

## Building a 'Hindu Rashtra' through 'Seva'

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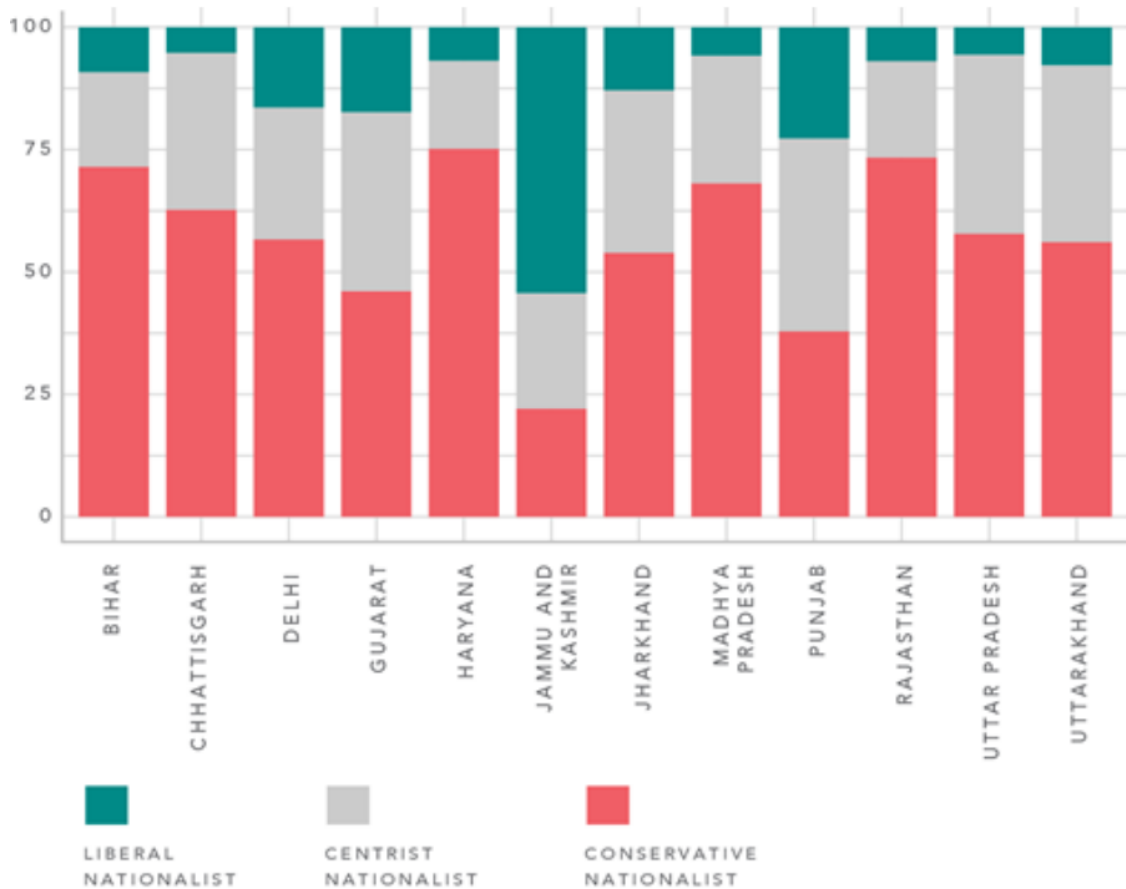
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*With the spectacular victory of Bharatiya Janata Party in India, the notion of Hindutva and Hindu nationalism have gained support. Malini Bhattacharjee explores the cultural appeal of the category of "seva" (service), one of the foundational pillars of the Hindu nationalist movement, and demonstrates how the political construction of seva, both as an idea and in practice, has advanced the entrenchment of Hindutva in contemporary India.*

