

**HINDUTVA AND WOMEN: A CASE STUDY ON  
RASHTRA SEVIKA SAMITI**

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Certified that this Dissertation entitled “**HINDUTVA AND WOMEN: A CASE STUDY ON RASHTRA SEVIKA SAMITI**” submitted by **HIMANSHI GOVIL** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY (M.Phil)** of the University, is her own work and has not been submitted for the award of any other Degree of this University or any other University. To the best of our knowledge this is a bonafide work.

We recommend that this Dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

  
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## INTRODUCING THE PROBLEMATIQUE

### I

Acrimonious debates have raged in the academic circles over the characterization of the increasingly militant Hindu consciousness since the late 80s. Some have labeled it as fascist while others have urged the futility of bracketing it in this paradigm<sup>1</sup>. Is it to be seen as an elite conspiracy or as a mass popular upsurge? Is it religious fundamentalism threatening to tear asunder the modern nation state or is itself a reawakening of a pristine 'Hindu nationalism', which alone can guarantee the boundedness of this nation state. Some would argue that it reflects a lack of political commitment to the idea of the state, but rather acts as a buffer against the various centrifugal energies of the secessionism of Kashmiris, Punjabis and of the North East as well as the extra territorial loyalties of the Muslims.

Golwalkar, the ideological fount head of Hindu militancy, proclaimed that Hindus constituted a nation by fulfilling all the templates of nationhood. "...The Hindus alone are the nation and the Moslems and others, if not actually anti nation are at least outside the body of the nation"<sup>2</sup>. In this sense, the events and episodes of Hindus assertiveness may be seen as the rousing of nationalist sentiments.

Now 'nation' is a slippery concept, which defies easy definition. Oommen attacks the nation of 'Hindu Rashtra' by dismissing the possibility that religion can be a

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance, Sumit Sarkar. "The Anti-Secularist Critique of Hindutva: Problems of a Shared Discursive Space", in *Germinal*, Vol-1, (Special Issue on Fascism and Culture), pp-101-10. Also see Achin Vanaik, "Situating Threat of Hindu Nationalism: Problems with Fascist Paradigm", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol No. 28, pp-1729-48.

<sup>2</sup> Golwalkar, *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, (Nagpur: Bharat Publication, 1939), p-53.

determinant of national identities. In the first place, he argues, even within the narrative of 'Hindu nationalists', Hinduness appears as a shifting category, alluding sometimes to simply the original and obvious inhabitants of Hindustan or India, sometimes to all Indic religions – religions that originated in India and whose followers exhibit sole and terminal loyalty to this country as their *pitrabhoo* and *punyabhoo* as their fatherland and their holy land. It also refers finally to all those who belong to the clean castes which occupy the Indo-Gangetic belt and who speak Indo-Aryan languages. This not only effectively leaves out a large aboriginal and lower caste population outside the fold of Hindus but also coalesces territory, language, culture and caste. Moreover there exist in India today 'foreign' religions, now centuries hold the bulk of whose adherents comprise lower caste and tribal converts. The claim for the coterminality of religion with nation is fallacious and cannot be sustained<sup>3</sup>. 'Hindu nationalism' therefore would be continued to be used as there own self-definition.

Even though these are religious appeals being made within the grid of nationalism, it will be wise not to see it as an illustration of religious fundamentalism. For religious orthodoxy lies at the heart of fundamentalism and "...it seeks to dominate much more than the political..."<sup>4</sup> The BJP/RSS/VHP are not calling for a return to the fundamentals of the faith – a defining feature of religious fundamentalism<sup>5</sup>. We shall argue also against the self-portrayal of the events such as the *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement and the eruption of riots as spontaneous and self-propelling, as the fruition of mass awakening and action. While not subscribing to the conspiracy theory, it is our

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<sup>3</sup> T. K. Oommen, *Citizenship, Nationality and Ethnicity: Reconciling competing Identities*, (U.K. Polity Press, 1997), pp.83-5.

<sup>4</sup> Dipankar Gupta, "Communalism and Fundamentalism: Some Notes on the Nature of Ethnic Politics in India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXXVI, Annual No... p.579.

<sup>5</sup> T. N. Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds*, (Delhi OUP, 1997), p.26.

contention that a singular hegemonic project such as that of 'Hindu nationalism' is crafted by deploying a clever repertoire of ideas, symbols and material concerns that appeals to various sectors and groups of the society such that they can be assimilated to the project as a groundswell of support.

## II

Identities do not exist as primordially and eternally fixated but have to be created by selectively abstracting from pre-existing tradition and inventing new ones. As Anderson reminds us, that all communities – from the 'little community' of the village, to the dialect community spanning a wide region, to the community called the nation – are imagined and molded<sup>6</sup>. Whether 'imagined' or 'invented' (Gellner argues that nations are invented where none exist), they entail relations of power and a continuous process of exclusion and inclusion suggesting the 'becoming' nature of these identities.

Women appear as the central signifier in these processes, the instability and the porosity of the boundaries sought to be ossified by the figure of the woman. It is control over women's sexuality and autonomy that marks the ethnic, cultural, racial and national purity. The collectivity itself comes to be constructed as 'female' especially the mother, susceptible to sexual defilement. The 'virile fraternity' is then needed to be mobilized to protect her honor. So the nation is embodied as feminine in the figure of the mother and in its military representatives with power of violence as hyper masculine. The condensation of the community into sexual honor achieves the purpose of obfuscating

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<sup>6</sup> benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, (London and New York : Verso, 1993)



the internal contradictions to give the appearance of a 'deep horizontal comradeship'<sup>7</sup>. The trope of motherhood also makes it imperative that all non-productively oriented sexualities be erased out of sight<sup>8</sup>.

Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias have located five different ways in which women have tended to participate in ethnic and national processes and state practices on different terms to men. These are –

- As biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities, as 'mothers of the nation'
- As reproducers of the boundaries of the ethnic/national groups
- As participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and transmitters of its culture
- As signifiers of ethnic/national differences – as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories
- As participants for national, economic, political and military struggles<sup>9</sup>.

Walby however takes issue with them firstly for prioritizing the realm of symbolism and relegating the real issue of sexual division of labor to the back stage<sup>10</sup>. Secondly, she attacks them for failing to analyze the differential commitment of men and women to these projects of identity building. Are they

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<sup>7</sup> Anderson cited in Parker et. Al (eds.), *Nationalisms and Sexuality*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p.5.

<sup>8</sup> Recall the controversy over the film 'Film depicting lesbian relations within a Hindu Joint household. It was labeled variously as 'unHindu' and unIndian'. Thackeray even called for changing the names of the central characters to that of Muslims

<sup>9</sup> Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval – Davis, "*Women and Nation – State*", in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (eds.), *Nationalisms*, (Oxford and New York : OUP, 1994), p313

<sup>10</sup> Sylvia Walby, "*Women and National*": in Balakrishnan (ed.) *Mapping the Nation*; (London and New York: Verso, 1996). P.238.

equally enthusiastic about it and are they moved by the same considerations<sup>11</sup>? To this we might add the question whether their involvement alter in any significant way in the dominate discourse? Many studies have noted that identities sharpen, women, viewed as repositories of uncorrupted cultural values, are subjected to greater strictures and discipline. And as men engage in ethnic, communal or national welfare, woman suffers the most in the loss of family, home and livelihood. Their bodies come to symbolize the land that must either be protected from the enemy or that which must be plundered and inscribed by the marks of a victory. There is then a tendency to portray women as victims and as healers who would suffuse the values of love, the 'ethic of care' and 'maternal thinking' into the public and the political sphere<sup>12</sup>. They are thus inherently suited to be the guardians of a fragile peace. This not only essentialises the category of 'women' imputing to its eternal, unchanging 'feminine' qualities but also blinds us to the multiple intersections of race, caste, class, religion with gender.

Our concern here is however to analyze the complicity of women in these projects. The enthusiastic women supporters of Adolf Hitler immediately come to mind. What drove these women to participate so willingly in the Nazi activities? Was it the vision of a distant perfect social order? The promise of 'restoration of the glory of womanhood' or something else<sup>13</sup>?

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p238.

<sup>12</sup> Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, (London: Bernstein Press, 1989).

For an indigenous version of the arguments see, Vandana Shiv, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Survival in India*. (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Papanek, "The Ideal Woman and the Ideal Society: Failed Visions and Broken Promises in Nazi Germany", in *Germinal*, Vol. 1, pp.12-25.

Nearer, home female militancy erupted around the issue of a temple dedicated of Lord Ram at Ayodhya, supposedly his birthplace. Lakhs of women descended on this temple town to offer *kar seva*, they also incited men to loot, murder and rape the Muslims and remorselessly justified their acts as retribution for historical humiliations. These events scarred the relationship between women and pacifism. Following it, there appeared a cluster of articles focusing on the women's activism within Hindu militancy. Tanika Sarkar's essay<sup>14</sup> proved to be a pioneer of sorts in transferring the focus away from the RSS to its women's wing *Rashtra Sevika Samiti*. Incisively, she x-rayed the intricacies of the organization, its history, its network of formal and informal ties, the Samiti's relation to the *Ram janmabhoomi* movement and she makes to us intelligible shift in the iconography and symbolism from that of the 'threatened Hindu woman' which surfaced with unflinching regularity in communal discourses earlier to that of the helpless, 'cute' child imagery of the Rama who must be saved and whose birth place must be liberated by these women warriors. It thus lodges with them a unique energy and agency. This new found agency also bestows according to Sarkar, a certain, if only a minimal autonomy from the professed and unprofessed patriarchy of the parent organization in its emphasis of women's professional and public roles which almost approximates the model of Bourgeois feminism.

Bacchetta stretches this point further to highlight the creation of a specifically feminine 'Hindu Nationality' discourse, which becomes a guide for action and practice<sup>15</sup>. Women act and think qua women. Their differential locations and concerns necessitate

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<sup>14</sup> Tanika Sarkar, "The Woman as the Communal Subject: Rashtrasevika Samiti and the Ram Janmabhoomi movement", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXVI, No. 35.p.2057-62.

<sup>15</sup> Bacchetta, "Hindu Nationalist Women as Ideologues: The 'Sang' and the 'Samiti' and Their Differential Concepts of the Hindu Nation", in Jayawardena and de Alwis (eds.) *Embodied Violence: Communalising Women's Sexuality in South Asia*, (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996), pp. 126-67.

this differential discourse. Placing the Sangh and the Samiti in a comparative framework, she shows how the nation, its history and territory, how Hindus and 'Others' are variegatedly constituted for men and women. For instance *Bharat Mata* for the Sangh is a helpless, victimized mother requiring her son's protection, while the Samiti invests her with militant, warrior like qualities.

An essay by the same author is illustrative of how a Samiti Activist Kamlabehn draws upon the range of images that the Samiti chisels (differently from the men) particularly it's pantheon of armed goddesses that sustain her and spur her to samiti work.<sup>16</sup> "All are goddesses are armed", is the justification Kamlabehn offers for the militant behavior of women.

There have been a clutch of other essays too, all focusing on the gender logic of Hindutva. All these are bound together with a string of thematic and foundational unities. They draw their main strength from their refusal to see these women who are driven from 'false consciousnesses'. Instead they argue that women participate in these exclusivist projects for it gives to them a rare opportunity to transcend the domestic domain to forge larger solidarities, providing them with a feeling of self worth, a sense of larger purpose and a confidence and control not merely over one's own self, over one's family and children whom they must mould and make appropriately 'Hindu Nationality', but most importantly over the 'Other' – namely the Muslim over whom they are endowed with the power even of elimination. Even while this allows women, the process at best may be termed as "controlled emancipation" as Hansen chooses to call

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<sup>16</sup> Bacchetta, "All Our Goddesses are Armed: Religion, Resistance and Revenge in the Life of Militant Hindu nationalist Woman", in *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 25, pp, 38-51.

it<sup>17</sup> or “feminism inverted” a phrase Basu developed to denote such activism<sup>18</sup>. For it must forever be the salient one, the familial hierarchies and patriarchal practices within the community.

Profoundly telling as these are, we maintain our differences with them. Foremost, by foregrounding the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, they sever the links that this militancy has with the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century ‘Hindu nationalism’ which had already fashioned an activist warrior woman though not phasing out the emblem of ‘woman in distress’. The construction of femininity that accompanies boundary demarcation, whether as militant or as docile, is indissoluble linked to a peculiar construction of masculinity, a fact that is obscured in these writings.

Also is discernible a tendency here to naturalize such activism by stereotyping it as an upper caste, middle class phenomenon. Sarkar, for examples draws solace from the fact that the Samit Shakhas are located in the middle class areas such as Karol Bagh, Patel Nagar etc. and that it’s membership is moving at a snail’s pace in comparison with the ‘radical’ organization such as AIDWA (the women’ wing of CPM). Such an understanding leads to, we believe, academic as well as political complacency. Not only are their Shakhas spreading to non-traditional localities, but also the sheer public visibility and aggressiveness of their cadre gives us no cause for comfort. It is only Hansen who speaks of lower caste participation in Durga Vahini, an affiliate of the VHP, but he too does not interrogate the reasons for their collision with this project.

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Blom Hansen, “Controlled Emancipation: Women and Hindu Nationalism”, in Wilson and Frederikson (eds.), *Ethnicity, Gender and the subversion of Nationalism*, (London: Frank Cass, 1995), p.82.

<sup>18</sup> Amrita Basu, “Feminism Inverted: the Real Women and the Gendered Imagery of Hindu Nationalism”, in *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 25, p. 25.

This study on the contrary aims to analyze the symbolism and the imagery that helps to establish communalism as the hegemonic discourse among women of various strata. In a historically rich, detailed account of the Hindu nationalist movement in India since the 1920s, this study explores how rapid changes in the political, social, and economic climate have made India fertile soil for the growth of the primary arm of Hindu nationalism, a paramilitary-style group known as the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, together with its political offshoots. This analysis takes into account the subtle interaction between long-term strategies for changing the country's culture and short-term tactics of political accommodation. It shall also propose to historicise it by locating the processes that constructed certain ideals of masculinity and femininity in the last century till now and how the woman of 'Hindu Rashtra' was constituted by the anxiety about Hindu male effeminacy. Such activism has clearly unsettled the categories of 'agency', 'selfhood', 'subjectivity' and 'motherhood'. The Hindu nationalist movement in India makes a major contribution to the study of the genesis and development of religious nationalism. We shall re-examine them through the lens of 'Hindu Nationalism'. And finally, in what paradoxical ways is such activism bound up with the various strands of feminism.

The first chapter titled, "Tracing the lineage of Rashtra Sevika Samiti" analyses the process largely in the context of the theory of ethnic nationalism, which is applied to the Arya Samaj, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. The objective, then, is to show that even though Hindu nationalism was constructed as an ideology between the 1870s and 1920s, largely to vindicate the traditional world-view of the upper castes, and in so doing incorporated traditional elements such as 'Indian

traditional xenology', it introduced 'modern' features that were totally foreign to Hinduism. Such a process implied a defensive stigmatization of the others, but it also represented a strategic emulation; it redefined Hindu identity in opposition to these 'threatening others' while- under the pretext of drawing inspiration from a so-called Vedic 'Golden Age' – assimilating those cultural features of the others which were regarded as prestigious and efficacious in order to regain self-esteem and resist the others more effectively.

The second chapter titled "RSS- Organization and Training- Reinforcing Politics and Ideology" analyses the dissemination of ideological issues and symbols with an aim of arousing and sustaining an ethno-religious mobilization, implied the development of a solid network of activists and religious figures able to provide reliable support and a 'moral' guarantee for the Hindu nationalist movement. The second, and the most important, was the political context, which either helped or hindered the application of the instrumentalist strategy. In fact this strategy was largely conditioned by the situation prevailing in the political arena, as the review of post-Independence Indian history would enable to demonstrate.

