

Sisterhood in saffron: women of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti

Research >
India

In the politics of the Indian subcontinent, the principle of Hindu majoritarianism has roots in the early twentieth century. The *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS, or National Volunteer Corps), founded in 1925, is now the leading disseminator of the most virulent and exclusionist version of the *Hindutva* doctrine; its strategy of establishing affiliated groups has ensured the spread of its political message to all areas of civil society. To investigate how the movement reaches out to women, I focus on the *Rashtra Sevika Samiti* all-women's affiliate, its institutional structure and discourse of the feminine which enables women to identify with and support the *Hindutva* agenda.

Namrata Ravichandra Ganneri

While traditional literature has focused on women as victims and targets of patriarchal control and violence, only marginal attention has been paid to the complicity of women in perpetuating the *Hindutva* vision and its politics. However, the involvement of women in right-wing organisations has had a long unbroken history, and challenges long-standing assumptions about women's low levels of politicisation and traditional pacifism. In particular, the quiet and enduring work of the *Rashtra Sevika Samiti* ('Samiti'), formed in 1936 and the oldest RSS affiliate, has eluded academic attention.

In the service of Hindutva

The politics behind the Samiti's inception is telling of RSS gender ideology. The group's founder Laxmibai Kelkar first approached RSS founder K.B. Hedgewar seeking the possibility for women to join the RSS, but was turned down. Instead, she was encouraged to start a separate organisation composed exclusively of women, an ideological parallel to the all-male RSS to organise and train Hindu women. Significantly, the most enduring aspect of the RSS was the creation of the 'brotherhood' - a band of dedicated and disciplined workers engaged in paramilitary training who pledged to safeguard the nation and its borders. The only feminine form allowed to intrude in the *shakhas* (local RSS branches) was the *Bharat-mata* (Mother India). Given that women have traditionally been segregated even when they entered the public sphere, a separate organisation appeared to conform to the notion of separate yet complementary (gendered) domains of concerns and activities for men and women.

Interestingly, links with the RSS are minimised in the Samiti's own account of its founding. It is said that the founder herself was inspired most by the need to train women in self-defence and self-protection. This again seems remarkable, as traditional upper-caste Hindus (the core group from which the RSS draws its members) do not celebrate women's entry into the public sphere. The protection of the 'sexual honour' of the nation's territory and its women being so integral to the nationalist project, this assertion of agency can be read as a challenge to Hindu males and their masculinity. Moreover, the fact remains that women decided to step out of 'their domain' in order to serve *Hindutva*, even if to work only with other women. The private domain thus became increasingly redefined, with the idea of 'home' extended to include the *shakha* as well, clearly subverting the theoretical and spatial division between women's and men's worlds. *Hindutva* ideology perceived no contradictions even when the Samiti women transgressed the world of the home by performing physical exercises in open spaces, as long as the overall project remained the *sangathan* (organisation) of Hindu women. However, it is clear that women themselves took the initiative to organise Hindu women in the service of the Hindu nation.

To an outsider, the RSS and the Samiti appear the same - in their salutation of the *bhagwa dhvaj* (the saffron flag regarded as the *guru*), their physical exercises and ideological training. Indeed, the Samiti replicates the hierarchical structure of the RSS: all power is vested in the *Pramukh Sanchalika* (chief director), who is appointed and holds the post for life, while a band of celibate peripatetics (the *pracharikas*) are responsible for the organisation's expansion. Samiti *shakhas* and training camps are modelled on those of the RSS, and its public face remains that of the RSS' women's wing. However, the fact that the organisation is exclusively comprised of women and its chief ideologues are women ensures that there is no straightforward emulation. The Samiti has its own prayer and festivals, plans its own programmes, and its publication wing disseminates its own view of history and glorifies its own ideals and heroines.

