

Sah'dharminī and more: Rāṣṭra Sevikā Samiti, the Familial Hindu Nationalist

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Abstract: *Sevikā Prakāśan*, the publication unit of the *Rāṣṭra Sevikā Samiti* (National Women's Committee; hereon, Samiti), was constructed as a mechanism to further its ideology as a parallel Hindu nationalist organisation. As the Samiti's *sevikās* (members) seldom come into the limelight (unlike the RSS' *svayamsevaks*), these texts become important materials for a cohesive description of the doctrine among women of the Hindu nationalist organisations. This article examines the role that the Hindu nationalist discourse and the Samiti ascribe to women of the Hindu nation. In doing so, it also analyses, how historical changes are reflected in the textual ideology of the organisation. By furthering the ideology of colonial-era Hindu reformers, Hindu nationalist women lay claim on the larger hegemonic Hindu nationalist ideology by hailing the private as the main space of patriotism and nation building. By envisioning a specific kind of religious nationalism different from the hegemonic Hindu nationalist vision, the Samiti outlines an everyday way of being a Hindu and a woman.

SAH'DHARMIṆĪ AND MORE: RĀṢṬRA SEVIKĀ SAMITI, THE FAMILIAL HINDU NATIONALIST

The electoral party leading the coalition of the current national government in India is the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party; BJP). It derives its ideological roots from the *Saṅgh Parivār* (Sangh Family or the Sangh Combine), a group or family of Hindu nationalist organisations. The *Rāṣṭrīya Svayamsevak Saṅgh* (National Volunteer Organisation; RSS) is the largest Hindu nationalist organisation in India and functions as the ideological center of the *Saṅgh Parivār*. It was founded in 1925 by Dr Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889–1940) and has affiliate organisations that cater to 'every aspect of the Hindu social life' (Mathur 2008: 8). The RSS follows the ideology of *Hindutva* as initially conceptualised by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966) in his influential essay '*Hindutva! Who is a Hindu?*' (1923) and the ideology has dynamically adapted itself to the decades that have followed. The *Rāṣṭra Sevikā Samiti* (National Women Volunteers Committee; Samiti) is the parallel

women's group that was founded in 1936 by Lakshmibai Kelkar (1905–1978). It is the oldest organisation affiliated to the RSS. The Samiti performs the same ideological functions as the RSS, but for women who are associated with Hindu nationalism in India.

The aim of the Hindu nationalist movement in India (as interpreted by the *Saṅgh Parivār*) is to restore the glory of the *Tejasvī Hindū Rāṣṭra* (glorious Hindu nation) before the impact of the Muslim and British colonial rulers, as delineated in the writings of its ideologues. The *Saṅgh Parivār* recruits new members through home-to-home meetings, member networks, in residential camps (15-day camps held annually in the summer, and other 2–3 day camps peppered throughout the year), in local temples and most importantly, local neighbourhood *śākhās* (meetings that are held daily/weekly, depending upon the membership). The format of the *śākhās* involves physical training (yoga, march-past, exercises and games) and *bauddhik* (intellectual/ideology) training. *Bauddhik* training involves storytelling, spiritual and religious advice and an explanation of a topic that has been pre-decided by the national *bauddhik* chief and implemented by the *bauddhik* chief of the district. The training models of the Samiti to induct new members and provide ideological training is similar to those of the RSS and other affiliate organisations. Regional and district chiefs work under the *bauddhik* chief are to follow the schedule. Many a times, *śākhā* in-charges consult Samiti books to elaborate on the topics given. Since the training model and externalities of the ideology of the *Saṅgh Parivār* are guided by the RSS, to understand the specificities of the role(s) expected of women in the Samiti and the larger *Hindutva* movement, the publications of the Samiti become an important source.

In 1953, *Sevikā Prakāśan*, the publication unit of the Samiti, began publishing booklets for women who wanted to know more about the Samiti and its founder, Lakshmibai Kelkar. The need to begin writing their own literature, the Samiti states, was due to the lack of 'national literature' and the comparative popularity of English literature. An introductory Samiti manual claims that after the Indian independence in 1947, there was very little material on traditional Hindu norms and scriptures. Keeping its goal of preserving traditional duties of 'Hindu womanhood', the Samiti reasoned, 'to spread

the message of the Samiti far and wide, there was a need for textual resources' (Sādh'nā Kar'tī Chaleṃ 2005: 35).¹ As the only resource for the written ideology of the Samiti, *Sevikā Prakāśan* books are sold during Samiti events and camps and are also distributed in local *śākhās* at the behest of members.² The pricing of the books is highly economical, ranging from rupees 20 to rupees 150 (20 cents to 1.50 euros). Seasoned Samiti members encourage new aspirant members to get to know more about the Samiti through these books.

The *Saṅgh Parivār* has outlined specific gendered roles for its members and the Samiti has attracted women who could contribute to the *Hindutva* movement of nation building. Without disrupting their duties as wives, mothers, daughters, and daughters-in-law, the Samiti provides a platform where women can discuss and ideate on the ideals that their male family members hold so dear and, in a way, make it their own. Both the ideological organisations, RSS and Samiti, have asserted the autonomy of the Samiti. While the hegemonic RSS vision outlines specific roles for women in the task of nation building, do RSS ideologues take any account of the Samiti's specific vision of the nation? Are women seen as more than just *sah'dharmiṇīs* (appendages to the patriotic men) and how are Samiti women redefining this term for their own brand of *Hindutva*?