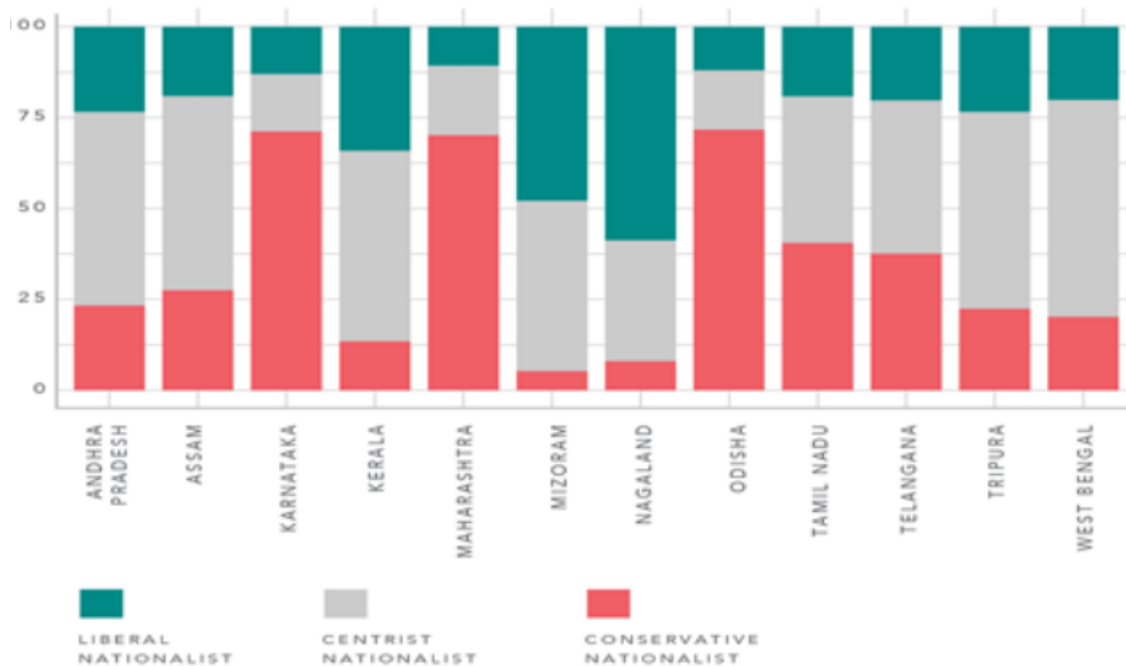
The traditional dichotomy envisaged between "religion" and "nation" in the Western discourse of modernity has by now been flattened. A quick overview of religious nationalisms across different continents reveals that not only is religion capable of inhabiting modern nation states but is also comfortable thriving within a secular democratic framework. India provides an interesting case analysis as Hindu nationalism too seems to have acquired a huge momentum since the past two decades, in a nation state that has been largely democratic and secular. A recently conducted three-part survey titled, "Politics and Society between Elections" (PSBE)<sup>1</sup> revealed that respondents from more than 50% of the 23 states and the National Capital Region of Delhi displayed a conservative nationalist position. As Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate, religious and majoritarian nationalism is a reality in India.

Figure 1: Statewise Survey Responses on Liberal, Centrist, and Conservative Nationalist Positions



Source: Swaminathan Siddharth and Suhas Palshikar, Politics and Society Between Elections: Public Opinion in India's States (Routledge, Forthcoming). The author is thankful to Asha Venugopalan for the graph.

Figure 2: Statewise Survey Responses on Liberal, Centrist, and Conservative Nationalist positions



Source: Swaminathan Siddharth and Suhas Palshikar, *Politics and Society Between Elections: Public Opinion in India's States* (Routledge, Forthcoming). The author is thankful to Asha Venugopalan for the graph.

If this had not already become evident, with the spectacular victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party in the 2014 and 2019 general elections under the leadership of Narendra Modi; in the social realm, growing scepticism with regard to the relevance of categories like "secularism" and "liberalism," the enormous popularity of Hindu spiritual gurus and yoga, and the growing clamour for building a Ram Temple at Ayodhya also reiterate the growing popularity of Hindu nationalism. Discourses do not become popular overnight, they are built assiduously through years of dedicated endeavour. Electoral victories aside, how has Hindutva made forays into the cultural and social imaginations of people at large? What kinds of religious and cultural idioms is it constantly resurrecting and valorising and what is the impact of their deployment in the public space? In this article, I interrogate the cultural appeal of the category of "seva" (service), one of the foundational pillars of the Hindu nationalist movement, and demonstrate how the political construction of "seva," both as an idea and in practice, has advanced the entrenchment of Hindutva in contemporary India.