The third chapter titled "Women as Communal Subject: Rashtra Sevika Samiti and Ram Janmabhoomi Movement" seeks to show how the strategy of identity-building served as the basis for an instrumentalist strategy consisting in ethno-religious mobilisation through the manipulation of Hindu symbols such as the 'birthplace' of Ram in Ayodhya and the exploitation of communal issues. This strategy alone does not have

the power to forge a Hindu nationalist identity. However, it appears to be the most efficient means of communicating to the masses the ideological Hindu identity evolved through the strategy of stigmatisation and emulation and closely associated with a small group of women, since it was largely influenced by brahminical values controlling women in all spheres of life.

This dissertation is not based on an 'empirical research'. The researcher has tried her level best to go through related literature on Rashtra Sevika Samiti in the national plane. And has tried to understand and analyze critically the concept of Hindu nationalism in the new modern era. Hence, it is a sort of critical exploration into the realms of women and Hindu nationalism and its examination in terms of party politics and relative insensitivity of the Hindu wing to the question of women, at all levels.

By this dissertation one can make a proper understanding of both the terms and their linkages with each other. The work has limited to certain spheres in order to understand these two concepts and have a holistic view of the perception of women in the pretext of Hindutva.



## TRACING THE LINEAGE OF RASHTRA SEVIKA SAMITI

### I

“Hindutva” or “communalism” or “Hindu Nationalism” is the most controversial, debatable and discussed concepts among people and scholars at present, locally, nationally and internationally. The BJP, which is based on the ‘Hindutva ideology’, either soft or hard Hindutva, is ruling the country with the help of other parties, and because of its Hindutva agenda, its policies have become more contentious among people. Though it is a controversial party, it is accepted by a good by a good number of people. The present BJP and Sangh Parivar, has its own roots in the Hindu Mahasabha, a party with an aim to unite the ‘Hindus’ under one ideology i.e. ‘Hindutva’<sup>1</sup>. The Hindutva forces have traveled ups and downs and used different means and strategies to mobilize the people to present political power, for implementation of its Hindutva agenda.

In general, people, who are associated with Hindu Mahasabha, BJP, “Sangh Parivar” (Hindu organizations), have characterized “Hinduism” in a particular way and called ‘Hinduism’ as ‘Hindutva’, which is equated with Hindu nationalism. For example, V. D. Savarkar, Golwalkar and others have defined it in this particular way, where as, secularists (liberals and leftists) interpreted

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<sup>1</sup> Gulam Abbas, Avtar: *A Hindu Myth*, in : Alok Bhalla (ed.) *Stories about the partition of India*, Vol. 3, and New Delhi: Indus / Harper Collins Publishers India Pvt. Ltd., 1994, pp. 191-205.

this Hindutva as a “politics of communalism” to achieve socio-economic and political goals of a particular section and equated Hindutva with fascism, because secularists differentiated between Hinduism, which is tolerant, positive and plural and Hindutva, which is divisive, aggressive and militant. Is it religious fundamentalism threatening to tear the society into sections or is it in itself a revivalism of Hinduism, which emerged in the 1920s<sup>2</sup>.

Firstly, this chapter deals in explaining Hindutva as an ideology in a historical perspective. How this ideology has been evolved since 1920s to the present, secondly, how individuals and organizations have contribution to the ideology building and lastly, the emergence of the women’s wing of the RSS i.e. the Rashtra Sevika Samiti and how this ideology perceives women. The chapter subscribes to how the project of ‘Hindu nationalism’ was crafted by deploying the ideology of Hindutva that appeals to various sectors and groups of the society, such that they can relate themselves to this project and give the foundational support to the rise of the ‘Sangh Parivar’.

While, the limitations of such a study must be made clear, some valid generalizations can be made. It also, does not take certain aspects like the ‘Shiv Sena’ into consideration. The reason being, firstly, that the study concentrates itself, only to the “Sangh Parivar” and its “ideology operation”.

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<sup>2</sup> Purushottam Aggarwal, *The fundamental question, Mainstream*, Vol. 29, No. 3, November 10, 1990.

Although, certain similarities can be traced between the Shiv Sena and the Sangh, but the former is more or less confined to Maharashtra, where as, the latter, the Sangh is more of an “expansionist” organization, both nationally and internationally.

There have been certain rapid changes in the social, political and economic climate since the 1920's that have made it possible for the growth of the primary arm of 'Hindu nationalism' in India<sup>3</sup>. The study, thus will center on these changes and the reasons, which gave birth to the 'political interpretation of Hindutva' by the 'Sangh Parivar' in recent years.

Religion and politics are always interconnected<sup>4</sup>. The phenomenon is more evident in developing societies where political units are generally social groups and identities<sup>5</sup>. Recent developments in India, marked by the emergence of Hindu nationalism and the religion-centric politics prove the above point. The 'Sangh Parivar' uses religion to enter the political sphere, and the ideology they speak has less to do with Hindu philosophy, and for creating a “*Hindu-Rashtra*”<sup>6</sup>. Thus, the study of 'Hindu nationalism' in India is

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<sup>3</sup> Swami Agnivesh, *Multireligious Approaches to Communalism*, paper presented to a seminar in Bombay, Bombay: unpublished paper, October 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Imtiaz Ahmed, *Political Economy of Communalism in Contemporary India*, Economic and Political weekly, Vol. XIX, No. 22-23, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1984, pp. 903-906.

<sup>5</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, *Riddles of Hinduism*, in: Govt. of Maharashtra (ed.) Dr. Ambedkar: Writings and speeches, Vol. 4, Bombay: Education Department, Govt. of Maharashtra, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Christophe Jeffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement, 1925-1992: Social and Political strategies*, New Delhi, Penguin India Pvt. Ltd. 1995.

an essential element for the genesis and development of religious nationalism.

Thus, the chapter is primarily concerned to explain how the Hindu nationalists developed their idea of Hindu identity over several decades. At the same time it analyses, the way in which this enterprise generated the speedy growth of the Hindu Nationalist movement – especially the RSS, as, by the 1947, this organization had a strong hold in all spheres of prior importance. Therefore, the present chapter examines 'Hindutva', in a historical perspective to understand this "Hindutva" properly at present.

The distinctive ideology of Hindutva was expounded at length during the early 1920's; however, it is argued that much of the content of 1920's Hindutva was already established much earlier<sup>7</sup>. Hindu Nationalism was constructed as an ideology between the 1870s and the 1920s. Although, concentration in this chapter is on the period beginning from 1920s. Hindu Nationalism derives itself from certain religious movements by the high caste Hindus, such as the Arya Samaj. This organization, founded in 1875, was a reaction against the British colonial rule and Christian missions<sup>8</sup>. Its primary concern was to maintain the basic elements of the traditional social order and

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<sup>7</sup> Sucheta Mazumdar, *For Rama and Hindutva: Women and right wing mobilization, COSAW bulletin special issue-women and the Hindu right*, Voll. 8, No. 3-4, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Kumkum Sangari, *Perpetuating the myth*, Seminar, No. 342, Delhi: Ramesh Raj Trust, February, 1988.

culture of the Hindus<sup>9</sup>. But, in 1920s certain Hindu organizations felt threatened by the mobilization of the Muslims in the khilafat movement, which propagated the idea of a 'Hindu Mahasabha', and 'Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh'.

A clear definition should be given to the terms '**ideology**', '**Hindutva**' and '**Hinduism**' before looking into the genesis of Hindu Nationalism. 'Ideology' according to Lloyd Fallers is "**that part of culture which is actively concerned with the establishment and defense of patterns of belief and value**"<sup>10</sup>. Ideology is thus, an unseparated part of culture. It is intended mainly to create a sense of national self-esteem. Thus, Hindu Nationalism, as we shall see, largely reflects the Brahminical view, of establishing the social order of varnashrama<sup>11</sup>. Although, our concern on ideological stands is only limited to "Hindu nationalist ideology" of the 'Sangh Parivar'.

Secondly, unlike Islam and Christianity, some difficulty exists in identifying the "**fundamentals of Hinduism**" upon which some of its 800 million adherents can agree. Not only the origins of Hinduism are some what clouded in ancient

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<sup>9</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *Fascism of the Sangh parivar*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 28, No. 5, 30 January, 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Tanika Sarkar, *The women of the Hindutva Brigade*, Bulletin of Concerned Asian scholars, No. 4: Oct. – Dec., 1993 (Special issue-Women and Religious Nationalism in India).

<sup>11</sup> Seminar-special issue on – *The BJP*, Seminar, Delhi: Rameshraj Trust, No. 417, May, 1994.

history, but also the major tenets are difficult to define. Nevertheless, Hinduism is one of the world's great religions<sup>12</sup>.

Lastly, according to Oxford Dictionary, the literal meaning of “Hindutva” is “Hinduness”<sup>13</sup>. Politically it connotes that India being a Hindu majority nation, its nationalism must find its essential sustenance from Hindu social and religious ideology. But, lately, eminent scholars worldwide have interpreted this concept differently.

Thus, in this 1920s when the ideology of Hindutva emerged on the Indian scene, it was due to the threat among Hindus for their survival. In this period, certain reforms were undertaken by the administration – certain Hindu customs were abolished by law, also the impact of the Khilafat movement, which united the Muslims, under Gandhiji, paved the way for the formation of the first organization of Hindus<sup>14</sup>. The Hindu Mahasabha, the national confederation, which had been, formed in 1915 – worked as a pressure group within Congress, but later, as a separate organization, provided a collective defense of the socio-political interests of the Hindus. (In fact, they even involved the untouchables in the sangathan with a view to dissuading them to

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<sup>12</sup> Seminar-special issue - *The Hindus and their isms*, Seminar, No. 313, New Delhi: Seminar, September, 1985.

<sup>13</sup> Romila Thapar, *Communalism and Historical Legacy: Some facets*, in: K.N. Pannikar (ed.) *Communalism in India, History, Politics and Culture*.

<sup>14</sup> A.K. Sur, *Tantrik odious of Hindu religion*, Folk, Vol. 33, No. 6, June, 1992.

convert to any other religion)<sup>15</sup>. The Hind-Muslim unity was further disturbed by anti-Hindu riots in the Malabar Coast in 1921, which also paved the way for the formation of this organization, based on a 'Hindu unity'<sup>16</sup>. B.S. Mooje, felt that the Hindus lacked a platform through which they could mobilize in an organized fashion. In 1925, under the leadership of the presidentship of Lala Lajpat Rai, the Hindu Mahasabha enunciated its programme of action based on Hindu nationalism<sup>17</sup>. The programme included-

- To organize Hindu sabhas throughout the country.
- To provide relief to such Hindus who need help on account of communal riots.
- Reconversion of Hindus who have been forcibly converted to Islam.
- To organize gymnasiums for the use of Hindu young men and women.
- To organize seva-samitis, and to popularize Hindi.
- To request the trustees and keepers of Hindu temples to allow halls attached to the temples where people may gather to discuss matters of social and religious interest.
- Hinduism all politics and militarize hindudom.
- Military strength behind the nation is the only criteria of greatness in the present world.

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<sup>15</sup> Ramendra, *Why I am not a Hindu*, Radical Humanist, Vol. 56, No. 10, January, 1993.

<sup>16</sup> C. Ramprasad, *Hindutva Ideology: Extracting the Fundamentals*, Contemporary South Asia, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1993, pp. 285-309.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5.

- To better the conditions of the Hindu women<sup>18</sup>.

The Hindu Mahasabha's stated aims during this period, enshrined in the constitution, were the maintenance, protection and promotion of the Hindu race, culture, and civilization and for the advancement and glory of Hindu Rashtra (Hindu Nation)<sup>19</sup>.

However, the ideology of Hindu nationalism was first codified in the 1920s. More instrumental than anyone else in bringing about this qualitative leap was a Maharashtrian Brahmin, Vinay Damodar Savarkar, the former head of a terrorist group, and the future president of the Hindu Mahasabha. (1937-42)<sup>20</sup>. His work, **Hindutva: who is a Hindu?** Is the basic text for nationalist "Hinduness"<sup>21</sup>.

Savarkar discovered nationalism in his study of nationalist movements in Europe. Even in his young age, he formulated secret organizations such as "Abhinav Bharat" in 1904, on the model of Mazzini's Young Italy organization<sup>22</sup>. Such sentiments suggest that Savarkar learnt what nationalism was from western experiments and then tried to apply the

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<sup>18</sup> Dilip Menon, *Warped Defence of Hinduism (A book of Review of Indigenous Indian writings)*, Indian Review of Books, October-December, 1994.

<sup>19</sup> T.N. Madan, *Fundamentalism*, Seminar, New Delhi, No. 394, June, 1994, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> Vinay Damodar Savarkar, *Six Glorious Epochus of Indian History*, New Delhi: Rajdhani Granthaghar, 1971.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7



imported concept to his own country, a process that relied on a new construction of tradition.

## II

Savarkar's main argument in Hindutva is that, "Aryans who settled in India at the dawn of history already formed a nation, now embodied in the Hindus. Their Hindutva rests on three pillars: geographical unity, racial features and a common culture<sup>23</sup>. Savarkar minimizes the importance of religious criteria in the definition of a Hindu by claiming that Hinduism was only one of the attributes of 'Hinduness'. The attributes for him are a part of the Vedic Golden Age. Thus, the basic aim of formulating such a **"definition of a Hindu"** is for creating the **feeling that India is a Hindu nation, a holyland, and the fatherland, of the Hindus since the Vedic Age**<sup>24</sup>. Although, it is quite interesting to note, that Muslims and Christians living in India would also be treated as Hindus, and have a place in the country, but subordinated to the "Hindu religion" as minorities, therefore, his racism is not a biological kind but is one of domination. It is true, however, that Hindutva marked a qualitative change in Hindu nationalism, aspects of which had previously been combined in a loose ideology but which now has acquired a more systematic and concrete definition.

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<sup>23</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, *Hindus nationalism: Strategy Syncretism in Ideology Building*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 28, No. 12-13, March 20, 1993, pp. 517-524.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7

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However, in 1909-1919, the constitutional reforms made by the Congress, enabled it to appeal to a wider audience. The Hindu Mahasabha, unable to follow and adjust with this path, remained highly dependent on the notables whose conservatism and factionalism hampered the growth of the organization<sup>25</sup>. Excluded from the Congress in 1937, on account of communalism, it was not truly represented in elective institutions. While, due to these reasons, the Hindu Mahasabha experienced an early decline, the RSS developed steadily and was to become the principal standard bearer of Hindu nationalist ideology<sup>26</sup>. In fact, this organization, which was formed by Hedgewar, was deeply influenced by Savarkar's conception of the nation. **The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh** (RSS – Association of National Volunteers) was founded in Nagpur in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, who had received his political initiation from Moonje<sup>27</sup>. He was sent to Calcutta for his medical studies and unofficially to learn terrorist techniques from the Bengali secret societies. His analysis extended to Congress where the factional divisions and the Gandhian method of non-cooperation seemed to him a mistake for the task of emancipating India from British Rule<sup>28</sup>. The main aim to build an organization like the RSS, was, firstly, to make it a non-political

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Blom Hansen, *RSS and the popularization of Hindutva: a Book Review of Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags by Tapan Basu*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XXVIII, No. 42, 1993.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Anderson and Sridhar Damle, *the Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism*, New Delhi: Vistaar, 1987.

<sup>27</sup> B.J.A. *India's Saffron Surge: renaissance or fascism? A collection of Political writings*, Bombay: Bhartiya Janwadi Aghadi, 1993.

