

**SAFFRON WOMEN:  
A STUDY OF THE NARRATIVES AND  
SUBJECTIVITIES OF WOMEN IN THE HINDUTVA  
BRIGADE**

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**ABSTRACT:**

The following paper examines the modes by which Indian women are both inserted, and insert themselves into the Hindutva campaign, or Hindu nationalist movement via organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. By tracing the narratives of two women dedicated to the Hindutva campaign, Sadhvi Rithambara and Kamlabehn, my study foregrounds the multiform and varied subjectivities open to the female constituency of such campaigns. Whether as the signifiers of an authentic “cultural essence,” objects of its varied political platforms, or agents of the organization’s ideological reproduction and distribution, the magnitude and impression of these female constituents is crucial. While the narratives that these women offer do reflect the cultural and historical precepts of the RSS, their varied subjectivities cannot be reduced to the organization’s boundaries. The stories they offer and the relationships they forge with the RSS and the Hindu nation are all their own. Through tracing these female subjects’ diverse narratives, the following paper suggest an encompassing study of the process by which Hindu women continually and actively construct their surrounding nation as well as the space they practice within.

## Introduction

On September 25, 1990, the first religious pilgrimage organized by the BJP, the political affiliate of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, commenced in the western coastal city of Somnath. Branded the Rath Ram Yatra, the procession was supposed to span 10,000 kilometers before culminating in Ayodhya on October 30, 1990. The map that the yatra (pilgrimage) traced was designed to construct the mythical motherland promulgated through Hindutva ideology. The Somnath temple, the starting point of the pilgrimage, is identified as one of the twelve lights of Shiva and commonly referred to as the “shrine eternal.” The shrine, having been destroyed six times under Muslim invasion, was restored in 1950 under the initiative of Sardar Patel. According to the official BJP website, Shri Advani, a politician of the BJP and the chief organizer of the *yatra*, chose the reconstructed shrine as the first chapter in a month-long journey to “preserve the old symbols of unity, communal amity and cultural oneness.”<sup>1</sup> Ayodhya accordingly marked its concluding chapter as it boasted a site not yet reconstructed: the Babri Masjid. This mosque, built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century under Babar, the first Mughal emperor, is allegedly plotted on the site of an older Hindu temple that commemorated Ram’s birthplace, the historical king of Ayodhya and Lord Vishnu’s incarnation.

The pilgrimage effectively reflected the political platform of its organizers, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Formed by Dr. Hedgewar in the midst of the 1925 Muslim- Hindu riots in Northern India, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh emerged as a cultural organization dedicated to unifying a diverse and stratified Hindu public through the continual projection of the other (ed) Muslim community. From its inception, the RSS’s consolidating platform relied on a recognition of Hindu culture, which encompassed everything from language to religious statutes, as a “corporate whole held together by shared blood and race.”<sup>2</sup>

Partha Chatterjee situates the project of organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh within the overarching dichotomy of the spiritual (inner) versus the material (outer) sphere. While the “material” domain denotes those fields of Western expertise such as economy, science and technology, the spiritual domain bears the “essential marks of cultural identity.”<sup>3</sup> Hedgewar’s project of cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Bharatriya Janata Party. “Ram Rath Yatra, September- October 1990,” <http://www.bjp.org/content/view/full/449/225/>, (accessed November 14, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hansen Bloom, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 1999), 78.

<sup>3</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial*

nationalism, or the uniting of a constituency through common religious statutes and language, is best understood as a project of the spiritual sphere. Early Indian national projects, as Chatterjee affirms, “declare the domain of the spiritual its sovereign territory and refuse to allow the colonial power to intervene in that domain.”<sup>4</sup> The inner sphere of national culture, to which the colonial state is denied access, then becomes the platform for the “most powerful creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a modern, national culture that is nevertheless not Western.”<sup>5</sup> The inner sphere, rather than remain an unchanged relic of tradition, becomes the platform on which the “cultural whole” of Hedgewar and RSS discourse is brought into being.

The organizational mission of the Sangh, thus rests on its ability to actively define and defend this “corporate whole” against any extra territorial political and cultural threats, namely Muslim infringement<sup>6</sup>. M.S. Golwalker, Hedgewar’s successor and the second president of the Sangh, was responsible for the organization’s more aggressive and militaristic strains. Under his leadership, the institution focused on the cultivation of its’ constituents physical and spiritual prowess. Golwalker, in a stringent effort to cultivate such citizens, established the shakha (branch) as the basic organizational unit of the institution. Based loosely on the popular tradition of akhara, in which men met at wrestling pits for daily exercise, the shakha added a strict ideological lens to these gatherings. Every day RSS members meet in an open public space, usually a park, for an hour of physical and ideological training. Constituents learned the basic precepts of the movement, which included political doctrines and Hindu cultural histories, an amalgamation of religious and historical texts, alongside traditional Hindi military skills such as lathi wielding, or sword fighting. For, as Golwalker asserted, the Hindu state could only be regained through “men with a capital M,” that is, men who had strapping and able bodies as well as a specifically Hindu “spiritual essence” that set them apart and above their Muslim neighbors<sup>7</sup>.

In the fashion of Hedgewar and Golwalker, the *Ram Rath Yatra* marked a mythical and historical India that unfolds unfinished into the present. It began at the site of an already reconstructed shrine and ended within the incomplete restoration of another. To effectively assemble the spatial imaginings of Bharatmata within a tangible reality, the BJP brought several hundred thousand bricks to villages and towns that lined the procession’s route. Local Brahmins

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*Histories* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton UP, 1993), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 78.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 82.

and town elders consecrated the bricks, wrapped them in saffron cloth and sold them to pilgrims, who then carried them to the next locality or town on the mythic-historic route. These bricks, according to the Sangh's design, would ultimately surface in Ayodhya for the reconstruction of Ram's temple. The procession was intended to bring together a community segregated along caste, class, and gendered lines, all within the unified span of the literal land beneath their feet and accompanied by a communal mission of restoration. According to the BJP's own estimates, more than 100 million people attended the processions.<sup>8</sup> The pilgrimage, having failed to restore Ram's birthplace at the end of its month course, witnessed the resurgence of its adherents' passions on December 6, 1992. Nearly two years after the initial campaign, in the early afternoon, a vanguard of disgruntled Hindu nationalists broke down the police barricades surrounding the mosque and within five hours hammered and axed the religious shrine to the ground.

