to be inclusive of Hindu women but completely exclusive of all other women. Creation of identities takes place through a dialectic of exclusions and inclusions, and the creation of an ideal identity also papers over a variety of differences, and homogenizes cross class and caste differences. The womanhood idealized even in this case has at the centre of its conception the worldview of the upper caste female, it glosses over the class and caste differences, has no conception of labouring women. The emphasis is on chastity and work is meant only to support families. There is not even a mention of poverty. Even when there is a mention, it brings in the favorite whipping boy: the Muslim and his demographic proliferation. Sathe began by holding population growth as the reason responsible for poverty of India. By a convoluted logic, this brought in its broad sweep fulminations against the Muslim personal law that enables Muslims to marry four wives and produce many children. She based her arguments as a commonsensical observation: "There are more Muslims than Hindus visible now". Amravatkar made a similar point. Though there is no pronounced anti Muslim rhetoric in the literature published by the Samiti, that the Samiti's founding principle is based on the exclusion of women of other communities is clearly known. The women were clearly communal in their outlook: this was clear from the way that they talked about the Gujarat riots. The discussion mentioned the necessity to retaliate, and "teaching Muslims a lesson". With the action- reaction theory being bandied

³⁷⁵ Tanika Sarkar, "The Woman as Communal Subject Rashtrasevika Samiti and Ramjanmabhoomi movement", *EPW*, opcit..

about everywhere nothing struck me as unremarkable. Prachi, never directly associated with any institution of the Sangh had the most extreme views- she rejected Secularism, justified the "natural" reaction in Gujarat and still has Muslim and Christian friends, but any question of marriage with them is unimaginable. The boundaries and limits of 'tolerance' are clear. Bakultai Devkule's words sum up the whole position "*Muslims ko maafi nahi hai*" (Muslims cannot be forgiven)

In conclusion, Tanika Sarkar's observation that the fundamental political objective of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti is dissemination of commercialised Hindutva seems to be more than true.³⁷⁶ The creation of newer models of femininity offers opportunities for action only in the service of Hindutva.

³⁷⁶ Tanika Sarkar, "Pragmatics of the Hindu Right Politics of Women's Organizations", in *EPW*, opcit.

Epilogue

The vision of the Hindu Rashtra inspired male Hindu ideologues to organize in order to turn this vision into reality. The compulsive impulse to organize led to the formation of the RSS, its sole motive being *Sangathan of* Hindu men. "The Brotherhood in Saffron" was created to serve the Motherland, the presiding deity of Hindutva.

The Samiti was, then, created to organize women in the service of the Hindu Rashtra. Women's activism manifested itself in the formation of the Samiti which came into existence, and which survives as a result of the agency of women. The "Brotherhood in Saffron", thus, has a counterpart in the "Sisterhood in Saffron" as well. The Sangh sees all women, primarily as mothers, deserving honour, but the Samiti has crafted elaborate models of womanhood drawing from Hindu mythology and History. These inspiring models enable women to assert themselves and give them 'agential' capacity. The heroines that the Samiti valorises were exceptional women whose actions affected the course of history. The women of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti see themselves as self-empowered soldiers in the cause of Hindutva. The message for womanhood is that women must act in solidarity with Hindu men to 'create' the Hindu Rashtra.

The theoretical - spatial division between the world of the men and the world of women, is subverted in this scheme, as moving outside the domestic domain is a precondition to participation in the Samiti, through the shakhas. While serving Hindutva, they become self-assertive and their domestic lives reflects this activism. This enables them to negotiate with patriarchal structures and loosen them to some extent. This was clear in the personal lives of sevikas whom I interviewed. However, it is recognized that my observations are based on the

lives of sevikas in Mumbai. How much has Mumbai's metropolitan culture changed the lives of women is difficult say. Nevertheless, it is certain that the Samiti is facing challenges even within its middle class, upper caste base that sustains and nurtures it. That its constituency is more limited than that of the Sangh is clear, and it is in efforts to expand this base as are evident now that challenges to their conceptions of womanhood will arise. Perhaps, then, newer models of the feminine will be foregrounded.

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