<sup>28</sup> N.E. Balaram, *Hindutva: Facts behind the Façade*, New Delhi: Communist Party of India Publication, 1996.



one, working for the development of the society and Hindu culture, secondly, in addition to a threat from foreign domination there was also threat from the Muslims, and lastly, to introduce in the Hindu society, the cohesion and the strength of the “aggressors”, because Hindu’s are seen as weak and divided<sup>29</sup>. The main mission can be comprised in one sentence as to **“regenerate the Hindu community”**. For this purpose, akharas were opened in every shakha for “creating” new Hindu men. The shakha was based on **“taking every individual after individual and molding him for an organized national life”**<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, he even organized an officers training camp, with a task of forming a corps of Pracharaks. The main difference between Savarkar’s Hindu Mahasabha and Hedgewar’s RSS organization can be traced to the former being politically inclined, as the latter formulated for a more voluntary purpose, but the ideology on which it was formed remained the same. But by this time, M.S. Golwalkar came on to the stage as the Sarangchhalak of the RSS in 1940; he linked his definition of Hindutva to Savarkar’s conception of Hindutva, Hindu Nation and Hindu war<sup>31</sup>.

Nation for Golwalkar was composed of what he called the “unassailable” and scientific famous five unities; Country, Race, Religion, Culture and Language,

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<sup>29</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, *Hindutva ideology and social psychology*, Economic and Political weekly, Vol. 26, January 19, 1991.

<sup>30</sup> Tapan Basu, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right, Tracts for the Times 2*, Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1992.

<sup>31</sup> C. Baxter, *The Jana Sangh: A Biography of an Indian party*, Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1971.

which he defines in his book **“We, or our nationhood defined”**<sup>32</sup>. But, in contrast to Savarkar, Golwalkar claims that, **“Hindus came into this land from nowhere but are indigenous children of the soil always, from times immemorial”**. Therefore, “the racial factor” is by far the most important ingredient of a nation. The base of such an assumption repeatedly lies in the threat from the “conquering invaders” on the one hand and “Britishers” on the other. Moreover, for Golwalkar, “Race” is a “Jati”, and he is interested in the cultural unity of the Hindus rather than domination of one race over the other<sup>33</sup>.

While the RSS was conceived primarily as an egalitarian organization from within but its view for the establishment of the ideal society continued to be based on the varnashrama. The pervasiveness of the brahminical ethic in the ideology and practice was probably the main reason why it failed to attract support from the low castes<sup>34</sup>. But, the main aim of the RSS was to fashion ‘society’ to ‘sustain it’, ‘improve it’, and finally merge with it when the point had been reached where society and the organization had become co-extensive, an even overlapping of each other.

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<sup>32</sup> M.S. Golwalkar, *We and or our nationhood Defined*, PP. 32, 26, 50, 53.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.9.

<sup>34</sup> Jan Breman, *The Hindu Right: Comparisons with Nazi Germany*, The Times of India, 15 January, 1993.

Much of the ideological tenets propounded by Golwalkar were influenced by the western movements. For him, both fascism and Nazism were the “awakening” of the desires and aspirations of ‘racial consciousnesses’<sup>35</sup>. Thus, for him, although he did not rejuvenate the Varna system, which was already present, but formulated individuals of high character who would dominate every sphere of national life, on the western model of militancy.

The reasons that attracted people to join the RSS were mainly two. Firstly, the prevalent brotherliness and egalitarianism in the RSS, became one of the motivating factors, and secondly, the movement’s ideology became a potent binding factor for its, increasing membership, which was although limited in nature in comparison to that of the Congress<sup>36</sup>.

Although, if any analysis had to be made in accordance with the pronouncement of the ideology before independence, one could say that “**the shell was interpreted differently, keeping the core (ideology of Hindutva) intact**”<sup>37</sup>. Different personalities did contribute to this ideology by implying to different conditions and their personal interpretation of it, as there were differences of opinions, attitudes and behaviors of all, but the basis of interpretation was based on one ideological concept of “Hindutva”. By

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<sup>35</sup> Achin Vanaik, *Reflections on Communalism and Nationalism in India*, New Left Review, No. 196, 1992, pp. 43-62.

<sup>36</sup> A. Varshney, *Contested Meanings: India’s National Identity, Hindu Nationalism and the Politics of anxiety*, Cambridge, MA: Daedalus, 1993.

<sup>37</sup> B.P.R. Vithal, *Roots of Hindu Nationalism*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 28, 1993.

critically analyzing, the position of RSS before independence, one could observe, that the inability of the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha to gather substantial support from the masses resulted from such fundamental contradictions. On the one hand, they were the pioneers in building a Hindu Rashtra evolved on the model of the western, egalitarian model, on the other hand, they practiced and promoted the brahminical culture.<sup>38</sup> However, the political conditions which emerged after Independence, enabled the RSS to take a different path of “secularism”, which would cater to the demands of its times.

Although, RSS claimed to be apolitical, the leaders were driven to an interest in power by their advocacy of a Hindu Rashtra, thus, some swayamsevaks thought that RSS should be directly involved in party politics, as they therefore became associated with the Janasangh, a party initiated by S.P. Mookerjee.<sup>39</sup> After Independence, RSS decided to build up a whole range of affiliated organizations within different sectors and institutions of Indian society as a means of infusing Hindu nationalist values into public life. To this end, it formed a student's organization and a trade union<sup>40</sup>. Thus, the social and psychological reform of the Hindu society needed to provide a

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<sup>38</sup>. Achin Vaniak, *Situating of Hindu Nationalism*” Problems with Fascist Paradigm, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 29, No. 28, 9 July 1994.

<sup>39</sup> Romila Thapar, *Communalism and the historical legacy: Some Historical Facets*, Social Scientist, Vol. 18, No. 6 and 7, June-July 1990.

<sup>40</sup> S. Shivananandam, *Hindu Communalism and crisis of the State*, Mainstream, Vol. 29, No., 2, 1<sup>st</sup> December, 1990.

political basis to enter every section of national life. Also, RSS was convinced that there was a need to enter politics, to defend their right to exist and providing an opposition to the Congress. These developments undoubtedly spurred the leaders to form a political party, attracting swayamsevaks but controlled by politicians. Although, the RSS leaders were persuaded to set up a political party, which would be kept within the framework of the RSS.<sup>41</sup> As, RSS also decided to form a set of affiliated organizations, collectively, all of its organizations were called as the “Sangh Parivar”, i.e., the ABVP (Akhil Bhartiya Vishwa Parishad) formulated in 1948, the task of this organization was to bring about collaboration between all those teachers and students in different universities, so that a full-support is given by the youth<sup>42</sup>.

Significantly, the BMS (Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh) established in 1955, also propagated, as the Trade Union of the Sangh Parivar, proclaiming its ideology to the working class<sup>43</sup>.

The Jana Sangh accepted that for them more important was to concentrate on the long-term process of building Hindu-Rashtra than the short-term methods of gaining control of government.

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<sup>41</sup> Arun Shourie, A. *Secular agenda: for saving our country for welding it*, New Delhi: ASA Publishing house, 1993.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, P.7

<sup>43</sup> Gunther D. Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke (eds.), *Hinduism Reconsidered*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributers, 1989.

The organizational structure of the Jan Sangh obviously resembles that of the RSS, i.e., the hierarchical structure of the organization, and also the strategy adopted by the Jana Sangh, to create a militant network, dedicated to the RSS, patiently working at the grassroots<sup>44</sup>. The other strategy to mobilize support, which the Hindu nationalists employed, was the manipulation of symbols and exploitation of issues such as Ramjanmbhoomi and refugees from East Pakistan<sup>45</sup>.

But, at the end of the 1950's, the Jan Sangh having failed to mobilize the people came into a dilemma-is the failure in elections due to the penetration in the Indian Society, in the RSS style? Thus, in 1960s the party compromised a strategy of integration with legitimate politics on the one hand, and militant religious mobilization on the other. The first option involved, the elaboration of economic programme development, i.e., to take a moderate path<sup>46</sup>.

In 1964, the RSS played a leading role in founding the VHP, (Vishwa Hindu Parishad), who's centralized and integrated structure indicated to match other styles of foreign organizations such as Christian missionaries<sup>47</sup>. Promotion of Hinduism all over the world, was the major aim of this organization. Why?

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<sup>44</sup> Gopal Singh, *Of religion and Politics*, The Hindustan Times (Sunday Supplement), March 18, 1990.

<sup>45</sup> Yoginder Sikand and Manjari Katju, *Hindutva Propaganda on planning*, Mainstream, Vol. 21, No. 35, July 10 1993

<sup>46</sup> Dilip Simeon, *Communalism in Modern India: A theoretical examination*, New Delhi: Peoples Publishing House, 1987.

<sup>47</sup> Amarty Sen, *The threats to secular India*, Calcutta: Socio-economic research Institute, 1993.



Even after the Jana Sangh entering into politics, did the RSS formulated another arm from within its organization called the VHP? The Vishwa Hindu Parishad was less susceptible than the Jana Sangh to the constraints of the government's secularist approach because it kept itself outside the sphere of politics<sup>48</sup>. The Parishad had to propagate the basic principles of Hindutva and a programme of socio-cultural reform by uniting the Hindus worldwide.

Soon afterwards, the mixed strategy was implemented in the 1967 election campaign. This consisted in combining (itself), the Jana Sangh with alliances of mainstream opposition parties while at the same time launching religious mobilization campaign, although, the success remained quite limited<sup>49</sup>. In the late 1960s local Jana Sangh cadres protested against the participation of the Jana Sangh in the coalition government. Thus, the party had to take into account, both, the agitation of the Sangh workers and also to resist any attempt to moderate the party's Hindu Nationalism. In the end, they opted for a style of populism, which would be acceptable to both the activists and the economic programme. But, the combination of populism and the recourse to military nationalism proved unworkable when confronted by Indira Gandhi, and deprived the Hindu nationalists of their claim to be the best custodians of

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<sup>48</sup> Ajit Roy, Countering the Sangh Parivar: Combining Punitive measures with ideational offensive, Economic and Political weekly, Vol. XXVII, No. 51-52, December 19, 1992.

<sup>49</sup> S.K. Raut, *RSS: A proto fascist organization*, Secular Democracy, Nov-Dec, 1979.

the country's security<sup>50</sup>. Involvement with the Janata Party, in the 1970s brought the Jana Sangh into the political mainstream based on Gandhian notions of social reform and decentralization, and even giving them access to power in the center.

However, in the 1980s, the Hindu nationalist reached a deadlock: they had tried unsuccessfully to develop a militant strategy and then to become integrated in mainstream politics. At this time, the newly founded BJP (Bhartiya Janta Party), saw a gradual return to the combination of 'militant' strategies, with a moderate attitude towards development. The BJP was formed, as a separate organization of the RSS, to participate in the field of politics. Its main aim was to gain power through its "moderate" strategies based on modernizing and scientific orientation. Similarly, alongside nationalism and national integration, democracy and value based politics, the BJP adopted what is called 'positive secularism'<sup>51</sup>. However, in late 1980s to the end of the decade, there were several events that signaled the rise of an aggressively Hindu, anti-Muslim sentiment that consolidated into a distinct Hindu vote bank for the BJP. Hindus for the first time were mobilized massively behind the RSS – VHP-BJP combination. The Ramjanmabhoomi movement enabled the Hindu nationalists, chiefly through the VHP, to again

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<sup>50</sup> Alok Rai, *Religious Conversions and the crisis of Brahminical Hinduism*, G. Pandey (ed.), *The Hindus and others*, New Delhi : Penguin India Pvt. Ltd., 1993, pp. 225-237.

<sup>51</sup> G. Puri, *Bhartiya Jan Sangh Organization and ideology*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1980.

play its elitist, brahminical image in favor of a national devotion borrowed from bhakti<sup>52</sup>. In the 1990s, BJP openly moved towards a Hindutva position and the party manifesto declared it to be the party of nationalism, and exactly reproduced Savarkar's definition of Hindutva<sup>53</sup>.

### III

Since 1990s BJP kept the momentum and received enormous support from the upper castes, who felt threatened by the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report, and they utilized this concept in formulating their social basis. Also, the reliance with the RSS and Bajrang Dal agitated issues, like the Ramjanambhoomi, and Hindutva, and also, that the party stood for a party, united India in which order prevailed<sup>54</sup>. This period faces a "continuing indirect support from the RSS" but a 'politics of separation' by the BJP from the core ideology of Hindutva. The BJP suspended by appearing less militant and dissociating itself from the VHP<sup>55</sup>. Lastly, the strategy, based on militant nationalism and the "formulation of the "other", made little impact on the backward castes and the scheduled castes because it relied on a high-caste view of society, a reinterpreted high tradition which ignored the concerns of the disadvantaged. Thus, the RSS and its affiliates, to increase their base to

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<sup>52</sup> Sudhir Pandse, *Hindu Rashtra: What it will be like?* Bombay: Vidnyannishth Bharat Prakashan.

<sup>53</sup> Nirmal Mukarji, *For a more Federal India*, Economic and political Weekly, Vol. 27, No. 12, 1990.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p.11.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p.10.

even this section of the society, appealed to religious feelings that transcended caste barriers, especially because they were increasingly supported by the upper caste<sup>56</sup>.

Thus, with an increasing enormous support from all sections of the society, and BJP's emergence as a party of economic liberalization, that is seriously attended to a changed global environment contradicted with its inheritance of an RSS philosophy based on Swadeshi, and a concern to promote the interests of traditional sections of North India's middle classes, who, together with the poor would be threatened by the economic globalization<sup>57</sup>. Although, mid-to-the late 1990's have witnessed the extraordinary rapidity with which BJP controlled states, and the "Hindutva" movements unleashed within them have induced their vision of "Hindu Rashtra" into the institutions of state governments and society.

### III

#### **"Hindu Nationalism" and women**

The most chilling and also the most impressive of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement of the RSS-VHP-BJP apart from the pulling down of the mosque

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p.11.

<sup>57</sup> Rajni Kothari, *Cultural Context of Communalism in India*, Economic and political Weekly, Vol. 24, No. 2, January 14, 1989.

itself was the participation and presence of women in actual episodes of communal aggression against the Muslims<sup>58</sup>. Prior to 1992, scant attention was paid to the women's organization within the Hindu right organization despite the fact that Sevika Samiti had been founded in 1936, only some years after the formation of the Sangh<sup>59</sup>.

Founded on the Vijay Dashmi Day, making the triumph of goddess Durga over evil, the Samiti was conceived by Laxmi Bai Kelkar, also the first Pramukh Sanchalika, a post subordinate to the Sarasanghchalak<sup>60</sup>. Other influences of Tilak and Vivekanada, on her, the conception of "an ideal Hindu women" traces the origin of the Samiti to the need to defend and cherish Hindu values by women seeking to "compete" with men. It was the task of the Samiti to wean away from the "western" women's movement to their traditional tasks of imparting sanskaras to children in order to mould them into "patriots" and "men of character"<sup>61</sup>.

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<sup>58</sup> Rajni Kothari, *Playing the Communal Card*, News Week, (International Edition), New York: Newsweek Inc., 1992.

<sup>59</sup> Subhadra Joshi, *Is RSS behind Communal riots?* New Delhi: Sampradayitka Virodhi Committee.

<sup>60</sup> Zoya Hasan (ed.), *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the state*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994.

<sup>61</sup> S. Mazumdar, *Moving away from a secular vision? Women, Nation and the cultural construction of Hindu India*, Paper Presented at the round table on Identity politics and Women, WIDER, Helsinki, 1990.

Kelkar initially approached Hedgewar to allow women into the Sangh, but was turned down. She was asked instead to start a similar society for women as their "life, psychology and activities are different"<sup>62</sup>.

Thus, was born the Rashtra Sevika Samiti. The Sangh and the Samiti should be forward along parallel lines like railway tracks in the same direction, with the same aim. The Samiti has its priority aim as, the development and building of the women's ability for leadership, the arousal of the sense of duty and motherliness- kartatva, Netratva, Matratva – to enable her to dedicate herself at the feet of mother India – Bharat Mata<sup>63</sup>. Let me cite the Samiti prayer at some length on this;

Benevolent, auspicious Hindu Land,  
I dedicate my life to you.....  
Your ideas about Holy chastity  
Embrace your beloved daughters.....  
Bless our meek, pious, devout women,  
Dedication to their religion and tradition,  
We our the blessed mothers,  
Of this powerful nation.....<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p.15.