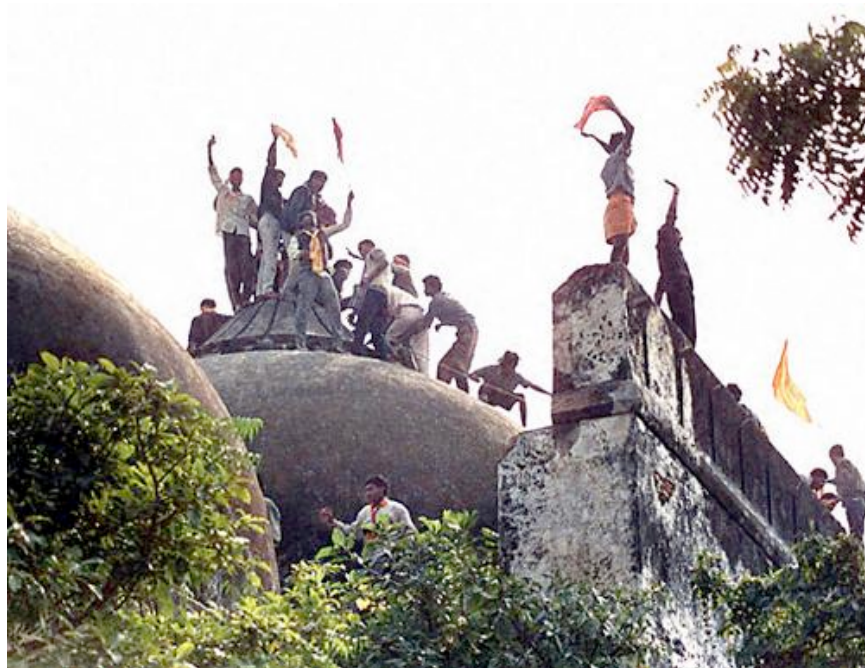


Figure I: Hindu Nationalists Siege the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya.

The *yatra* left, both alongside and beyond its path, a trail of riots, communal tension, and casualties. Woman surfaced in unprecedented spaces. Emerging as both the architects and executors of the movement, their voices emanated both above and within the public arena. Audiocassette tapes recorded and distributed by the BJP trace the speeches of two seminal women, Sadhvi Rithambara and Uma Bharati, as they call both Hindu men and women to the

<sup>8</sup> Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 161.

restorative mission. The voices of these two women were so violent and persuasive that the Imam of the Babri Masjid entreated authorities to destroy the tapes: “It has built a wall of hatred,” he implored<sup>9</sup>. Rithambara and Bharati, it seems, had effectively reversed traditional Hindu gender constructions: asserting violence through feminine channels, which had historically been bounded to images of compliance and tranquility. The spaces afforded to women within the pilgrimage and the subject-positions that they constructed within its borders compel us to ask and explore a variety of questions: How and by what means are women, particularly Bharati and Rithambara, called into the communal conflict and how do they insert the female figure, both figuratively and tangibly, into the ensuing event? How do they construct their surrounding space, Bharatmata, and how do they envision themselves residing within it? What positions for female activism do they propagate? And finally, how do they challenge and/or reinforce traditional gender identities?

The female figure has, from the colonial period forward, emerged as the central and principal signifier of Hindutva or Hinduness<sup>10</sup>. In recalling the domestic sphere, she surfaced as the chief representation of a bounded and authentic culture and hence, a viable and projected other to the western, politicized colonial administration. In the following article, however, I posit an examination and analysis of women as neither the platform by which Hindutva’s ideology was structured, nor the object of its concern, but as agents involved in its’ continual reproduction. To effectively account for such agency, I remain dedicated to presenting a rendition of Hindutva as espoused by two of its female subjects, Sadhvi Rithambara and Kamlabehn, in their own words and via their own actions. Accordingly, I provide a cohesive analysis of a speech recorded by Rithambara, one of the chief cultural activists of the RSS, alongside an ethnographic portrait of one of the Samiti’s many dedicated female volunteers, Kamlabehn. In this way, I effectively investigate how these women *practice* the spaces that they construct via Samiti discourse.

The body of my paper thus revolves around stories and the subjects that tell them. It spans the narratives imparted during the shakha ideological training sessions and the religious tales propagated between a mother and her children in the privacy of their home. It is within and via these narrative structures that identities, both communal and collective, emerge, and myths of common origin and destiny become a real, potent and lived form. Narrative, as I posit throughout the paper, is an active practice by which relationships

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<sup>9</sup> Tapan Basu. *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993), 100.

<sup>10</sup> Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 93.

between self and nation as well as gender and ethnicity are continually forged. The subjects I engage with each construct their relationship to, as well as their place within the Hindu nation differently. It is through their personal and varied narratives that we, as outsiders, can effectively understand the means by which they align and insert their varied gendered and ethnic selves within the unitary and bounded Hindu nation.

However, these words, or narrative structures, and the identities they foster must be measured against the setting and background that birthed them. As Nita Kumar states in her introduction to *Women-as-Subject: South Asian Histories*: "...there is no South Asian outside history"<sup>11</sup> (Kumar 1994:17). In this way, she implored me to consider the subjects' narratives, or the words of women Hindu nationalists, alongside the dominant discourse of the RSS. For as Kumar maintains: "Only when set against the normative voice is there any meaning to the reversals embodied in the subjects narrative."<sup>12</sup> Drawing on Kumar's theoretical approach, my discussion and analysis of the forms and distributions of women's agency are continually integrated as part of a larger and relentlessly shifting set of historical and cultural relationships.

Through identifying the practices, or the modes by which Rithambara and Kamlabehn (re) pell, (re) appropriate and (re) assemble the dominant discourse, I hope to both question and critique the subject positions and spaces that present anthropological and theoretical literature provide for their conceptions of self. While these two women do actively construct their identity in both their modes of speech and agency from within the dominant discourse, their actions cannot be reduced to it. Yet, the intricacies of their subject positions cannot be understood outside of the discourse itself. They seem to straddle between free will and no will at all in the realm of opportunism, conviction, and active choice. Rather than produced by the RSS, they have been fashioned by it. They provide via their narratives, a plethora of new modes and manners of understanding the subject and resistance both within and alongside the dominant discourse.

### **Sadhvi Rithambara: "We Shall Build This Temple!"**

#### *Introduction: The Form, History and Medium of the Sadhvi's Speech*

In a speech given in Hyberbad in 1991, only two weeks after the national parliament and state assemblies general election,

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<sup>11</sup> Nita Kumar, *Women as Subjects: South Asian histories* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 17.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 17.

Rithambara exclaims:

“Ram’s birthplace is not a quarrel about a small piece of land. It is a question of national integrity. The Hindu is not fighting for a temple of brick and stone. He is fighting for the preservation of a civilization, for his Indianess, for national consciousness, for the recognition of his true nature. We shall build this temple!”<sup>13</sup>

Here she evokes a visceral reaction from her audience that sustains a shared communal loss. In building Ram’s temple within her speech, Rithambara constructs and consolidates a single, powerful consciousness: “We shall build this temple.” It is a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, which through appealing to a group identity simultaneously constructs it. The proliferation and strength of Rithambara’s words within the context of the Ram Jamanbhoomi movement, or the restoration of Ram’s temple (of which the *rath yatra* discussed in the introduction is part) cannot be underestimated. Her speeches were repeatedly broadcast at temples across the country, recited at BJP assemblies, and dispersed within the homes of RSS affiliates. Her voice and its’ message sold on street corners for one rupee. Priests throughout the state of Uttar Pradesh, in which Ayodhya is located, had even “suspended their normal programs of recitation from sacred texts at temples to continuously play the cassette”<sup>14</sup>. Both rural towns and bustling cities, which had no prior history of communal tension, were thrown into a bout of conflict rearing the slogans of Rithambara. What then lies behind the shrill voice of these recordings? What sort of personal and political agendas is Rithambara advancing? Do they conflate or conflict with the larger subjectivities and forms of Hindu nationalism?

