

‘Not Flowers, but Flames’: the Women Behind the Hindu Nationalist Movement

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Abstract

This paper attempts to unpack how and why women become part of the Hindutva movement, and how many of them have tried to step out of the rigid patriarchal boundaries to further their political aspirations. It traces the history of these militant women from the first organization under the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), to the evolution of women as ideologues and influencers in the digital age. Much of the research on women in the Hindutva movement tends to focus on particular organizations, like the Durga Vahini or the women's wing of the Shiv Sena. This paper proceeds as follows: we explore previous research on female activists and influencers in right-wing movements, provide a brief history of some of the organizational aspects of female activism in the Hindutva movement, examine some historical turning points for women's involvement, and conclude by looking at the new generation of influencers and activists in this space, both online and offline.

Keywords

Hindu nationalism; women; female influencers; Hindutva; Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

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Introduction

In May 2022, Nupur Sharma, a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) spokesperson, made derogatory comments about the Prophet Muhammad and the age of his third wife Aisha. These statements ignited outrage in the Muslim world and triggered a diplomatic nightmare for the Indian government.¹ The Gulf countries which have been usually supportive of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, fervently condemned the humiliating remarks. More than 20 Islamic countries and international bodies² including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Malaysia and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, called on the Indian government to publicly apologize. In Pakistan and the Gulf region, the controversy led to massive protests and threats to boycott Indian products.³ At home, the remarks fueled demonstrations among the estimated 14% of India's 1.4 billion Muslim population, raising communal tensions and opposition parties demanding the spokesperson's arrest.

Amidst mounting international and domestic pressure, the government dismissed Sharma's comments on national television as "views of fringe elements."⁴ The BJP which has particularly engaged in spreading vitriolic hatred against the Indian Muslim community, suspended Sharma from the party's primary membership and released a statement saying the party was "against any ideology which insults or demeans any sect or religion."⁵ This was one of the rare occasions that a woman from the rank and file of the BJP was responsible for a firestorm that caused a backlash against the Modi government. This domain was usually dominated by male leaders of the party whose controversial remarks⁶ landed the party in hot water.

Sharma is an example of the new cohort of firebrand women who are widening the political landscape of Hindu nationalism. A lawyer with a Master's degree from the London school of Economics, Sharma hails from an upper caste and wealthy urban elite. Her political journey began in 2008 with the student wing of the Hindu nationalist movement, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), and she later went on to

¹ Condemnation, Summons for Indian Envoys in Gulf After BJP Leaders' Remarks on Prophet, The Wire, 6 June 2022, [Condemnation, Summons for Indian Envoys in Gulf After BJP Leaders' Remarks on Prophet](#)

² The Full List of 20 Countries and Bodies That Have Condemned the BJP Leaders' Remarks, The Wire, [The Full List of 20 Countries and Bodies That Have Condemned the BJP Leaders' Remarks](#)

³ ABP News Bureau, Prophet Remark Row: Superstores In Kuwait Remove Indian Products From Shelves, 6 June 2022, [Prophet Remark Row: Superstores In Kuwait Remove Indian Products From Shelves | Watch](#)

⁴ Press Release by Embassy of India-Doha, 5 June 2022, [Embassy of India in Qatar: Press Release](#)

⁵ India's Ruling Party Suspends Official Over Comments about Islam, [India's ruling party suspends official over comments about Islam | CNN](#)

⁶ Amit Shah booked for 'revenge' remark on Muzaffarnagar riots, India Today <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/highlights/story/amit-shah-booked-muzaffarnagar-riots-mulayam-singh-yadav-narendra-mo-di-187896-2014-04-06>; BJP chief slammed for calling Bangladeshi migrants 'termites', Al Jazeera, [BJP chief slammed for calling Bangladeshi migrants 'termites' | Racism News | Al Jazeera](#); Adityanath's comments on Shahrukh Khan uncalled for, says BJP; The Hindu [BJP disapproves of Adityanath's comments on Shah Rukh Khan - The Hindu](#)

work with the BJP's media committee ahead of the 2014 national elections. She was one of the youngest chief ministerial candidates in the 2015 Delhi elections. Her ability to articulate the BJP's ideology and agenda with ease in Hindi and English made her a popular fixture on Indian television.

After singlehandedly launching India's diplomatic debacle, damaging bilateral ties with the Gulf and West Asia region, that has emerged as a cornerstone of India's energy-dependent foreign policy, Sharma retracted her words and retreated from public life. Nonetheless, her vitriolic salvo is reminiscent of the saffron-robed predecessors like Sadhvi Rithambara, Uma Bharti and Sadhvi Pragya whose incendiary statements reflected their militant stance.

While talking about Hindutva or militant Hindu extremism, the focus usually centers around men and aggressive masculinity. Hindu nationalist politics is largely governed by men, and the violence emanating out of such politics is also largely executed by them. Traditionally, women were visually absent from Hindu nationalist movements. The right-wing organizations restricted roles for women, preferring them to stay in the domestic sphere and perform the duty of mothers and wives to raise future generations in the service of the Hindu nation. But a close examination of the movement shows that women play a significant role in advocating and imposing far-right ideologies – and their presence in the movement has received relatively sparse scholarly attention.

Scholars like Tanika Sarkar (2001), Urvashi Butalia (1995), Sikata Banerjee (2006), and others have rigorously examined the role played by Hindu women in religious nationalist politics. Their research confirms that beyond the shadows of patriarchy, women participated as active and passive members in various Hindu nationalist groups. The focus on women members challenges the common misperceptions that women have not been active members in the Hindutva movement, and that they have never been involved in incidents of communal violence. These discussions help us to understand how the contemporary Hindutva movement has been shaped by women and how women negotiate the male-dominated spaces in pursuit of political empowerment.

According to Sikata Banerjee women enter the political landscape of Hindu nationalism as passive symbols of the nation as well as active participants as “masculinized warriors”, wives, and mothers.⁷ In the recent past these categories of women's role in the Hindutva movement have expanded along with the expansion of the BJP's political strength as the dominant ruling party. Since coming to power for the first time in 1996⁸

⁷ Sikata Banerjee, Gender and Nationalism: the masculinization of Hinduism and Female Political Participation in India, Women's Studies International Forum, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2003 [GENDER AND NATIONALISM: THE MASCULINIZATION OF HINDUISM AND FEMALE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN INDIA](#)

⁸ Kenneth J. Cooper, Indian Government falls after 13 days in power, Washington Post, 29 May 1996, [INDIAN GOVERNMENT FALLS AFTER 13 DAYS IN POWER - The Washington Post](#)

the BJP has validated aspirations of the party's educated and elite female members with cabinet ranks to head key ministerial portfolios. As of this writing, the Modi government has 11 women ministers,⁹ the highest in any ruling administration since independence. Notably, the BJP also backed female tribal politician Draupadi Murmu to the President's post.¹⁰

With the advent of the internet, the space for Hindu nationalist women who are not official members of the right-wing groups, but espouse its ideology, has grown. There are numerous social media influencers who now radicalize, recruit and spread propaganda for the movement.¹¹ Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are filled with vociferous voices of saffron activist women who are staunch supporters of the BJP government and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and who peddle hate-speech, conspiracies, misinformation and propaganda to defend Hindutva ideology. When instances of communal violence or protests erupt, women members have also claimed the space as vigilantes and rioters.¹²

This paper attempts to unpack how and why women become part of the Hindutva movement, and how many have tried to step out of the rigid patriarchal boundaries to further their political aspirations. It traces the history of these militant women from the first organization under the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)¹³, to the evolution of women as ideologues and influencers in the digital age. Much of the research on women in the Hindutva movement tends to focus on particular organizations, like the Durga Vahini or their women's wing of the Shiv Sena. This paper proceeds as follows: we explore previous research on female activists and influencers in right-wing movements, provide a brief history of some of the organizational aspects of female activism in the Hindutva movement, examine some historical turning points for women's involvement, and conclude by looking at the new cohort of influencers and activists in this space, both online and offline.