<sup>63</sup> Bipan Chandra, *Growing threat of Communalism*, Sunday, Vol. 11, No. 35, 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1984.

<sup>64</sup> Tanika Sarkar, *Pragmatics of the Hindu Right: politics of Women's organizations*, Economic and political Weekly, July 31, 1999.

The next aim however outlines her duties as daughter, sister, wife and mother, i.e. to inspire their father, brother, husband and son to take the path of Hindu Nationalism. While men may be viewed as individual entities, it is rare to view women outside of their family ties<sup>65</sup>.

It is this complete isolation of the self that is also present in its name. The 'Swayam' of the 'Rashtra SwayamSevak Sangh' is absent here. However, the argument given in defending the above statement is appropriated and invested with a new meaning, as stated, "that women organizations like Samiti's are even more important than the Sangh, and sevikas reaffirm the confidence in their own selves in taking up and fulfilling the duties of the Samiti"<sup>66</sup>. Hence, the samiti's function can be seen as the development of a distinctive Hindutva gender ideology with an overarching patriarchal configuration established by the RSS. The samiti's gender ideology commences with patriarchal premise that all women except one's wife are be regarded as one's mother. The significance of this statement is that, both its subject and its intended object is male, women are present only as a wife or a mother<sup>67</sup>. It shows that this ideology wants to take back women to traditional

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<sup>65</sup> COSAW, *women and the Hindu Right*, Special Issue – Committee on South Asian Women Bulletin, Vol 8, No. 3-4, 1993.

<sup>66</sup> Pradip Dutta, *VHP's Ram at Ayodhya*, Economic and political Weekly, November 2, 1999.

<sup>67</sup> Gabriele Dietrich, *Women's Movement in religion*, Economic and political Weekly, January 25, 1986.

history, where she has a limited role to play, but in a more open atmosphere of *modernity*.

The internal structure of the samiti is similar to that of the Sangh. The training is regarded to as Varga, literally a class and represents a typical situation with a teacher<sup>68</sup>. It is here that the sevikas learn to sharpen their skills for arguing, convincing and awakening the Hindu people for the cause of Hindutva.

A critical observation would bring onto the forefront an important question, as to why then the RSS formulated such an organization called the “women’s wing”? the answer curtails to a lot many reasons, firstly, according to RSS, due to western impact women were struggling for equal rights and economic freedom, there was every risk of women being non-committed to love, sacrifice, service and other inborn qualities glorifying women...., many women were attracted to the new easy going and showy way of life<sup>69</sup>. This unnatural change in the attitude of women might have led to the disintegration of the family, the primary and the most important unit of imparting good sanskars, and secondly, modification of such views also required if Hindu women were to participate in defense of “Hindutva”, and therefore, all aspects of this

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>69</sup> Des Raj Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayam sevak sangh*, New Delhi: Radha Krishna, 1979.



organization were modeled on that of the RSS, and like the RSS, it was to build an all India organization<sup>70</sup>.

Thus, the guiding principle of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti is "Hindutva" and promotion of Hindu nationalism, and at the same time keeping the essence of a Hindu woman, being an eternal mother, a symbol of love, sacrifice, dedication, fearlessness and devotion intact.

#### IV

The evolution of the "Sangh Parivar", from 1920s to the present, from Savarkar to Tagodia, the "**Hindu ideology**" remains the center point, as to rebuild the nation into a "Hindu Rashtra", The chain of events, discussed historically crystallizes a Hindu nationalist movement which at present challenges the foremost principles of "secularism" and "multiculturalism". As argued by C.P. Bhambhri, "**the fundamental belief of the ideologies of Hindutva is that India is a Hindu country and Hindus have a right to demand**", **loyalty from other minority groups like the Muslims and Christians**".

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<sup>70</sup> Dipankar Gupta, *The Indispensable center: ethnicity and politics in the Indian nation state*, Journal of Contemporary Asia, Vol. 20, No. 4, 1990, pp. 521-539.

While Hedgewar intended the RSS to work silently, if not secretly to spread its influence the organization has of late increasingly turned to the media, with channels broadcasting religious, moral and spiritual programmes. The media disseminate Hindu nationalist propaganda discreetly and effectively.

Evidently, with the weapon of "militancy" and "aggressiveness" in the hands of the "Sangh Parivar", since its establishment, implanted and mobilized people in Hindu identity-building and creating the "others". Somewhere, down the line, while British rule was partly responsible, the responsibility also rested with Hindu and Muslim leaderships to unite the country as one and not play on religious patterns for their own interests. While, BJP, with its, 'Hindutva' integrates Hindu based cultures with political power to create a polarized society based on the concept of the "other" and social" exclusivism". Here, the question is inevitable, 'what then is the future vision of the Sangh Parivar? Where does democracy based on the principle of equality of the all citizens fit into the project of "Hindutva"? BJP-in government has an "adversial" relationship with secular, democratic pluralist political system of India. 'Hindutva' and Indian democracy cannot co-exist because Hindutva is ideologically committed to establish Hindu majority State is a negation of the very idea of democratic rights of every citizen irrespective of caste, creed, religion, sex, and color.

## RSS – ORGANIZATION AND TRAINING: REINFORCING POLITICS AND IDEOLOGY

### I

The most chilling and also the most impressive spectacle of the *Ramjanmabhoomi movement* of the RSS – VHP – BJP apart from the pulling down of the mosque itself was the omniscient presence of Sadhvi Rithambara's impassioned outpourings to large gatherings creating mass hysteria. That she was addressing primarily men to arouse their '*purusatva*', exhorting them to assert their manhood and speaking largely in terms of the masculinist ideology of retribution and blood feud<sup>1</sup> in order to avenge the 'Babar ki aulads' did not deter women from participating in the kar seva or discourage their complicity in actual episodes of communal and even sexual aggression against the Muslims<sup>2</sup>.

Prior to 1992, scant attention was paid to the women's organization within the Hindu Right despite the fact that Sevika Samiti had been founded in 1936, only some years after the formation of the Sangh. Our attempt in this chapter will be to outline the insidious ways in which the Samiti function's to create a committed cadre force or the many means by which the Durga Vahini was able to consolidate and rally young girls and women and around the image of the fiery Durga in mid battle.

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<sup>1</sup> Sangari, "Consent, Agency and Rhetorics of Incitement", op. cit. p. 878.ss.

<sup>2</sup> See Kishwar, '*Religion in the Service of Nationalism*', (Delhi: OUP, 1998). She details how women in Bombay and Surat urged their men to murder and rape Muslims without the slightest trace of remorse.

Founded on the Vijay Dashmi day, making the triumph of goddess Durga over evil,<sup>3</sup> the Samiti was conceived by Laxmi Bai Kelkar, also the first pramukh sanchalika, a post subordinate to that of the sarsangh chalak. The crucible for the Samiti's foundation is explained variously in the several oral and published accounts of the Samiti. Some attribute it to Kelkar's propensity towards nationalism. Her participation in Gandhian programmes of picketing and spinning during the course of which she had some bitter experiences impressing on her the imperative of an independent women's organization for awakening women to the cause of the nation.<sup>4</sup>

Other sources described the pathos and pain she felt at the defenselessness of Hindu women in face of male sexual advances and the cowardliness of their husbands. Interestingly, while a Samiti publication depicts Kelkar being moved by the plight of orange pickers and Rekha Raje speaks of a helpless woman traveler in such a predicament that enraged the founder, neither is speaking of a Muslim aggressor<sup>5</sup>. It is the Hindu woman being oppressed by the Hindu males and the failure of the other Hindu men to protect the former that is seen as precipitating the need for an organization to train women in self-defence on the lines of the Sangh.

Still other accounts list the influences of Tilak and Vivekananda on her, especially latter's conception of an 'ideal Hindu women'<sup>6</sup> and traces the origin of the

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<sup>3</sup> The Sangh too celebrates its founding day on Vijay dashmi, but depicts it as the victory of Ram over evil. Bacchetta outlines how Sangh and Samiti constitute the same events and symbols. Bacchetta, "Hindu Nationalist Women as Ideologues: The 'Sangh' and the 'Samiti' and their Differential Concepts of the Hindu Nation", in Jayawardena and de Alwis (eds.), *Embodied Violence : Communalising Women's Sexuality in South Asia*, (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996), pp. 126-67.

<sup>4</sup> *Pratah Smarniya Mahilayen*, (Nagpur : Sevika Prakashan, 1995), p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> See Bacchetta, op. cit., p. 131 and for Rekha Raje's comment, see Tanika Sarkar, "The Woman as a Communal Subject : Rashtrasevika Samiti and Ramjanma Bhoomi Movement", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXVI, No. 35, 1991, p. 2061.

<sup>6</sup> "60 Years of Rastra Sevika Samiti : A living Example of Slow and Steady Wins the Race", in *Organiser, Nari Shakti Special*, Vol. XLVIII, No. 14, Nov. 3, 1996, p. 7.

Samiti to the need to defend and resurrect cherished Hindu values being frittered away by women seeking to 'compete' with men. It was the task of the Samiti to wean away women from the 'western' women's movement to their traditional tasks of imparting samskaras to children in order to mould them into 'patriots' and 'men of character'.<sup>7</sup>

Kelkar initially approached Hedgewar to allow women into the Sangh, but was turned down. She was asked instead to start a similar society for women as their "life, psychology and activities are different".<sup>8</sup>

Thus was born the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, "The Sangh and the Samiti go forward along parallel lines like railway tracks – in the same direction, with the same aim".<sup>9</sup> This has not only to do with the notion of separate but complementary gendered domains of concerns and activities but also with the conception of Sangh as desexualized spaces and control over one's sexuality as a necessary precondition for devotion to Hindu and national cause.

## II

Were women then only to appear as 'tropes', boundary markers of a community, as symbols of its collective honor and shame, as eternal victims – weak, suffering and vulnerable. On the contrary, they were to be empowered for self

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 7, also see, "Women – The Mother of Nation", Interview with Usha Tai Chati, the present Pramukh Sachalika of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti in the *Organiser*, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., "The Better Half", Hedgewar's speech at a Baudhik delivered at the Samiti Shakha on June 24, 1938.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

defence (atmaraksha) by manifesting valour (virya). A new image of woman embellished by arms and preying on the predatory Muslims began to be cultivated.

The propagandist book of the Sangathan, "Sangathan Ka Bigul", addressing itself to the women urged that "Every sister who joins the army of this revolution called the Sangathan should have a sharp knife with which she can use whenever she needs. The knife should be made like house hold knives, which can be used immediately. Every sister should practice for ten to fifteen minutes with this knife. And this can be easily done by cutting various fruits like kashifal (custard apple) and tarbooz (watermelon). It is a prime religious duty of all the women who enter the army of the Sangathan to be able to defend chastity and honour."<sup>10</sup> The need for women to stop depending on men for 'protection' and instead to defend their own honor was also the guiding principle of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, founded in 1934, by Lakshmibai Kelkar.

The emergent ideal was far removed from the soft delicate home bound Hindu woman. Emphasis came to be placed on a strong female body with regular and rigorous physical training, even in martial arts and shooting. The threat of the Muslim notwithstanding, it much have been difficult in the conservative society of that time to gain support and sanction for the women to go through such a physical regimen as that of men, for bodies of women connoted spaces of inviolable tradition and cultural sanctity. So the traditional figures of fiery and armed mother Goddess –

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<sup>10</sup> Charu Gupta, op. cit. p. 732.

Kali, Shakti were evoked as was the historical genre of virangana, Rani of Jhansi, being the most favored subject of secret nationalist literature.<sup>11</sup>

This is not to suggest that the conventional roles of mother and wife were cast aside as women took on the mantle of valiant warrior and a sister – in – arms in this war, indeed crusade of Hindu nationalism. On the contrary, it was their foregrounding courageous and brave deeds that they were to strike terror in the hearts of the Muslims and evoke awe and inspire action among the Hindu. As wives, their bravery was to their masculinity and ability to protect their women and religion. It was as if the woman was the agent, herself endowing agency to her man and claiming the Muslim as her 'victim'.

As mothers, they were perfectly suited to nurture in the young, the qualities of fearlessness, patriotism, lover for the nation and of course hate for the Muslim. The example of Shivaji and Jijabai was rampantly quoted. But for that, the mother would also have to be transformed, from a silent, suffering, tender woman ignorant of national and world affairs, she would have to be a confident woman well versed in all matters – religious, political and social Devi outlining the duties of the Hindu woman wrote:

"We would first of all like... the Hindu woman to 'feel' personally insulted whenever they come to know of any such action (reference here being made of course to the Muslim tyranny-MS); that is an insult, not merely to such and such family or person

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<sup>11</sup> Kathryn Hansen, *The Virangana in North India History : Myth and Popular Culture*, in EPW, Vol. XXIII No. 18, 1988, WS-25-33.

but to the Hindus as a whole. They should feel ashamed and they should feel indignant; they should promote to action their husbands, their brothers, their sons."<sup>12</sup>

Further, it was her task to see that little Hindu boys played "Indian and Mlechha soldiers with two batches of toy soldiers" and little girls rehearsed Durgavati, Padmavati and Laxmibai as their role models.

This activism of women was to be contained within a mode that did not subvert the traditional power dynamics either within the family, the community or the nation – the notion of izzat being the dominant leitmotif.

In fact, Asha Sharma incharge of Sevika Samiti, North India said that the intermingling between sexes leads necessarily to perversion and all organizations that did not practice sex segregation – as in Buddhist math – were bound to fail.<sup>13</sup>

The samiti has at its avowed aim, the development and honing of the woman's ability for leadership, the arousal of the sense of duty and motherliness – Kartatva, Netratva, Matratva – to enable her to dedicate herself at the feet of mother India – Bharat mata. The next aim however outlines her duties as daughter, sister, wife and mother i.e. inspire their father, brother, husband and son to take to the path of Hindu nationalism.<sup>14</sup> While men may be viewed as individual entities, it is rare to view women outside of their familial ties. Several Sevikas also pointed out that

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<sup>12</sup> Savitri Devi, op. cit., p. 128.

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>14</sup> Rashtra Sevika Samiti : *Ek Parichay*, (Mathura : Sevika Prakashan, n.d.)



women enjoyed a unique power owing to their task of infusing values in the family and especially the children and thus they could shape the nation and its citizens.<sup>15</sup>

It is the complete effacement of self that is also absent in its name. The “swayam” of the Rashtra swayam sevak sangh is conspicuously absent here. However this argument is appropriated and invested with a new meaning. For this very purpose, argued, Asha Sharma, women organizations like Samiti are even more important than the Sangh. Sevikas were asked to affirm faith in their own selves in taking up and fulfilling the duties of the Samiti. They are also asked to seek inspiration from the memory of Kelkar who dared to set up the organization against all personal odds, “Mein kar sakti hoon”, I can do it, they are constantly urged to remember.<sup>16</sup>

The internal structure of the Samiti is similar to that of the Sangh, where the pramukh sanchalika is not elected to office but is nominated to the office by her predecessor and the most basic unit too remains the shakha, where the members meet daily or weekly. The paddati or the pattern is identical to that of the Sangh with its emphasis on ideological indoctrination – baudhik, intellectual discussion – charcha, which allows for discussion issues of political significance, considered usually a man’s preserve. The training is referred to as varga, literally a class and represents a typical pedagogical situation with a teacher – the disseminator of knowledge and the students – the uncritical recipients of that knowledge. A theme is

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<sup>15</sup> This point was made by sevikas during a baudhik session which the author attended as well as in personal conversations with her.