While little is known of Sadhvi Rithambara’s life prior to her work with the VHP, the RSS religious subsidiary, it is reported that at the age of sixteen she had a “strong spiritual experience while listening to a discourse by Swami Parmananda, one of the many ‘saints’ in the forefront of Hindu revivalism.”<sup>15</sup> Following this transcendental occurrence, Rithambara left her family home in Khana, a poor rural village in Punjab, to join Parmananda’s ashram in Haridwar. As his disciple, she traveled throughout northern India to attend various religious meetings, taking daily oratory lessons from her guru. Samiti officials, impressed by her oratorical talent, invited her into the echelons of the organization. Ultimately, however,

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<sup>13</sup> Sadhvi Rithambara cited in Sudhir Kakar. *The Colors of Violence: Cultural Identities, Religion, and Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 157.

<sup>14</sup> Tanika Sarkar. *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001), 269

<sup>15</sup> Kakar, *The Colors of Violence*, 153.

Rithambara gained prominence within the VHP and became their chief spokesperson during the Ram campaign.



Figure II: Sadhvi Rithambara Partakes in the *Ram Rath Yatra*  
(The Pilgrimage to Ayodhya)

As the movement's principal voice, Rithambara always remained outwardly concerned with identifying along religious, rather than the political lines. While accompanying her guru on religious pilgrimages in the north, she adopted the title *sadhvi*, the female counterpart of *saddhu*, or ascetic. By renouncing worldly life, Rithambara projected a certain selflessness and "power which is of another, 'purer' world."<sup>16</sup> She effectively removed herself from the political arena of selfishness, deceit, and falseness and constructed her identity along religious lines of truth and devotion. Rather than emerging as an advocate of specific partisan interests, Rithambara established herself as a pseudo-goddess concerned and saddened by the plight of the entirety of the Hindu nation. Her gender magnified this image. While she may not embody the traditional Hindu woman, identifying neither as mother nor wife, she employs the significations of such to her advantage, locating her being and motives within the "inner sanctum" of the home and traditional Hindu existence. As Amrita Basu asserts in "Feminism Inverted:"

"Female ascetics can claim to recognize greed and corruption from their position of selflessness, suffering and martyrdom. But given their vulnerability to sexual exploitation, they also

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 155.



recognize the need for law, order, and morality to reinvigorate political life”<sup>17</sup>.

By conflating her identity as ascetic and woman, Rithambara offers a scathing critique of present tainted politics, while simultaneously advocating for a more paternalistic state.

Her words are, as Tanika Sarkar affirms, ”bare,” and her voice “pure,” evoking a message which is both natural and spontaneous<sup>18</sup>. The sincerity and devotion evoked through her speech can be attributed to the medium of her oratory style, the katha form. This traditional technique, present in the rhyming verses of Hindu epics and sacred texts, is marked or identified by its continual return to an identical point of reference via various discursive paths: “In Rithambara’s case these discursive routes take the form of exhortations, homilies, anecdotes, and stories and couplets that embed the moral ineffably in the memory.”<sup>19</sup> In evoking this traditional narration form, Rithambara constructs her subjecthood within the spatial landscape of the “spiritual sphere.” Like the sacred texts she emanates, her words denote a bare truth and eternal wisdom. Rithambara is thereby able to situate her message against the temporary narrow-minded deceptions of her political adversaries.

The medium of Rithambara’s speeches dispersal, the audiocassette, only magnifies the eternal nature of her voice. The VHP, through employing such technology, enabled the constant and recurrent exchange between speaker and listener or congregation. In this way, it facilitated an ever-expanding development and extension of the speeches original significations and connotations. As Basu, a scholar of the RSS, argues in *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*:

“By preserving and replaying the human voice and spoken word, the audio cassette achieves an impact qualitatively distinct from the one resulting from re-reading a text, The latter also can grow and attain new meanings in overtone, but it remains an individual exercise, a private act. The spoken word is addressed to a whole congregation and proceeds through a continual interchange of passion between the speaker and listener. New technology is able to recapture that exchange ad infinitum for freshly or differently constituted congregations, and, at the same time, allow the first message to fatten on new meanings and associations gathered from

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<sup>17</sup> Amrita Basu, “Hindu Women’s Activism in India and the Questions it Raises,” in *Appropriating Gender: Women’s Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*, ed. Patricia Jeffery and Amrita Basu (New York: Routledge, 1998), 105.

<sup>18</sup> Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, 269.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 286.

the movement, unleashed by itself, grown from its own self-fulfilling prophecies.”<sup>20</sup>

The replaying spoken word sustains the communal conscience of her adherents. The singularity and unity of their identification and loyalties is a direct result of Rithambara’s invocation of a communal passion. Thus, when a woman sits in her courtyard playing Rithambara’s speech on cassette, she does not envision a private discussion between herself and the Sadhvi, but imagines her subject as part of a larger congregation, all wound up together in a “continual interchange of passion.”<sup>21</sup> An “interchange” assumes that the said woman is, rather than understanding Rithambara’s words within the context of the political, social and religious environment surrounding its recording, appropriating the message within present circumstances. Thus, we can imagine that those speeches Rithambara recorded before October 30, 1990, had considerably altered significations when played past the date of failed (re) construction.

Through its ability to read the communal future (“we will build this temple”), Rithambara’s cassette confirms the mythical interpretations of the “unified” and bounded past which it simultaneously constructs. Her politics becomes a “politics of magic,” which summons a collective subjectivity through arousing the deep-seated fear of the Hindu body politics present vulnerability. This vulnerability is defined, further, as the threatened state of their “true” Hindu selves in the face of the Muslim enemy. Keeping both the style of her speech as well as the medium through which they were projected at hand, I will analyze the recording of a 1991 Hyberbad speech, as translated by Sudhir Kakar in the *Colors of Violence* (1996). Rather than divide her speech according to issue, or within a frame of comparative analysis, I will investigate it within its original form and structure. The coherence, authority and strength of her words can only be recognized and appreciated when presented in their original fashion.

### **The Invocation: Bounding the Hindu Nation**

Rithambara begins her speech through invoking a collection of Hindu gods, goddesses, and figures drawn from both modern and ancient Indian history:

“Hail Mother Sita! Hail Brave Hanuman! Hail Mother India!  
Hail Lord Krishna! Hail the eternal religion! Hails the religion  
of the Vedas! Hail lord Mahavira! Hail Lord Buddha! Hail  
Banda Bairagi! Hail Guru Gobind Singh! Hail the great sage

<sup>20</sup> Basu, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, 100.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 100.

