Sisterhood in saffron: women of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti

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. This paper investigates how the movement reaches out to women, focusing on the Rashtra Sevika Samiti (RSS’s women’s wing), its institutional structure and discourse of the feminine which enables women to identify with and support the Hindutva agenda.

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 Laxman 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, and 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 shakhs (local RSS branches) was the Bharati-mata (Mother India). Given that women have traditionally been excluded even when they served 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 women being 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 the RSS, even if it only work only with other women. The private domain thus became increasingly defined, 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 sanghathan (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 dhwaj (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 and training guru); the other women fill the roles of workers and cadres. In an effort to ensure the spread of its political message to all areas of civil society, the RSS has ensured the formation of separate organisations to organise and train Hindu women. Hence, the RSS’s women’s wing is a separate organisation that conforms to the notion of separate yet complementary (gendered) domains of concerns and activities for men and women.

Joan Scott has observed that when women are asked to discipline themselves, they are often told to imitate men and women in the service of the Hindutva movement. The political lens of these women is undeniably shaped by the RSS, which has a unique mechanism of recruitment and participation in Samiti activities. 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 women being 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 the RSS, even if it only work only with other women. The private domain thus became increasingly defined, 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 sanghathan (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.

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Crafting the feminine

Hindutva discourse conceptualises all women as mothers, or matriskati (mother power); biological motherhood - producing sons and imbuing them with Hindu 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 Ashthabhuja Devi (literally, ‘the devi with eight hands’), said to embody qualities of strength, intellect and wealth as well as war-like qualities, her strength, intellect and wealth as well as war-like qualities, her eight hands signifying 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 eulogised 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), his 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.

The involvement of women in right-wing organisations has had a long unbroken history

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 maha-trashni 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 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 its affiliation with the parent RSS, enabling the group to retain members from many backgrounds.

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.

Namrata Ravichandran Ganneri is a doctoral candidate at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her thesis examines the politics of Hindu right-wing organisations in western India. NamrataGanneri@hotmail.com

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