The article examines major themes that emerge from the books published by *Sevikā Prakāśan* that are used by the Samiti to supplement the oral pedagogy during *bauddhik* classes, meetings and annual camps (*varg*). For this, three Samiti books, originally in Hindi, have been translated and will be contextualized within the larger Hindu-nationalist discourse. The books are: *Mṛtyumjāy: Ham Hiṃdū Haiṃ* (Lectures of Pramila Tai Apte – Second Sanchalika) (2003), *Hiṃdu Parivār Saṃkalpanā* (Vision for the Hindu Family) (2005) and *Sādh'nā Kar'tī Chaleṃ* (Keep Striving On) (2005). By using religious-

¹ The author has done all translations. Two of the Samiti books examined in this article have no author and will thus be referenced in the text with their title. In the bibliography, they are referenced beginning with 'No author'.

² I would like to point out in my experience in Delhi no Samiti publication was sold in RSS bookshops and during RSS stalls at book fairs. Samiti books were exclusively sold or are in stock at the *kāryālaya* (headquarters) or during Samiti camps.

ity as the main anchor of the gendered vision of the ideology, the article attempts to understand the complexity of situating agency of the Samiti within the larger vision of Hindu nationalism.

STORY OF THE SAMITI IN ITS OWN WORDS: PUBLICATION MATERIALS AND DISSEMINATION OF IDEOLOGY

The cover of *Sādh'nā Kar'tī Chaleṃ* (from hereon, SKC) is representative of the way the Samiti wishes to be perceived in the larger scheme of Hindutva. The *sevikās* are protecting the territorial boundary, which is a radical departure from the hegemonic *San̄gh* discourse that seeks to posit the Samiti as an organisation that works behind the scenes. Such a depiction is noteworthy because it counters male nationalist claims over the protection of *Bhārat Mātā* (Mother India).

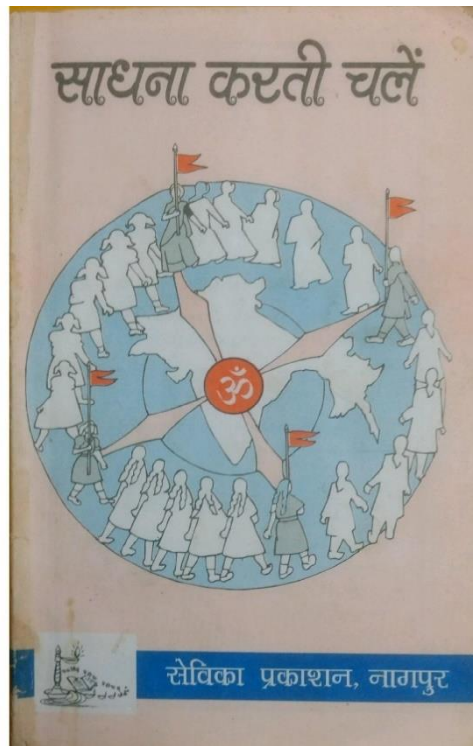


Fig. 1: Cover of *Sādh'nā Kar'tī Chaleṃ* (Keep Striving On), 2005.

The Samiti on its book cover sees the entire gamut of women, from young to old, as being an active part of the organisation and participating in its ideology. Though symbolically the Samiti seems to seek a departure from the traditional discourse of the Hindu nationalist vision (Golwalkar 1966), the focus in verbal communications remains on the reproductive years of women as those that need attention and moulding. Further, roles such as a young daughter or an old mother are recognised and seen as important shareholders in the cycle of being part of various aspects of the Samiti.³ The cover of the book is on a light saffron background. A large blue circle encompasses the map of *Akhaṇḍ Bhārat*, the undivided map of *Bhārat* or *Hindū Rāṣṭra* (Hindu nation) that includes Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal. Surrounding the map are figures that denote women. Four figures in the circle are grey in colour (a woman in a saree and one in a *qamīz-cūrīdār* (Indian tunic with trousers), a girl with pigtails and a girl with ponytails (both in frocks). The four figures are holding the *Bhag'vā Dhvaj* (the revered saffron flag of the movement; addressed as a *Guru Bhag'vā Dhvaj* (teacher)) and they are leading similarly framed figures in white – members of their own demographic group as denoted by their dress. There is an *Oṃ* symbol, slightly south of the map's centre. The *Oṃ* symbol is enclosed inside a saffron circle and is emanating lightening-shaped arrows towards the leading grey figures. Both insides of the cover have Samiti songs and prayers, which are performed as a part of the *śākhā* proceedings.

SKC was published in Nagpur, the headquarters of Samiti *Prakāśan* in November 2005 and is priced at 25 Rupees (25 cents). The book was conceptualised as a succinct introduction to the Samiti and its workings, and its front cover is telling in a lot of ways. The book's title translates into the mantra of the Samiti and directs *sevikās* to keep striving on their path to create a *Tejasvī Hindū Rāṣṭra*. The idea of *Akhaṇḍ Bhārat* is the crystallisation of the ultimate goal of Hindu nationalism. It stands for a geographical unit where the sub-continent is envisioned without present political boundaries. *Akhaṇḍ Bhārat*

³ I would like to point out here that while the focus of the discourses among the Sangh organisations are on young women that have possibilities for reproducing for the Hindu nation, the pre-pubescent and post-menopausal women are prized for their energy and wisdom, respectively. The older women are especially revered in *Bauddhik* approaches because of the value placed in age hierarchy within the organisation.

is a dream that is want of realisation of unification of parts of *Bhārat* (India) that include present-day Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Starting from Abanindranath Tagore's depiction of *Bhārat Mātā* in his painting to Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's poem 'Bande Mātaram' in his Bangla novel *Ānandmaṭh* (1882), the figure of *Bhārat Mātā* has predominantly been addressed through the male gaze – the trope of the goddess in need of protection from her virile sons (Kovacs 2004).⁴ Gupta writes, '*Bharat Mata* is not a distinct personality in her own right but a metaphor for a fixed, bounded space' (Gupta 2001: 4291). The 'fixed bounded space' is the *Akhaṇḍ Bhārat*, the territory embodying the spirituality of its populace en masse. While the Samiti discourse itself elaborates at length about the need of mothers to produce sons who would protect *Bhārat Mātā*, the image on the SKC cover could be read as the strategic point of divergence from the larger Hindu nationalist discourse that is structured around this patriarchal language. Further, the various ages of women depicted, from little girls in dresses to women in sarees, are all denoted to be carrying the Samiti mantle. This is indicative of the fact that leadership roles will emerge from common *sevikās*.