Dayananda! Hail the great sage Valmiki! Hail the martyred  
kar-sevaks! Hail Mother India!”<sup>22</sup>

What struck me first was that the invocation for the restoration of Ram begins not with the epic figure himself, but with his wife Sita. According to the Ramayana epic, Ram was forced to exile his wife, albeit unwillingly, after she had been taken and captured by Ravana. No longer embodying the form of a chaste and pure female, Ram removed Sita from his household to maintain the virtue of his reign and dynasty. Deserted and pregnant, she was taken in by the sage Valmiki, and delivered twins in his hermitage. Her sons, Kusha and Lama, grew to be intelligent, virile characters. Upon the children’s return to their father, Sita, in a revered speech begged Bharat, Mother Earth, to swallow her:

“If unstained in thought and action I have lived from day of  
birth,  
Spare a daughter's shame and anguish and receive her,  
Mother Earth!

If in duty and devotion I have labored undefiled,  
Mother Earth! who bore this woman, once again receive thy  
child!

If in truth unto my husband I have proved a faithful wife,  
Mother Earth! relieve thy Sita from the burden of this life!”<sup>23</sup>

Sita thus defies both Valmiki and Ram’s pleas for her return to Ayodhya. Evoking Sita within this epic constructs a woman, who as Bharati affirms “did not always obey,” but instead “went her own way and committed suicide in the end rather than following her husband’s orders.”<sup>24</sup> Rithambara assembles a mythic Hinduism that tolerates her personal convictions and gendered transgressions. In doing so, she constructs a space for her woman compatriots, at home and in courtyards listening to her shrill voice via cassette, to do the same. She calls them into a present that demands they not obey. For only through such active transgressions, Rithambara maintains, can the motherland encapsulated in its new capital, Ayodhya, be reconstructed in its’ former glory. Like Sita, they must implore the land, Bharat, over and before their husband, the epic figure of Ram. The mythic “duty” and “devotion” of Sita, is transfigured into a historical and present will.

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<sup>22</sup> Kakar, *The Colors of Violence*, 156.

<sup>23</sup> Romesh C Dutt, trans. *Ramayana* (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 208

<sup>24</sup> Uma Bharati cited in Basu, “Hindu Women’s Activism and the Questions it Raises”, 167.

The entire epic denotes an even larger transformation. Until now, all the objects of fetishized love to be reclaimed have been embodied in the feminine figure, whether Bharatmata or the abducted Hindu woman. Here, however, such logic is reversed. The object of “sacred” love is Ram, a male deity, and Sita is called upon to rescue him. The present reappropriation transposes the mythic epic, which records the struggles of Ram and his army in recovering Sita from the depth of her hermitry. As Basu maintains: “The reversals of roles equips the communal woman with a new and empowering self image. She has stepped out of a purely iconic status to take up an active position as a militant.”<sup>25</sup> Women, led by the iconic image of Sita, are not only conceived as an integral part of the body politic, but implored to build and uphold its boundaries. Through the Sadhvi’s calling, the mythic female becomes the present historic savior, summoned to the front lines of Ayodhya’s restoration.

After invoking both Sita and Hanuman, two characters linked to Ram’s epic, and reflecting the contemporary concerns of the restoration at Ayodhya, Rithambara continues to construct the boundaries of the Hindu community as espoused by the Sangh. She calls upon a Jain sage, Mahavira, a Sikh guru, Gobind, and the Buddha; denoting that these three religions, like Hinduism, are “birthed” of Bharat and its’ constituencies, thereby, enmeshed in a similar fate. This is epitomized more directly through her summoning of Banda Bairagi, a Sikh whose story circulates around his lifelong struggle against Mughal (Muslim) forces<sup>26</sup>. Alongside these religious characters, Rithambara invokes the nineteenth century reformer Dayananda, who founded the first Hindu nationalist society, the Arya Samaj. Rithambara thereby extends the subjects of her introductory chant from religious deity to historical figure. She concludes, finally, by invoking the “martyred *kar-sevaks*,” or the RSS members who died at the hands of police fire in a bid for the reconstruction of Ram’s temple. In her invocation, Rithambara links the gods of a mythic past to the heroes of a historical present. Both the mortal and immortal, gods and citizens, become the subjects and children of Bharatmata, or mother India. However, her placement of these figures alongside one another blurs the boundaries between the sacred and profane:

“The logic of the placement of these names in relation to each other ostentatiously confuses the mythic and the historical, imparting mythic status to human figures and historical truth to myths.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Basu, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, 82.

<sup>26</sup> Kakar, *The Colors of Violence*, 156.

<sup>27</sup> Bishnupriya Ghosh “Queering Hindutva” in *Right Wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists Around the World* ed. Paolo Bachetta and Margaret Power

By blurring these boundaries, Rithambara constructs the historical female in light of the goddess Sita. Women, through the initial summoning, remain both indispensable “mythic” subjects within the body politic as well as its’ most potent and literal restorative force. The mythic India of Ram’s epic becomes a historical reality which they, as women, have the potential to reclaim.

### **Ram’s Devotees: Naturalizing the Boundaries of Nationhood**

Having established, in her introductory remarks, the boundaries of the body politic, Rithambara proceeds to both essentialize and naturalize the community of this spatial landscape:

“Some people became afraid of Ram’s devotees. They brought up Mandal. They thought the Hindu will be divided. He will be fragmented by the reservation issue. His attention will be diverted from the temple. But your thought was wrong. Your thought was despicable. We shall build this temple! I have come to tell our Hindu youth, do not take the candy of reservations and divide yourself into castes. If Hindus get divided, the sun of Hindu unity will set. How will the sage Valmiki look after Sita? Those who thought that our bonds with the backward caste with the Harijans are cut will be dust. We shall build this temple! Listen Ram is the representation of mass consciousness. He is the god of the poor and the oppressed. He is the life of the fisherman, cobblers, and washerman. If anyone is not a devotee of such a god, he does not have Hindu blood in his veins. We shall build this temple!”<sup>28</sup>

When placing this text alongside the invocation and approaching it as an extension of the former, it becomes clear that the Hindu community is not a bounded cultural entity whose borders can be effectively guarded and maintained, but a process constantly in flux, continuously assaulted by forces from both within and without. Forces like the Indian National Congress continually endeavor to divide, disorder, and shatter the fragile and recuperating unity. The mytho-historical Hindu subject, so clearly demarcated in the invocation, becomes a blurred victim of looming political threats. To effectively illustrate such vulnerability, Rithambara structures her concerns around the Mandal Commission. Implemented in 1979 by the Janta Dal government, the commission provided quotas for OBC’s, or “Other Backward Classes<sup>29</sup>,” in both public education and

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(New York: Routledge, 2002), 266.

<sup>28</sup> Rithambara cited in Kakar, *Colors of Violence*, 158.

<sup>29</sup> The criteria for Backward Classes, according to the commission, had more to do with status rather than economic parameters: “In keeping with the

employment. Afraid that the commission would effectively raise caste-consciousness and destroy Hindu solidarity, she implores the youth not to “take the candy of reservations.” Through aligning and exemplifying the commission’s motives within the image of “candy,” Rithambara effectively constructs their political endeavor as one of deceit and lure. The government, through the raw and bare constructions of the Sadhvi’s illustration, becomes an institution engaged in childish games of trickery; an institution that envisions it’s populous as inherently naïve and susceptible.