Women and Extremism

Historically, women and gender have received relatively less attention in the study of extremist movements, and the research that does exist often struggles to be

⁹ Highest in the last 17 years: 11 women ministers in Modis new cabinet, Times of India, 14 July 2021, [Highest in the last 17 years: 11 women ministers in Modi's new cabinet | India News](#)

¹⁰ BJP backs tribal politician for India's president, Deutsche Welle, 18 July 2022, [BJP backs tribal politician for India's president – DW – 07/18/2022](#)

¹¹ Eviane Leidig, From Love Jihad to Grooming Gangs: Tracing Flows of the Hypersexual Muslim Male through Far-Right Female Influencers, Religions, 2021, [From Love Jihad to Grooming Gangs: Tracing Flows of the Hypersexual Muslim Male through Far-Right Female Influencers](#)

¹² Shweta Desai, The Hateful Facebook Adventures of Ragini Tiwari and Friends, Article-14 News, 6 October 2020, [The Hateful Facebook Adventures Of Ragini Tiwari & Friends | Article-14](#)

¹³ Rashtra Sevika Samiti [Rashtra Sevika Samiti](#)

incorporated into the larger field of extremism studies.¹⁴ Researchers have noted several possible reasons for this. First, women's contributions to these movements have largely been seen as insignificant and subordinate to men.¹⁵ Second, women's agency is frequently dismissed, and scholars assume that women are only in the movement due to a male relative or partner or due to internalized misogyny.¹⁶ Third, gender stereotypes often paint women as caring mothers,¹⁷ wives, or as victims of violence rather than perpetrators or instigators.¹⁸ In practice though, women have continually played active roles in extremist movements, such as the Indiana Klanswomen of the 1920s who recruited other women, upheld standards of social exclusion, and disseminated the organization's message.¹⁹

There are several different ways that scholars tend to categorize and classify the roles that women play in these extremist movements. Blee (1996) identifies four distinct roles assigned to women inside and outside far-right groups: (1) goddess/victim; (2) race traitor; (3) wife and mother; and (4) female activist.²⁰ Looking more specifically at the positions they can hold within groups, Campion (2020) asserts that there are six forms of participation: (1) violent actors; (2) thinkers; (3) facilitators; (4) promoters; (5) activists; and (6) exemplars. These roles are certainly not mutually exclusive and often overlap, and some scholars have suggested that a new generation of extremist women is engaging in all but the first form (violent action).²¹ When looking at female influencers though, the two most relevant positions are (4) promoters and (5) activists (which is also a role according to Blee's categorization). Promoters are individuals who engage in "information sharing, dissemination, and provocation (commonly online), but who largely repackage and share ideas rather than create them."²² While the activism category is very broad and spans public and private spheres, it generally refers to individuals who rarely engage in violent or illegal action. Instead, they attend rallies, protests, and meetings and run blogs or websites, canvas for donations, or manage finances, among many other tasks.²³ In practice, this means that female influencers are doing the work of activists (normalizing attitudes and behaviors and shifting public

¹⁴ Alex Phelan, ed. *Terrorism, Gender and Women: Toward an Integrated Research Agenda* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Jessica Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism: From Liberation Wars to Global Jihad and the Islamic State* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017); Jessica Davis, Leah West, and Amarnath Amarasingam, "Measuring Impact, Uncovering Bias? Citation Analysis of Literature on Women in Terrorism," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume 15, Issue 2 (2021): 58-76.

¹⁵ Kathleen M. Blee, "Ethnographies of the Far Right," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 36, no. 2 (April 1, 2007); Katherine E. Brown, *Gender, Religion, Extremism: Finding Women in Anti-Radicalization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹⁶ Claire Provost and Lara Whyte, "Why Are Women Joining Far-Right Movements, and Why Are We so Surprised?," *OpenDemocracy* (blog), 2018.

¹⁷ Roger Eatwell, *Fascism: A History* (Pimlico London, 2003), 82.

¹⁸ Maria-Elena Kisuyova, Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, and Vanessa Newby, "Conversations with Other (Alt-Right) Women: How Do Alt-Right Female Influencers Narrate a Far-Right Identity?," no. 31 (2022).

¹⁹ Adriana Ladmirande, "The Rise of the Alt Right's Female Social Media Influencer," *Gender and Intersectional Analysis* (blog), January 19, 2021.

²⁰ Kathleen M. Blee, "Becoming a Racist: Women in Contemporary Ku Klux Klan and Neo-Nazi Groups," *Gender and Society* 10, no. 6 (1996): 680-702.

²¹ Alexandra Minna Stern, "Gender and the Far-Right in the United States: Female Extremists and the Mainstreaming of Contemporary White Nationalism," *Journal of Modern European History* 20, no. 3 (August 2022), 324.

²² Kristy Campion, "Women in the Extreme and Radical Right: Forms of Participation and Their Implications," *Social Sciences* 9, no. 9 (September 2020), 13.

²³ Campion, "Women in the Extreme and Radical Right," 10.

discourse) and promoters (use activist networks to cross-promote ideas and expand reach for recruitment).²⁴ We will return to Champion's typology below when discussing the new generation of female Hindutva activists.

In the United States specifically, the alt-right gained prominence leading up to the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Since then, it has attempted to popularize far-right ideologies by distancing itself from overtly white supremacist rhetoric and by infiltrating online spaces to mainstream its goals.²⁵ Here, female influencers play a key role in mainstreaming and normalizing extremist ideologies. Worth refers to these women as "organic intellectuals",²⁶ which refers to the fact that while they do not lead political parties or groups, they have become "influential in areas of everyday life and normalize the ideas and principles of the far-right across civil society."²⁷ They primarily use popular media outlets, such as Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, to spread their message, where they also operate as gateways to more independent and unregulated sites.²⁸ Rather than promoting explicitly neo-Nazi or anti-Semitic talking points,²⁹ they instead focus on assuring their audience that "ideas society deems offensive ... feel normal when you're in the right crowd."³⁰ These groups also recognize that women play a key role in "normalizing" or "softening" extremist messages,³¹ and research has shown that when groups pursue electoral politics, women tend to be actively recruited.³²

Second, as part of their roles as activists and efforts to mainstream extremist messaging, these female influencers also create and recreate relevant narratives. In their roles as "organic intellectuals",³³ these women shape the online ideological space of the far-right by creating unique narratives and emphasizing existing ones.³⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, much of their content is directed towards other women, and the topics they discuss and prioritize reflect that. Foremost, there is a strong emphasis on tropes of marriage, family, children, and motherhood.³⁵ These topics "disguise racism, suggesting [these are] conversations on lifestyle and wellbeing".³⁶ In the case of far-right groups in North America and Europe, there is also an emphasis placed on "shared pan-European

²⁴ Champion, "Women in the Extreme and Radical Right.", 13.