<sup>16</sup> This is constantly reiterated. In the introductory speech by Asha Sharma welcoming the girls and women to a 15 day shivir as well as in the Baudhik.

constantly played upon until it becomes a part of the common sense.<sup>17</sup> Even poems and songs are worked around this theme. Girls are made to repeat the songs and slokas until they have learnt them 'by heart'. Many poems are the staple of nursery school rhymes but with a twist in the end to reiterate the topic of Hindu Rashtra.<sup>18</sup> Neither is charcha a free wheeling *discussion on any topic*. It is gently guided by a pramukh where arguments are built and opinions invited around these basic issues. It is here that the sevikas learn to sharpen their skills of arguing, convincing and awakening the Hindu people for the cause of Hindutva. The shakha also includes physical training – sharirik involving Yoga, games and learning skills in wielding churikas and lathis and judo karate. While the practical utility of knowing how to use a churika may be restricted, the attendant confidence of the knowledge that she can use the knife is immense. As a VHP pamphlet claims, it is this knowledge that is supreme.<sup>19</sup> The shakha then holds out a promise for young women to negotiate public spaces traditionally monopolized by men.

The Samiti also offers correspondence courses to women who are unable to attend regular shakhas as well as to those women who independently run shakhas to help them organize their activities through pamphlets sent every three months.<sup>20</sup> Annual camps or shivirs are also held and these last from two to fifteen days. Records of membership are not kept (no formal memberships are given) but the office bearers reckon that about 3,500 to 5,000 shakhas are being run today.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 2060

<sup>18</sup> For instance a poem depicts the characteristics of passengers in a train hailing from different states such as the Bengali's love for the Rossugulla (a sweet). In the end of speaks of Sevikas traveling in the train and their love for the nation that pervades the atmosphere.

<sup>19</sup> Mahila Vibhag, *Parichay Mala*, Pushpa 0- 2, 1998, VHP.

<sup>20</sup> Baudhik Patrak (Nov., Dec. and Jan.), Rashtra Sevika Samiti, Kendra Wardha.

<sup>21</sup> In conversation with Asha Sharma.

Matrishakti, mother power defines itself in active and explicit opposition to those women's organizations which offer women only an illusion of rights and equality with men but undermine their glorious status and divine duties as mothers.<sup>22</sup> It calls upon the woman to expand her own self beyond the family to the nation, society and to ultimately engulf God.<sup>23</sup> It operates largely like a welfare organization running schools, arranging for tuitions in slums, constructing hostels, libraries, setting up blood donation and medical camps in tribal areas. It also recognizes the urgency of economic independence for especially for destitute women and organizes income generating programmes.<sup>24</sup>

However the need for all these programmes is underscored by the task of defining the boundary of the Hindu community and protecting it from the designs of the Muslims and Christians. Their forays in the areas of health and education have been spurred by the need to repel and counter the missionary activity of the church. Economic independence is necessary for women to ward off the overtures of Muslim men. The critique of dowry and untouchability emerge with the same logic.<sup>25</sup>

While Matrishakti casts itself in the mould of a charitable organization, it is left to Durga Vahini to pursue agitational programmes on issues such as dowry, pornography, cultural corruption from the west and so on. Not surprisingly since the Durga Vahini came into being at the height of the Mandir agitation to recruit young women and girls and was given an organizational structure and form, which later developed in 1994. Service, self defence and Values – seva, suraksha, samskara, it

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<sup>22</sup> Matri Shakti, *Parichay Mala*, Pushpa – 3, 1998, VHP.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

takes as its founding and guiding principles.<sup>26</sup> Service to the family and the nation, defence of the self and also of the religion and community (Durga Vahini was at the forefront of the attack on M.F. Hussain's paintings of nude Saraswati and the film 'Fire' depicting lesbian relations in a joint household), values are to be parted not only to one's own family and children but also to all those who have not as yet been touched by the Hindu Values and are 'uncultured'.<sup>27</sup> The large network of schools and medical assistance thus allows the expansion of the Hindu Right vertically downwards to assimilate sections of society, hitherto outside their ambit. In migrant slums of metropolis and in tribal areas, these Durgas reach out in the spirit of 'civilizing mission'.

Thus the Vahini makes mass recruitment from among the lower caste women, while retaining an upper caste leadership drawn from traditional Sangh families.<sup>28</sup> The contrast in the membership between the Samiti and the Vahini could also account for the difference in the strategies, one eschewing agitation, the other being born out of it. The Durga Vahini almost entirely replicates the basic unit and the working of the Samiti shakha but chooses to call it Shakti sadhna Kendra.<sup>29</sup>

There are other striking similarities too between all these organizations. In all three, religiosity and nationalism coalesced and indeed religiosity is sought as an entry point into the woman's world. A Matrishakti pamphlet recognizes that it would be best to begin with religious programmes, satsang, and to only gradually introduce a slot for discussion or chintan on problems confronting the neighborhood, society,

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<sup>26</sup> Durga Vahini, *Parichay Mala*, Pushpa – 3, 1998, VHP.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Blom Hansen, "Controlled Emancipation : Women and Hindu Nationalism", *op. cit.*, p.91.

<sup>29</sup> Durga Vahini, *op. cit.* pp. 6-8.

nation and women.<sup>30</sup> The Samiti could escape organizational collapse after the ban on RSS following the assassination of Gandhi, by keeping alive its mass contact through bhajan mandals and discourses on the Mahabharata and Ramayana.<sup>31</sup> In the Shakha the cry of *Bharat mata ki jai* is promptly followed by Hindu dharma ki jai. Ram is repeatedly cited as the national hero thus erasing the distinction between Ram bhakti and desh bhakti.

Traditional networking has been deployed by all three to expand the work and idea beyond the shakha and satsang. The first phase of growth was made possible by the young sevikas of Wardha – the nerve centre of the organization, who spread the ideas and the work in places where they married. These women were instrumental in spreading the ideology of the Samiti among the women in their marital homes and in setting up shakhas in their localities.<sup>32</sup> Not only is the shakha or the satsang to be developed like a family wherein women display mutual love and trust, the volunteers are encouraged to foster close family ties and are expected to enquire about the well being of those who absent themselves from the shakha. The old and the sick are nursed by them.<sup>33</sup> For this reason, families do not hesitate in sending their girls to Shivirs, when usually the only visits allowed to the girls are to the homes of the relatives. Despite their opposition to the liberal and left women's movement in India, they tend to appropriate many of their concerns and agenda, peppering their rhetoric with these issues thus making secular feminism redundant. Samiti publications particularly laud women professionals. Many articles and fiction describe women in their professional roles such as teachers, doctors and even

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<sup>30</sup> Matri Shakti, op. cit., p.6

<sup>31</sup> "60 years of Rashtra Sevika Samiti", op. cit., p.8.

<sup>32</sup> Samiti : Ek Parichay, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 3 and also Matri Shakti, op. cit. p. 5

sportspersons. They are shown as exercising choice in matters of the marriage. Thus women are reinstated in their positions as swayambara. As in a Swayambar where the participants were carefully scanned for ancient and proud lineages, skills in warfare and the like, where choice was thus restricted, the women in these stories and articles also do not break class and caste barriers, indeed the choice for their mate even belong usually to the Sangh background. The choice of issues is also ruled by political expediency. The Sangh and its female affiliates are the most vociferous advocates of the Common Civil Code. The Sangh's critique of the Muslim personal law betrays a hint of hostility against a privilege that has been denied to the Hindus but still lawfully enjoyed by the Muslims – Swami Muktanand Saraswati of the VHP complained "... Today a Hindu can marry only one woman while a Muslim can have five wives. Why should a law be there? If a man wants to have 25 wives let him".<sup>34</sup> The campaign for uniform civil code serves several purposes. For one, it allows the constant reiteration of Sangh's ideology of 'one nation-one culture' with an added 'one code'. It makes possible also the repetition of the stereotype of Muslim male as insatiable and lustful whose sexual appetite demands many women. Islam can then be established as disrespectful and oppressive to women in comparison with 'tolerant' Hinduism which has accepted change within its personal laws with considerable ease. The logical next step for the samiti and the Durga vahini is to project the Muslim woman as suffering, weak and oppressed and themselves as the vehicle of awakened conscious Hindu woman.

## II

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<sup>34</sup> Cited in Manini Chatterjee, "Strident Sadhus : Contours of a Hindu Rastra", in *Frontline*, Jan. 29, 1993, p. 5.

'Hindu nationalist' women emphasize the futility of secular feminism by privileging India's ancient and 'glorious' culture and religion (Both are invariably elided) as the most favored terrain for women's self realization of her potential and agency. Their interpretations of Hindu texts and understanding of history while operating within the overall framework of the Sangh ideology departs significantly by placing women at it's center. Women are the primeval source of all creation Nirmatri and motion gati and power as Prakriti and adi Shakti. For a Nirmatri to demand rights equal to her own creation (men) is to taint the divinity attached to her status. Thus their conception of activism is guided by the ideal of 'nari shakti' rather than 'nari mukti'.<sup>35</sup> The latter evokes the vision of an anchorless, rootless woman bereft of her duties as a mother and home maker – precisely those qualities that make her so reversed.

The Samiti has two mutually exclusive yet interpenetrating temporal frameworks.<sup>36</sup> The Hindu categories of Yugas such as sapta yug and kaliyug constitutes one cycle of time while the linear historical shift from 'Hindu', 'Muslim' and 'Christian' periods represents the other<sup>37</sup>. In both of these, women appear as key figures. In the Saptayug which corresponds to the Hindu period women were revered as seers, engaged in spiritual pursuits – Maitreyi and Gargi being the epitome of Vedic learning. "The Mahanirvans and many other Vedic texts laid stress on the importance of educating women. They were also eligible for Upanayana or

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<sup>35</sup> This is the title of several articles published by the Samiti.

<sup>36</sup> Bacchetta, op. cit. p. 139.

<sup>37</sup> The Sangh too believes in the latter even though Golwalkar critiqued James Mill on account of his characterization of an 'unending Hindu history' as interspersed by Muslim and Christian periods. For Golwalkar, they represent merely phases of conflict between Hindus and Muslims and Christians respectively where the Hindus emerged victorious. See Golwalkar, Bunch of Thoughts, (Bangalore: Vikrama Prakashan, 1966),P. 140

initiation into a life of bhramacharya or the study of bhrama vidya"<sup>38</sup>. In contrast *kaliyug* is represented as inversion of this moral order but one which has been brought about by certain historical events, namely, the Muslim invasions and Western imperialism. Imperialism implies here not as political or economic processes but rather a state of mind which is enamored of the Western lifestyle and ideals of women. All oppressive practices such as child marriage, sati and purdah can thus be safely adduced to the 'Barbaric' Muslims. If the Muslims treated women as mere 'objects' of their lust, then with the impact of the West the commodification of women was complete. Her body began to be used for selling products.

It is women alone who can by their actions restore the morality and correct this dystopia.

Julia Kristeva says that women have a peculiarly cyclical notion of temporality that corresponds to the recurrence of biological rhythms. The linear movement of time is replaced in female subjectively by a "...all encompassing, infinite like imaginary space...".<sup>39</sup> Announcements by the sevikas during kar seva that "...Hindu hi adi ant hai ...", or that "...Poora vishwa badal ho jayega, ek naya srishti ka narman hoga...",<sup>40</sup> do connote sweeping millenarian visions of an eternal religion and resurrection that defy the category of temporality altogether but they are not uniquely feminine imaginations. Both men and women were driven by the belief in the timeless Hindu Rashtra.

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<sup>38</sup> Organiser, Op. cit., p.1.

<sup>39</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time", in Keohane et. Al, (eds.), *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology*, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), P. 35

<sup>40</sup> In Sarkar, "The Woman as a Communal Subject", op. cit. p. 2057



These organizations deploy a whole repertoire of images and symbols to connote the qualities desirable of a woman. They range from the warrior queens like Rani Laxmi Bai, Durgavati and Vishbala to the able women administrators like Ahilya Bai and Rani Chennama to the Bhakti poetess Mirabai, without however giving up the traditional figures of Sita, Savitri and Anusuya. Two unorthodox figures have been sneaked into this list of role models – Kaikeyi and Mandodri. Kaikeyi has been traditionally and popularly reviled as the woman whose greed brought about so much grief to everybody she knew, her husband, her sons and the subjects of Ayodhya. And yet she is admired in the pages of Samiti publications for her skills in the battlefield which saved her husband's life and earned her boons through which she could exercise her power over him. Mandodri on the other hand was the virtuous wife of Ravan, whose words of wisdom went unheeded by her husband and led to his ruin. She is admired for her vision and foresightedness.

Women of 'Hindu Nationalism' also lay claim to an ancient lineage of mother goddesses to empower themselves. India has had a rich tradition of mother goddesses dating back to more than five thousand years. A split is often made between 'unhusbanded' goddesses like Kali whose powers are pregnant with dangerous and destructive potential and those goddesses who have been 'spousified and purged of their martial, sexual and ethical autonomy and who emanate a mellow benevolence.'<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Lynn Gatwood, *Devi and the Spouse Goddess*, (Delhi: Manohar, 1985), pp. 1,4. See Kamla Ganesh, "Mother who is not a Mother: In Search of the Great Indian Goddess", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXV, No. 43, pp. WS-59. The cult of the mother goddess has also been studied in some depth by Kosambi, *Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture*, (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1992).

Almost invariably, goddesses are usually shown with two arms, the single goddess possesses four arms or more.

The most important goddess of the samiti is Bharat Mata. The daily salutation dedicated to Mother India is emblematic of the conception of the Goddess, the nation and the awakened Hindu woman – the Sevika. The prayer may be sung individually but maximum benefit accrues when sung in a collectivity, when the 'I' is drowned in the 'we'. The prayer begins by reaffirming Savarkar's conceptualization of the sacred geography of the nation, the citizenship of which rests on the devotion to the 'sacred land' (Punjabhoomi). Motherland is the origin of all divinities and is boundlessly affectionate—a quality of all mothers, is auspicious and the very embodiment of power. As her daughters, Sevikas are replicas of the mother—chaste, selfless, fearless, capable and united. As power she is Durga and auspiciousness she is Parvati.<sup>42</sup> In fact Bharat Mata, Durga, Parvati and the physical mother all elide easily into each other. Durga, created from the combined energies of all Gods wields weapons and battles alone, unaided she slays the buffalo demon Mahisha to claim the title of 'Mahishasur Mardini'. It is her horrific form and the destructive principle that is most evoked by the Durga Vahini in its theme song. It is highly evocative of bloodshed and death. The virulence of women Kar sevaks immediately springs to mind.

Kelkar had wished to provide the samiti with a spiritual base and hence created a goddess, Devi Ashtabhujā, the eight armed goddess. She represents an assimilation of Mahalaxmi's wealth, mahasaraswati's intellect and Mahadurga's

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<sup>42</sup> "The Prayer", in Organiser, Op. cit., pp. 19-24. It is a detailed translation and explication of the prayer.

power. Her status in the Samiti pantheon is lower to that of Bharat Mata – who is alone to be worshipped. *Ashtabhuj* is above all a model of virtues to be emulated by the sevikas, each of her hands representing one virtue – chastity, power, dedication and so on.

It can be suggested as Paola Bacchetta does, that these images of goddesses as placid, bounteous to tempestuous and out of control allows women a wide array of role choices. I argue instead that they are not so much different roles as one single and harmonious whole which may manifest different characteristic or forms at different times. A woman must straddle the poles of fecundity and destruction by directing the latter towards the 'other', namely the Muslims. Hindu nationalism deploys this iconography to empower women in socially acceptable ways.