## The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and 'Seva'

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), popularly known as the Sangh, is the parent organisation of the Sangh Parivar (family of organisations) which refers to the range of

organisations that represents the Hindu nationalist orientation in modern India. A reading of the RSS's history reveals that since its establishment in 1925, a foundational pillar of the organisation has been the provision of "seva" during natural and political calamities. In the early years, for instance, RSS swayamsevaks (volunteers) were involved in large-scale relief work during the Partition of India in 1947, the Assam Earthquake of 1950, the Punjab Floods in 1955, the Tamil Nadu cyclone in 1955, and the Anjar earthquake in 1956. This tradition of providing relief during times of crisis has continued and has also been evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participation in relief and rehabilitation activities have not only helped create a compassionate image for the RSS, but also provided it with opportunities to undertake cadre building, consolidate its organisational network, and even penetrate those regions where it had no traditional support base.

In 1948, the Sangh faced a major setback when it was banned for the first time following the assassination of M K Gandhi by an ex-RSS member. Soon after the ban was lifted in 1949, M S Golwalkar, the second sarsanghchhalak of the RSS, sought to salvage the respectability of the organisation by strengthening its "seva" activities (Hansen 1999: 96). Golwalkar and, in subsequent years, his successor, Balasaheb Deoras, commissioned a series of affiliates known as matrosansthas or vivedhakkshatras—namely Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Vidya Bharati, Bharati Vikas Parishad and Rashtriya Sevika Samiti—which initiated several thousands of institutionalised service activities. In subsequent years, other service organisations that came within the ambit of the Parivar include Arogya Bharati, National Medicos Organisation (NMO), Deendayal Shodh Sansthan (Chitrakoot), and Vivekananda Kendra. United by the single agenda of building a strong "Hindu rashtra," all of these organisations undertake a broad spectrum of humanitarian activities, particularly in the realm of education and health (for marginalised groups like Dalits and Adivasis) with the strategic aim of creating an omnibus of Hindu unity and weaning them away from Christian missionary influence. Since the 1980s, international affiliates of the RSS and VHP such as the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, Sewa International and the international chapters of VHP too have deployed "seva" in order to mobilise the Hindu diaspora.

The RSS today boasts of a variety of humanitarian activities across the country, ranging from women's self-help groups, micro enterprises, milk cooperatives, forest conservation projects, eye banks, bird sanctuaries, ashrams for the homeless, computer-aided learning centres, organisations for persons with physical disabilities, rural technology centres, vocational training programmes, veterinary welfare and campaigns for the awareness of drug abuse.<sup>2</sup> In addition to providing services, these organisations are deeply concerned with the infusion of "Hindu awareness and national discipline" (Jaffrelot 2005: 216), an ethic that binds them to the common umbilical cord of the RSS and helps in achieving the broader political goals of the Parivar through an apolitical framework.

A few studies (Dyahadroy 2009; Reddy 2011; Thachil 2016; Bordia 2015) that have specifically focused on the "seva" activities of the RSS have examined these from a purely

instrumental perspective and argue that "seva" is nothing more than a political strategy to further the project of Hindutva. While my own research also validates the instrumental motivations for deploying "seva," I also ask the following questions: What makes the specific category of "seva" so strangely powerful? What does the invocation of "seva" do to common people, both recipients and donors? In light of the criticisms levelled against the Sangh Parivar, as being advocates of an irrational nativism, I seek to understand if the category of "seva" is merely irrational, paternalistic and morally vacuous or does it possess a cultural currency? (Bhattacharjee 2019: 4) How does one, to use Mbembe's (Spivak 2007) phrase, "restitute intelligibility" to "seva"? I argue that to derecognise the realm of the "non-secular" and "non-rational" as intelligible sources that influence public life is to do great disservice towards building a more nuanced understanding of conservative movements (Bhattacharjee 2019).