²⁵ Kisyova, Veilleux-Lepage, and Newby, "Conversations with Other (Alt-Right) Women.", 36.

²⁶ Owen Worth, "Reasserting Hegemonic Masculinity: Women's Leadership within the Far Right," *International Affairs* 97, no. 2 (March 1, 2021).

²⁷ Kisyova, Veilleux-Lepage, and Newby, "Conversations with Other (Alt-Right) Women.", 40.

²⁸ Kisyova, Veilleux-Lepage, and Newby, "Conversations with Other (Alt-Right) Women.", 40.

²⁹ Stern, "Gender and the Far-Right in the United States.", 329.

³⁰ Seyward Darby, "The Rise of the Valkyries," *Harper's Magazine*, September 1, 2017.

³¹ Seyward Darby, *Sisters in Hate: American Women on the Front Lines of White Nationalism* (Hachette UK, 2020); Ashley Mattheis, "Shieldmaidens of Whiteness: (Alt) Maternalism and Women Recruiting for the Far/Alt-Right," *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 17 (December 23, 2018).

³² Tina Askanius, "Women in the Nordic Resistance Movement and Their Online Media Practices: Between Internalised Misogyny and 'Embedded Feminism,'" *Feminist Media Studies* 22, no. 7 (October 3, 2022), 1770.

³³ Worth, "Reasserting Hegemonic Masculinity."

³⁴ Kisyova, Veilleux-Lepage, and Newby, "Conversations with Other (Alt-Right) Women.", 40.

³⁵ Stern, "Gender and the Far-Right in the United States."; Ico Maly, "Metapolitical New Right Influencers: The Case of Brittany Pettibone," *Social Sciences* 9, no. 7 (July 2020).

³⁶ Kisyova et al., 2022, 40; Ladmirande, "The Rise of the Alt Right's Female Social Media Influencer."

ancestry, culture, literature, spirituality, and philosophy”.³⁷ Cross-cutting these themes is the narrative of victimhood and social outcast personas, which, as we’ll see, also play a role in Hindu nationalist activism. Right-wing female influencers frequently create a narrative around white victimhood on a general scale and a narrative around being personal victims of “racial, gender, and class oppression posed by the “other” – liberal feminists, LGBTQ+ individuals, African Americans, Muslims, and Jews.”³⁸

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Finally, female extremist influencers play a key role in mobilizing other women to join. In the far-right sphere, members use the term “red-pilling” to refer to when influencers “awaken” their audience to the belief that “feminists, Marxists, socialists, and liberals have conspired to destroy Western civilization and culture.”³⁹ These manifest in several ways. Some scholars argue that the presence of women in movements functions as a recruitment tactic,⁴⁰ while others look more closely at the messaging used to cater specifically to women. Recruitment campaigns, especially on the far-right, strategically tap into women’s anxieties and fears in their efforts to recruit them. This includes fears of being assaulted or raped (especially by a racialized “other”), ability to protect their children, and a lack of comfort and financial security.⁴¹ In many cases, feminism is blamed for having “cheated women out of the comfort once given by the patriarchy ... and consequently, their potential for fulfillment and happiness.”⁴² On the flip side to these anxieties that influencers emphasize, they also focus on the positive aspects of their movement, such as through stories of finding sisterhood and community within the group.⁴³

Existing research also takes note of a paradox that is inherent to the female influencer role within far-right extremist movements. How can these influencers advocate for women within a movement that is strongly associated with hyper-masculinity, control over women, and – in some groups – argues that women should not have the right to vote?⁴⁴ In practice, it means that the influencers regularly police themselves and each

³⁷ Stern, “Gender and the Far-Right in the United States.”, 329.

³⁸ Ladmirande, “The Rise of the Alt Right’s Female Social Media Influencer.”

³⁹ Bharath Ganesh, “What the Red Pill Means for Radicals,” *Fair Observer* (blog), June 7, 2018.

⁴⁰ Aniko Felix, “Old Missions in New Clothes,” *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics* 1, no. 1 (2015).

⁴¹ Mattheis 2018, Blee 1996, 2009; Campion 2020; Kisyova et al., 2022; Darby 2017

⁴² Kisyova et al., 2022, 48; Hilary Pilkington, “‘EDL Angels Stand beside Their Men ... Not behind Them’: The Politics of Gender and Sexuality in an Anti-Islam(Ist) Movement,” *Gender and Education* 29, no. 2 (February 23, 2017).

⁴³ Kisyova, Veilleux-Lepage, and Newby, “Conversations with Other (Alt-Right) Women.”, 60.

⁴⁴ Askanius, “Women in the Nordic Resistance Movement and Their Online Media Practices.”

other,⁴⁵ and generally toe the line between handling men “who are skeptical or even disdainful of female strength” and trying to recruit “confident women wary of a cause that might sideline them.”⁴⁶ Frequently, female influencers also frame themselves as different from the average women, which thus allows them to play this larger role.⁴⁷

As should be clear, much of the research on women and extremist movements tends to be focused on the experiences of far-right female influencers in Europe and the United States. The findings from this research are not always easily generalizable to all types of female extremist influencers, and there are a few key differences that are worth noting. For Salafi-jihadist women, for instance, opportunities for public engagement in offline spaces are frequently limited.⁴⁸ As a result, online spaces are often popular among them since it “operates as a comparative site of liberation ... particularly regarding the expression of female aggression.”⁴⁹ In the case of female Hindu nationalist influencers, some researchers have noted that, compared to far-right women in North America and Europe, they are significantly more accepted in public spaces as promoters and activists.⁵⁰ This is because these female influencers embody “ideological and political convictions that [reproduce] patriarchal conditions”.⁵¹ While there are shared values and practices, such as the fact that Hindu nationalist and Western far-right groups both promote an otherized view of Muslim men,⁵² how these female influencers are perceived and the tasks they engage in can vary significantly. As we show below, much of this research is confirmed by our work as well.

The First Generation of Women in the Hindu Nationalist Movement

India has a long history of revering warrior women, depicted for their bravery and strength in mythology and ancient history. Goddesses like Durga and Kali are represented in popular culture armed with weapons. Female militant figures and queens who bravely fought in anti-colonial struggles and even mothers of warrior men have all been seen as inspiring models of strength. The tales of Rani Durgavati’s (1524-1564) battle against the Mughals, the defeat of the Portuguese by the hands of Abbakka Rani in 16th century, Kittur Rani Chennamma’s armed attack against the British forces in

⁴⁵ Askanius, “Women in the Nordic Resistance Movement and Their Online Media Practices.”

⁴⁶ Darby, “The Rise of the Valkyries.”

⁴⁷ Kisyoova, Veilleux-Lepage, and Newby, “Conversations with Other (Alt-Right) Women.”, 36.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Pearson, “Online as the New Frontline: Affect, Gender, and ISIS-Take-Down on Social Media,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no. 11 (November 2, 2018).

⁴⁹ Pearson, “Online as the New Frontline.”, 853; Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

⁵⁰ Eviane Leidig, “From Love Jihad to Grooming Gangs: Tracing Flows of the Hypersexual Muslim Male through Far-Right Female Influencers,” *Religions* 12, no. 12 (December 2021), 3.