The divergence from the male Hindutva ideology is clearly present – that it is not only mothers who wish to be associated with the cause of establishing the *Tejasvī Hindū Rāṣṭra* – it is also young girls, young women and older women – all those demographics that receive no mention at all in the writings of the RSS ideologues. While the image on the cover denotes absolute equality and no sign of an ageist bias, the constant refrain in the Samiti discourse is about the recognition of the authority of older persons. In the Samiti texts discussed later on, it will be shown how age is leveraged because of assumed wisdom and experiences. Hierarchy based on age is thus established, and often goes unquestioned. Further, assigning of leadership positions is not as simple as just hierarchy – a very complex set-up is in place to ensure that only the loyal (which can be read as mainly upper-caste Hindus with an allegiance to the RSS) are holding the mantle.

⁴ Bacchetta (2005) has noted that the figure of *Bhārat Mātā* functions as a third relation between two *Svayamsevaks* (members of the RSS) to 'mediate their homosociality' (Bacchetta 2005: 138).

The aims of the organisation outlined in SKC are: to enable women with self-defence and independence by developing their intellectual and physical capabilities; to prepare them to protect their religion and culture; and lastly, to remind the women of *Bhārat* of their familial and national responsibilities (Sādh'nā Kar'tī Chaleṃ 2005: 1).⁵ According to the Samiti, women have to be inspired to reclaim their confidence 'despite external attacks like foreign education and a general disregard for responsibilities' (ibid.: 5). A recurring theme in the Samiti primers is the way the organisation describes itself as the sole women's group functioning in the society before Indian independence, and it makes a very clear demarcation between itself and other women's movements of the time. For this purpose, the booklet outlines the historical evolution of the Samiti, which will be described in the following subsection.

Founding of the organisation and initial years

Established in 1936, eleven years after the RSS on *Vijay Daś'mī* (*Daś'harā* day of the Hindu mythology), the Samiti was founded by 'vandanīya Mausiji' (revered aunt) Lakshmibai Kelkar (1905–1978). At the age of 31, Kelkar had founded an organisation specifically for Hindu women who were suffering at the hands of the (British) ruling powers and the society. The Samiti manual explains the reasons for the necessity of the organisation:

Patriotism as a responsibility was getting sidelined. There had been a decline in the status of the woman. Therefore, it is natural that the value system in the society will go down. There were some people in the society who began to work to re-awaken this aspect. It was at this time that vandanīya Lakshmibai Kelkar laid the founding stone for an all India women's organisation (Sādh'nā Kar'tī Chaleṃ 2005: 4).

The next section of the booklet introduces readers to the organizational structure of the Samiti. It lays emphasis on the site of the *śākhā* as the primary meeting place of the members. *Śākhās*, literally translated as branches

⁵ I would like to point out here that there is a slight apprehension here to use 'tradition' as a word that is replaceable to 'culture'. The politics of using culture/tradition arise from the organisation's roots in Hindu revivalist discourses that focused on reviving Hindu customs and traditions in consonance with the scriptures (Vedas, Upanishads etc). Mani (1989) voices the same concerns during the formation of the official discourse in the colonial era.

of a tree, are the smallest unit of training for the *Saṅgh* cadre. They are held daily and/or weekly, according to the needs of the demographic group. For example, a young boys' RSS *śākhā* might meet daily in the evening or morning, whereas, the married women's group might convene once a week. The booklet explains that it is here that *sevikās* develop their physical and intellectual abilities and 'obtain a confidence boost' (ibid.: 4). In the *śākhās* special emphasis is given to self-defence training.

Three years after it was established in Wardha, Maharashtra, the organisation had *śākhās* across Maharashtra. The first *pracārikā* (full-time celibate worker) was *Sindhutai* (*taī* = sister; Marathi) from Akola in Maharashtra, who began her work in 1938. The first core level meeting was held in Poona, where Kaku Paranjpe (an influential Samiti leader) was appointed the head of Nagpur region and Pramila Apte was appointed the head of Pune region. Apte later went on to become the second *pramukh samcālikā* (highest office held by a Samiti member) of the Samiti. By 1947, the Samiti claims to have had active *śākhās* in all parts of the country, with 240 places seeing daily *śākhās* and overall, 13,000 members in attendance (Sādhnā Kar'tī Chaleṃ 2005). The first full-fledged *varg* was held in Nasik in 1958.⁶

Women who relocated to other parts of India due to marriage established most of the *śākhās* outside Maharashtra. The first *śākhā* of this kind was set-up in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh in 1938, followed by *śākhās* in Delhi and Odisha. Marriage acquired and performed the purpose of mobility for the Samiti message and thus, has upturned the traditional understanding of marriage where the woman is bound by the home. Hence, the Samiti has utilised the space of the family to expand the presence of the organisation, and thereby it finds marriage liberating for its cause. The Samiti manual, when discussing its territorial spread (the years are not mentioned clearly), makes a special mention of states like Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar where they claim to have faced resistance and problems while convincing guardians to let their daughters join the Samiti or be part of the *śākhā*. A *sevikā* who surveyed Gujarat reported to the higher authorities that the local language

⁶ The *varg* camp is a site where large groups of women from different age groups and adjacent districts come together to learn about the Hindutva ideology. The camps held by the *Saṅgh* are usually held in Saraswati Shishu Mandirs or RSS schools. The longest camps are held in the summer months for the duration of 15–20 days. In the camp, the day is divided to include various forms of physical *śākhā* and ideology lessons.