Durgas, Ranchandis and Bharatmata are not the only images of women's activism offered by 'Hindu Nationalism'. Religious renunciators especially after the rise of Sadhvi Rithambhara and Uma Bharati have emerged as powerful icons of the movement. The notion of renunciation has been prevalent in India since the composition of the Dharmashastra. It implies the voluntary ejection of an individual from the world in a personalized quest for an individual and private Moksha.<sup>43</sup> Louis Dumont views renunciation as the only avenue open in a holistic society like India that de-emphasizes 'individualism' to give expression to individual autonomous

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<sup>43</sup> Romila Thapar, *The Householder and the Renouncer in the Brahminical and Buddhist Traditions*, in Madan (ed.) *Way of Life: King, Householder, Renouncer – Essays in Honor of Louis Dumont*, (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1982), pp. 274-76.

self.<sup>44</sup> In that sense he says that the status of the renouncer remains always in an antithetical relation with that of the householder for he must leave the world and adapt an entirely different mode of life. Thapar says that renunciation does not imply denial of reciprocity and social action. On the contrary, isolation from public performance suffuses the renouncer with a charisma that is most effective in its public role.<sup>45</sup> Sandhu and sants have always engaged themselves in a range of activities as traders, mercenaries, moneylenders, and landlords and as leaders in social and religious reform movements. Their actions have been guided by motives not always saintly.<sup>46</sup> Any accusation of hunger for political power is however rebuffed by them by taking recourse to lofty ideals and values. They argue that they have been forced to tread out of their spiritual pursuits to purge the social order of its current immorality and indeed in this sense, it is an extension and fruition of their spiritual journey.

Charges Sadhvi Rithambara, Are hame vote Chahiya? Hum sadhu mahatma Vyas gaddi pe beth kar puri kayanaat ke badshah ho jate hein. Hame tumhari Delhi ki satta nahi chahiye. Hame Ram Janmabhoomi Chahiye. (Do you think we want votes? We sants can become the emperors of the universe simply by virtue of our claim to the omniscience of Vyas. We do not want political power in Delhi. We want our Ram. We want our Ram Janma Bhoomi).<sup>47</sup> In popular imagination then

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<sup>44</sup> Louis Dumont, "World Renunciation in Indian Religions", in Contributions to Indian Sociology, (4) 1960, pp. 33-62

<sup>45</sup> Thapar, op. cit., p. 276

<sup>46</sup> The religious specialists outside the world of caste, politics, and economy are largely a figment of the Orientalist imagination. Van der Veer illustrates how internal dynamics of cast and most importantly among the mathas. Profit guides the involvement of various religious heads in any movement such as the Ram Janmabhoomi. See Van der Veer, Gods on Earth: The Management of Religious Experience and Identity in a North Indian Pilgrimage Centre, (Delhi" OUP, 1989). Also Virginia Van dyke, "General Elections, 1996: Political Sadhus and limits to Religious Mobilisation in India", in Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XXXII, no. 49, 1997

<sup>47</sup> Rithambhar's speech cited in Sangari, op. cit., p. 878

renunciation does connote emptying oneself of the values of artha and Kama that is, profit and pleasure, which tie a householder to the mundane worldly affairs. Not coincidentally in India many social reformers and politicians the most famous example being that of Gandhi, have taken on the mantle of renouncers.

Renouncers thus create around themselves an aura of great selflessness and other worldliness. Being herself outside the grid of Kama, Sadhvi Rithambhara nonetheless uses explicit sexual imagery to incite and provoke the Hindu Men to prove their 'manliness'. "... if you do not awaken, cows will be slaughtered everywhere. You will be responsible for these catastrophes for history will say, Hindus were cowards. Accept the challenge...".<sup>48</sup> It is clearly a challenge that is thrown at the men by a woman, whose approval they can win only by proving their virility (which is synonymous with killing Muslims). The duty of incitement, which lay with the wife, is taken over by the Sadhvi whose speech serves to incite the entire community. Her carefully modulated voice, the starkness, of her yellow robes and her self imposed chasity all elevate her to the status of a screen goddess, visible and desirable but out of reach. Conversely the graffiti inscribed by karesevaks in Ayodhya read "I sleep with Zeenat aman" of "I sleep with Saira Banu", both highly successful and glamorous actress from Bombay. The Muslim woman is made accessible in the individual and collective fantasies of Hindu men.

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<sup>48</sup> Kakar refers to Rithambhar's speech in *The Colors of Violence*, (Delhi: Viking Penguin, 1995). An identical tenor is struck by Uma Bharati when she urges Hindu men to "...Throw off the cloak of cowardice and impotence...learn to sing songs of valour and courage...", in Kishwar, "In Defence of Our Dharma", *Manushi*, No. 60, 1990.

### III

In the narrative of 'Hindu nationalism', the family comes to stand in for the nation. Just as family is the site of mutual love and trust, so must be the nation. More significantly as the power relations within the family can be obliterated, the hierarchies of caste, class and gender can be easily and forcefully naturalised. The supreme responsibility of ironing out the difficult creases that might arise owing to these hierarchies lies with the woman who must also burden herself with the task of ensuring that families do not splinter.

Nation in this sense is not a terrain fraught with political battles and fissured with opposition of interests but rather marked by an idyllic harmony – *samrasta*. Given here the co-terminality of religion with nation, it is at once a homogenous and non conflictual 'Hindu Nation' but also eternally in conflict with an equally monolithic Islam. It is not simple however to constitute this smooth and unfractured 'Hindu Nation' in face of real oppressive high caste practices and equally powerful lower cast resistance. Virtually everywhere a reference is made to caste in the discourse of the Sangh or any of its affiliate, a distinction is made between *varnashrama* and *jatipratha*. It is the latter that presupposes hereditary, endogamous and hierarchical castes. The tendency to split the two may be traced back to Daynand Saraswati who added a social dimension to the myth of the 'Golden Vedic Age', an age which did not exhibit the rigidity of the *jati* but deployed the ideal four fold *Varna* governed by

merit alone and which sprung from the collectivities needed for socio economic complementarity. Status distinctions were later aberrations<sup>49</sup>.

In recent times caste acquired an urgency following the announcement of Mandal Commission report recommending reservations for backward castes. The Sangh 'parivar' perceived as threat to the prospect of *Hindu unity* and a reinvigorated Hindu identity. It was at the forefront of the anti-Mandal agitation.<sup>50</sup> Its nation of mitigating caste structures is confined to organising *sahbhoj* – commensal eating with the lower castes and *upanayana* ceremony for women and lower castes ritually excluded from these ceremonies. It also borders on some symbolic gestures as inviting a Dalit to lay the *shilanyas* of the proposed temple in Ayodhya.<sup>51</sup>

A jarring note is struck by Uma Bharati, a backward caste Lodh woman leader herself, a rarity in the upper caste dominated leadership of the Sangh. She argues for reservations and is almost radical in her rhetoric of social dignity, economic and political power sharing for the backward castes.<sup>52</sup> But this is appropriated in terms of Hindu values of *prayashchit* – repentance and familial ideology of paying off the debts of one's ancestors – *poorvajon ka rin*. Thus the upper castes must concede their privileges in favour of those who have been oppressed by their ancestors. Ultimately these privileges must be forsaken to consolidate the Hindus. Mothers must teach and emphasize the filial ties between the lower and the upper castes<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Christopher Jafferlot, "*Hindu Nationalism : Strategic Syncretism in Ideology Building*" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXVIII, Nos. 12-3, 1993, p. 518.

<sup>50</sup> See for instances Chakravarti et. Al, "Khurja Riots", op. cit.

<sup>51</sup> Tapan Basu et. Al, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags : A Critique of the Hindu Right*, (Delhi : Orient Longmen, 1993), p. 91.

<sup>52</sup> Rithambhara's speech in *Sammelan Vrita : Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Sammelon*, 1994, pp.16-7.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, Bharati has opposed 33% reservation for women in parliament in present form for it would only she fears, swamp the parliament with upper caste women. She stands thus in a strange solidarity with her caste brethren but political opponents – Mulayam Singh and Laloo Yadav in demanding a

Rithambara's opening lines of a carefully orchestrated speech which nonetheless appeals as spontaneous has the effect of welding the Hindu identity and demarcating its boundary.

Hail mother Sita! Hail brave Hanuman! Hail Mother India! Hail the birth place of Rama! Hail lord Vishwanath of Kashi (Benaras)! Hail Lord Krishna! Hail the eternal religion (dharma)! Hail the religion of Vedas! Hail Lord Mahavira! Hail Lord Buddha! Hail Banda Bairagi! Hail Guru Gobind Singh! Hail great sage Valmiki! Hail the martyred Kar sevaks! Hail Mother India!<sup>54</sup>

This begins with the invocation of Sita, the wife of Rama. Interestingly some of the anti-modernist critiques of Hindutva are premised on the position that it is a spurious Hinduism, that it has little to do with religious traditions in its pursuit of political power.<sup>55</sup> While Hinduism in its pre-Hindutva gentle forms acknowledged Sita before Rama in the traditional greeting of 'Jai Siya Ram', the battle cry of Jai Shri Ram miscellanies Hinduism encroaching upon the space given to women traditionally. In their view Hinduism is only to be recovered and saved from Hindutvavadis and all shall be well. But they do share with the latter a belief in 'tolerant Hinduism' as against the fanaticism of Semitic religions. The journal

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reservation within this for O.B.C. women and in opposing the entry of par kati, a euphemism for urban elite women.

<sup>54</sup> Kalkar, op. cit., p.200.

<sup>55</sup> This is the argument forwarded by Kishwar in "In Defence of Our Dharma", op. cit. Ashis Nandy too makes a distinction between faith and ideology. Hindutva pursues religion not as a faith, as away of life, but as an ideology, that is as a "...sub-national, national or cross national identifier of populations contesting for or protecting anon religious, usually political or social, economic interests". See Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance", in Veena Das (ed.), *Mirrors of Violence Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia*, (Delhi : OUP, 1996), pp. 70-2.



Manushi regularly features articles that stress on the cultural and traditional resources that may sustain women's struggles. Rithambara's address may see as a redressal of this lament.

Also significant are the references to Valmik – the author of Ramayana, now elevated to the status of patron saint of the Harijans and to Buddha – towards whom Ambedkar and his followers turned rejecting Hinduism as the religion of their oppression and humiliation. Thus fervent appeals are being made to lower castes and Dalits to mitigate caste boundaries and merge into this melting pot of Hinduism.

Jafferlot notes the presence of these castes in the shakhas as proof of its social inclusiveness.<sup>56</sup> Rioting mobs have been known to comprise of a large spectrum of castes to give the illusion of a united Hindu community identity and action.<sup>57</sup>

How is the 'Sangh Parivar' able to draw upon the support of from these castes even as it continues to resist privileges granted to them? The problem may be approached through the concept of 'majoritarianism'. Indian democracy has remained mired in the idea of numerically dominated bloc voting in contrast to the idea of an autonomous bourgeoisie individual casting his vote as a citizen.<sup>58</sup> The Indian political scene has witnessed two strikingly even opposed notions of 'majority'. One is of course the RSS/BJP version of a pan-Hindu majority (recall it's advertisement splashed across all weeklies and dailies to the effect – democracy is

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<sup>56</sup> Jafferlot, *op. cit.*, p. 521

<sup>57</sup> Chakravarti et. Al, *op. cit.*, p. 529. The authors note how the rioters composed of a combined front of "...Malis, ahirs, khattris, valmikis, jogis and banias....".

<sup>58</sup> Arjun Appadurai, "Number in Colonial Imagination", in Van der Veer and Breckenbridge (eds.), *Orientalism and the Post Colonial predicament*, (Delhi : OUP, 1994), p. 331.

the rule of the majority : Hindus are the majority, implying in the course that only a rule of the Hindus or a Hindu Rashtra that could be a truly democratic state). The other refers to the concept of 'Bahujan' popularized by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) which rode to limelight on its daring slogan of 'tilak, tarazu aur talwar, inko maro jote char' referring to the dwija castes.<sup>59</sup> It not only delimits itself from the upper castes but also provokes them and challenges their political hegemony. The alliance of Chamars and Muslims won the Bijnore Lok sabha seat for Mayawati of the BSP in 1991 while differential and non conflictual appeals were made to the different sections of the Bahujan Samaj by Mulayam Singh Yadav. To the backward castes were promised reservations in government services, to the Muslims, the promise of the safety of Babri Masjid whereas the Dalits were to be won over by anti-upper caste rhetoric.<sup>60</sup> This 'Bahujan' thus militates against the BJP's version of the 'majority'.

When does this Bahujan identity dissipate to fuse into the Hindu one? How is caste alliances forged against the Muslim 'Other'? How are caste riots against reservations directed towards the Muslims? When does caste consciousness assert itself and when does a Hindu identity emerge?

May it be explained by the concept of Sanskritization – the urge of the lower castes to emulate the lifestyle of the ritually superior castes. As a Durga Vahini activist condescendingly explained lower caste membership of the organization in terms of "... the latent desire among the hitherto unenlightened sections to have

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<sup>59</sup> R.K. Jain, "*Hierarchy, Hegemony and Dominance : Politics of Ethnicity in Uttar Pradesh, 1995*", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXXI, No. 4, 1996.

<sup>60</sup> Jeffery and Jeffery, "*The Bijnore Riots, Oct, 1990 : The Collapse of a Mythical Relationship*", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXIX, No. 10, 1994, p. 552.

(upper caste) cultural values and high culture inculcated in the girls and the families through the encounter with the RSS".<sup>61</sup>

Such a position is justifiable if one accepts that the caste system in true Dumontian fashion is a system of encompassment. That it is the ideology of hierarchy, defined as opposition of the pure and the impure prescribing the action of men"... When in the eyes of those who participate in it legitimizes their respective positions...".<sup>62</sup> Mouffat's study of an untouchable community in South India confirms the shared space of consensus and hierarchy among the castes. Then of course it becomes possible to understand the lure that high caste rituals like upanayana may hold for a lower caste attending shakha. Dipankar Gupta argues for displacing the proposition that there exists a universally valid and believed true hierarchy with that of a multitude of hierarchies and discreteness of caste. Sanskritisation for Gupta implies indeed the opposite of what Srinivas means – it is not the acceptance but the rejection of one's position in the caste hierarchy that spurs sanskritisation.<sup>63</sup> In any case it does not involve the eschewing of one's identity, but rather an attempt to relieve oneself of the duress that such an unfavorable hierarchy places on them by asserting what they always believed to be their rightful status, hitherto denied to them. If such an alliance launches an attack at Dumont's principle of encompassment, it allows us to analyze the forgoing of alliances in terms of political and economic exigencies of that time. But the question is, can we afford to ignore either culture or material factors at the expense of each other?

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<sup>61</sup> Hensen, op. cit. p.92.

<sup>62</sup> Dumont in Madan, "*Dumont on the Nature of Caste in India*", in Dipankar Gupta (ed.), *Social Stratification*, (Delhi : OUP, 1992), p. 72.

<sup>63</sup> Dipankar Gupta, "*Continuous Hierarchies and Discrete Castes*", in Gupta (ed.), *Social Stratification*, op. cit., p. 132.

Our decisions about choosing a particular identity from the multiplex of identities available to us are not simple ones and are influenced by a whole range of issues, both cultural and those having to do with the political economy. The crucial point to remember is that at any given moment, there are a number of identities to choose from and no identity is terminal and permanent.

## THE WOMEN AS COMMUNAL SUBJECT: RASHTRA SEVIKA SAMITI AND RAM JANMABHOOMI MOVEMENT

### I

One of the most striking features of the Hindutva movement has been the foregrounding of the militantly communal Hindu woman in a variety of unprecedented ways. Nor is this phenomenon a flash in the pan. The BSP has located women along with SC/ST's as a primary target-area for the coming times. Thus, the new communal phase enables women's self-constitution as active political subjects in dangerously unprecedented ways.

Firstly, much of the existing literature on women activists within the Hindu Right, tends to, even if unwittingly, see such activism as a relatively new phenomenon that gathered momentum around the period of *Ram-janmabhoomi* movement which saw at an unprecedented scale the participation of women in actual episodes of communal violence<sup>1</sup>. It is argued instead that it was neither sudden nor new but that rather it has to be traced to the cultural nationalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which molded a particular image of Indian (read Hindu) womanhood. Secondly, that the social, religious reformist and

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<sup>1</sup> N.A. Ansari, "Trend of Communal Riots in India", *Mainstream* Vol.29, No. 11, 5 Jan. 1991.

nationalist movements did not evoke “woman” merely as “sites of contestation” but also drew them into the process as active agents<sup>2</sup>.