In a state of overwhelming agitation Rithambara passionately retorts: “But your thought was wrong!” Her plea at once strikes at her adversaries and attempts to awaken the Hindu mass consciousness. In an effort to regain their crippled and vulnerable unity, Rithambara reminds her audience of the mutually dependent and faithful relationship of Valmiki, a hunter of low caste, and Sita, the wife of a king and deity. “How will the Valmiki look after Sita?” she asks. Rithambara thus envisions caste within unitary rather than fragmentary terms. A unity, which ultimately falls beneath the overwhelming figure of Ram, “the god of the poor and the oppressed.” A God, which anyone born with “Hindu blood in his veins,” would naturally devote himself. In her concluding plea, Rithambara asserts a sort of naturalized and essentialized communal consciousness. By being born of Bharatmata, she maintains, one has inherent sentiments and loyalties. Rithambara thereby effectively constructs the “eternal” Hindu subject through appealing to him. She leaves the listener engaged; convinced that in being born of the land, he is called upon and required by Ram to rebuild it.

The subject imagined within this segment is undeniably male: “he will be fragmented,” “his attention will be diverted.” However, Rithambara’s concluding retorts are always framed within the unitary “we.” She thus infers that while the current state only recognizes the male subject, in an effort to “fragment” and “divert” *his* communal consciousness, Hindutva’s platform and struggle reincorporates “her” lost voice in a valiant effort to reassemble the shattered unity. Rithambara’s “her” signifies all those at the margins of Indian society. Women, in occupying a liminal position, provide a most convincing consolidating platform: “First of all, women are depicted as the homogenous mass and are identified with the common folk or the whole people. Women’s presence in the movement is then used as a sign of the movements ubiquity, its universality.”<sup>30</sup> Ram, in being the

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prevalent ranking of status, the most important criterion was whether a community was ‘considered backwards by others.’ Other decisive criteria were high frequency of manual labor, low age of marriage, and above-average percentage of working women.” Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 98.

<sup>30</sup> Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, 209.

God of “the poor and oppressed,” becomes the seminal figure of their calling. The Sangh thereby emerges as the sole organization which recognizes those on the margins, women and “backwards classes,” as both mythic components of a Hindu body politic and integral historical participants in the present unfolding drama. Through this consolidating platform, the RSS disentangles itself from its primary associations with upper-middle class politically aware elite and emerges as the only movement that embodies the pluralistic and varied Hindu society as it now stands. The will espoused by the RSS, through such invocations, becomes the communal will as embodied by Ram. Rithambara accordingly emerges as the historical-mythic persona who implores women out of the inner sanctum on a mission to restore the sphere to its former glory. As Basu maintains, the platform of Hindutva “encourages women’s espousal of violence to rectify the unethical nature of the social order.”<sup>31</sup> The restorative becomes the position of Hindutva’s female activists and the Sangh, the preeminent institution that provides for these women’s mobilization.

### **The “Denial of Reality:” Constructing Hindu Victimhood**

Having bounded both the mytho-historical landscape and constructed the “essential” nature of its inhabitants, Rithambara then continues to build her subjects’ cohesion by illustrating the idealized virtues inherent in their character. This romanticizing project remains dependant on the simultaneous construction of an other to which the idealized group can be contrasted. Thus the Hindutva characterization of the male Muslim emerges:

“Our civilization has never been one of destruction. Intellectuals and scholars of the world, wherever you may find ruins, wherever you come upon broken monuments, you will find the signature of Islam. Wherever you find creation, you discover the signature of Hindu. We have never believed in breaking but in constructing.”<sup>32</sup>

The Muslim, within Rithambara’s speech, is constructed as a destructive force that has “trod upon humanity.” His violence is positioned against the Hindu subjects selfless acts of “creation.” In summoning “scholars of the world,” Rithambara is suggesting that such divisions are both inherent and universal. The language employed, that of “ruins,” “monuments” and “discovery,” constructs the Ram janmabhoomi movement as a sort of historical excavation; An act of creation in which the past, rather than destructed, is restored.

<sup>31</sup> Basu, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, 178.

<sup>32</sup> Rithambara cited in Kakar, *Colors of Violence*, 159.

The violent character of the Muslim, rather than just acting as a base of comparison, is portrayed by Rithambara as a real and viable threat:

“Even in a mutilated India they [Muslims] have special rights. They have no use for family planning. They have their own religious schools. What do we have? An India with its arms cut off. An India where restrictions are placed on our festivals, where our processions are always in danger of attack, where the expression of our opinion is prohibited, where our religious beliefs are cruelly derided [...] In Kashmir, the Hindu was a minority and was hounded out of the valley. Slogans of ‘Long Live Pakistan’ were carved with red-hot iron rods on the thighs of our Hindu daughters. The Hindu was dishonored in Kashmir because he was in a minority. But there is a conspiracy to make him a minority in the whole country. The state tells us Hindus to have only two or three children. After a while, they will say do not have even one. But what about those who have six wives, have thirty-five children and breed like mosquitoes and flies? Why should there be two sets of laws in this country? Why should we be treated like stepchildren? [...] You know the doctors who carry out their medical experiments by cutting open frogs, rabbits, cats? All these experiments in Hindu-Muslim unity are being carried out on the Hindu chest as if he is a frog, rabbit or cat.”<sup>33</sup>

The grotesque, sexual, and invasive imagery painted through Rithambara’s speech commands an almost visceral and intuitive response from her audience. A reaction so instinctive that it demonstrates what Kakar terms, a staunch “denial of reality.” Namely, an effective neglect of the present socio-economic conditions: first, that the Muslim community is an eighth of the size of the Hindu population, and second, that they live in far worse circumstances.

This denial of reality, and the images of Hindu victimhood and Muslim tyranny that emerge, derive their potency from Rithambara’s employment of the mutilated and fragmented female body. “What do we have?” Rithambara asks, “An India with its arms cut off.” Here, the Sadhvi recalls the Samiti goddess constructed by Lakshmi Kelkar<sup>34</sup>, Ashtabuja, whose eight arms wield her power.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>34</sup> Lakshmi Kelkar formed the Samiti, the women’s wing and first subsidiary of the RSS in 1936. The Samiti partakes in all the avenues and arenas afforded to their male counterpart. They too partake in daily shakha sessions and are trained along the Sangh’s physical and ideological lines.



The mutilated female image propagated within this metaphor assembles modern Indian history as a series of defeats and fragmentations; a narrative of the unfair distribution of state resources. Through calling on her congregation to reclaim the state, Rithambara effectively re-members her mother's lost limbs. She thus recovers the Hindu daughters, whose thighs were burnt with "red hot irons." Such images resurge in her discussion of dissection, during which she frames the Hindu nation within the vulnerable form of frogs, rabbits, and cats at the mercy of doctors, or more directly the governmental apparatus. In opposition to the dissected frog, who can produce no more offspring, the Muslim emerges as a mosquito spinning and buzzing the eugenic tales of incessant breeding. Rithambara effectively spatializes the threats of the organic metaphors: The Muslims, like mosquitoes, are soon going to envelop and overwhelm the frog's quaint pond. The frog at the mercy of the doctor, or state apparatus, remains completely incapable of initiating any means for self-defense. Images of diseased breeding and contamination abound.