⁵¹ Leidig, “From Love Jihad to Grooming Gangs.”, 3.

⁵² Leidig, “From Love Jihad to Grooming Gangs.”, 4.

1824, Rani Lakshmibai, the queen of Jhansi's resistance against British rule in 1857, and Jijabai, mother of Maratha king Shivaji are celebrated across the country. In the later years of the 19th century, women's presence was marked by visible participation in the freedom struggle as well as in the post-independent struggles of the worker's movement and the women's rights movement.

The male-dominated RSS uses narratives of religious and historical female figures to underscore their contribution as a warrior, mother, and wife in creating a Hindu nation. They honor them annually with public commemoration events.⁵³ In the Hindutva imagination, the geographical entity of Bharat (India) is represented as a divine female form -- Bharat mata (literally mother India). Hindutva supporters vow to fight for and defend Bharat mata from conquerors. Depicting the motherland or nation as a woman to be protected by brave citizen warriors is a common metaphor used by many nationalist movements – the French national anthem "*La Marseillaise*", for instance, calls upon soldiers to protect the French nation embodied by the beautiful young Marianne.⁵⁴

Yet, when it was founded in 1925, RSS founder Keshav Baliram Hegdewar, an upper caste Brahmin from Nagpur, was not open to the suggestion that women should be allowed to join. In the affluent sections of upper and middle caste families, Hindu women were considered pious with pure virtues whose existence was relegated to family welfare.⁵⁵ Hegdewar rejected the suggestion by Lakshmibai Kelkar, a mother of an RSS veteran, to allow men and women to study together in Hindu theological schools (*shakhas*).⁵⁶ As a compromise, in 1936, he suggested that Kelkar open an entirely separate women's movement, independent from the RSS. This group came to be called the *Rashtra Sevika Samiti*.

The Rashtra Sevika Samiti

The Rashtra Sevika Samiti (National Women Volunteers Committee) was born with the intention of broadening the organization's base. Sevika refers to the women who serve the nation. Contrary to the RSS's aggressive masculine projection, the Samiti focuses on Hindu women's role in the society as leaders and agents of "positive social reform" through the ideals of *matrutva* (motherhood), *kartrutva* (efficiency and social activism) and *netrutva* (leadership).⁵⁷ From past leaders like Golwalkar to the current head Mohan Bhagwat, the stress has always been on "*matri shakti*" (woman's power) and

⁵³ PM pays tributes to Rani Lakshmibai on birth anniversary, The Hindu, November 2020 [PM pays tributes to Rani Lakshmibai on birth anniversary | National News - The Hindu](#)

⁵⁴ Sikata Banerjee, Gender and Nationalism: the masculinisation of Hinduism and female political participation in India, Women's Studies International Forum, Vol. 26, No. 2, Pg 168 <https://jan.ucc.nau.edu/sj6/BanerjeeGenderandnationalism.pdf>

⁵⁵ Tanika Sarkar, The Women of Hindutva Brigade, Pg 16-20

⁵⁶ Eighty years on the RSS women's wing has not moved beyond seeing the woman as mother, Scroll <https://scroll.in/article/821360/eighty-years-on-the-rss-womens-wing-has-not-moved-beyond-seeing-the-woman-as-mother>

⁵⁷ What is Shakha, Rashtra Sevika Samiti [Rashtra Sevika Samiti - Shakha](#)

“*kutumb prabodhan*” (the awakening of family values). In its formative years, the Samiti focussed exactly on these principles, instilling RSS values (*sanskar*) within their own families and young children, who would grow up to be the organization’s future members.⁵⁸

Kelkar was keen on the physical training of women members like their male counterparts and started imparting exercise modules with a special focus on martial arts, which was rare for Hindu women of that time. The idea behind training Hindu women in self-defense was in part motivated to encourage them to fight purported sexual exploitation, forced conversion, and marriage by lustful Muslim men. It was also designed to prepare Hindu women to ably meet the requirement of performing their role as child bearers and mothers. Tanika Sarkar draws parallels between the Samiti’s physical training ritual and European fascist movements which demanded women cultivate exceptionally healthy bodies to bear the most efficient future soldiers.⁵⁹ The Samiti equally provides space to women who wish to remain celibate and dedicate themselves to the service of the nation. The post of *pracharika* (preacher) was reserved for such female ascetics.⁶⁰

The Samiti’s structure and daily activities centered around the intellectual and cultural development of the members through classes on values, nationalism, and Hindu ideology. Outdoor games, personality development, and organizing demonstrations were all modeled on the workings of the RSS. Unlike the RSS, the Samiti has not grown to be a dominant home for nationalist women. As of 2022, the Samiti is operational in 25 centers⁶¹ that have approximately 5,000 shakhas across India. It also maintains a presence among the diaspora through the Hindu Sevika Samiti (HSS)⁶², similar to the RSS’s overseas arm, the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh. The number of Samiti members is unavailable but by conservative estimates is believed to be over 1 million. In contrast, the RSS has more than 50,000 daily shakhas with a membership of more than 6 million and is believed to be growing at an annual rate of 20-25 percent.⁶³

No women members of the Samiti have climbed the ranks to the executive decision-making bodies of the Sangh or even the BJP. Yet, the Samiti has been a crucial foundation in the formation of women’s organizations like the Matrishakti, the Durga Vahini, and the BJP’s Mahila Morcha. The Samiti has played a particularly important role in providing a sense of political empowerment for a section of lower and middle

⁵⁸ Tanika Sarkar, *The Women of Hindutva Brigade*, pg 18

⁵⁹ Tanika Sarkar, *The women of Hindutva Brigade*, pg 20

⁶⁰ Paola Bacchetta, *Hindu nationalist women as ideologues: The 'Sangh,' the 'Samiti' and their differential concepts of the Hindu Nation*, Pg 134

⁶¹ Rashtra Sevika Samiti, Centers [Rashtra Sevika Samiti - Kendra](#)

⁶² Hindu Sevika Samiti [Hindu Sevika Samiti - HSS UK](#)

⁶³ RSS membership doubled in 10 years, says its official, *The Hindu*, August 2019, [RSS membership doubled in 10 years, says its official - The Hindu](#)

caste urban women, who are otherwise restricted to the domestic sphere.⁶⁴ These women have little education, are prevented from stepping outside the house to work, and are usually forced into early marriage. In the narratives of such women members, the Samiti acts as a civil society group and is usually their first exposure to political activism related to nation building.⁶⁵ For many, their introduction to the Samiti is from male members of the family who are either part of the RSS or endorse its ideology. The Samiti provides women with mobility outside the home and workplace and an opportunity to further personal ambitions to contribute to society and the nation, which is largely reserved for men in the Hindu patriarchal system.⁶⁶