needed to be used for the Samiti to gain ground. Hence, a similar strategy of learning the local language was applied in states like Karnataka (first *śākhā* in Belgaum, 1947), Kerala (around 1975), West Bengal (around 1970s; the manual cites the Naxal movement as a factor that deterred Samiti activity in the region).⁷

The Samiti booklet enlists that the organisation has since its inception established hostels, libraries (*vācanālays*), sewing centres, toy banks, teacher training centres, family counselling centres and vocational training centres. Mentioned in the books are four women's hostels in Thane, Nasik, Nagpur, and Dhule (Maharashtra) that are run by the Samiti. There are two hostels specifically mentioned in the text that house young women from the North-east region of India – in Nanded (Maharashtra) and Haflong (Assam) (Sādh'nā Kar'tī Chaleṃ 2005: 8).⁸

Śākhās, as Sen (2007) has shown, have become the feminine place outside of the home for Hindu nationalist women. By including physical education and yoga, the Samiti advocates for a self-dependent body that is resilient and does not need the protection of men thereby protecting their virtue.⁹

A fine balance? Erasure and assertion in the Samiti ideology

The figure of the Samiti founder, Lakshmibai Kelkar, is important to emphasize as her role corresponded with the need of a Hindu nationalist organisation that focused on traditional womanhood. Focusing on Kelkar's representation in Samiti and *Saṅgh* literature, there are two points that are worth dealing with. First, the RSS' founder, K. B. Hedgewar, is reverently referred to a 'Doctorjī'. Likewise, RSS members fondly remember Madhao Sadashiv Golwalkar as 'Gurujī' (revered teacher), as he taught biology at the Benaras Hindu University (Varanasi). Unlike the male ideologues who are addressed

⁷ The 'Left' and 'Right' aligned organisations in India have been at loggerheads with each other. While the Left organisations talk about the communal agenda of the Right, the Right is especially distrustful of any social movements (such as Naxalism as invoked above, for example) that arise inspired by the ideology of the Left.

⁸ RSS' Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), the wing that deals with tribal affairs mentions the presence of the Haflong hostel to counter 'the threat of conversion', along with hostels in Shillong and Imphal (Sādh'nā Kar'tī Chaleṃ 2005).

⁹ 'Virtue' is a desired nationalist value.

in ways that retain a separate identity as scholars and teachers, Kelkar is circumscribed within the kinship framework as *Mausījī*, the mother's sister. 'Mausī', literally translated from Hindi, is understood as mother-like ('ma-sī' – like a mother). What is worth noting is that Kelkar's position, as the founder of the organisation does not automatically make her the mother figure of the Samiti. Instead, she is conveniently, maybe even strategically, given a place subservient to the mother figure of Hindu nationalist imagination, *Bhārat Mātā*. Thus, the overall Hindu nationalist subservience to the *Bhārat Mātā* image is retained. In this manner, the reverence for Kelkar does not threaten the overall hegemonic discourse of *Bhārat Mātā* for Hindutva men and women. It also allows the figure of the aunt to become a facilitator of Hindutva women, rather than the symbolic creator of women's Hindutva. Thus, while Kelkar as an aunt will nourish and raise the children of the celibate mother *Bhārat Mātā*, she will not be given the position of the mother and is conveniently retained within the kinship bounds of the imagined Hindu nation.

Secondly, Kelkar founded the organisation at the age of 31. Curiously, Kelkar has always been presented as an old woman (in pictures and text) – a matronly figure that organised the younger, often directionless women around her, according to the Samiti texts.¹⁰ Remembering Kelkar as an old woman and devoid of any form of sexuality, does serve the same purpose as imagining *Bhārat Mātā* as celibate. There is very little in these introductory texts that account for her struggles as a woman who negotiated her roles as a mother and a young woman without a partner.¹¹ Instead, she is presented in a patriotic framework and Kelkar as an old woman becomes a role model for women around her. In a male Hindu nationalist framework that seems to only value women for their labour and reproductive roles, it is thus poignant that we can imagine Kelkar as a once-married, now-old woman, fulfilling her familial duties so silently, to the point of erasure. But by keeping patriotism

¹⁰ Kelkar's succinct biography *Life Sketch of Vandaneeya Mausiji* (1996) notes that Kelkar was married at the age of 14 and became a stepmother to two young girls as soon as she was married. She was widowed at the age of 27 (Rai 1996).

¹¹ There are other offerings from the organisation that detail a longer life journey of the founder. For example, see 'Life Sketch of Vandaneeya Mausiji Smt. Lakshmi Bai Kelkar: Founder & Adya Pramukh Sanchalika of Rashtra Sevika Samiti' by Rajani Rai (Sanghamitra Seva Pratishthan, Sevika Prakashan, Nagpur 1996 (second edition 2012)).

at the heart of her story, the Samiti moves away from the traditional Hindu nationalist discourse and gives place to women who single-handedly imagine a nationalist ideology from within the household.