Ultimately this brings Rithambara to ask: "Why should there be two sets of laws in this country? Why should we be treated like stepchildren? [...] What is this impartiality toward all religions where the mullah gets the moneybags and the Hindu the bullets? We also want religious partiality but not of the kind where only Hindus are oppressed."<sup>35</sup> In identifying the Hindu community as "stepchildren," Rithambara is actively constructing a second mode of identifying and comprehending the fragmented Bharatmata. While the organic metaphors of dismemberment evoke modern Indian history as a series of "loss and division," the summoning of a stepchild reminds the listener or congregation "of the libidinal figure of the son divided from a harmonious dyad with the maternal body and striving to reclaim her in a fallen world."<sup>36</sup> She thus recognizes a body politic, which although wounded and fragmented, is inherently capable of (re) claiming the lost limbs of modern Indian history.

### ***"Hail Mother Tulsi!": Envisioning a Female Body Politic***

While in both forms of fragmentation thus far visited, the imagined body politic capable of restoration is masculine, Rithambara's (re) narration of a children's folk tale unfolds something strikingly different. The tale invoked is that of Birbal, a Hindu minister, and Akbar, a Mughal emperor.

"Once Akbar and Birbal were going somewhere. On the way they saw a plant. Birbal dismounted and prostrated himself

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>36</sup> Ghosh, "Queering Hindutva," 269.

before the plant saying, ‘Hail mother Tulsi!’ Akbar said, Birbal you Hindus are out of our minds, making parents out of trees and plants. Lets see how strong is your mother!’ He got off his horse, pulled the Tulsi plant out by its roots and threw it on the road. Birbal swallowed his humiliation and kept quiet. What could he do? It was the reign of the Mughals. They rode farther and saw another plant. Birbal again prostrated himself saying, ‘Hail, father! Hail, honored father!’ Akbar said, ‘ Birbal I have dealt with your mother. Now let me deal with your father too..’ He again pulled out the plant and threw it away. The plant was a nettle. Akbar’s hand started itching and soon the painful itch spread all over his body. He began rolling on the ground like a donkey, with tears in his eyes and his nose watering. All that while he was scratching himself like a dog. When Birbal saw this condition of his king, he said, ‘ Oh, protector of the world, pardon my saying that our Hindu mothers may be innocent but our fathers are hard bitten.’ Akbar asked, ‘Birbal, how do I get rid of your father?’ Birbal said, ‘Go and ask forgiveness of my mother tulsi. Then rub the paste made out of her leaves on your body and my father will pardon you.’<sup>37</sup>

In Rithambara’s retelling of this folk tale, she demonstrates not only Birbal’s wit and intellectual superiority, but also Akbar’s innate stupidity and animal-like vulnerability, as he “scratch [es] himself like a dog.” She thereby evokes the bounded communities of the Muslim and Hindu alongside their inherent characteristics. However, above this resurgent communal platform is the claim that the sacral and naturalized Hindu citizen is feminine, epitomized in the *tulsi* plant, renowned for its “spiritual and medicinal” properties.<sup>38</sup> In opposition to the healing feminine flora, the masculine emerges in the form of a stinging nettle who relies on the former for alleviation. The male thus surfaces alongside modern history, a victim of both fragmentation and destruction. This claim is most apparent when Rithambara maintains “What could he [Birbal] do? It was the reign of the Mughals.” While the masculine remains a figure both influenced and swayed by the material world of politics, women’s essence lingers unchanged. The eternal personification of the feminine provides for her restorative agency. The tulsi plant is thus able to “cure” the ailing wounds of a destructive masculine world as embodied in the form of the nettle. The woman, residing outside of the fallen world of politics, remains its most formidable cure and agent of renewal. As Ghosh insists: “Women personify lost unity and as restorative agents have the ability to transmute this fallen time and place to a

<sup>37</sup> Rithambara cited in Kakar, *The Colors of Violence*, 161.

<sup>38</sup> Ghosh, “Queering Hindutva,” 269.

remembered myth.”<sup>39</sup> Through evoking this folktale, Rithambara advances a feminine political agenda, which implores its members to “sustain, nurture, and make possible a politically instrumental national ethos.”<sup>40</sup>

### **Subjecting the Dis-Membered Feminine: Victim of Virile Agent?**

On the one hand, Bharatmata (the feminine) must be rescued from the material and modern forces of evil. On the other, she is ascribed a self-regenerative nature and restorative capabilities. It is among and between these two divergent conceptions of the dis-membered feminine that I would like to situate both Rithambara’s self as well as the female subject she envisions. For it is between these two poles of femininity that I believe we can locate and attribute the often-transgressive appropriations of the Hindu nationalist woman. To conceive of this space, we must first discern that of its counter, the Hindu male. While the masculine subject remains the focal subject of her political pleas, he also remains the prime target of her critique. It is “he” who through his cowardly and fearful disposition sanctioned the fragmented present. His helplessness, both physical and ideological, is solely responsible for the branded thighs of Hindu girls and the partition of the nation. The inadequacy of male protection both provides for and commands women’s entrance into the public sphere of destruction and deprivation. As Ghosh so articulately maintains: “They are warriors by default.”<sup>41</sup>

This default, however, has striking consequences. Amrita Basu’s accounts of women in Bijnor during the Ram pilgrimage, or *yatra* provides a salient example:

“In October 1990 in the town of Bijnor in western Uttar Pradesh, Hindu women led a procession through a Muslim neighborhood with trishuls (tridents) in hand, shouting bigoted, inflammatory slogans. In the aftermath of the violence in which several hundred people were killed, these women radiated pride at their actions.”<sup>42</sup>

For women of the right, the Sangh’s tales of Muslim rape and eugenics provided a supple opportunity for the transposition of their private selves into the public world of political upheaval. These

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 269.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 269.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 271.

<sup>42</sup> Basu, “Hindu Women’s Activism in India and the Questions it Raises,”

167.

women found themselves at the front of the *yatra* battles, their saris pressed against police barricades, their domestic voices screaming “inflammatory slogans.” For Rithambara particularly this transition enabled and bestowed her self with male speech patterns and familiarities. The potency of these reappropriated masculine traits overwhelm her concluding statement, in which she asserts: “Whatever the Hindu does, it is the Muslim’s religion to do the opposite, I said, ‘If you want to do everything contrary to Hindu, then the Hindu eats with his mouth; you should do the opposite in this matter too.’”<sup>43</sup> The crude and aggressive insinuations of this passage, namely her suggestion that Muslim male eat with “the opposite” of his mouth, reflects a distinctly male voice. Rithambara assumes a sort of fluency in such vulgar gestures and a familiarity with the male audience at which they are aimed. Through a skillful manipulation of language, Rithambara effectively resists those categories of normative femininity. She emerges as a self-designated virile male obsessed with re-membling the female body of Bharat, a crude compatriot versed in sexual innuendos and a nationalist who bluntly derides his Muslim neighbor. In her concluding statement, Rithambara effectively trans-genders her speech pattern and her sense of self. What remain questions of concern, however, are whether Rithambara consciously and actively propagates her subject-position to her woman adherents, And if so, whether this undermines or threatens the framework which she so passionately advocates.

