

Vasudeva Kutumb?: Membership and Recruitment in the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti

Aastha Tyagi

Abstract

In patriarchal societies, women have always carried the burden of preserving the tradition and culture. The narrative of the largest Hindu-right organisation in India, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh makes no pretensions about its expectations of the role of the woman in its project of the creation of the Hindu nation or 'rashtra'. Confining women to the role of the home-maker and working specifically in the private sphere, most of the wives/daughters of RSS members go on to join its parallel women's organisation, the Rashtra Sevika Samiti. Thus the Samiti becomes a space where women are given a chance to step outside the binds of the home and yet remain under the larger ideological framework of the RSS.

This paper is a part of the larger project to understand the world view of the young women who become part of the Samiti. This paper in particular seeks to ascertain the root of the membership base of the Samiti and its ties to the RSS. While RSS is a widely known organisation, the Samiti is relatively lesser known by purpose. How do women see their membership in the Samiti, is there a question of agency that arises and what are the negotiations that they have to make to not question the larger RSS ideological framework? These are some of the questions that will be addressed in the course of this paper.

Keywords: Rashtra Sevika Samiti, Hindu right wing, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Sadhvi Rithambara, Uma Bharati, membership, girlhood, Hindu rashtra, brahmanical patriarchy, Ram Janmbhoomi movement, Sangh Parivar, Lakshmibai Kelkar, Durga Vahini, Meerut

Introduction

Women and the Hindu Right-wing

Nationalism has routinely been understood as a masculine discourse. The Hindu nationalism of the *Sangh Parivar* and its affiliates is seen even more blatantly so, because of the patriarchal imaginary it espouses (Sarkar 1991). Yet for the *Ram janmbhoomi* campaign, the onus of hate speech lies with two women associated with RSS affiliates with the Hindu right: Sadhvi Rithambara and Uma Bharati. During the course of this study, I spoke to KK, a resident of Delhi who was involved with an unsuccessful group of *kar sevaks* (the men recruited for the building of Ram Mandir and destruction of Babri Masjid, mostly belonging to the north of India). The group did not get to Faizabad because they were intercepted¹ by the Uttar Pradesh police and taken to Gorakhpur. Upon being asked what compelled him to go the distance and risk being arrested, KK remembers being deeply influenced by the videos of Lal Krishna Advani's *Rathiyatra*² (a journey undertaken in a vehicle fashioned like a chariot) of 1992, watching images of a hurt Ashok Singhal (President of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP)) and listening to Sadhvi Rithambara. Similarly, ST, currently a teacher in a government school in Delhi, recalls watching a smuggled video of Uma Bharti and again, a hurt Ashok Singhal in his hostel in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh. Although he does admit that the videos might have been fabricated, he believes that they were very influential.

The Hindu right (from hereon used to refer to the *Sangh parivar* and its affiliates) works through male networks — the pedagogical tools, influence and action has originated from the men of the

¹ The reason why I use 'intercepted' and not arrested is because they were not booked under the Indian Penal Code (IPC). In fact, he remembers the episode as a pleasant one where the *kar sevaks* were given "respect and honour" by the people of Gorakhpur.

² Advani's journey has been captured vividly in Anand Patwardhan's film 'Ram Ke Naam' (1991).

organisation. In fact, apart from the women mentioned above, it is rare for women to be at the forefront of the RSS.³ Hence, it is important to understand the role of the women in the propagation of such an ideology.

Thus, how are women, who are primary educators of the ideology in the private sphere and are expected to conform to feminine roles, in accordance with upper-caste Hindu beliefs, recruited and indoctrinated? What are the sites and bonds that are invoked to ensure at least introduction to the Hindu right-wing ideology of the RSS? These are some of the questions that this paper seeks to address.

Like in most cultures, women are seen as sites/keepers of the tradition, culture and honour of the group (Gupta 1998). They are singled out for their reproductive role.⁴ . As attested by several scholars (Kovacs 2010), by venerating the reproductive powers of the woman, there is an automatic denial of sexual desire and agency. Thus, a narrative of women's protection and mobility is constructed and internalised. The position and hierarchy of women in Hindu society and among the *Sangh* groups is the same. Uma Chakravarti in her 1993 essay succinctly encapsulates the role women play in the formulation of a Hindu ideology. Further, she borrows from Nur Yalman's study of practices and beliefs of the upper castes⁵ and writes,

...the fundamental principle of the Hindu social organisation is to construct a closed structure to preserve land, women and ritual quality within it. The three are structurally linked and it is impossible to maintain all three without stringently organising female sexuality. Indeed, neither land, nor ritual quality, ie., the purity of caste can be ensured without closely guarding women who form the pivot for the entire structure (Chakravarti 1993).

However, I seek to assert here that these discourses have adapted to contemporary times, thus attempting to utilise the female subject for political gains. The Hindu right, which finally realised the power of the female electorate, has constructed its discourse, from the *Ramjanmbhoomi*

³ One cannot say for certainty that this could be due to the lack of female participation at the ideologue level of the RSS.

⁴ I consciously avoid using the term 'power', which is often exploited in such narratives.

⁵ Caste is an extremely contentious issue in the Hindu right-wing discourse. While the core ideology completely denies caste, one can see the internalisation of caste and its manifestation in any arena. This topic needs elaborate discussion.