Who constitutes Bhārat: the ideal Hindu Family

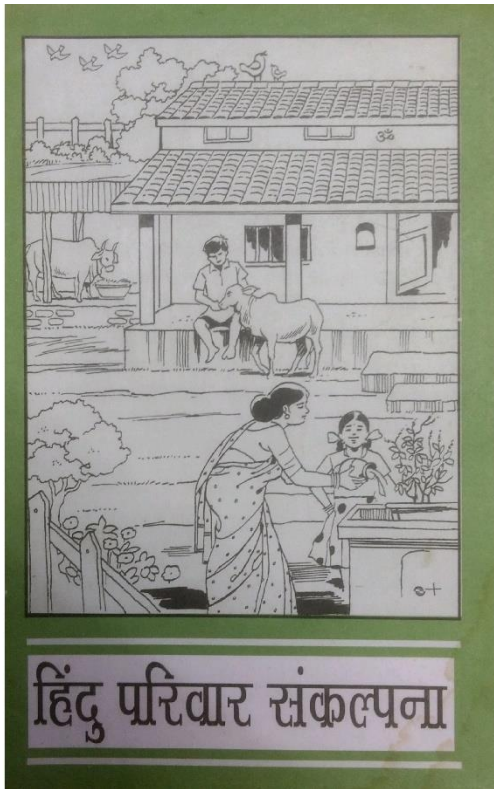


Fig. 2: Cover of *Hindu Parivār Saṃkalpanā* (Vision for the Hindu Family), 2005.

Another important Samiti publication is *Hindu Parivār Saṃkalpanā* (Pledging for a Hindu Family, HPS) (2005), which is a text that discusses the foundational aspect of the Hindu nation – the family. The book cover image depicts a humble *pakkā* structure (building made of brick) within a fenced boundary. There is a prominent *Om* symbol on the side of the house that is facing the viewer. There are birds, trees, plants, and two cows. The first cow is eating hay in its shed and the other is playing with the young boy who is feeding grass to it. The boy, wearing shorts and a collared shirt, is shown sitting on a raised platform of the house. An older woman, presumably the

mother, wearing a saree is watering a plant, which might be holy basil or *tulsī*, a plant that is revered among Hindus. A girl is standing next to her. Wearing a blouse and skirt, her hair is neatly tied in two ponytails.

The cover describes the ideal setup of a Hindu home, as imagined by the Samiti. A fertile cow that supplies milk is imperative for the economy of the home. Cows also assume significance as their presence symbolises prosperity. The house is a modest structure and the family remains within the confines of the fence.¹² Assuming the fence represents the *lakṣmaṇ rekhā* or the inviolable boundary of tradition, the mother is diligently performing her duties of preserving the Hindu traditions while the daughter looks on.¹³ The daughter, it is implied, will learn from the mother how to build and maintain her own home in the future. The man of the house, the father, is undoubtedly outside the sphere of the home, working for his family and the nation, and his omnipresence can be inferred through the order of the home, thereby allocating the public sphere to the father (male) and the private sphere to the mother (female). The book contains a description of the utopian family that is worth quoting at length:

This is a description of an Indian home. It is here that the child bathes in the tender love of the mother. He learns to walk with his father. He finds heaven-like bliss in the arms of his grandmother (paternal). In the stories that are told to him by his grandfather, he is invigorated by the stories of valour from the nation's history. It is in the family that the child develops affection for his parents, a sacrificial nature, the ability to serve without a bias and the feeling of kinship. A family provides a feeling of security and it is this security that is the endearing uniqueness of Bharat (Hindu Parivār Saṃkalpanā 2005: 3).

¹² It should be noted here that the members of the RSS and Samiti take pride in a modest and austere way of living, which is true for many members I encountered. Modest living is a virtue that is prized in both organisations and is a way that the members gain respect among communities that they work with. Living with moderate means also allows for the selfless service aspect of the membership, with ideal members not deriving any personal gains from the association.

¹³ *Lakṣmaṇ rekhā* is a metaphor that comes from Tulsidas' epic *Rām'carit'mānas*. In some of the folklore and myths around the Ramayana, while in exile, Laxman would draw a safety line of sorts around the home that he shared with his brother Ram and sister-in-law, Sita. The line acted as a protective boundary, beyond which Sita would be exposed to all types of dangers, lest she toe the line. It is interesting to note that the reason why Sita had to toe the line was to give alms to a Sadhu (Ravana, the disguised Demon King of Lanka), who abducted her when she went beyond the protection of the boundary. The *lakṣmaṇ rekhā* is used as a metaphor to warn people (especially women and girls) against transgression of any kind.

The pronoun used in the description to refer to the child is male – reinforcing the belief that the young, pre-pubescent girl is perhaps not a category that is under the purview of Hindutva.¹⁴ The girl only becomes relevant when she enters the realm of fertility and is at the risk of an unapproved union that would not be conducive to the cause of the *Hindū Rāṣṭra*.¹⁵ Crucial here is also the recognition that family is a socialisation unit that fosters development of certain characteristics that are conducive to the maintaining of the structures of the family and the nation. The above quote stresses the importance of socialisation into the correct role(s) for the nation, where adopting the child into the larger society through the route of the family is important. '[Family as a structure, A.T.] is a system that has been perfected by our ancestors and now finds itself under decline. It is a grave matter of concern for the entire world', writes the Samiti in *Himḍu Parivār Saṃkalpanā* (2005: 1). HPS aims to provide the picture of an ideal family set-up and hopes to revive the practice again. Hence, while there is a 'brotherhood of saffron' (Anderson & Damle 1987) and there is also a network of *sevikās* working together as a Hindutva family for the nation, the prime aim is the maintenance and sustenance of the smallest unit of the nation – the family, as mentioned in the book, 'family is the essence of the nation' (*Himḍu Parivār Saṃkalpanā* 2005: 3).

The text valorises the kinship set-up and subsequently laments the clash between family and modernity. The importance of kinship networks can be illustrated from the introduction to the section on marriage. HPS notes that marriage alliances of a 'bygone age' (*pahle samay*) required knowledge of the genealogy of seven generations of family members. In fact, the Samiti gives a very clear definition of what makes a family/home: 'A family consists of the people, relatives, friends, plants and animals who live in the home' (*ibid.*: 3).

¹⁴ This inference is being derived from the description written in Hindi in the original text. The original text uses the male-female forms of address towards *baccā* (male) and not, *baccī* (female). The entire description only refers to the male child and never to the female or plural (*bacce*).

¹⁵ See the next section for substantiation.