This has to be situated in the context of the creation of a unique historical consciousness by the nationalists and the complex of common sense about what it was to be a Hindu, what it was to be an Indian and what it was to be Muslim at that time<sup>3</sup>. The search for the community’s and the nation’s roots acquired a sense of urgency in the late nineteenth century when an explicit connection was being made between national pride and history writing.

Of the estimated two lakh *Kar sevaks* at Ayodhya, some fifty five thousand were women. Maharashtra followed by Andhra Pradesh accounting for the bulk of it. A pamphlet distributed by the *Durga Vahini*, the women’s wing of the VHP, urged women that at this time of *agni pariksha* (trial by fire), women must become *viranganas* and *ranchandis* (warrior women). In several other towns like Bijnore too, women were at the forefront, leading and mobilizing processions that fomented violence<sup>4</sup>. This high visibility of women in the pacifism and jolting the political activists as well as the academicians alike from as easy complacency about the democratic and feminist potential of women. There was a veritable explosion of literature seeking to explain this phenomenon and it became almost mandatory for writers commenting on communalization of society and polity to

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<sup>2</sup> Sadhna Arya, “*Woman, Religion and State in India*”, Teaching Politics, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> B.R.S., “*Why I am not a Hindu*”, Patna: Bihar Rationalist Society (B.R.S.), 1997

<sup>4</sup> N.E. Balaram, “*Hindutva: Facts behind the Façade*”, New Delhi: Communist Party of India Publication, 1997

comment also on the role of women in this entire period. While indeed it is important to focus on moments such as these, it is more fruitful to emphasize and understand the processes and structures during periods of relative quietude that enable these women to take up particular subject positions – as *Ram bhaktas*, as Hindu nationalists and as Hindu nationalist women – allows them expression of certain kinds of agency – virulent and avenging, seemingly independent and spontaneous and yet not upsetting the traditional hierarchies of personal relationships<sup>5</sup>.

Around 1989-90, in a sudden and dramatic spurt of activities, the Sangh parivar threw up a large number of women's organizations and women leaders into dazzling prominence – the BJP Mahila Morcha, the VHP Matri Mandal and Durga Vahini with their different regional versions. Thousands of karsevaks participated in the attacks on the Babri Masjid and in its demolition and their role was highlighted in the Sangh media products – the Jain Studio videofilms, the VHP fortnightly magazine *Hindu Chetna*, Hindi video newsmagazines like *Kalachakra*. On 6 January 1993, a month after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, a women's celebratory demonstration was held at Ayodhya where Sadhvi Rithambhara was a guest of honor. Women were active and prominent in the bloody riots that swept across India in the course of Ram-janmabhoomi movement – in Bhagalpur, at Ahmedabad, in Bombay<sup>6</sup>. The role of Rithambhara's audiocassetted speech and

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<sup>5</sup> Swami Agnivesh, *Multireligious Approaches to Communalism*, paper presented to a seminar in Bombay, Bombay: unpublished paper, October 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pp. 5.

Uma Bharati's propaganda tours on stoking ferocious anger and aggression against Muslims was memorable<sup>7</sup>.

The Sangh began to flaunt its women, for the first time in its history, in public places and roles. It was a special moment, very up beat and self-confident, a moment of spectacular growth and spread, a phase of mass mobilization and movement- all of which were new and heady departures for the Sangh and its women. At the Samiti office, officebearers told me of an internal struggle that had preceded the Samiti's decision to allow and train women as Karsevikas<sup>8</sup>. They said that it had been the young members who forced the hands of the Samiti. The Samiti was in an excited and hopeful mood, claiming credit for the growth of women's wings and activism.

## II

Although the primary focus remained on women within the home, for a new generation of more active women, it could impart confidence and competences. I had also observed that these new possibilities had opened some fractures within the established pattern of work and ideas. The Samiti's journal *Jagriti* reflected deep ambivalences about the women's movements, with older Sangh leaders warning against their disruptive influence, but ordinary contributors occasionally

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<sup>7</sup> B.K., "*Communalism and Election*", Third Concept, Vol 4, No. 50-51, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> Subhadra Joshi, "*Is RSS behind communal riots?*" New Delhi: Sampradayikta Virodhi Committee.



identifying themselves with them<sup>9</sup>. There were articles about the woman's empowerment needs against male domination, discrimination and violence<sup>10</sup>.

The tension, however, was structured by and contained within a generally conservative domesticity – a modernized and somewhat loose and flexible version of brahmanical patriarchy. That allowed and encouraged education, employment and a more informed and activist politicization only on the basis of communal violence and commitment to an extremely inegalitarian social perspective<sup>11</sup>. The women were upper caste and middle class. They were stitched securely into the class-caste interest and politics of the milieu. They rarely raised issues of gender justice very openly or fully, and never participated in any struggles against gender oppression. At the same time, certain incipient dissonances were unleashed even by their politics of communal violence and through the transformations in new urban middle-class households in this generation<sup>12</sup>.

The last year of the century finds the Sangh parivar in significantly changed circumstances. The mass phase of this fascistic formation is closing down, movements being replaced with rhetoric and even their few feeble populist gestures dying out fast. Expansion, especially among lesser social strata that are

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<sup>9</sup> K. Jayaprasad, *"RSS and Hindu Nationalism: Inroads in a leftist stronghold"*, New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications, 1991, pp 298.

<sup>10</sup> Shashi Joshi, and Bhagwan Josh, *"Women and Sexuality in Discourse of Communalism and Communal Violence, in Shashi Joshi, and Bhagwan Josh. Struggle for Hegemony in India"*, 1920-47, Vol.III, Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 1994, pp. 194-258.

<sup>11</sup> J.P. Jaiswal, *"Communalism and National Integration"*, U.P. Journal of Political Science, Jan-Dec. 1992, Vol. 4, No. 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Sadhna Arya, *"Woman, Religion and State in India"*, Teaching Politics, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1989.

not the traditional Sangh strongholds, is now replaced with consolidation of existing gains<sup>13</sup>. State power, or its very close proximity in a loose coalition with many political groups, has necessitated a sharper differentiation between the electoral front of the BJP and other Sangh affiliates like the Samiti, the VHP or the *Swadeshi Jagaran Manch*. Much accommodation has been made with globalization in State policies and its cultural impact has led to acute discomforts among the old guard. In short, an unprecedented preoccupation with the grasping of State power and with its maintenance has led to prospects of the dilution of the old Sangh character, with a need to juggle with its different affiliates at different times with amazing dexterity. While doors had to be opened, perforce, to new allies, constituencies and policies hitherto unthinkable for the Sangh, there has been an acute need, also, to revive and preserve old values and to harden old convictions in certain areas within the parivar<sup>14</sup>. It is my impression that the women's wing has been entrusted with the conservation of old and inner values.

The Samiti, in the early nineties, had taken the decision that women should join the karseva movements and the attacks on the Babri mosque. They had proudly pointed out the Samiti's icon of the 8-armed Durga, carrying weapons. They had recited the Samiti mantra, which exhorted them to lay down their lives in the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. pp. 86.

<sup>14</sup> R.D. Baird (ed.), *Religion and Law in Independent India*, Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 1993, pp 401.

service of the nation – and said that it was a literal call to war for the sevikas<sup>15</sup>. They had explained that this was to be a ‘civil war’ against enemies within. This urge for violence, destruction, revenge, for trampling over Muslims and Christians, is, if anything, even more strident today<sup>16</sup>. Both Poonam Gupta and Asha Sharma, Samiti officebearers, indignantly refuted my timid suggestions that Rithambahara’s audiocassette and her call for a slaughter of Muslims might be a ‘bit’ problematic; they both said, in identical words, that these things needed to be said and that Rithambahara ‘was the only one who could have said them’. Poonam Gupta referred to Rithambahara’s current work with an orphanage and her low-keyed existence in the middle-class Agrasen Apartments at Patparganj with some regret. At the same time, an equal agency in violent politics does not seem to be on the agenda. The heady hopes of going into war are no longer articulated. The Samiti is content, to remain the transmission belt for the RSS, conveying stories about Muslim and Christian ‘atrocities’ among Hindu women. There is a retreat to older female functions and roles where women gossip about things that they have not seen themselves but have heard from their men<sup>17</sup>.

Retreat from active violence or public politics does not mean an emphasis on women-centered work. Samiti officebearers often refer to the ‘social work’ that their women do so well from their homes, but when they are pressed to specify, they fall back upon ‘writing letters to newspapers about oppression of Hindus and

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<sup>15</sup> Ali Baqquer (ed.), *From the press: The Ayodhya Story*, New Delhi: Media Impact, 1993.

<sup>16</sup> Pradip Datta, “VHP’s Ram at Ayodhya”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 2, 1991. Bombay: Sameeksha Trust, 1991.

<sup>17</sup> Ali Asghar Engineer, “Behind the Communal Fury”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 17 (10). Bombay: *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6 Mar 1982, 356-57.

about sex and violence in western movies and TV shows'. The Samiti celebrated its sixtieth year in 1996 with a national seminar on this theme. They also conduct workshops on the Vande Mataram hymn of Bankimchandra, which the RSS considers to be the national anthem. The seminars and the letters to the editors – largely restricted to stories about Hindu suffering and cultural degradation – seem to be the only other things that they do, apart from running the *shakhas*<sup>18</sup>. Despite five years in Delhi government and access to funds, they have not set up shelters and counseling or legal help centers for battered women, or significant schemes for employment-generation or slum welfare. Elsewhere, too, a picture of minor, sporadic activity emerges. The Samiti runs a girls hostel at Nagpur, and a new one has been opened at Bilaspur in Madhya Pradesh where girls from homes afflicted with leprosy are enrolled. However, they hastened to assure me, the girls themselves are 'healthy' and they remain segregated from their infected surroundings, as do the sevikas who cater to them<sup>19</sup>. A more telling contrast to Staines cannot be imagined. They have not started any schemes for training women members of Panchayati institutions, nor do they have any ideas about how women function within them. Again, the contrast with the Left and radical women's organizations comes readily to mind. Despite great opposition and obstruction from patriarchal and State agencies, Left and radical women's organizations provide precisely these services and empowering resources to women.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. pp. 98.

<sup>19</sup> Des Raj Goyal, "*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*", New Delhi: Radhakrishna, 1979.

### III

At the same time, *shakhas* remain central to their enterprise. They see them as mobilizing points for entire localities, since through intimate relationships with the women; they gain entry into their homes. Since each *shakha* trains 20-25 women at the most, relations are warm and close, spiced with 'enjoyable' activities like storytelling and games. Parents who do not subscribe to Sangh ideology would still like to send their daughters to *shakhas* since they teach deference and obedience, inculcate conservative values like arranged marriages, good housekeeping, modesty in dress and behavior and diligent service to men and elders<sup>20</sup>. Girls themselves like to go because of the physical training programmes, which are invaluable ways of gaining control over their own bodies when they have control over so little else. The sense of physical well-being, strength and empowerment are offered<sup>21</sup>. Also, the ideological instructions about services to a militaristic, aggressive Hindu nation, of vengeance against its enemies, about heroic qualities of legendary men and women who resisted 'enemies' of the nation, fulfill aspirations for a life above pure self-interest, release frustrations built up as a result of having been marginalized members of orthodox families<sup>22</sup>. Moreover, they are not told anything that offends mainstream patriarchal, Hindu nationalistic values and myths very deeply. Kanchan, an old woman coming from a non-RSS home, affirmed: 'All that they say is part of our

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<sup>20</sup> Yubaraj Ghimire, "*Sangh Brotherhoods' New Patron Saint*", India Today, Aug 31, 1993, pp. 65 & 68.

<sup>21</sup> S.P. Gupta, "*Ramjanmabhoomi: What History and Archeology Have to Say on this Issue*", Manthan, Vol. 11, No. 2, Feb, 1990.

<sup>22</sup> Ish. Mishra, "*The Women's Question in Communal Ideologies*", New Delhi: Centre for Women's Development Studies.

environment (vatavaran)'. Although they do admit that young girls are not the most enthusiastic members, they do not prohibit all the new pleasures in the name of fighting western cultures. Girls are encouraged to look good the modern way. They can visit beauty parlors and spend money on buying up beauty products – provided most of these are home-manufactured. Though mini-skirts and shorts are out since they expose the body, jeans are all right if they suit their figures. If they do not have the right figure, then they must cultivate one. These are important concessions<sup>23</sup>. The new consumerist self-abortions of the middle-class women, fanned by the ad-culture and the flood of beauty aids, cosmetics and household gadgets, are encouraged, since they provide the economic strength of much of the country's manufacturing-trading classes. And this class is also the major basis for the political constituency of the Sangh parivar.

What cannot be tolerated, however, and what is powerfully and continuously denounced, as the fruit of the western poison tree is the notion of equal gender rights. Poonam Gupta said that there has been 'far too much talk about the rights of the Indian women', it has led to domestic competition, broken families, unhappy children. It was the poison injected by the colonial State and its educational policies, said Asha Sharma. The colonial, foreign education is the biggest single problem of today's India, especially since it taught women all the wrong things<sup>24</sup>. A proper Hindu educational system would restore to her the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. pp. 104.

<sup>24</sup> Gobinda Mukhoty, "Religion and Human Rights", *Mainstream*, Vol. 30, No. 54, 31 Oct. 1992.

ancient knowledge about how to be pure wives, good mothers<sup>25</sup>. When I asked her how she would distinguish herself from other women's organizations as a Samiti activist, she said immediately: 'They teach women about their rights, they tell them to fight their men about these rights. We teach them how to sacrifice themselves to keep the family together. Rights may be there, but it is wrong to fight for them. Women lose more eventually that way. Don't you remember your mother? Did she need to go to the law court to be happy? My mother was worshipped like a queen in the family. A good, pure Hindu woman can achieve such respect, such happiness by being a mother. Why do they want to throw it away by fighting for rights?' when I asked her how women will cope with dowry demands, domestic violence, desertion and discrimination, she said: We teach them how to do it, how to possess honor, dignity and authority in the family. They do so by being good mothers. They do not need anything more. How can they be good wives, good mothers if they think all the time of how to be equal of men, of doing better than them, of competing with them and fighting with them over rights?' Poonam Gupta used a colorful analogy to make the same point. 'Because seats are reserved for women in buses, they get only the reserved seats to use, but no more than that. If seats were not reserved for them, all the men on buses would give up their seats to each woman who did not have one. Talking of laws on equality deprives women in this way'.

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<sup>25</sup> Taslima Nasreen, "*Lajja*", Delhi: Penguin Books India Limited, 1994.

## A SUMMARY AND SOME QUESTIONS

In this tract, we have attempted to understand how and why women align with the project of 'Hindu nationalism' and work with it in active collusion. Our proposition has sought to draw away from the coercion/misrecognition thesis and has instead situated their complicity in the active choices the women themselves make.

Women play a central role in identity politics. They define the boundaries of the community and represent its honor. The definitions of masculinity and femininity intercut and are crisscrossed. We have traced here the foregrounding of sexuality in the discourse of 'Hindu nationalism' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and how the perceived threats of Muslim lust to the Hindu women's virtue shaped the debates of social reformism in that period and necessitated the emergence of the militant Hindu woman<sup>1</sup>. In a sense, this militant woman was the forerunner of the *sevikas* and the *Durgas* that made them so visible during and around the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. The specter of Hindu impotency and defilement by the Muslim was raised once again. Again, the sexual and the communal hierarchies looped together. However, women are drawn into the processes of identity formation and demarcation not merely as tropes but as active agents. Indeed they sustain such a politics through their actions. Identity and agency are bound in many myriad ways. Acquisition of a particular identity, say that of a *sevika* or a 'Hindu nationalist' woman allows for the unfolding of agential trajectories that would lie dormant otherwise. It means simultaneously that would choose this identity of a *sevika* for the compensations it affords them and are already exercising an agency in

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<sup>1</sup> Strathern defines this as the project of feminist inquiry. See Marilyn Strathern, "An awkward Relationship: The case of feminism and anthropology", in *Signs: Journal of Women in culture and society*, 1987, Vol.12, No.2.



the choice of an identity. The two are interlinked propositions. It is chosen over other possible identities because it gives them an access to a world of action and catapults them into a public life. The shakha becomes a site of bonding – a female bonding outside of the context of oppressiveness of the joint family structure in the immediate sense and a bonding with the community and the nation in the larger sense. The *baudhik* and the *charcha* quench the thirst for intellectual and political discussion when otherwise women are thought of as political beings<sup>2</sup>. Such activism also, if only momentarily allows for the inversion of traditional familial structures and division of labor (A *sevika* attending a fifteen day *shivir* with her daughters gleefully told the author that her husband and son would have to learn to manage without them and cook during her absence). There exists an entire oeuvre of compensatory mechanisms ranging from the deployment of the icons of powerful female goddesses that provide them with a strong self identity to the real possibility of participation in public activities, hitherto denied to them – all of which give the women in ‘Hindu nationalism’ a sense of power and autonomy without having to relinquish the comfortable protection of family life. Indeed their traditional roles of mother and wife are invested with a new weight and significance.