Movement till now, to accommodate the female sensibility. It is important to note the steps taken to accommodate the female subject and the magnitude of participation in the Ramjanmbhoomi movement by the women, directly or indirectly. In ‘The Woman as a Communal Subject’, Tanika Sarkar has noted, ‘While *Ramlala* (the image of Ram as a toddler) appeals to the mother in the woman, the warrior Ram probably simultaneously arouses a response to an aggressive male sexuality’⁶ (Sarkar 1991: 258). On the modernisation of Ram, Uma Bharati, a former member of the National Democratic Alliance cabinet (BJP alliance which governed from 2000-2004) said, “...that picture of Ram, with Hanuman bowing to him, or Krishna playing the flute. That’s why we are so ineffective and weak...You have to show them fighting. Krishna with a *chakra* (rotating circle with spokes, regarded as a weapon) and Ram with his bow drawn” (Uma Bharati quoted in Rajagopal 1994: 1663). While Sadhvi Rithambara and Uma Bharati and more recently, Sadhvi Pragma⁷ have been pushed as role models for the establishment of the ‘*Tejasvi Hindu Rashtra*’, the electoral affiliates like the BJP have used Sushma Swaraj, Vasundhara Raje Scindia and Smriti Irani as icons in political arena that women can aspire to. Further, Sarkar (1991: 2057-2061) writes, “The BJP has located women along with SC/STs as a primary target area for the coming times”. This has been seen widely in *Sangh Parivar*’s new methods of recruitment and political action.

Women & the *Rashtra Sevika Samiti*

Although one seldom hears of the working of the *Rashtra Sevika Samiti* (National Women’s Service Committee) in the media or mainstream discourse, the organisation is posited as the ideal women’s collective by the *Sangh* and sympathisers. The current member base comprises of

⁶ Recently, a Hindi film, *Galiyon ki Rasleela-Ram Leela* (Sanjay Leela Bhasali, 2013) introduced the actor of the film in the modernised, Ram- avatar. The actor, Ranveer Singh, is modeled on the Ram of the Hindu right, with flowing hair and a muscular body. The women in the song ‘Tattad-Tattad’ are shown to be completely enamored by his look and often shown fainting at the display of his sexuality. What is also interesting to note is that the image popularised of the new Ram during the Ram Janmbhoomi Movement is also shown larger than life in the background of the song.

⁷ Allegedly involved in the infamous Malegaon Blasts of 2008.

unmarried and married⁸ women who are all in some way or the other connected to the *Sangh parivar*.

The *Samiti* was formed in 1936 the efforts of Lakshmi Bai Kelkar. It was envisioned as the ‘parallel but separate organisation’ of the RSS. Paola Bachhetta says that the *Samiti* members believe that the organisation was established as a “culturally grounded alternative to the IWM (Indian Women Movement) which, it claims, was bent on westernising women” (Bachhetta 1999: 129).

The RSS and *Samiti* hold their primary allegiance to the ‘Guru *Bhagya Dhwa*’, the saffron flag which in popular imagination has come to be identified with all-things Hindutva. The iconography and symbolism of glorious ‘Hindu’ heroes (Chhatrapati Shivaji) reign supreme as defenders of *Bharat Mata*, a goddess fashioned to represent the ‘Hindu’ subcontinent with parts like Kashmir, Pakistan and Bangladesh intact. They are more loyal to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Bande Mataram* and sing it faithfully along with *Samiti Prarthana* (prayer) which is the *Saraswati Vandana* (Ode to Saraswati, Goddess of Knowledge). Their vision is to make possible the dream of *Akhand Bharat* (United India) and establish a *Tejasvi Hindu Rashtra* (an enlightened Hindu nation).

The members of both the organisations are encouraged to be physically active and learn self-defence. The ideology of RSS and *Samiti* believes that the role of the man is working hard outside home, to save the *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) while sees serving the family, in the domestic sphere, as the woman’s primary duty.

Here an attempt will be made to understand how women come in contact with the *Samiti* and how the present members make active arrangements to expand their member base. This information was collected in the field as a part of a Master’s thesis project on the organisation. The site was Meerut, a city in Western Uttar Pradesh in the month of June 2013. The women and girls who were interviewed were part of the residential summer camp being held in the city where I stayed and conducted research through participant observation and in-depth interviews. Most women attendees at the camp had come in contact with the ideals of the *Samiti* through male family members: fathers, brothers and husbands. Hence, their first interaction with the Hindutva ideology was with the RSS and its patriarchal ideas of nationhood formation.

⁸ This is an important distinction that many *Samiti* members made while speaking about recruitment strategies.

What is interesting is that most women interviewed found the space of the *Samiti* to be empowering because it enabled them to speak about the world outside of their homes, without coming in conflict with their household duties. Importantly, this venturing out was not restricted because of the blessings of the male family members who perhaps see the Samiti as a contributor to both, the support for the nation and the society with strict gender-roles that they seek to create, thus reproducing the subjugation of women in all respects. These women then take it upon themselves to propagate the ideals of the Samiti in two forms. The first is through *sampark* (contact) in their communities by holding the *Shakhas* and other programmes. The other more important way, that is also the most effective, are the yearly summer camps. It is in these camps that young women are given a taste of the *Samiti* ideology while being completely removed from their surroundings.

All the present members spoke of fostering a feeling of patriotism even before they had heard of the *Samiti*. Only after establishing, what seems to be a cosmic connection between patriotism, themselves and the Samiti, would they then establish the tangible reason of coming in contact with the *Samiti*. They remember seeing their fathers/brothers/husbands being engrossed in *Shakha* work. All admit that they did not want to pursue what the male members of the family were doing. They wanted to contribute in whatever way and to whatever degree the patriarchal figures in their homes found appropriate.