The Ram Janmabhoomi Movement and Early Women Influencers

The defining turning point for women's involvement in Hindu nationalism came in the 1980s with the Ramjanmabhoomi movement, which was portrayed as a pan-Hindu nationalist cause supported by all castes, communities, men, women, and children. Common Hindu 'apolitical' women broke off the domestic shackles and entered public space like never before. Thousands of female activists supported and participated in the political and religious rallies in the 1980s that led to the demolition of the 16th-century mosque, constructed over the alleged birthplace of Lord Rama in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. The destruction of the Babri mosque was pivotal in the rise of majoritarianism and cultural nationalism, which continues today.⁶⁷ Hindu women chanted "*hum bharat ki naari hai, phool nahi chingari hai*" (we are women of India; not flowers, but flames).⁶⁸ They also led processions through Muslim neighborhoods with trishuls (tridents) in hand, shouting bigoted, inflammatory slogans, causing violence in which several hundred people were killed.⁶⁹ On the day of the demolition of the mosque, hundreds of thousands of people are reported to have assembled in Ayodhya. Shiv Kumari Prachchanya of Meerut was claimed to be the first woman ever to have climbed the dome alongside other protesters to raze the structure to the ground.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Tanika Sarkar, *The women of Hindutva Brigade*,

⁶⁵ Astha Tyagi, *Vasudeva Kutumb?: Membership and Recruitment in the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti*, SubVersions, Volume 2. Issue 2. 2014, School of Media and Cultural Studies (SMCS), Tata Institute of Social Sciences, [Vasudeva Kutumb: Membership and Recruitment in the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti – Subversions](#)

⁶⁶ Astha Tyagi, *Vasudeva Kutumb?: Membership and Recruitment in the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti*, SubVersions, Volume 2. Issue 2. 2014, School of Media and Cultural Studies (SMCS), Tata Institute of Social Sciences, [Vasudeva Kutumb: Membership and Recruitment in the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti – Subversions](#)

⁶⁷ Amarnath Amarasingam, Sanouber Umar, and Shweta Desai, "Fight, Die, and if Required Kill": Hindu nationalism, misinformation, and Islamophobia in India, *Religions* 13.5 (2022): 1-33; Amarnath Amarasingam, Hicham Tiflati, and Nathan C. Walker, "Religious Illiteracy in Law: Anti-Muslim Initiatives in Quebec, the United States, and India." *Religion and Education*. Special Issue: Religious Literacy Across the Professions. 48.1 (2021): 121-140; Shweta Desai and Amarnath Amarasingam, "#CoronaJihad: COVID-19, Misinformation, and Anti-Muslim Violence in India." *ISD Report/Strong Cities Report*. May 26, 2020. Available at: <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2020/05/CoronaJihad.pdf>

⁶⁸ The Woman as Communal Subject: Rashtrasevika Samiti and Ram Janmabhoomi Movement, *Economic Political Weekly*, 31 August 1991

⁶⁹ Maya Azran, *Saffron Women*, <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cuijas/Volume%20I/Issue%20II/Maya%20Azran%20-%20Saffron%20Women.pdf>

⁷⁰ *Creating a Nationality*, by Ashis Nandy, Shikha Trivedy, Shail Mayaram and Achyut Yagnik, Oxford University Press, 1995, Rediff,

The movement also witnessed emergence of female stalwarts like saffron clad *sanyasinis* (renunciants) Uma Bharti,⁷¹ Sadhvi Rithambara⁷² and lawmaker Vijayaraje Scindia who played a key role in shaping the rise of female militancy in the Hindu right-wing. All three of these women, associated with the Sangh organizations, were indicted by the Liberhan Commission of Inquiry which probed the demolition of the Babri mosque, for being culpable of bringing the country to the brink of communal discord.⁷³ As such, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at them.

Vijayaraje Scindia (1919-2001), known as the Rajmata of Gwalior was an erstwhile royal, BJP and VHP leader and a leading female figure in the campaign for Ramjanmabhoomi. She had nurtured and funded⁷⁴ the BJP's right-wing politics with her royal purse, from the party's early days. A rare woman in Indian politics to oppose the Congress party, she eventually switched her allegiance and won Loksabha elections for the newly founded Jan Sangh in the 1960s. In the 1980s when the BJP was formed, she led its affairs as a vice-president and pushed the party to adopt a hard-line Hindutva position.⁷⁵ An example of Scindia's Hindutva beliefs is seen when she led a procession to parliament in support of committing *sati* (burning of women on the funeral pyre of their husbands) as a glorious tradition of Hindu women.

She lent her full support to the Ramjanmabhoomi campaign, which was initially a plan hatched by the radical VHP. Dressed in a white saree with the pallu drawn over her head and her trademark oversized glasses covering her face, Scindia's presence on the stage alongside male leaders of the BJP, VHP and others Sangh outfits, was hard to ignore. In her speeches she encouraged the karsevaks (individuals offering their services for a religious cause) to demolish the mosque. Scindia is reported to have declared that she could "now die without any regret, for she had seen her dream come true."⁷⁶

Scindia's protegee Uma Bharti (1959 -), and Sadhvi Rithambara (1964 -), played a prominent part in the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement. Both young women in saffron robes made a strong impression among the masses, particularly with the men who were enamored by their charismatic personalities which began to be objectified in the media as 'sexy sanyasin.' Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay writes in his book, *The Demolition: India at the Crossroads*, that these two women sadhus/sadhavis were considered at the time to

⁷¹ Who is Uma Bharti, NDTV, February 2014, [Who is Uma Bharti?](#)

⁷² 6/12/1992 - As It Happened, Swarajya Magazine, [i6/12/1992—As It Happened](#)

⁷³ Vajpayee among 68 named in Babri demolition, The Hindu, November 2009

[Vajpayee among 68 named in Babri demolition | National News - The Hindu](#)

⁷⁴ Rasheed Kidwai, Money, jewellery gone from palace — Madhavrao Scindia didn't like Rajmata funding Jana Sangh, The Print, 20 June 2021, [Money, jewellery gone from palace — Madhavrao Scindia didn't like Rajmata funding Jana Sangh](#)

⁷⁵ Woman of India's right: Rajmata Vijaya Raje Scindia, History connect, WION news, [Woman of India's right: Rajmata Vijaya Raje Scindia | History connect | WION | Opinion](#)

⁷⁶ Ashis Nandy, Shikha Trivedy, Shail Mayaram and Achyut Yagnik, Creating a Nationality, Oxford University Press, 1995, Rediff, [One group of karsevaks blocked all entry points into Ayodhya to keep out central security forces, while another began to loot and burn Muslim homes](#)

be the "first real mass leaders in the entire RSS clan."⁷⁷ Both women were admired for their heroism and inspiring common Hindu men to take charge for the sake of protecting their religion. Bharti was arrested by the Uttar Pradesh police in an attempt to prevent her from entering the disputed site. She staged a daring escape and shaved her head to avoid being captured again. A BJP leader commended her for sacrificing her "femininity for the cause of the temple."⁷⁸

Bharti exhorted karsevaks to squat on the roads preventing security forces from reaching Ayodhya.⁷⁹ She was indicted in the charge sheet for her slogans: '*Ram nam satya hai, Babri Masjid dhvasthan hai*,' (True is the name of Ram; the Babri Masjid has been demolished), '*Ek dhakka aur do, Babri masjid tod do*' (Give one more push, and break the Babri Masjid), and "masjid girao, mandir banao Babar ki aulad ko Pakistan bhagao" (demolish the mosque, construct the temple, send Babar's progeny to Pakistan).⁸⁰ Bharti remained unapologetic about her role in Ayodhya on and proudly boasted she was not ashamed to be among the accused: "Being an accused in Ayodhya movement is not a taint. I consider this as a chandan tilak on forehead," she said.⁸¹ She was the first woman sanyasin to be elected as a chief minister of Madhya Pradesh in 2003 but resigned a year later after being arrested for her involvement in the 1994 communal riots in Hubli, Karnataka, where six people lost their lives. She was elected to the parliament multiple times and held ministerial positions until 2017. Beyond the Hindutva agenda, Bharti also championed secular issues like minimum wage for daily laborers, development, water, roads etc. In 2022, she renounced her worldly identity in favor of a spiritual role as *didi maa* (sisterly mother).⁸²