### **Marking Off Kamlabehn’s Territory: The Self and Spatial Imaginings of a Pracharika**

In an attempt to illustrate the female subject of Rithambara’s agenda, I will shift my attention to Kamlabehn, a dedicated pracharika, or full-time ascetic leader of the Samiti. Within my analysis I will remain attentive to her conception of the feminine self and the space that it affords within the present conflict. This project requires that I trace the pracharika against her propagator, Rithambara. In doing so I ask: Does Kamlabehn’s subject position align or depart with that of the Sadhvi? What about her conception of nation and citizenship?

Kamlabehn is noted by Bacchetta, in the introduction to her ethnographic portrait, as “a sevika before birth.”<sup>44</sup> While both her parents and siblings are active members of the RSS, Kamlabehn remains the most committed to the organization. Though she claims to admire both her parents dedication to the national call, she specifically sites admiration for her mother: “Kamlabehn admires

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<sup>43</sup> Rithambara cited in Kakar, *Colors of Violence*, 165.

<sup>44</sup> Paolo Bacchetta, *Gender in the Hindu Nations: RSS Women as Ideologues* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2004), 66.

both her parents for their active commitment to Hindu nationalism, but emphasizes her mother's merits and the strength required to break with her 'traditional upbringing.'"<sup>45</sup> She thus attributes her mother's position as housewife not to the bounds of gender, but to her family's lack of familiarity or association with the Sangh. For Kamlabehn, like Rithambara, the RSS is constructed as the primary route to female empowerment. It is among the ideological precepts of its leadership, that her father found the conviction to send her to English speaking schools and support her entry into traditionally male domains. Encouraging Kamlabehn, after graduating from secondary school, to continue her education at a local engineering college.

Perhaps the most incessant critique of the Samiti daughter during her schooling years was her manner of dress; Kamlabehn's daily uniform consisted of an oversized men's shirt, trousers and tennis sneakers. While men, particularly her father, remained mostly indifferent to her dress, female family members', most notably her mother and aunts, were continually apprehensive. As Bacchetta notes:

"They were 'bothered' by her dress not so much because of its origin in extra-representational Hindu systems, but primarily because they presumed she was violating what they had constructed as the naturalness of the sari for Hindu women."<sup>46</sup>

These concerns, it seems, were strikingly relevant and truthful. Kamlabehn was, through her dress, attempting to occupy a new structural position: that of a resilient, yet valued single woman who could penetrate public space (namely college) without any prescribed gendered or sexual significations. The transgressive nature of her new form becomes overwhelmingly apparent when Kamlabehn refuses a marriage proposal from a *sevak* (male RSS volunteer) with whom she became familiar with in engineering school. Accordingly, she affirms: "I told him, I am already married to the Samiti, I am married to the Nation, not to any man."<sup>47</sup> After providing such explanation, Kamlabehn maintains, the *sevak* approached and respected her as a sister and held her in an even higher regard.

Following her rejection of marriage, Kamlabehn resolved to commit her entire being to the RSS, becoming a *pracharika*, or full time, single, and celibate volunteer and leader of the Samiti.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 70.

*Pracharikas* are responsible for organizing shakhas, daily physical and ideological training sessions,, as well as coordinating various campaigns. Such programming necessitates that they travel, very often alone, on public transport. The ability to physically defend oneself here turns from novelty to necessity. The spatial mobility inherent in the *pracharikas*, and notably, Kamlabehn's existence challenges "the de facto rule that traditional upper caste, middle class women should be confined to the domestic space or protected by male family members in the public space."<sup>48</sup> She invokes a space and self that, rather than restricted to the boundaries of a single male, becomes a space-unto-itself. Kamlabehn emerges as a subject who can, by her own devices, span the physical boundaries of the public sphere, *her* nation.

What lingers of Kamlabehn's self-image is her adamant atheism. Unlike Rithambara, whose speech, both in its form and message, aligns with religious convictions, the *pracharika's* travels throughout the mythic nation are invested with "non spiritual political meaning."<sup>49</sup> For Kamlabehn, Hindu religion and Hindu culture are synonymous. The former merely denoting the explicit significations and rituals of the latter, which is identified as an "overall way of life."<sup>50</sup> In divorcing Hindutva ideology from religious doctrine, Kamlabehn propagates its philosophy to individuals who may not have any spiritual convictions. She thereby expands the Sangh's constituency to a secular public. Without any religious sanctions, the space inhabited by the female subject is far more easily subject to change within and along historical circumstance.

Kamlabehn's unusual marriage proposition reflects such malleability: "Then, in a skillful reversal of the norms in her context (where males dominate and arranged marriage is the rule), 'she decided to propose to him, and he accepted.' She told her parents only later."<sup>51</sup> Kamlabehn becomes the decisive agent: she asks for the *sevak's* hand in marriage, thereby dictating and asserting the route her life will take. Their marriage follows the unusual course of its proposition. After marriage the couple never officially claimed residence together. While Kamlabehn resides in an apartment in Allahabad, her husband Nilabehn remains in Mumbai. Although no longer a *pracharika* (since marriage), Kamlabehn continues to teach para-military skills at her local shakha. As Bacchetta maintains:

"Thus paradoxically, marriage had been a factor in the expansion of her space of relative freedom. Her family

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 71-72.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 78.

presumes that she no longer needs their collective protection or surveillance, for they expect her to come under the individual surveillance of her husband. In reality, her husband is rarely there and not answerable to him. Thus, she is even less directly accountable to others now than earlier.”<sup>52</sup>

Kamlabehn, like Rithambara, effectively manipulates traditional gender significations to her advantage, expanding her space of autonomy. “Less directly accountable” than ever before, the *sevika* can dictate the minute details of her daily life without having to tend or respond to any imposing male figures.

The *sevika*’s gendered transgressions, namely Kamlabehn’s self-appropriation of space/time, remain exclusively dependent on her relation to the “othered” Muslim. Her acquisition of traditional male skills, including her familiarity and ability with weaponry, are “only justifiable in the name of self defense (of her own chaste Hindu femininity) and self-sacrifice (for the Hindu Nation where ultimately men rule) against the projected threat constituted by the Muslims.”<sup>53</sup> In a manner similar to Rithambara, Kamlabehn employs the duality of her nationalist subjectivity, that of victim and regenerative actor, to cleverly transgress her normative gendered roles. For a more comprehensive analysis of Kamlabehn’s subjecthood via projection of the other, I will turn to her accounts of two riots that transpired in Allahabad.