I will describe the nature of the women's association with the Samiti by dividing them into two; first, association through the natal/maternal home (fathers, brothers) and second, through the marital home (father-in-law, husband). What is common to all the narratives is that none of the members were aware of the Samiti and had initially thought of the RSS as the means to realise their 'patriotic' ambitions.

Fathers

The *Pracharika* of the Western Uttar Pradesh region was raised in an atmosphere that was conducive to the ideals of the *Sangh*. Her father was the President of the *Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh*, an affiliate of the *Sangh Parivar*. While describing her parents' union, she speaks about their marriage as an arrangement where they both realised their dream of serving the society through their children. In fact, one can see the parents' union/marriage as a perfect specimen of the *Sangh* ideals: that the marriage be for procreation and as a result, create the perfect Hindu citizen, modelled on their ideals. Of the seven siblings, three are full-time workers of the *Sangh* family.

According to her, her values or *sanskaar* given to her by her parents were to serve the society and it was through the *Samiti* she sought to realise this dream. She talks of being born with a ‘vision’ to serve *Bharatiya Sanskriti* (Culture of Bharat). In this respect, she went on to study Sanskrit language and eventually to obtain a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in the same. The interaction with the *Samiti* was a revelation of sorts that gave her a direction in life. She said:

...it was my ambition to serve the society. We knew that there was the Sangh but did not know about the activities of the Samiti till MA/B.Ed. After that, I attended the camp (varg) and it is then that I got a direction on how to proceed with my life. This was the year 1995. It was then that I took the decision to become a Pracharika.

It is only later that she mentions that two of her brothers were already *Pracharaks* before she took the vow to remain celibate and work for the Hindutva cause.

Considering the social set-up of the Hindu community her decision to value education and aspiration over marriage seems like a radical move for two reasons.. Firstly, she uses education as a means of negotiating the patriarchal system of marriage and manages to legitimise such a decision while fulfilling her own dream of serving the society. Secondly, despite the *Samiti* stance of marriage being the most important stage in a woman’s life,⁹ she completely avoided that route altogether and added to a variety in its membership, in her own way.

But despite all these decisions that seem to show agency, there is an overarching patriarchal notion at work here. The decision to see one’s ‘choice’ of serving the society, and therefore not marrying as more legitimate, is problematic. That some choices are approved to avoid marriage and further, that women need to have a concrete, patriarchy approved reason to not marry points that in fact, there is no agency involved here. What is at work is a negotiation with oneself with high possibilities of compromise in other spheres of life.

Paola Bachhetta chooses to put it more positively as:

...Samiti serves as a space where members can escape constraints which otherwise may have been imposed upon them as women, within their context. They do so not only without directly rebelling against their environment, but also with its express approval as long as their demands are formulated not in terms of

⁹ *Samiti* members constantly create discourses the value marriage over everything that women can do in their lives. One has constantly heard of the refrain, ‘Everyone has to get married. It is natural’. This naturalisation of marriage is problematic in both feminist and sociological areas and this will be discussed in detail later.

themselves, but in terms of self-sacrifice in the service of a higher common cause, the Hindu Nation (Bacchetta 2004: 77).

In Bacchetta's case, her subject, Kamlabehn, was using her *Samiti* position to enable increased mobility that would have been unavailable to her otherwise. The *Pracharika* that I interviewed spoke at length of her work in idyllic terms. Also, according to the latter, the mobility and the access to public space were already a given. In another instance, Kamlabehn's rejection of a suitor of marriage and influencing him to become a Pracharak and work for the *Sangh* is seen as more respectable option, which is in line with the narrative provided to me by the *Pracharika*. But what is different about the two women in the same position is the complete denial of, not only a possibility but also existence of any romance with the same or opposite sex, by the latter.¹⁰

Another member, the Western Uttar Pradesh *Baudhik Pramukh*, MS, was also introduced to the *Samiti* through her father. She distinctly remembers the RSS dress, the khaki shorts being worn by her father before leaving for *Shakha*. It was through this association that she was asked to attend her first camp in Muzaffarnagar. She says that she agreed to attend the camp "since it was part of the *Sangh*, the camp could only be a good thing". But what emerges from her narrative was that, unlike other interviewees, what attracted her to the *Sangh* was the way the *Sangh* people conducted themselves and not so much the camp experience.¹¹ She says, in a rather long monologue:

People used to come home so my father would introduce them to us, telling us that they were Pracharaks, they work for the Sangh. We would have them over for tea or a meal... They used to come and ask my mother what had been cooked for the day, my mother would tell them that the sabji (vegetable curry) is over and only rotis are left. They used to ask my mother to bring rotis with salt, even if pickle is over. They never made my mother cook especially for them. Whatever was left, they would eat. If there was chai, good enough, otherwise, they would make do with water only. If a Sangh Parivar person comes, their first question is about the well-being of the family. They would make enquiries about home, work, family,

¹⁰ I should point out that there was an age difference between me and *Pracharika*. Yet, if one can talk about sexual violence and 'immorality' among girls, surely romance is a topic that she must be aware about and would not be hesitant to approach.