Motherhood and Family: Crux of the Hindu nation

If a nation of true mothers can be built, the true sons will abound in every household –
Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (Sarkar 2001: 258)

As mentioned in the introduction, the Samiti regards the institution of the family as the crux of its project. Within the family, motherhood is considered the most powerful role in influencing the developmental direction of the Hindu nation. The Samiti evokes three Hindu women from history as an aspirational ideal for its members to embody, each representing a specific quality required of a *sevikā*: *māṭṛtva*, *ḥṛtatva* and *netṛtva* (maternal duties, work ethics, and leadership, respectively). To illustrate the qualities they seek for *māṭṛtva*, ideal maternal duties, the *sevikās* look to *Rāṣṭramātā* (mother of the nation), Jijabai Bhonsle (1598–1674), the mother of Shivaji Bhonsle (1627/1630–1680; popularly addressed by the royal title king or ‘Chhatrapati’ Shivaji), ruler of the Maratha Kingdom from 1674–1680. For her work ethic and crystallizing the ideas of *ḥṛtatva*, the Samiti idolises Queen Ahilyabai Holkar (1725–1795) from the Holkar dynasty (1731–1948), who ruled the Malwa region from 1767–1795. The Samiti asserts that Ahilyabai, despite her status as a widow, ruled the kingdom both administratively and militarily. Similarly, for her fight against the British the Samiti regards Lakshmbai Newalkar (1828–1858), queen of Jhansi (popularly called *Rani* of Jhansi or *Rani* Lakshmbībāī), as an inspiring leader and the one embodying exemplary *netṛtva*.

Like the RSS, the Samiti upholds the iconic influence of king Shivaji to create a glorious Hindu nation. But the Samiti does so by always mentioning him as an ideal son who internalised the teachings of his mother and thus, transferring agency and vision of the ideal Hindu nation (as envisioned by Savarkar for Shivaji) to Jijabai. By referring to Jijabai as the mother of the nation (*Rāṣṭramātā*, not *Bhārat Mātā*), which makes Shivaji the ideal son of the nation, the Samiti envisions a very distinct identity for the nation. In its vision, it would be the woman in the form of the mother who will first and foremost, inspire her son to devote his life to the nation. She would perform multiple roles as the inspiring, nurturing force, and it is through motherhood that she would bring her own vision into action. By endowing within herself the power to positively manipulate her child’s devotion to herself for the bigger cause

of the nation, the Samiti reclaims and magnifies the 'mother's role' in the project of Hindutva nation building.

I see this as a way of re-claiming the influence of motherhood as a strategic intervention of the Samiti ideology that cuts at the heart of Hindutva ideas on subservient motherhood. Motherhood, as shown from the example, is the key role through which Samiti women seek to make an active intervention and contribution to the task of building their own vision of the nation based on Hindutva ideals. In the Samiti schema (and the larger *Saṅgh* ideas), the woman performs the role of the 'moral mother' (Chodorow 1978: 5) – as a facilitator-nurturer to the children and unstinting support to the husband. But differing from the RSS ideology, in the Samiti ideology, the mother in the family provides an additional function of socialising the entire unit of the family into the Hindutva ideology.

The Hindu way of life

Due to the incomplete understanding of religion, secularism is on the rise and the Hindu way of life is being posited as regressive, anti-women and unjust [...]
(Āpte 2003: 2).

In opposition to the lack of familial networks that are attributed to 'western cultures', there is the *Hindutva* theorisation of the 'Hindu way of life' – the way of living among Hindu society that upholds tradition and enters in a symbiotic relationship with nature. A specific organisation of society, the family, and the nation constitutes the 'Hindu way of life', since all the elements of nature and culture are working together to realise the dream of the glorious Hindu nation. It is a significant parameter that controls and guides the Samiti's, as well as the Hindu nationalist activities in India. In the book that contains a collection of her speeches, Pramila Apte, the second *pramukh saṃcālikā* draws a link between the Hindu society, nationhood, and nature. She writes: 'The Hindu way of life has the ability to accept everything as its own. *Jāti* (sub-castes), different groups, language, geography transcend to give way to a feeling of affection and sacrifice' (Āpte 2003: 41). One of the characteristics that emerges regarding the 'Hindu way of life' is the symbiotic way of living with one's surroundings. Therefore, nature and society are in perfect harmony with the individual. In her speech at the 'Africa Varg' in Durban, South Africa (2002), Apte suggests that all the problems

that plague the world today have only one solution: adherence to the Hindu way of life. Referring to it as the *rāmbāṇ* (the arrow from the bow of Lord Ram, synonymous with the panacea), there is an implication that the complexities of current issues give way to a simple solution – what emerges from the discourse around the ‘Hindu way of life’ for our argument is the direct connection made between the discourse and women. And this is where the Samiti borrows from the revivalist movement and adds to the homilies on women glorified in Hindu society.

Sarkar (2001) maintains that the coinage of the authentic ‘Hindu way of life’ was formulated during the colonial era. The ‘Hindu way of life’ was located in the space that was protected from the ‘imposed modernity’ and was ‘inviolable and autonomous’ (ibid.: 36). Thus, the traditions that were being practiced away from the colonial eye, in the private sphere came to represent the ‘Hindu way of life’. For example, Apte blames colonial incursion for the unequal status of women, something that was hitherto absent in the ‘Hindu way of life’ (Āpṭe 2003). She notes in her keynote speech at a national camp in Bhopal (year not mentioned),

In the Hindu view of life, men and women are not thought of in different contexts [...]. Unfortunately; there is a lot of despair, sadness and misunderstanding about the Indian way of life. We are lost because we are looking at this culture through the Western lens. If women throw away this lens, the way of life will become much clearer (ibid.: 2).