Her contemporary, Sadhvi Rithambara, is a co-founder of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP)'s women's wing Durga Vahini⁸³ (the army of Durga). Prior to her involvement in nationalist rallies, during which her oratory skills were on full display, she was a relatively unknown figure in the movement. Born into a disadvantaged caste in Punjab, she became a *sanyasa* and dedicated her life to religious nationalism. She joined the Sangh Parivar as a member of Rashtriya Sevika Samiti and founded the Vahini in 1984-85, which became a key mobiliser of women activists during the Ram mandir campaign. The Vahini organized mass recruitment of young women between the ages of 18-35 from low-income and/or 'lower caste' families. It offered them physical training and spiritual awakening on the lines of RSS Shakha and Sevika Samiti.

⁷⁷ Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, *The Demolition: India at the Crossroads*, Pg 305

⁷⁸ Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, *The Demolition: India at the Crossroads*, Pg 305

⁷⁹ Seetha, 6/12/1992—As It Happened, Sunday Mail on 13 December, 1992, republished in Swarajya magazine, 22 April 2017, [6/12/1992—As It Happened](#)

⁸⁰ What LK Advani, Uma Bharti, Murli Manohar Joshi and Kalyan Singh are charged with, Indian Express [Babri Masjid demolition case: What LK Advani, Uma Bharti, Murli Manohar Joshi and Kalyan Singh are charged with | Explained News - The Indian Express](#)

⁸¹ Uma Bharti exclusive: Being an accused in Babri case is not taint, it's a tilak on forehead, India Today, April 2017 <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/uma-bharti-babri-masjid-ram-mandir-ayodhya-972497-2017-04-20>

⁸² BJP Leader Uma Bharti renounces family, will now be known as 'DIDI MAA', Zee News, 4 November 2022, [BJP Leader Uma Bharti RENOUNCES family, will now be known as DIDI MAA - Read the full story HERE | India News](#)

⁸³ Durga Vahini, VHP, [Durga Vahini – Vishva Hindu Parishad – Official Website](#)

During the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, Teesta Setalvad notes, members of the Vahini were given katars (sheathed knives) and instructed by Rithambara to defend themselves if need be and to “ensure your katars taste blood.”⁸⁴ Her vitriolic slogan “*Kaho garv se hum Hindu, hai Hindustan hamara hai*” (say with pride we are Hindu, Hindustan is ours) enthralled the masses and were so popular that audio cassettes of her speeches were publicly distributed in Hindu areas. Excerpts from her best-selling cassette, translated into Hindi by Rajesh Pradhan⁸⁵, provide insight into how her speeches serve as a call to action:

Hail Mother India, Har Har Mahadev! ! ! Speak up, victory to Ramjanmabhoomi, victory to Krishnanjanmabhoomi, victory to Kashi Vishwanath. Don't let any blame come to the blood you may have to spill, don't let your mothers say that their brave sons did not rise to the cause. We have accepted the challenge of Ramjanmabhoomi and we are very close to the final stages of the battle. Now is the time when our patience, devotion, and resolve will be tested.

They are asking us to change the site where we want to build the Ram temple. Ram is the father of our nation. Bastards. Will they agree to change their fathers for new fathers? All they want is the ready-made vote of Muslims as a bloc.

But be prepared to fight. If they stop us from building the temple, go and fight. Let there be violence, let blood flow. These mosque supporters are like dogs with tails that will never become straight. So, there is no point trying to do that and talk with them. There is no point turning the other cheek for they slap on that as well. Let us fight, let blood flow. And all you rich Hindus, open your coffers and give us the money so we can fight well.

Rithambara was arrested for her vituperative speeches on the charges of inciting communal tension. Notwithstanding the mounting evidence in the form of audio cassettes which were used to whip up anti-Muslim violence, she was acquitted of all charges along with 32 of the other accused by a special court during the BJP's second term in September 2020. She remains unfazed about her role in the demolition which led to communal violence across the country killing over 2000 people. “I feel proud to have played a part in the movement because of which the construction of Ram temple is taking place today,” she said in a November 2022 BBC interview.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ “The Woman Shiv Sainik and Her Sister 19 Swayamsevika,” in Women and Right-Wing Movements: Indian Experiences, eds. Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia (London: Zed Books Limited, 1995), 235

⁸⁵ Rajesh Pradhan, When the Saints go Marching in: Democratic Politics in late 20th Century India [“WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING IN” Sadhus in Democratic Politics in Late 20 th Century India](#)

⁸⁶ [Sadhvi Rithambara का इंटरव्यू, रामजन्मभूमि आंदोलन, विदेशी दौरों पर क्या बोली? \(BBC Hindi\)](#)

After the Ram Mandir campaign, Rithambara continued to play the role of a rabble rouser and was put behind bars several times by the Congress government for targeting Muslims and Christian minorities. In 1995, her inflammatory speech against Mother Teresa and Christian missionaries purported converting Hindus led to a violent arson. The speech was made in a town in Madhya Pradesh where VHP workers had brutally murdered a Catholic nun a few days before: "If a single choti or janeu is cut, Christians will be wiped out from the face of India."⁸⁷ The BJP also inducted her as a star-campaigner during election rallies, during which she made speeches laced with hate against minority communities. Most recently, she exhorted Hindus to have at least 4 children and devote two for the cause of Hindu nationalism.⁸⁸

Despite repeatedly engaging in hate speech, Rithambara has become popular with right-leaning members of the Hindu diaspora, who regularly invite her to deliver religious sermons. These visits have been consistently opposed by more mainstream members of the Indian diaspora, who have organized protests and pressured authorities to cancel her travel visa.⁸⁹ Over the last several years, Rithambara has retreated from active political activities and taken up spiritual work. She has established several ashrams (shelters) for abandoned elderly people, orphaned children, single women and other vulnerable groups. She regularly travels overseas to raise funds for the ashrams which have centers in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia among other countries.