¹¹ Most women, as you will notice from their narratives describe the first experience of the camp as a pre-ordained enlightenment and some sort of a holy induction.

kids even before stepping inside the house. There is an attachment with these people. If we do have a problem, you feel like sharing it .

Hence, for her, the extended *Samiti* was not a space of the unknown where she would go on to realise her dream of the unified motherland. For her, the space of the *Samiti* represented a safe space that she was accustomed to, especially in its membership, form and functioning. What is interesting to note in this regard is the complete absence of any female influence in the *Sangh*. Never were the wives/mothers/sisters/daughters of other *Sangh* members mentioned. Hence, her earlier statement about the *Samiti* camp being a ‘good thing’ is based on her experience with the *Sangh* men only. Thus, whatever aspiration for working for the cause of the Hindu nation, would have been inspired from the role of the men. The *Baudhik* Pramukh, MS, then went on to marry a member of the *Sangh* itself and her husband is currently an active member of the RSS in Saharanpur region.

Husbands

With the husbands or connections with the marital home, the wives/daughters-in-law are bound to become members if their husbands are active members of the RSS. Most women, whose husbands were part of the RSS, were automatically expected to become a part of the *Samiti* or contribute in some way or the other to the functioning of the RSS. The reverse, though, may not always be true. For example, the area in Delhi, where my relative was part of the RSS, was a hotbed for the *Sangh* recruits. In a span of two years, most men became avid members of the RSS, and their wives and daughters simultaneously became members of the *Samiti*. The wives celebrated all the *Sangh/Samiti* events with much fanfare. Three women that I spoke to narrated at length their experiences of induction into the *Samiti* as a part of the natural transformation from the natal to the marital home. None spoke of a discussion preceding the camp or the woman even being asked if she agreed with the ideology.

The Western Uttar Pradesh *Karyavahika*, GB, was one such inductee. She speaks at length about her mother’s love for the country and how she inherited that love from her. She wanted to serve the country in some way and to realise that dream, wished to marry a soldier from the armed forces. Her husband, a member of the RSS, is a teacher. It was he who pressed her to do an Officer’s Training Course (OTC) at a *Samiti* camp in 1985. “I came here and I realised that this is exactly the kind of platform I was looking for. I should have come here earlier”, she spoke of the

camp, adding, “At the time, I felt that every girl should attend such a camp before getting married”.

The statement above deserves further elaboration, not only because it is laden with meaning, but also because of the context that it was spoken in. Before speaking about the *Samiti's* positive influence on women's mentality, she mentioned that her husband's work in the RSS was erratic and at times, she used to give in to the natural reactions of anger and feel neglected. She said:

I was foolish, I got married while studying and after kids, sometimes I would also fight with my husband. My husband used to go for Shakhbas and there was no fixed time for his return. We would all wait for him, kids and I. We would prepare food for two or three people, but he would return accompanied with five. I had small kids and then to prepare the extra food, I would sometimes get angry. So these values I wish had before getting married.

Instead of asking her husband to reconsider and alter his lifestyle, she blames herself for failing to see the larger picture: his work was too important for nation building.

Unlike the narrative of the *Baudhik* in-charge, MS, earlier, where she waxes eloquent about the simple lifestyles of the RSS members, the *Karyavahika's* narrative can be used to understand a wife's point of view. The feeling of anger and neglect is something natural but her association with the *Samiti* and the 'values' she gained during the camp taught her that the woman should be sacrificial to the point of self-erasure. She says, “If I had become associated with the *Sangh* earlier in my life, I would have given better values (*sanskhaar*) to my children. At the time I did not have wisdom, as to what preparation a mother should do before children are born. I got that wisdom/knowledge only after coming here”.

Another aspect of this is the 'wisdom' given by the *Samiti* of its ideology of wifehood entails is being passed off as natural truth and an ideal that all women should emulate. Those women, who have not 'realised' or refuse to adhere, then should always feel guilty of not performing well the role of the wife and further, obstructing the cause of the nation.

What follows in her narrative is then the previous lack of 'wisdom' is compensated for in the promise she made to the teacher, *Bhagwa Dhvaj*, to serve the society and dedicate 15 days every summer to the *Samiti*. “I wrote on a paper and made a commitment that I would devote 15 days of every summer holidays to the camp. Now, I made that commitment in front of the *Bhagwa Dhvaj*, our teacher, so I should fulfil it right?” But since she was not affiliated to the RSS, the

reverence for the *Bhagva Dhvaj* and other *Samiti* symbols should not be assumed to be automatic as well? From her and other recent inductees' narratives, this reverence and beliefs come almost gradually, naturally but surely and it seems that there is a special effort taken to establish such an unshakable belief. For example:

Q. 'Considering you did not know about the Bhagva-Dhwaj or Lakshmbai Kelkar before marriage, how did you start believing in them because it cannot come all of a sudden?'

A. 'Faith in the Bhagva-Dhwaj was present from before because I studied in an Arya Samaj school. There, the flag has an Aum sign on it which represents the higher Being. That time I did not know why we hoist the flag. After coming to the camp, we were told that the Rig Ved has a mention of Arun-Ketu and a flag. But even then questions about why we pray to the flag kept crossing my mind. The belief increased slowly.'