Further she says, ‘A nation’s strength lies in its values and character. On it lies the foundation of the nation. A woman with ideal qualities becomes an inspiration to such a society [...]. Respect of such a woman is the Hindu view of life’ (ibid.: 3). Thus, the Samiti envisions that it is women who preserve the domestic sphere in a way that is in line with Hindutva ideals, and thereby maintain and propagate the Hindu view of life.

Love's labour lost: Women and housework in the home

The homemaker (Grahini) is understood to be the home... The character of the homemaker reflects the character and atmosphere of the home. (Hiṃḍu Parivār Saṃkalpanā 2005: 5).

A family that has one source of income is the most prosperous (ibid.: 21).

The seat of socialisation into the patriotic *Hindutva* set-up is the family/household, and the Samiti places the entire onus on the Hindu woman to make use of the familial setup in the service of the nation. Consequently, it claims that it is the lack of the family system that has created nations which 'despite their intellectual prowess, lack in inner peace' (Sādh'nā Kar'tī Chaleṃ 2005: 3). In *Bhārat* (as opposed to India),¹⁶ on the other hand, the Samiti claims, the system of the family is still intact, in spite of aggression against it. As the quotes above illustrate, the foundation of the Indian family in *Bhārat* is the homemaker. For the Samiti, the woman represents the home and the home represents the family, and as shown earlier, the family is the smallest and most essential unit of the nation. Therefore, for women, performing ideal wife and motherhood is performing the nation. The Samiti's ideology asserts that it is the woman who internalises and then spreads the *saṃskārs* (values) among the members of the household. 'She is the epitome of creation and security. She has the Saraswati, Durga and Lakshmi in her' (ibid.: 3). Borrowing from the religious aspect of *Hindutva*, the Samiti seamlessly merges the scriptures and myths to imagine the desirable qualities in the *se-vikā*. Physical training is justified with the myths of Hindu gods and goddesses' resorting to violence when under external attack. SKC quotes:

The Hindu way of life is very diverse. We learn self-protection not to attack but to protect ourselves. This is the reason that our Gods are adept in using their hands to impart blessings as well as defense. Protection of the

¹⁶ In Sangh narratives (verbal and textual), there is a difference in the usage of *Bhārat* (the Hindi name of the subcontinent) and India, a name that is not claimed and used as often by the organisation. *Bhārat* could denote the undivided subcontinent, the imagined pristine land before its corruption by foreign invaders and to differentiate the values between a 'Hindu' *Bhārat* and a secular India.

saints and punishment of evil is the message given in [the] Gita (ibid.: 4).

Thus, the need emerges for an organisation like the Samiti, which sees itself as empowering women in the direction of leading a household towards the realisation of a *Hindū Rāṣṭra*. Therefore, as indicated by the quote from the text, the Samiti works to revive the sense of responsibilities that would contribute to restoring India's glory from the private sphere. Thereby, the goals of the Samiti are clearly laid out: 'women had to be prepared physically, mentally, and intellectually, be made independent and united' (ibid.: 5). Samiti, thus, locates the homemaker (gṛhiṇī; denotes necessarily a woman) at the heart of the *Hindutva* nation and therein lies her agency. Palriwala writes that the household is not just the space for 'co-residence, consumption, and reproduction' (Palriwala 1990: 15) but also an economic and productive unit. And the Samiti lays claim to the domain of the household as the site that would enable the most radical change in their vision of *Hindutva*. The site of the family thus becomes the site for the appropriation of gendered nationalist dreams of the Samiti women, the degree of influence of which is much more than what the larger hegemonic RSS ideology can give it credit for.

The private is political: The Indian women's movement, the Samiti, and elements of the ideal nation

The position of women in the West was always lacking. That is why they needed to fight for their rights (Āpte 2003: 5).

The Samiti's view of marital connections sheds light on the women's role in relationship and how to make marriage a function of the larger *Hindutva* aspiration. The husband and wife are treated as one single unit, performing different functions for the *Hindū Rāṣṭra*. 'The couple should not have individual aspirations – they are inseparable' (ibid.: 14). Since for the Samiti, the largest potentialities of power and agency lie in each member's assigned role in the family, the *Hindutva* nation has always been imagined as a family, with the role of the parents being paramount. Since the project of the nation is heavily dependent on socialisation in the home, the Samiti sees the importance of the domestic sphere within the larger unit of the family as being imperative to the process of nation building. A woman, without her family,

cannot contribute fully to the cause of the nation. This lies at odds with certain parts of the women's movement, especially those aligning with feminist ideologies, which locate the root of subjugation of women in the structure of the family. This brings me to discuss an aspect that I raised earlier about the Samiti's discord with the Indian women's movement.

In a section called 'Gaṅgotrī' (in *Sādh'nā Kar'tī Chaleṃ*), the Samiti claims to be the unifying force that brought various groups of women in 'Wardha, Bhandara, Satara, Pune' together during the freedom struggle, a claim to illustrate the Samiti's presence and contribution to the Indian independence movement. At the present moment, the Samiti sees itself fulfilling a role that women's groups have fought for for years, at the same time it seeks to position itself outside of other women's movements. In *Mṛtyuṃjay: Ham Himḍū Haiṃ*, Apte raises the issue during a speech at the *Viśva Vibhāg Samiti Śikṣā Varg* in 2002. She asserts,

The process of becoming pro-Hindutva [...] needs to be starting in the home. That is why an organised women's group is important. The groups asking only for women's liberation and the rights are merely causing discord in the society. Samiti is not pro-women. We don't want women empowerment at the cost of a power struggle (Āpte 2003: 38).