## Constructing a Distinct Brand of 'Seva'

The institution of "seva" is fairly old in the Hindu tradition and broadly denotes "selfless service;" "seva" could be directed towards society, an individual, one's parents, towards god or towards one's guru (Warrier 2003: 265). It acquired a variety of forms and orientations in specific historical moments and was driven by religious, moral and material motivations. During the Bhakti movement in the medieval period, "seva" referred to the practice of giving time and offering menial duties for the maintenance of temple deities (Juergensmeyer and McMahan 1998: 267). During the colonial period, owing to an encounter with Christian missionary welfare activities, "seva" was transformed from an individualised and personal act to an act of secular public welfare. "Seva" as "organised service" received a further fillip under the spiritual leadership of Swami Vivekananda and then acquired renewed traction when Gandhi advocated "seva" as a means for achieving purna swaraj (or complete independence). However, as Maya Warrier reminds us (2005: 59), despite its myriad manifestations, in its "ideal type," "seva" is quintessentially an act that is performed "impersonally and selflessly" without any expectations of "reciprocity, reward, protection or patronage." It is this spontaneous impulsive idea of "seva," as opposed to more legal rational forms of giving, that pervades the moral imagination of the common people. The RSS's construction of "seva" builds on this capacious larger-than-life understanding of "seva" that is distinct from other (more "inferior") forms of giving.

In 1954, M S Golwalkar declared in a speech delivered to a gathering of 300 pracharaks that the philosophy of "positive Hinduism" emphasises on duty towards the community rather than the idea of self-aggrandisement, which was based on Western principles of individualism and materialism (Andersen and Damle 1987: 111). Similarly, Eknath Ranade (2011: 89-95), the founder of Vivekananda Kendra, mentions that the vocabulary of "seva sangathan" is devoid of pratifa ("reciprocity"). Drawing from Vivekananda, he argues that in rendering "seva," it is not the recipient but the donor who gains spiritual contentment. Shyam Parande (coordinator of Sewa International) suggests that that "seva has no equivalent word in English just as there is no equivalent word for Dharma and Karma" and

that is the fulfilment of Samaj Runa (or debt to one's society) (HSS nd).

The political construction of "seva," as being "superior" to other kinds of giving, is a manifestation of the Sangh Parivar's resistance to Western (largely Christian) dominant knowledge systems, which are expressed through categories like "charity" and "philanthropy." For the Sangh, the vocabulary of "seva" is an assertion of Indian (Hindu) values that contribute to its larger rhetoric of Hindutva. Postcolonial scholars have legitimately argued that this celebration of indigeneity is essentially trapped within the orientalist framework that was a gift of colonialism. However, by underlining "seva" as an "indigenous" institution, the Sangh allows for an ontological shift with regard to its perception as a superior form of ("selfless") giving in the imagination of common people. The "Indianness" of "seva" makes it extremely attractive, especially to donors who are convinced that this is a morally superior form of giving.

While analysing the institution of "seva" in the Sangh, one frequently encounters instances of service provided to non-Hindus and expressions of gratitude recorded from non-Hindu recipients of service. A report in the *Organiser* (1996: 11), for instance, recounts a story about how *swayamsevaks* rendered relief services after an air crash involving two aircrafts (Saudi Arabian Airlines and Kazakhstan Airlines) in November 1996 over the village of Charkhi Dadri, near New Delhi. The passengers on board the two aircrafts were mostly Muslims and the *swayamsevaks* played a key role in conducting their cremations according to Islamic rituals. Sangh leaders have repeatedly stressed on the fact that the nature of "seva" rendered by the organisation is "non-sectarian." In his book, *Bunch of Thoughts*, Golwalkar decries any form of service that is discriminatory. In his words,