The inductees that come through their fathers do not have to make such a negotiation with the ideology of the *Samiti* the way one does when she comes from a marital home. What is interesting from her statement is the cosmic connection that she tries to make with the ideology (as was mentioned before) as being aware, yet unaware of the significance of the *Bhagva Dhvaj* in the knowledge that she gained before getting married. What is also important to note in her narrative is that the *Samiti* provided her answers to her questions of 'why', which her previous educational affiliation failed to do. Hence, for her, the association with the *Samiti* brought with it enlightenment and a reason to believe in the flag and other beliefs. This 'scientific' or explanatory approach is used widely by such organisations to lend credibility to their beliefs.

While the *Karyavahika* GB spoke of leaning towards the ideology 'slowly', another member of the *Samiti*, BT, speaks of making a partial negotiation with the *Samiti*. She was introduced to the *Samiti* through her father-in-law who has been a long-time member of the RSS and hence, her association was to be taken for granted. Her husband is presently the Principal of the school in their village and until recently, she was the Vice-Principal. Her daughter, a very active and lively girl, loves the *Shakha* because of the physical activities that she gets to take part in.

A part of the *Samiti* for eight years now, she was first asked to attend the camp by her father-in-law in 2005. Since then, she has repeatedly attended the camps, first as a student and now as a *Shikshika* (peer educator). Upon being asked what attracted her to the *Samiti*, her response was, "As such there is nothing". This is indicative of 'granted-ness' that was spoken of earlier with regard to her membership in the *Samiti*. On being prodded, she added, "But yes, we do not take

to an activity only because of selfish reasons. I like that we are able to manage work and household and still devote time to social causes. Hence, because of our affinity to social work, we got associated with the *Samiti*'.

Hence, it is not so much a passive association that she is making with the *Samiti*. An active agent, she is trying to negotiate the ideology and be clear about the reasons why she chooses to remain connected to it. The *Samiti*'s work in the field of social work is respected by the people of the community and her clear distinction with regard to her reasons for association also shows an alternate reason for the attraction towards the *Samiti*. As the *Pracharika* had mentioned earlier, "Before I knew about the *Samiti*, I planned to open an orphanage or work independently as a social worker. But after my association with the *Samiti*, I came to know that it is a vast organisation where they work to create people into *ati-manav*, *swavlambi* and patriots. There cannot be a better way to lead your life than this".

Kathleen M. Bleen, in her essay 'Becoming a Racist: Women in Contemporary Ku Klux Klan and Neo-Nazi Groups' (1996) writes to demolish notion that women in organised racist groups are passive recipients of a male ideology. Calling this notion among scholarly work as 'circular logic', she writes that most literature focuses on male members of such groups. She, importantly points out,

As a result of such a reasoning, scholarship on women in modern racist groups in the United States is virtually non-existent-although studies on women in 1920's Ku Klux Klan and in nineteenth and twentieth century Britain, contemporary Hindu Fascism in India, the German Nazi Movement and World War II-era Italian fascism find that women have not been incidental to the reactionary, racist and anti-Semitic movements (Bleen 1996: 681).

She then goes to explain the consequences of such a move: ignorance of the women's psychology and the perplexing reasons why women in such large numbers choose to attach themselves to such groups.

She then goes on to point out the three ways that women take to become one with the ideology: 'Conversion', 'Adoption' and 'Resignation'. Conversion occurs when, assuming such an ideology is to be introduced to be accepted, the women make/construct a 'personal, dramatic transformation' towards the ideology. This is the case universally: when the *Pracharika* insists that she was born with a 'vision' with a serve the society or the way the *Baudhik Pramukh* was naturalised and began to appreciate the *Sangh* for the caring nature of its members. Second

alternative, ‘Adoption’ is prevalent in cases where one comes with a certain set of ideas and has to adapt to an ideology because of the conditions of their context. Hence, a way to look at ‘adoption’ is that it could be seen as a positive negotiation. Negotiations, such as above, are important to understand and predict the memberships and future of the Samiti. For example, BT’s partial acceptance of the *Samiti* ideology because of their work in the social sector or NJ’s appreciation of the *Samiti* space as being informative and allowing girls to learn self-defence. Of course, the discourse and the aim for which such steps are taken are highly questionable and problematic, but the active negotiation to appropriate an ideology and engage with it is definitely a positive sign.

Recruitment

After the negotiation and acceptance of the ideology, the members are required to bring in more members to make the organisation numerically stronger. The recruitment of fresh members happens in various ways. One is through aligning with an existing member of the *Samiti* in their practice: for example, attending the *Shakha*, lectures and initiatives that bring the community women together. The second way is to attend the camps held by the Samiti in a site carefully identified to attract maximum new members.

All the permanent members of the *Samiti* spoke reverently of working on their *Shakhas* and seeing young girls becoming active members of the *Samiti*. To acquire a status and position in the *Samiti*, members are required to open as many *Shakhas* as possible and induct and further train potential members. Various other programmes are conducted before opening of the first *Shakha* to attract the girls. GB, the Western UP *Karyavahika* spoke of organising a grand prayer ceremony on *Guru Purnima*, a day dedicated to the reverence of the *Bhagwa Dhvaj* by the *Sangh parivar*. This programme was conducted in a school that was run by her relative and which was sympathetic to the Hindutva cause. This function gave her the initial numbers to begin her own *Shakha*. This method was to induct young girls exclusively.