Similar assertions of difference to feminism are also made in other instances. In *Vasum̄dharā Parivār Hamārā* (Our earth's family), Apte makes a statement portraying feminism as antithetical to 'the Indian way of life' (ibid.: xx). According to Apte, the way of life is based on the feeling of *Vasudeva Kuṭumb* (world being one family) and Hinduism as having the ability to accept everyone as their own. According to her, feminism implies protest and demands radical change, which the Samiti styles as selfish. As stated earlier, the women's movement and the Hindu nationalist women have found it very difficult to find some overlapping issues. Banerjee has observed that there is an overarching strain between the Hindu nationalist women's groups and the feminist movement in India, because of the former's involvement in the masculine Hindu nationalist discourse, a tension between 'feminine nationalist activism and feminist nationalism' (Banerjee 2005: 17). Bachhetta (2004) has pointed to the divisions between the Indian feminist movement and the Samiti, and throughout the Samiti primers significant portions address this

issue. One of the main topics of contention is ‘family’. While various fractions of the Indian women’s movement sought to democratize the family through legal intervention, and demand equal access for women to the public sphere, the Samiti sees the traditional family as an enabling instrument that guarantees women’s claims of power in the domestic sphere. Motherhood is seen as a role that has the potential to bring about positive change (also noted by Shaheed 1999), and the Samiti goes beyond the vision of the RSS by imagining motherhood as a site of active mobilization. The prominent thought that emerges in the Samiti texts is of a universal family. At various places in the text, the family is not just the residents of the home – the idea is to transcend external boundaries and accept everyone as one’s own (Sādh'nā Kar'tī Chaleṃ 2005: 5). This idea, on the face of it, might seem to resonate with universalist ideas of compassion and love. It is even reminiscent of the RSS motto of *Vasudeva Kuṭumb* or the world is my home. But there is a stark difference in the former ideas and the vision of the Hindu nationalist ideologies. Family becomes the site where there is ‘no space for egotistical tendencies’ (ibid). Hence, a familial pursuit of the nation will be given priority over an individual’s pursuit of subjectivity or subjective truth. Therefore, housework and labour do not form part of the framework because they are just part of the larger project of nation building. Hence, the fractions of the Indian women’s movement that demand better working conditions and access to and in public sphere, are seen as a digression from the task of nation building.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to provide a comprehensive view of the ideology of the *Rāṣṭra Sevikā Samiti* and the way it finds implementation in textual sources, which would be later used as pedagogic tools. While language becomes a means of access, most material is directed at women and young women who lean towards traditional Hindu ideas of womanhood. A sense of the family is given a priority over personhood; a sense of one’s immediate community is given less prominence over the imagined idea of *Akhaṇḍ Bhārat* and finally, being an active mobiliser of women in the Hindu nationalist movement is preferable to overtly fighting and destabilizing gender norms. Among the themes that emerged from the analysis of the primers, a

common factor was the way they inextricably linked religion, virtuous womanhood, nationhood and motherhood to one another: womanhood finds its ideal realisation when the nation finds its voice in the value system provided by the mother – the value system being based completely on Hindu rituals and norms.

By linking patriotism to religion and responsibility, the Samiti combines the gamut of ideal values and duties that a *sevikā* needs to embody, which ultimately leads to her serving the *Hindū Rāṣṭra*. Mothers, due to their position as influencers, become the custodians of *Hindutva* in the home. Some values one is born into while others need to be inculcated. The Samiti believes that the values required for an ideal Hindu nation will be transmitted only through the community and when everyone aspires to embody the gendered prescribed values (in the case of the Samiti: *māṭṛtva*, *kṛtatva* and *netṛtva*). These values need to be created and imagined – through fables and stories. This is where Samiti finds its role – through the creation of literature, various cultural programmes, intellectual discussions, and services that promote these ideals. The Samiti books analysed in this paper are peppered with examples from myth and reality to illustrate the desired qualities of the ideal *sevikā*. To begin with, the ideal *sevikā* is someone who is proficient in taking care of the home and, hence, is the ideal *gṛhiṇī*. In the private sphere the male figurehead remains the head of the household. Yet she is to be the force that keeps it conducive to the progression of the Hindu nationalist thought.

There are the tensions that make this project's conclusion a little difficult to resolve. At the first impression, one can dismiss women's presence in the Hindu nationalist discourses as an internalisation of the patriarchy inherent within this discourse, but women's participation in nationalist discourses establish more complex reasons for joining. While the Hindu nationalist consciousness attributes spirituality to women, Samiti discourses show that women have developed their own version of religiosity. They have made claims over their roles as *sah'dharminīs* of their partners and are now appropriating that to gain mobility and status in the public sphere. According to Kristeva nationalist frameworks 'reduce women to the identification needs of their originary groups, imprisoning them in impregnable aloofness of a weird primal paradise: family, ethnicity, nation, and race' (Kristeva 1993 in Menon 1999:

31). On the other hand, Sen has theoretically identified how women within masculine nationalist frameworks express their ideology: first, as ‘permissive’, where they offer their support from the ‘margins’ by performing duties that are considered supportive and secondary. Secondly, they express it as ‘active agency’ by staging overt displays of allegiance to the ideology (Sen 2007: 3). In the case of the Samiti, we see an exhibition of both types of agency. Through its texts, the Samiti establishes its own identity (separate from the RSS and the larger *Sangh Parivār*). Sarkar writes, ‘[Samiti] supplements Sangh’s activity as a householder’, through schools, *śākhās*, and ideology classes, by emphasizing the active role of the mother ‘a related but subordinated’ position (Sarkar 1991: 2059). She further notes, ‘Much of the Samiti’s activity is then informal and directed at constructing an ideal, totalitarian RSS family’ (ibid.: 2061). And thus, the agency of the organisation is realized through the analysis of the Samiti texts and its ideological interventions to assert women’s role in the Hindu nationalist ideology. To empirically show how this agency translates on field is difficult but would help enable an understanding of how the ideology finds its place in the hegemonic Hindu nationalist framework.

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