This is not to suggest that all that women have to do is to simply make a decision or choose an identity from a multitude. Rather the choice is shaped by a variety of social processes, both material and discursive located as women are at the intersection of multiple axes of power – such as caste, class, race, religions and so on, all sites of enactment of gender ideology.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p.276.

The fact that participation in 'Hindu nationalism' exposes women to a domain of actions beyond their grasp before, also simultaneously forecloses any possibility of a rigorous interrogation of the patriarchies in which they are embedded. The 'tolerance' of Hinduism and the 'fanaticism' of Islam become universal truths. It is towards the latter that the women's wrath must be directed<sup>3</sup>.

What is being argued is that identities are acquired in practical engagements with life and are not simply passively assumed. Questions of identity cannot be disentangled from those of agency.

It is true that by focusing our attention on women, we have arrived at an understanding of how women are drawn into the project of 'Hindu nationalism' as against the men. What unique discursive and material persuasions are at work? This gives us insights into not only the processes by which "Hindu Nationalism' is able to mobilize different sectors of the society with its agenda but also tells us something about women that an automatic association between women and pacifism, non-violence, nurturance and victim hood cannot be made.

What relation did the author bear to the women at Rashtra Sevika Samiti/ Durgavahini? Gender was an issue here certainly, for these were exclusively female spaces of shakha prohibited to men, but it was not the sole issue. Women and girls were willing to talk for the believed that the researcher shared their ideological and political stance, was in complete sympathy with their cause.

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<sup>3</sup> See Kamla Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, (Delhi: OUP, 1996), p. 30.

This research makes one skeptical of the 'common understanding of domination' that feminism is supposed to endanger. For the sevikas, male oppression within the Hindu community was almost non-existent and in many cases a result of Islamic influences<sup>4</sup>. Oppression evokes a singular meaning, the oppression of Hindu community. Is it possible then to speak of an unproblematic bonding with one's subjects?

All these arguments are far beyond traditionalism, they are fundamentalist, explicitly anti-women, blatantly male chauvinistic and very much include with Manu's concept of woman<sup>5</sup>. This understanding of the RSS contradicts its claim that women enjoyed prestigious positions in Hindu society. When the RSS denies them the equal status even now, how can it claim that women enjoyed a higher status earlier?

But, for recognizing the need to reach different sections of women, some affiliates of the sangh parivar have set up their respective women's wing. Besides the oldest affiliate of the RSS, the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, the BJP has its Mahila Morcha and the VHP controls the Durga Vahini. The Durga Vahini, with these developments, the discourses constituting the Hindu woman within the parivar are multiple: moderate and extremist, traditional and modern<sup>6</sup>. At times these discourses seem contradictory. For example, the moderates within the Rashtra Sevika Samiti and BJP Mahila Morcha oppose Sati, whereas the extremists favor a woman's right to choose to commit sati. Similarly, moderates support the legal

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<sup>4</sup> Mascia-lees, Sharpe and Cohen, "The *post-modernist Turn in anthropology: Cautions from a feminist perspective*", in *signs*, Vol. 15, No. 11, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> M. Le' Doeuff (1977), *Ibid.* p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> Moira Gatens cites the writings of V. Solanas as symptomatic of this trend. See Gatens, "The Dangers of a Woman-centered Philosophy", in *Polity Reader in Gender Studies*, (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1994), p.93.

amendments that have been made to Hindu personal law and plead for similar changes of Muslim law through a Uniform civil code. The BJP even speaks of ensuring women's equal access to their husband's property. On the other side, the saints and sadhus of the VHP are strongly opposed to the reform of the Hindu personal law and argue for the restoration of the laws of Manu. Some even go to the extent of demanding restoration of Hindu polygamy<sup>7</sup>.

However, both the moderate and extremist discourses contain, to differing extents, elements of modernity and tradition. For example, the moderate voice of the BJP Mahila Morcha contains very strong traditional over tones in their emphasis on women's role in the family as mines and mothers<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, which brings women out of their houses and their traditional roles, is careful not to challenge the families ultimate authority over its members, particularly, its female members.

Therefore, though all these multiple discourses appear contradictory, they are not really so. Underlying these divergent discourses exists a common thread-the recognition of women as Matri Shakti, as moves and mothers, as strong Hindu women. Within these discourses, the Hindu Woman is a product of both a traditional and a modern discourse<sup>9</sup>. She is both the subject of the traditional discourse of religion-celebrated as Matri Shakti, as mother and the subject of the modern discourses of liberalism and Secularism – she has rights.

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<sup>7</sup> Mascia-Lees et al, op. cit., p.22.

<sup>8</sup> For elaboration, see Mary E. Hawksworth, "Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and Claims to Truth", in *Signs*, 1989, Vol.14. No. 3, p. 535.

<sup>9</sup> Gatens, op. cit., p.94. In a sense Daly is closer to the nihilism espoused by Solanas than with other Feminists who seek to accommodate themselves within conventional philosophy.

The Hindutva movement negotiates the new situation with a threefold strategy. It does not deny the privileged of consumerist individualism to its women<sup>10</sup>. It incorporates women as leaders of the anti-muslim violence and allows them a new role in activism that was earlier withheld. And, it simultaneously constructs a revitalized moral vision of domestic and sexual norms that promises to restore the comforts of old sociability's and familiar solidarities without tampering either the women's public role or with consumerist individualism<sup>11</sup>. Murli Manohar Joshi, the BJP leader, writes about the dangers of the erosion of old values: divorces, widow remarriage, lesbianism, feminist ideas, women's movements, Samiti leaders reiterate the virtues of Hindu patriarchal tradition. Older forms of gender ideology are merged with new offers of self-fashioning and a relative political equality in the field of anti-muslim and anti-secular violence. Patriarchal discipline is reinforced by anticipating and accommodating consumerist aspirations<sup>12</sup>.

Hindu revivalism or cultural nationalism, however, provided a very different moral imperative. Instead of self-determination as a right of the female individual or the people, it referred to the uniqueness of the culture of the Hindu folk. It also referred to the powers over individual that it required in order to preserve itself from extinction when faced with a different and triumphant cultural system. Here the Hindu woman was allotted a unique responsibility as the site of past freedom and future nationhood, since the Hindu man had already supposedly compromised his cultural authenticity<sup>13</sup>. On her fixed, unchanging obedience to community prescriptions would

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<sup>10</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Encounter: Locating the Politics of Experience", in Barrett and Phillips (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 536.

<sup>11</sup> Hekman (1990) quoted in Meenakshi Thapan, "Partial Truths: Privileging a 'Male' Viewpoint", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXX, No. 23, 1995, p. 1400.

<sup>12</sup> Visweswaran, *op. cit.*, p.18.

<sup>13</sup> See Mascia-Lees et al, *op. cit.*, p.21.

depend the life of her tradition and religion. She was, therefore, the source of *authenticity, nation making, and freedom*. But his huge political role depended on an abdication of all agency and self-determination in actual practice. The discourses of liberal reformism and political nationalism on the one hand, and that of Hindu revivalism and cultural nationalism on the other, can be differentiated from each other on this ground: are people a site of autonomy and self-determination, or of authenticity and culture preservation? Is the woman a rights-bearing individual, or a culture-bearing one?

The Hindu Right has inherited this structure of possibilities and problems and it has had to steer a very delicate and difficult course. When it emerged in the 1920s, political nationalism, left anti-imperialism, women's movements and low caste protest movements had, despite their mutual differences and conflicts, all fed into a discourse of rights and self determination which had already emerged as a deeply-ingrained value in the political sphere<sup>14</sup>. So hegemonic was this as a political value that its overt and explicit refutation would be suicidal for any political interest striving for hegemony and power. The Right's political articulations have had, therefore to verbally confirm the validity of a democratic, constitutional mode of governance that is based on notions of universal citizenship rights on the one hand, and on affirmative supports to historically disadvantaged groups on the other.

On the other hand, a formal commitment to this order does not constrain the Right's authoritarian, anti-emancipatory agenda unduly. For, it can simultaneously rely on and bring to play another resource that has also come down from the nineteenth century: the intensions and the discourses of Hindu revivalism and cultural nationalism. Through its arguments around the Hindu woman's ideal mode of

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<sup>14</sup> Visweswaran, op. cit., p.20.

being, nineteenth century cultural nationalism had created a larger theoretical justification not only for the brahmanical form of conjugality, but, by implication, of the entire complex of the brahmanical, hierarchical system. It was now defended on the ground of an embattled Hindu cultural and religious authenticity<sup>15</sup>. Revivalist cultural nationalism tried to reinforce an adherence to this comprehensive system of absolute inequality by branding all projects that held any emancipatory potential, however slight-as borrowed, alien, surrender to colonization of culture and minds of Hindus<sup>16</sup>. The large, comprehensive implications of the nineteenth century debates on Hindu conjugality, and their historical implications for caste, class and the poor and the dissident, are extremely significant, for the assumptions that were developed about the condition of the women could be used as a metaphor and a protean argument for a freeze on any discourse of equal rights<sup>17</sup>.

The Hindu Right today has been able to maneuver very skillfully with this inherited tension and debate: openly it rarely challenges the discourse of rights as such, though it has tried many times to suppress different kinds of rights that do not belong to upper-caste rich Hindu males of its own political persuasion. But it has successfully cast the very intention of emancipatory, libertarian politics of equal rights into doubt by branding it as an alien product that will doom the future of Hindu cultural authenticity.

The Hindu Right today stands at a transitional moment in its history when it still tries to hold on to the possibilities generated by both kinds of discourses that are fundamentally incompatible -equal rights and cultural authenticity. It attempts a resolution by stitching up the two. It talks incessantly of Hindu rights, the rights of the

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<sup>15</sup> R.N. Dandekar, *Some Aspects of the History of Hinduism*, Poona: Bhandarker Oriental Research Institute, 1989, pp 142.

<sup>16</sup> B. Das Gupta, *BJP and Religion*, the Statesman, 25 October 1990.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.92

majority community and the rights of a threatened culture and nation. Hindus are signs of both weakness and strength-as the majority community, and as threatened culture. In either capacity, they are to be granted superior rights that preclude notions of equality.

The tension forms a language that to secular ears sometimes sounds like either doublespeak or incoherence. In the area of women's conditions, a critique of Muslim polygamy or sati, the foregrounding of women politicians of the BJP, are aligned to paeans of praise to traditions of brahmanical Hinduism, and to occasional fundamentalist pronouncements even by their women leaders which applaud sati, criticize women's employment, divorce and widow remarriage and flay rebellious sexual preference like lesbianism. Amrita Basu considers that it is futile to look for any logical structuring behind the incompatible issues; they are dictated by sheer political expediency, decided according to vote banks and constituencies<sup>18</sup>. While this may hold true for the BJP, for the Sangh parivar as a whole, I think it is possible to uncover an underlying logic that is extremely complicated and tortuous but that, nonetheless, binds the contradictory stances together.

The last year of the century finds the Sangh parivar in significantly changed circumstances. The mass phase of this fascistic formation is closing down, movements being replaced with rhetoric and even their few feeble populist gestures dying out fast. Expansion, especially among lesser social strata, which are not the traditional Sangh strongholds, is now replaced with consolidation of existing gains. State power, or its very close proximity in a loose coalition with many political groups, has necessitated a sharper differentiation between the electoral front of the

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<sup>18</sup> P. Datta, "VHP's Ram at Ayodhya", Economic and Political Weekly, November 2, 1991.



*BJP and other Sangh affiliates like the Samiti, the VHP or the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch. Much accommodation has been made with globalization in State policies and its cultural impact has led to acute discomforts among the old guard. In short, an unprecedented preoccupation with the grasping of State power and with its maintenance has led to prospects of the dilution of the old Sangh character, with a need to juggle with its different affiliates at different times with amazing dexterity. While doors had to be opened, perforce, to new allies, constituencies and policies hitherto unthinkable for the Sangh, there has been an acute need, also to revive and preserve old values and to harden old convictions in certain areas within the parivar. It is my impression that the women's wing has been entrusted with the conservation of old and inner values*<sup>19</sup>.

The major political function of the Samiti remains the dissemination of communalism. Women are taught to 'analyze' current affairs and newspapers at shakhas. They are told about Hindu Rashtra, about Christian-colonial and Muslim 'misdeeds' of the past, about Christian aggression and violent attacks on Hindu women, men and temples in all parts of the country in the past year. They are told horror stories about attacks on Hindu women in communal riots. They are told that no Hindu has ever attacked a Muslim or a Christian so far-not a single Muslim or Christian has been killed by a Hindu. But Christians annoy Hindus by inciting dalits. Dalits are like ignorant children, said Poonam Mahajan with a contemptuous laugh. 'You just smile at them, say a few sweet things, and they have lost their hearts to you.' The tone strongly suggested a mongrel wagging his tail at a morsel thrown at him. The communal perspective slides into social hierarchy smoothly. They reiterate all the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.112

time: 'we do not approve of reservations, whether for women or for some castes. It does not help anyone, merit must be observed'<sup>20</sup>.

Sevikas, therefore, are home-based, insulated from contamination from lesser social circles. There is only one major exception to this. Some of them—mostly the unmarried *pracharikas*—work with the Sangh's slum-rehabilitation programmes under the Seva Bharati's work of rehabilitation would seem to *require* 'womanly' nurturing services. Yet, Samiti participation is highly restricted. The Samiti, at best, is an auxiliary to certain fronts under the Sangh.

If the Samiti is a small, bounded, non-expansive affair, like the good, modest, non-competitive Hindu woman, then what is the significance of their beliefs, and in the pattern of changes, new accents and stresses within them? I believe that the Samiti has a great relevance. Its women are the repositories, the custodians of the essential Sangh values, of its authentic ideology, that the other fronts have somewhat diluted and imperiled in the current war games over electoral power. Since those preoccupations will grow and reach a peak, the conservation of older values becomes all the more crucial. Hence the Samiti is important as both a guarantee as well as a mirror of the 'real' Sangh.

Secondly, if the battle over electoral power is won, as seems quite likely, then the Samiti is the nucleus of the new Hindu domesticity. Its women will be the living pattern for the Hindu *Rashtra* of the future. Therefore, precisely at a moment of expected triumph did it need to contract its activities and affirm its purity, morality and conservatism at the cost of its public activism?

Finally, the convictions that the Samiti expressed go beyond gender-or, rather, gender is the pattern, the inspiration, the exemplar for relations between

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<sup>20</sup> Deepti, *"Dharm Hamain Jorta Kaise Hai? Torta Kaise Hai?"* New Delhi: Women & Religion Group, 1993, pp 22.

castes and classes. Since it can mystify its operations of power with intimacy, it is the most effective argument for all hierarchies. The battle against equality and rights that the Samiti had undertaken in the name of Hindu traditions is also a larger, unnamed struggle that the Sangh is engaged into to reorient power relations in the Hindu Rashtra of its dreams.

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