To garner the support of adult women, she again describes, in much detail, how she organised weekly ‘*aartis*’ (prayer ceremonies) and conducted lectures among housewives to discuss relevant topics, mostly relating to housekeeping and religion. Through her experience, she learnt that very few women choose to actively associate themselves with the *Samiti* because this work requires one to step outside of the home and according to her, “the housewives do not want to do anything outside the home”. And secondly, that to keep the member base, it is more important

to focus on the daughters-in-law than the daughters because the former do not change their location and are future child bearers. The reason to not give as much attention to insist on the membership of the daughters was that they go away once they are married and hence are not a very reliable investment. She said, “The girls I worked with have gotten married and moved away. So, we shifted the experiment to daughters-in-law. If we are able to transform their thinking, then we expect they will stay for around twenty years. Girls can only stay for ten” (Karyavahika 2013).

She also spoke of working with under-privileged girls and women and lending them support after which they ally themselves with the *Samiti*. She gives the example of an orphan girl who was supported by her and who was inducted into the Samiti once she acquired the required values or ‘*sanskaars*’. In Mumbai, the same technique was used to induct members of a relatively newer demographic: lower-caste, lower-class young girls.¹² The mothers were told to send their girls because they would be made to play games and taught ‘*Shloks*’ (religious Hindu chants).

Through these acts of Sanskritisation, the *Samiti* members always assume the role of the selfless, ever-giving privileged authority that is doing the society a favour. They use such instances to demonstrate that their minds are free of prejudice because the cause of the Hindu nation demands that one dissolve such differences. But the hint of prejudice lingers. For example, speaking on the *Sangh*’s caste position, the *Prant Karyavahika* of the Saharanpur region, SB, mentioned,

Even before marriage, I had to work with members (karyakarta) and we never came to know that the person sitting next to us is a Harijan or not... I have even gone into their (unke; ambiguous term referring to ‘lower caste’) homes and eaten with them. I have taught their daughters in their homes itself. Even though I don’t like tea, if I refuse it they think that I am discriminating. One has to drink it to demonstrate that we are not discriminating. And it is not like their homes are dirty. The way they keep their homes and utensils, even our homes will not have such cleanliness.

The other method of recruiting is to hold large scale meetings and camps. Such camps have been a feature of all organisations seeking to consolidate a member base and transmit their ideology on a larger scale. The organisers provided various reasons for choosing Meerut as a site but in

¹² This is a part of a larger Sangh drive to include the demographics that have been hitherto been excluded from their upper-caste focused narrative like the marginalized groups like poor, Dalits etc.

the present section, it is important to mention that the site was chosen so as to establish a strong Samiti presence in Meerut, which it had lacked till now. The *Prant Karyavahika* SB elaborated,

In Meerut, I was the Karyavahika and we had five shakhas in all. In Pratap Nagar (the neighbourhood of her natal home), our numbers were 50-60...Girls, as young as three, would come for the Shakha...But I don't think the group they trained after them was good enough. Now, there is no Shakha in Meerut. That is why we have held this camp here to create Shakhas here (SB 2013).

The camps, such as the ones held by right-wing organisations in India, are held primarily to recruit newer members into the fold. These spaces provide an uninterrupted flow for transmission of the ideology. For this, the younger people (children, adolescents, teenagers) are preferred because the institutions believe that it is easier to influence them.

Balika Shikshan (Education for Girls) (BS) is a State-prescribed lesson-plan for teachers in government schools. It aids teachers in providing knowledge to girls which does not fall into the category of schooling curriculum. In a textual analysis and in-depth interviews of teachers who teach *Balika Shikshan*, Nandini Manjrekar notes from her study of State-sanctioned, Hindutva literature on girls,

A girl needs to be trained to nurture all these values, not in order to strengthen her own capacities, but to be the carrier of these virtues for children, particularly male children, and their spread to the matrimonial home, which BS (Bal Shikshan) states to be the 'additional' value of such 'knowledge' (Manjrekar 2011: 358).

She notes how the gendering of schooling education is furthering patriarchal codes and how conditioning by adults shapes the future roles that girls envision for themselves.

In the same vein, the *Samiti* believes that a girl has the power to transform two homes-natal and marital. Therefore, if a girl is introduced to the ideology at a young age, she can try in her power to transmit the ideology in her natal home and then once, married, to members in the marital home. For the *Samiti*, younger girls are also preferred because they believe that the ideology will be transferred to the next generation as well because all the girls will someday become mothers. Hence, to understand how their target audience, i.e. young women, is analysing the discourse, such a camp seemed like the perfect site.

Majority of the population of the camp I attended were below the age of 25. Out of nine groups, only one was of older, married women. Rest of the groups were divided into respective age

groups from eight years to 25 years. Most of the girls came from villages near the districts of Saharanpur, Shamli, Meerut, Muzaffarnagar, Moradabad and Ghaziabad. Except the group where 15 girls were completing their second year (*Prabodh* group), this camp was the first time that any of them had the chance to step outside of their homes for a comparatively longer period of time. Also, this was the first opportunity where many saw the urban setting without their parents.

The sample I am using consists of three different groups of girls. The first group was the one I was clubbed into for the purposes of lectures and physical training. It consisted of 13 girls who were unmarried and were pursuing their higher education. Through camp activities with this group, I borrow opinions and discussions held during '*Aachar paddbhati*' (Code of conduct) lectures. All the girls in this group, even though they were aware of the work of the *Sangh*, were all first-time attendees of the camp.