"This supreme vision of Godhead in society is the very core of our concept of 'nation' ... That vision inspires us to look upon every individual; of our society as part of that Divine Whole. All individuals are therefore equally sacred and worthy of our service. Therefore, any sense of discrimination among them is reprehensible. Thus, in our culture, the spirit of social service has been sublimated into worship of God." (2014: 37)

The claim of being non-sectarian is particularly significant as critics of the organisation have repeatedly attacked the Sangh for being allegedly "anti-minority" and "anti-secular." Two important civil society reports (Awaaz 2004; South Asian Citizens 2002) in the past have alleged that the relief funds raised by the Sangh after the Odisha Super Cyclone of 1999 and the Bhuj Earthquake of 2001 were channelled to promote Hindutva. In 2014, *Caravan* magazine published a story (Reghunath 2014) based on Swami Aseemanand's (a close associate of the Sangh) interview where he confessed to have refused aid to a Christian woman in the Andaman Islands after the 2004 tsunami. Despite these anomalies, the construction of "seva" as an apolitical, benign and moral institution helps the RSS induct a large number of supporters within its fold.

The humanitarian activities of the Sangh Parivar, both during disasters and during normal

circumstances have helped Hindu nationalists come in touch with a sizeable number of middle- and lower-middle-class sections. The beneficiaries of these "seva" activities are those who may have faced difficulty in accessing public goods from the state and hence remain doubly grateful for the benevolence of the Sangh. They strive to give back to the organisation either by becoming members themselves and mobilising others to join the same and/or by supporting the political affiliate of the RSS during elections. A large section of these people truly believes that by doing seva they are contributing towards building a better society and a better nation. The fundraising techniques of the Parivar have also enabled them to establish strong patronage networks with local notables in different regions and with the Hindu diaspora community outside India. Most importantly, the RSS's deployment of seva as an idea provides the recovery of a native idiom, a vocabulary that both performers and recipients of seva instantly resonate with because they recognise it as their own.

## Conclusion

Political analysts have often tried to explain the growing popularity of Hindu nationalism by drawing attention to the ability of the ruling party to strike strategic caste-class-religious alliances and construct a hegemonic nationalist discourse with the help of a robust public relations machinery. What is not analysed sufficiently, however, is the acumen of the larger movement to experiment with creative and more covert forms of mobilisation that are seemingly benign and non-threatening. The strategy of seva is a classic illustration of this kind of a political mobilisation.

The idea and practice of "seva" has a long legacy in the Hindu tradition and has been repeatedly invoked by several leaders and movements including Gandhi for fulfilling specific political agendas. In the hands of the RSS leaders, it was consciously valorised as a distinct and a "superior" category compared to the Western notions of charity and philanthropy. This has been achieved through frequent allusions to Swami Vivekananda who contributed enormously towards popularising "seva" and conflating it with nationalism during the colonial period. Despite its instrumental dimensions, the reason "seva" continues to be so powerful is because both donors and recipients of "seva" are instantly able to connect with its capacious meaning. The recipients of "seva" enact their gratitude through a moral indebtedness that is often manifested in appropriating certain kinds of cultural behaviour. Seva thus becomes a process of identity performance. An acknowledgment of this complicated motivation that entails genuine altruism, rational reckoning and the compulsion to "give back" is vital for a fuller understanding of what makes the Sangh so hugely popular today.

## End Notes:

[1] Politics and Society between Elections (2017-2019) is a research collaboration between Azim Premji University (Bengaluru) and Lokniti (CSDS, Delhi) that surveys public opinion relating to politics, society, and governance between elections across 23 Indian States and the National Capital Region of Delhi. The total sample size is 48,000. The first survey which was conducted in 2017, covers four states: Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, and Odisha. The second survey (2018) includes eight States: Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Telangana. The 2019 survey was conducted across 12 States: Assam, Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala, Mizoram, Nagaland, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, West Bengal, and the National Capital Region of Delhi. The reports of all these surveys are available at <https://crpe.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/about-psbe>.

[2] Information collected from several bulletins of Rashtriya Sewa Bharti 2007-20.

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