The New Generation

The political dominance of Hindutva in the last decade, following the BJP's electoral victory in 2014 and 2019, has paved the way for the emergence of new feminist expressions of Hindu nationalist politics. This varied set of responses is in contrast to the traditional idea of *seva* wherein women members of right-wing Hindu organizations were encouraged to volunteer for social causes in the service of the nation. While a large number of women continue to cast their work in the *seva* framework, several Hindutva women are stepping up to actively engage in militant activities as foot soldiers and ideologues of Santana Dharma. At the grassroots level, they are participating in fringe movements as gaurakshaks (cow protectors), encouraging the reconversion of

⁸⁷ For me Hinduism connotes nationalism: sadhvi Ritambhara India Today, 31 May 1995 <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19950531-for-me-hinduism-connotes-nationalism-sadhvi-ritambhara-807364-1995-05-30>

⁸⁸ Sadhvi Ritambhara appeals to Hindu couples to produce 4 children each [Sadhvi Ritambhara Appeals To Hindu Couples to Produce 4 Children Each](#)

⁸⁹ Protestors confront Sadhvi Rithambara in New York, Rediff, July 2002, [rediff.com US edition: Protestors confront Sadhvi Rithambara in New York](#); Sadhvi Ritambhara's event canceled in London after protests outside temple in Birmingham, IndiaTV News, 22 September 2022 [Sadhvi Ritambhara's event cancelled in London after protests outside temple in Birmingham](#); Indian-Americans, interfaith groups to protest Sadhvi Ritambhara's event in New Jersey, Siasat, 10 September 2022, [Indian-Americans, interfaith groups to protest Sadhvi Ritambhara's event in New Jersey](#)

Christians and Muslims to Hinduism, and ‘love jihad’ propaganda among others.⁹⁰ In particular, the visibility of educated, tech-savvy women have grown on social media platforms, and they have become prominent ideologues of the BJP and Hindutva movements.

Many of these women influencers are not members of the BJP or any right-wing organization but project themselves as “proud Hindus” while endorsing Hindutva’s supremacy. Through their content, they promote enmity towards minority religious groups, engage in hate speech, peddle conspiracy theories, and legitimize violence. Both subsets of women share common agendas dedicated to the establishment of a “Hindu Rashtra”, protection of Sanatana Dharma, and an unwavering loyalty to Modi and the BJP. It is important to note that the majority of these women and the fringe outfits they belong to have become emboldened by having the BJP in power. Below we examine some of these women who are part of the new generations of Hindutva activism, through four of the six forms of participation outlined by Kristy Campion: violent actors, activists, promoters, and thinkers.⁹¹

Violent Actors

For Campion, violent actors are individuals who “engage in illegal violence against enemies.”⁹² One of the key “violent actors” who is part of this new generation of Hindu nationalism is Sadhvi Pragya Thakur, who was accused of being involved in the 2008 Malegaon bombings, which killed five Muslims and injured hundreds more. She became the first female Hindu nationalist accused of terrorism. After the BJP rose to power, several serious charges against her were dropped and she was granted bail on account of her poor health. The BJP took responsibility for “rehabilitating” Thakur and whitewashing her tarnished image by, quite surprisingly, making her a candidate for elected office in the 2019 Bhopal elections. She ended up winning by a huge margin. Her trajectory from being involved in a terror attack to a parliamentary lawmaker makes Thakur among the most controversial figures of contemporary Hindutva and Indian right-wing politics.

Thakur’s radicalisation began years before the Malegaon blasts with the Jai Vande Matram Jankalyan Samiti, which she founded in 2002 to rescue Hindu women trapped”

⁹⁰ Shweta Desai and Amarnath Amarasingam, “#CoronaJihad: COVID-19, Misinformation, and Anti-Muslim Violence in India.” *ISD Report/Strong Cities Report*. May 26, 2020. Available at:

<https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2020/05/CoronaJihad.pdf>

⁹¹ Kristy Campion, “Women in the Extreme and Radical Right: Forms of Participation and Their Implications,” *Social Sciences* 9, no. 9 (September 2020), 13.

⁹² Kristy Campion, *Women in the Extreme and Radical Right: Forms of Participation and Their Implications*, p 5

by Muslim men on the pretext of love.⁹³ Prior to that she served on the national executive committee of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), a student wing of the Hindutva movement, and was later actively involved with the radical Hindu Janjagran Manch to counter the purported rise of Islamist extremism.⁹⁴ Thakur continues to stoke controversy with her remarks, like calling Gandhi's assassin Nathuram Godse a nationalist in her speech in parliament, reinforcing discrimination against oppressed castes, and for telling Hindus at a gathering to "keep knives sharpened" to protect themselves and young girls from Muslims.⁹⁵

More recently, a collective display of violent action was witnessed during the February 2020 Delhi riots that followed in the wake of anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests. Right-wing Hindu women participated in large numbers in the pro-CAA agitations. In the events preceding the violence and looting, groups of pro-BJP women spearheaded an indefinite sit-in demonstration demanding eviction of anti-(CAA) Muslim protestors in Jaffarabad. A group of female demonstrators led by a Hindu activist named Ragini Tiwari⁹⁶ blocked the other end of the road to counter Muslim protestors. They raised slogans of Jai Shri Ram, Har Har Mahadev, Bharat Mata ki Jai, and sang religious songs blocking the Jaffarabad site. Tiwari used Facebook live⁹⁷ from the sit-in site to incite Hindu followers to kill Muslim protestors and exhorted Delhi police to attack them. Another Hindu activist, Anjali Verma⁹⁸, also used Facebook to mobilize the crowd and issue a call to arms from the protest site. Such Remarks raised the level of tension in the area and precipitated skirmishes leading to violent communal clashes that left at least 53 dead and hundreds of others injured. The Delhi police alleged⁹⁹ the riots were a pre-planned conspiracy by anti-nationals (i.e. Muslim anti-CAA protestors) and found no evidence¹⁰⁰ of Hindu pro-CAA protester involvement in the riots.

⁹³ Grim Goddess of Hindutva Rage, Firstpost, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/grim-goddess-of-hindutva-rage-6566051.html>; Shweta Desai and Amarnath Amarasingam, "#CoronaJihad: COVID-19, Misinformation, and Anti-Muslim Violence in India." *ISD Report/Strong Cities Report*. May 26, 2020. Available at:

<https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2020/05/CoronaJihad.pdf>

⁹⁴ Trio had formed group to counter Indian Mujahedeen, Mumbai Mirror,

<https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/mumbai/other/trio-had-formed-group-to-counter-indian-mujahideen/articleshow/15863944.cms>

⁹⁵ FIR against Pragya Thakur for inflammatory remarks at event in Karnataka, The Hindu, 28 December

2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/fir-against-pragya-thakur-for-inflammatory-remarks-at-event-in-karnataka/article66315022.ece>

⁹⁶ Meet Ragini Tiwari, Accused Of Giving Hate Speeches In Delhi, ABP News,

[Meet Ragini Tiwari, Accused Of Giving Hate Speeches In Delhi | ABP News](#)

⁹⁷ Shweta Desai, The Hateful Facebook Adventures Of Ragini Tiwari & Friends, Article-14 News, 6 October 2020, [The Hateful Facebook Adventures Of Ragini Tiwari & Friends | Article-14](#)

⁹⁸ Shweta Desai, The Hateful Facebook Adventures Of Ragini Tiwari & Friends, Article-14 News, 6 October 2020, [The Hateful Facebook Adventures Of Ragini Tiwari & Friends | Article-14](#)

⁹⁹ Delhi Riots 2020: Here's why FIR no 59 is so crucial to the case, Outlook India,

<https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-delhi-riots-2020-heres-why-fir-no-59-is-so-crucial-to-the-case/360456>

¹⁰⁰ Delhi riots: Police file 10,000-page chargesheet against 15 accused under UAPA & other sections | India News - The Indian Express

Activists

Activists, according to Campion's typology, are those who engage in "active participation and support for individuals, organizations, and movements associated with RWE subcultures."¹⁰¹ She sees the role of the activists as those who attend rallies, protests, and distribute pamphlets, while keeping themselves away from violent or illegal action. But activism in terms of the Hindutva movement has often involved "direct and noticeable action to achieve political or social change in the public sphere."¹⁰² And at times it has the tendency to veer into enabling violent and illegal actions.