The first riot, referred to as the “1969 Muslim riot,” took place while Kamlabehn was still a child. The riots claimed around 1,500 lives and left over 30,000 residents homeless. Most of the victims were Muslim. Both the Muslims and Hindus involved came from the city’s slums, far from the middle class enclave of the *sevika*’s childhood. The second set of riots, from 1985-86, were concentrated in the same neighborhood and claimed a similar segment of the population as victims. While Kamlabehn was old enough to have taken part in the ensuing chaos, she was traveling on Samiti work and hence absent for the duration of the conflict. She notes, however, that her brother and father were both present and participated in Sangh relief work between designated curfews. Although almost twenty years separates the two riots, Kamlabehn’s projected memory of them is practically identical. Having been absent for both of the insurrections, she draws her visions of the riots from her family’s personal experience, the Shakha’s ideological training sessions, as well as Sangh and non-Sangh media coverage. Bacchetta notes certain Hindu nationalist clichés and markers that pervade her descriptions: “Muslims on the warpath,” and “Muslim barbarism” are two

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 79-80.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 80.

particular phrases that overwhelm her speech.<sup>54</sup> Archetypal projections seem to pervade her account, in which any detail or specificity is alarmingly absent: “They humiliated our men. They raped our women. They destroyed our property. It was just like partition all over again.”<sup>55</sup> Kamlabehn’s hatred seems to be reserved for the collectivity, embodied in the preposition “our.” Personally, Kamlabehn maintains: “I have nothing against them. Earlier they were Hindus but they turned traitors. They could become Hindus again, but you see what they have done to our people. That is why we don’t like them.”<sup>56</sup> Her guilt, like her hatred, finds its most potent expression in its positionality within the collective. It emerges in the context of her inability and failure to provide protection despite her paramilitary skills in the second set of riots: “They lost everything. They even lose their lives. We did nothing to save them from the Muslims. I was outside.”<sup>57</sup> Kamlabehn’s conscious differentiation between the collective Hindu community and her location within, effectively asserts her position as an individual actor and subject. Thus, “if” she had been in Allahabad during the riots, she “could” have saved her fellow Hindu’s lives. This sense of self-guilt also projects the failure of the male contingency who “did nothing to save them from the Muslims” and her feminine militancy, which although absent could have offered relief. While Kamlabehn often does fall prey to the collective consciousness, through positioning herself in relation to the collectivity she asserts her status as an individual woman subject within. She is thus never completely reduced to the mass.

Kamlabehn, by situating herself as a singular agent traversing between the poles of victimhood and regenerative feminine force, emerges as a potent subject and model for female activism. She employs her victimhood, through her assertion of self-sacrifice for a paternalistic state, to deter all forms of daily subjection to male dominance. Further, she exploits the notion of self-defense to legitimize those transgressive practices that occupy her autonomous space within. Kamlabehn is thus able to live by herself in Allahabad, directly accountable to no one and continue to practice and train other women in para-military skills. Like Rithambara, this *sevika* effectively resists categories of normative femininity while remaining a prominent and respected woman of the Hindu collectivity. The prominence and respect that Kamlabehn asserts rests upon the continual construction and inflation of the existent, imminent, and devastating threat of the othered Muslim male and his communal consciousness.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 81

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 82.



## Conclusion

As I maintained in my introduction, there is “no South Asian outside history.”<sup>58</sup> It is Kumar’s agenda, specifically, that encouraged me to read and analyze the narratives and subjectivities of women within and against the history and dominant discourse which figuratively and literally birthed them. Only through placing the narratives of my subjects against the dominant discourse of the Sangh, was I able to grasp and posit the significance and implications of their words. The subject positions of both Rithambara and Kamlabehn are inherently tied to an other, the Muslim, whose communal identity is reliant on the essentialized and naturalized boundaries of the Hindu body politic. It is only among and within this history that these two seminal women become subjects. Taking their practices, whether Rithambara’s vulgar masculine language or Kamlabehn’s proficiency in arms, outside of their immediate context would seriously undermine their significations. However, recognizing either as inherently and unconsciously part of the larger ideology out of which they are drawn is just as dangerous. By positioning themselves between two distinct interpretations of the dis-membered Bharatmata, that of victim and regenerative agent, both Kamlabehn and Rithambara exhibit desires and intentions which can be reduced to neither polarity. They straddle free will and no will in the realm of opportunism, conviction, and active choice. Their subjectivity is constructed in their modes of (re) pelling, (re) bounding, and (re) flecting the history that envelops them. By providing an account of Hindutva via two subjects personal narratives, I demonstrate those methods by which they construct, practice and live the ideology which they so ceaselessly propagate.

In doing so, I offer an example of how women frame and are framed by the “nation.” Both Rithambara and Kamlabehn, through their gendered bodies and sexual significations, act as “territories, markers and reproducers” of the narratives that they preach and practice.<sup>59</sup> As markers of the “inner sphere” they represent a sort of last bastion of cultural authenticity; agents, who unlike their male counterparts, have evaded the polluting elements of any extra territorial cultural and political threats. Their reproductive qualities are thus bestowed with an almost transcendental symbolic attribute; as carriers of true and fixed communal identities, women become the lone agents able to effectively replicate and proliferate their traditional boundaries. According to Yuval-Davis, women’s self-regenerative capabilities, both literal (motherhood) and figurative (cultural reproduction), assume what she terms a “burden of

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<sup>58</sup> Kumar, *Women as Subjects*, 12.

<sup>59</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis. *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage publication, 1997), 39.

representation.”<sup>60</sup> Women, in order to protect the boundaries of the collective identity, must adhere to certain gender appropriate guidelines as espoused by the dominant masculine authority. This burden, or rather submission, includes, among other things, “proper” behavior and clothing. Within the present context it requires Hindu women to relinquish their sexual being and entrust it with their husbands, fathers, and brothers, to ensure the protection of their honor, both personal (literal) and collective (figurative), from the menacing and hypersexual Muslim other.

It is within and among the burdens presented by Yuval-Davis that the subjects of my analysis seem to effectively depart. While Rithambara and Kamlabehn do actively assume the subject position of markers and reproducers of Hindutva’s territory, they do so while dynamically transgressing all those “proper” guidelines that bound the addressed sphere. Rithambara’s appropriation of male affinities and vulgar speech patterns as well as Kamlabehn’s distinctively male dress effectively attest to such disobedience. These two women challenge and critique the space and subject positions that Nina Yuval- Davis and her contemporaries assign her.

It remains to be asked, however, what is at stake in those spaces and practices we have encountered? While Rithambara has herself effectively overcome the patriarchal significations of Sangh ideology, with every speech she perpetuates the strength and momentum of a discourse which aims to keep women within traditional boundaries. How can Rithambara, who has herself been subject to the consequences of marginality, both classed and gendered, advocate violence against a powerless minority? It would be unjust and erroneous to assume she is a mere dupe of a patriarchal movement, however we would be mistaken if we considered her subject position entirely removed from the discourse that the RSS propagates. I would like to suggest that we begin to understand subjectivities through practice. That academics construct a space that is neither postmodern nor poststructuralist; that does not reduce the subject to free will or no will at all, but rather situates individuals, like Rithambara, within an agenda of opportunism, conviction, and predicated choice. It is only through the active construction of narratives and subjectivities within such spaces that we can effectively reformulate notions of feminism and empowerment and divorce agency from objectives. Only within an agenda of practice can we effectively account for women like Rithambara; recognizing the opportunities and boundaries that such subject positions pose.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 45.