The second group of girls are the ones who had attended the camp more than once. These were girls from the *Prabodh* group (completing second level of 'varg' or camp) and *Shikshikas* (teachers who performed the roles of peer educators). I chose to interview these girls because they had been accustomed to the Samiti setting and would be able to give more information regarding its ideology and their understanding of it. Out of 12 girls, six belonged to the *Shikshika* group and six to the *Prabodh* group. The third group consisted of girls who were studying at a *Sangh* hostel and were required to attend the camp as an obligation for availing *Sangh*-funded facilities.

Association with the Samiti

The girls who were attending the camp were in some way or the other, aware of the work of the *Sangh* (and sometimes, *Samiti*). Like the older members, most of the girls came through the contact of male family members – fathers or brothers. While most of the girls confessed that they were initially forced into attending the camp, almost all accepted that it was a learning experience. TS, a first-time attendee said,

My father and brothers used to practice the physical exercises at home. To me, this was both curiosity inducing and funny and I used to make fun of them for doing so... Then, when we came to know that the camp was to be held here, my father decided that he would make me attend the camp at all costs. I was stubborn too and protested till the last day. But somewhere, I did want to see what the camp was about' (TS 2013).

The girls from the *Shikshika* and *Prabodh* groups declared that they were testaments to the fact that the camp experience is rich and compels one to attend again. Another girl, a *Shikshika* recounted,

I was in eighth standard when I first attended a camp. My father had forced me to go the first time. Going to a new place is frightening, obviously. The first two days I didn't like it there at all... after those initial days, I gradually started liking the camp. I began to take interest and was excited about what they would teach next. The yearning to learn grew (AK 2013).

Those who attended the camp through family members were more comfortable in the surroundings than those who had lesser influential contacts in the *Sangh Parivar*. The girls whose fathers occupied higher posts in the *Sangh* were more likely to attend the camp the second time. According to them, the daunting atmosphere of the camp became less threatening if an older, recognisable person was at the camp. As NS, a 17 year old, three-time *Shikshika* said,

I have seen the RSS since childhood since my father is a member...I've been coming to the camp ever since eighth standard. The first time camp experience was a little problematic ('gad-bad'). My mother, brother and sister-in-law would come to visit me every three-four days and my father used to have his meals at the camp itself. But even then I used to cry. The second time I went, I was wiser and enjoyed myself (NS 2013).

This experience seems like an ideal one because the girls at the camp were denied any contact with relatives. Those with prior contacts could make calls home and could meet with parents.

Other than the ones coming via *Sangh* families, there were three other affiliations that brought the girls to the camp. First group consisted of teachers of the primary schools run by the *Samiti*. The teachers of the *Saraswati Shishu Mandir*-affiliated schools were attending the camp because of a requirement of teaching at the school. This was described as the OTC (optional/officer training course). In my group itself, there were 4 teachers from the school and many others in the married women's group. They were not necessarily from *Sangh* families but adapted very quickly to the camp setting. In fact, most of them admitted to not knowing about the existence of the *Samiti* as a separate entity, prior to the camp. NS, a 21-year old, *Prabodh* level attendee said, 'I teach the primary level at the Saraswati School. These schools, even though private, have RSS members as founders. This is how I came here'. She also admits that she did not like the rules of the camp at the start but the '*masti*' (fun) atmosphere in the room compelled her to come back. Two other teachers from another region who were attending the camp for the first time

confessed during discussions that they had no idea about the *Samiti*. 'I had only heard of the RSS and thought that it was a political party', recounted one.

Another *Samiti* school teacher, a first time attendee, admitted to me that attending the camp was imperative to remain in the good books of the administrators of their respective schools. It was pointing to such entrants that the *Pracharika* had remarked nastily,

There have been times when some behnein have joined us for their selfish purposes and have remained only for a short duration. By selfish reasons I mean for political reasons or by the compulsions of their job. Some women believe that their personal enmities will be won if they ally themselves with this organisation (Pracharika 2013).

It is this compulsion that perhaps the earlier young woman had pointed to.

The third group of girls were the ones who were being educated at the *Sangh Parivar* hostels and were required to attend these camps during their holidays. At the present camp, a large group of girls from a town at the bottom of the Shiwalik hills were in attendance. They were distributed as helpers, teachers and participants. All the girls were originally from the states in the north-east part of India. These are the states where the *Sangh* is "trying to fight off missionary conversion activity" and establish its presence (Dixit 2013). These girls, because of disadvantaged economic backgrounds were brought to hostels such as these through local RSS (significantly, not *Samiti*) workers. All the girls that were attending were between the ages of 12-18.

For them, availing the hostel facilities is synonymous to attending the camp. DS was first introduced to the *Sangh* through the rampant RSS work taking place in her state. GS's uncle was a member of the RSS and he was the one who told her family about the free-of-cost hostels and education. "My uncle is working with the RSS so he sent us here to the hostel. I came here when I was in third standard and now I am 18 years old. I just completed my 12th and am now looking for an admission in BA", she said (GS 2013). Apart from ones organised by the *Samiti*, all the girls had also participated in Durga Vahini (women's wing of the VHP) camps.

Conclusion

As illustrated, the membership of the *Samiti* is not by chance or choice. A paternal/marital connection is imperative to making the first contact and more importantly, to sustain it. The 'agency' in this framework can be understood in the extent to which the girls and women choose to appropriate the ideology and align it with their life goals. What is important to note here is

also that the members of the Samiti use its means to negotiate the public sphere, all the while being enclosed with the larger right-wing patriarchal framework. Further though, this negotiation is always seen as an ancillary exercise, the focus always remaining to serve the cause of the male members associated with the RSS in the private sphere.