Sevikas in a Mumbai
Shakha, April 2004



courtesy of author

Originating in Wardha in the state of Maharashtra, the Samiti has spread throughout India and claims a membership of one million women. The constituency remains the traditional maharashtrian Brahmin, while *shakhas* also exist in Brahmin-dominated localities. Although there have been efforts to reach out to other upwardly mobile caste groups, the social base has largely remained the same since its inception. Most women were initiated into the Samiti by their mothers, and were also married into families sympathetic to the RSS. In some cases, women enter into marriage with the condition that they be allowed to maintain their association with the Samiti after marriage. Thus Samiti membership is usually a lifelong commitment. Recruitment and participation in Samiti activities involves association with welfare schemes operated by the Samiti - girls' hostels, volunteer work in remote areas, teaching in

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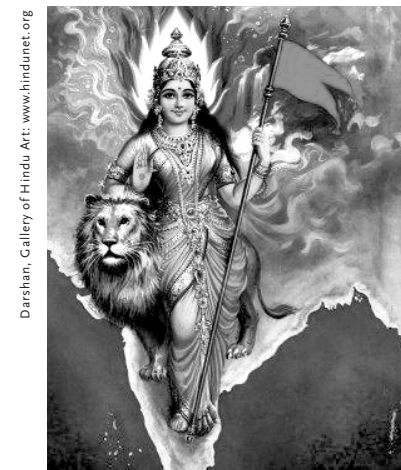
schools, informal teaching centres and so on. The combination of social service with organisational work is the most enduring feature of their activity, and the key to the organisation's strength: flexibility and the ability to move into different fields of activity, as well as into affiliates of the parent RSS, enabling the group to retain members from many backgrounds.

Crafting the feminine

Hindutva discourse conceptualises all women as mothers, or *matrishakti* (mother power); biological motherhood - producing sons and imbuing them with *Hindutva* ideology - is seen as Hindu women's primary function. Nevertheless, while remaining within the boundaries of the RSS worldview, Samiti women have tweaked and twisted its gender ideology to enable their own participation. Their task has been to craft an ideal of womanhood for the Hindu nation, and its departure from the parent ideology is clear to the discerning eye. Here, the feminine is eternally empowered and the discourse celebrates active womanhood. This is reflected best in the ideals of valiant womanhood that the Samiti highlights: Hindu Kshatriya queens and their idol and goddess Ashtabhuj Devi (literally, 'the devi with eight hands'), said to embody qualities of strength, intellect and wealth as well as war-like qualities, her

eight hands symbolising women's infinite capacities. Key here is the attempt to put women at the centre of the worldview and to affirm the feminine. An entire array of women from history and mythology - Vedic scholars, heroines from epics, Rajput princesses, women ascetics, brave rulers, dutiful wives and heroic mothers - are all eulogized and held up as models worthy of emulation.

More importantly, however, motherhood itself has been powerfully redefined. Even in their traditional roles, women as mothers are invested with immense potential for change. Mothers have a privileged position in fashioning the history of the Hindu Rashtra, and women as mothers, in the Samiti's discourse, seek to become true actors and agents. For instance, in the representation of the story of Shivaji (especially venerated by the RSS), it is Jijabai - Shivaji's mother, the Samiti ideal of 'enlightened motherhood' - who is credited with imbuing in Shivaji the zeal to fight Muslim rulers and found a Hindu Kingdom. While women have traditionally been accepted as the transmitters of culture, the challenge in this construction lies in the central role accorded to the mother. In this sense, traditional accounts are subverted and Jijabai becomes a larger icon than even Shivaji. Indeed, mothering features prominently in Samiti ideology as the creators of a glorious nation. The Samiti prayer sends out a similar message: women praying for strength to inspire men, but, more importantly, to act directly to transform the *Hindutva* vision into reality. Hence women's role is not confined to motherhood and 'homemaking' since the greater 'family' is ultimately the nation. Women's participation in the Samiti then becomes a practical means of turning femininity into empowered motherhood in the service of the Hindu nation.



Darshan, Gallery of Hindu Art: www.hindunet.org

Bharat-Mata

Creating identities invariably involves a dialectic of exclusions and inclusions. Creating an 'ideal' identity also papers over a variety of fractures, and homogenises cross-class and caste differences. It is well known that the threat of the 'other' is a constituent element of *Hindutva*, and in *Hindutva* discourse the feminine is constructed to include all Hindu women but exclude all others. By privileging their communal identity, this group of women transform into self-proclaimed soldiers committed to the *Hindutva* cause. <

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