When it comes to the girls and the young women, the extent and depth of the association is directly proportional to the comfort of the male members of the family with their involvement. Uncertain of her future at the Samiti, AK said, “I will definitely try to remain associated with the Samiti but there are lot of problems and sometimes, unexpected, that don’t allow you to continue...”. On being asked if she wanted to go on to become a *Pracharika* for the Samiti, NB said, “I would want to, but I know my family is concerned about the society. I think that even my father would be supportive of the idea but the rest of the family would not” (NB 2013). Her solution was that in case her family did not agree to her becoming a *Pracharika*, she would try to devote some years exclusively to the organisation.

Older Samiti members had raised this concern during interviews, saying that investment in young girls sometimes became futile because they moved to other places after their marriages. SB, a *Karyavahika*, remembers training many girls before her marriage and at the time, the area was brimming with *Shakhas*. She remembers, “There were 40 *Shakhas* here at the time. I expected the numbers to continue. But I don’t think the group they trained after them was good enough” (SB 2013). The result was that the region did not have a single shakha at the time of the present camp. Another *Karyavahika* said, “Now, the thing is that I am getting tired. The girls I worked with have gotten married and moved away”. After seeing that the girls they trained did not yield any visible effects in their own areas, her solution was to focus on the women who join families after marriage, i.e., daughters-in-law. She said,

After seeing this, we shifted the experiment to daughters-in-law. It takes time with them too because they have values of their own maternal homes but even if four women come out of it, we feel we are successful. If we are able to transform their thinking, then we expect they will stay for around twenty years. Girls can only stay for ten (Karyavahika 2013)¹³.

¹³ Maybe I am over-analysing this method of recruitment but this seems to further belittle the position of girls before marriage and subsequently, pays more emphasis to birthing boys who will be responsible in bringing the next potential members of the Samiti as wives and further, as sons and daughters.

But what is extremely interesting is that the *Samiti* members see their rigid ideology as being a reason for the dwindling numbers. This was lamented by almost all older *Samiti* members, who tried to rationalise various reasons for the lesser participation. The *Pracharika* said, “In this camp, girls from 23 districts are in attendance. But in the men’s camp (*bhaiyon ka varg*), there are 550 people attending...They have 550 in one place and 230 in another. We are short also when it comes to manpower (numbers)”. On being asked if the *Samiti* should modify its beliefs to accommodate girls who are living in the present society, she remarked, “We cannot change this at all. If we do, they will destroy us. It is only because of this reason that we could hold on to your culture even after being under slavery (*ghulam*) for so many years. I don’t think we should lessen our vigour even one bit” (Pracharika 2013).

Glossary:

The following list includes words that have been repeated often in the paper and are important to understand the discourse of the *Samiti*. Though most of the words are in Hindi, they are used for the same purposes in other areas where Hindi is not the native language.

(In order of appearance)

Sangh Parivar: Meaning the family of the *Sangh*, the coalition of organisations that follow the philosophy of Hindutva and look to the RSS as their ideologue. This includes cultural and electoral organisations like *Samiti*, *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP, World Hindu Organisation) which includes *Bajrang Dal* (male, referring to the bravado of Hindu deity Hanuman) and *Durga Vahini* (female, the chariot of Hindu goddess Durga); *Bharatiya Janta Party* (BJP, Indian People’s Party) which includes the youth-wing *Akhil Bharatiya Vidhyarthi Parishad* (ABVP, All-India Student Committee) and *Bharatiya Yuva Janta Morcha* (BYJM, Indian Youth People’s Campaign), the *Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh* (Indian Labour Union) etc. Due to the interchangeable memberships and similar ideology, the collective is called a ‘*parivar*’.

Kar sevak/s: Literally, a person (here, man) who is an on-ground worker. This term became extremely popular during the lead-up to the *Ram Janmabhoomi* campaign. *Kar sevaks* collected bricks, donations, formed and organised crowds and finally, answered the call to demolish the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh on 6 December, 1991.

Tejasvi Hindu Rashtra: Translated as ‘enlightened Hindu nation’, the *Samiti* counts this as the ultimate aim. This refers to restoring the golden age in the territorial Hindu nation.

References:

Bacchetta, P. (2004) *Gender in the Hindu Nation: RSS Women as Ideologues*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Bleen, K. M.(1996) “Becoming a Racist: Women in Contemporary Ku Klux Klan and Neo-Nazi Groups,” *Gender and Society*. 10(6): 680-704.

Chakravarti, U. (1993) “Brahmanical Patriarchy,” *Economic and Political Weekly*. 3 April. Volume 28.

Dixit, N. (2013) “Holier Than Cow,” *Outlook*, 28 January.

Jaffrelot, C. (2007) *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*. Third ed. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.

Manjrekar, N. (2011) “Ideals of Hindu Girlhood: Reading Vidya Bharati's 'Balika Shikshan',” *Childhood August 2011 vol. 18 no. 3 350-366*.

Rajagopal, A., (1994) “Ram Janmabhoomi, Consumer Identity and Image-Based Politics,” *Economic and Political Weekly*. 29(27): 1659-1668.

Ram Ke Naam. 1991. [Film] Directed by Anand Patwardhan. India: Anand Patwardhan.

Sarkar, T. (1991) “Woman as a Communal Subject: Rashtra Sevika Samiti and the Ram Janmbhoomi Movement,”. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol - XXVI No. 35, August 30, 1991