Individuals like Sadhvi Kamal Didi, a self-styled vigilante who runs the Rashtriya Mahila Gau Raksha Dal, a "cow protection" group operating in three Indian states, and Chetana Devi, head of an outfit called Akhand Hindustan Morcha that claims to fight love jihad fall into the category of activists.

Kamal Didi's activism on "cow protection" prevails in Rajasthan, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, where cow slaughter is banned, but it is legal to kill and eat buffaloes. Of the 7500 members in the forum, nearly 2,200 are women.¹⁰³ These members often resort to hooliganism and intimidation tactics to achieve their objective of cow protection. Kamal came into the national spotlight in 2017, after a Muslim trader named Pehlu Khan was lynched by cow protection vigilantes for "smuggling" cows.¹⁰⁴ Her supporters launched a campaign to have those arrested released, with thousands of them blocking the national highway, and forcefully shutdown Muslim-owned restaurants¹⁰⁵ for allegedly for serving beef. Kamal has campaigned with the BJP government to declare the cow a national animal.¹⁰⁶ Chetana Devi's work, on the other hand, centers on rescuing nubile Hindu women from the entrapment of Muslim men. She is convinced that if action against Muslims is not taken today then by 2030, India will turn into a Islamic nation with Muslims outnumbering Hindus. A big part of her activism includes offering rescue services to the Hindu families whose daughters are married to or are in relationships with Muslim men.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ Kristy Campion, *Women in the Extreme and Radical Right: Forms of Participation and Their Implications*, p 10

¹⁰² Kristy Campion, *Women in the Extreme and Radical Right: Forms of Participation and Their Implications*, p 10

¹⁰³ Abhishek Dey, In Rajasthan, a sadhvi and her cow vigilante group are slowly gaining popularity, Scroll, 24 March 2017, [In Rajasthan, a sadhvi and her cow vigilante group are slowly gaining popularity](#)

¹⁰⁴ "Alwar cow vigilante murder case: 3 arrested." *Mint*, April 6, 2017 [Alwar cow vigilante murder case: 3 arrested | Mint](#)

¹⁰⁵ When a mob of 'gau rakshaks' laid siege to a Jaipur hotel over beef rumors, Hindustan Times, 21 March 2017, [When a mob of 'gau rakshaks' laid siege to a Jaipur hotel over beef rumours | Latest News India - Hindustan Times](#)

¹⁰⁶ Gau Rakshika from Rajasthan wants Modi to declare cow national animal [Gau Rakshika from Rajasthan wants Modi to declare cow India's national animal](#)

¹⁰⁷ Mihir Srivastava and Raul irani, *Love Jihadis: An Open-Minded Journey into the Heart of Western Uttar Pradesh*, published in Scroll, 13 March 2020, [This book shows how a Meerut 'godwoman' is trying to 'save' Hindu women from 'sensuous' Muslim men](#); Shweta Desai and Amarnath Amarasingam, "#CoronaJihad: COVID-19, Misinformation, and Anti-Muslim Violence in India." *ISD Report/Strong Cities Report*. May 26, 2020. Available at: <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2020/05/CoronaJihad.pdf>

Promoters

Promoters are individuals who commonly engage in online “information sharing, dissemination, and provocation.”¹⁰⁸ They largely repackage and share ideas rather than create original concepts. The prominent voices in this category are independent Hindu individuals on social media, who as Campion observes, are leading “the charge against feminism and dominate radical right discourses on women.”¹⁰⁹ These include accounts of individuals like academic and feminist Madhu Kishwar, columnist Shefali Vaidya, commentator Ritu Rathaur, and BJP leader Priti Gandhi. These are just some of the key accounts of female right-wing influencers who have cultivated a large following on social media. Kishwar, for one, is notorious for posting doctored content, rumors, and fake information to her 2 million followers on Twitter. These include false stories, such as police raiding an weapons cache in a mosque in Gujarat, Muslims posing as Hindus to attack a school bus in Gurugram, and Muslim invaders slaughtering 400 million Hindus in the 16th century.¹¹⁰

Ritu Rathaur was arrested in 2015 for attempting to disturb communal harmony, for posting a picture of a police officer’s mauled body falsely claiming he was mowed down by Muslim traders carrying beef.¹¹¹ In 2020, the above mentioned accounts shared a video of journalist Arfa Khanum Sherwani’s distorted speech, claiming Muslims have initiated a strategy to make India an Islamic Caliphate.¹¹²

These mega accounts propagate Hindu supremacy while spreading misinformation, fake news stories, and Islamophobic narratives through their comments and routinely deride their opponents as anti-nationals, urban naxals, and jihadists to make them vulnerable to verbal abuse and harmful behavior from their followers. They exploit incidents of crime, current political affairs, and past historical events to further their religious nationalist agenda. Due to their large follower count and high interaction rate, their posts have a tendency to go viral frequently, causing outrage, promoting hateful behavior, and desensitizing people to violence against minority communities.

Another online category that broadly falls into the sub-set of promoters are the Hindutva pop Influencers. In the last decade of BJP’s rule, a rising tide of Islamophobia has seeped into mainstream culture in the form of anti-Muslim songs called ‘Hindutva pop.’ These hugely popular songs are blasted by Hindu right-wing groups during public

¹⁰⁸ Kristy Campion, *Women in the Extreme and Radical Right: Forms of Participation and Their Implications*, p 8

¹⁰⁹ Kristy Campion, *Women in the Extreme and Radical Right: Forms of Participation and Their Implications*, p 8

¹¹⁰ Sam Jawed, *Is it true? A day in Madhu Kishwar’s WhatsApp University*, Alt News, 28 January 2018

<https://www.altnews.in/true-day-madhu-kishwars-whatsapp-university/>

¹¹¹ Mohammad Ali, *Ritu Rathaur booked for ‘spreading rumors’*, The Hindu, 5 October 2015 [Ritu Rathaur booked for ‘spreading rumours’ | Other State News - The Hindu](#)

¹¹² *BJP Leaders Distort Speech by The Wire’s Arfa Khanum Sherwani to Attack CAA Protests*, The Wire, 28 January 2020 [BJP Leaders Distort Speech by The Wire’s Arfa Khanum Sherwani to Attack CAA Protests](#)

events, festivals, rallies and processions in Muslim neighborhoods to chide and provoke Muslims. Young female singers like Kavi Singh from Haryana and Laxmi Dubey from Madhya Pradesh are part of the growing circle of pop influencers. They use a religious nationalist discourse along with current affairs to produce venomous songs targeted against Muslims to polarize society. Both women have fashioned their physical appearance by leveraging their Hindu identity and are often seen dressed in traditionally male attire, such as long-sleeved kurtas and colorful turbans with vermilion tilak smeared across their foreheads. Through her music, Singh has given expression to Hindutva discourse demanding an anti-population bill, praising the abrogation of article 370 (which guaranteed semi-autonomous status to Muslim majority Kashmir), and railing against love jihad. Meanwhile, Dubey, a local reporter turned musician, has belted tunes like *agar Hindustan mein rehna hoga, to vande mataram kehna hoga* (if you have to live in Hindustan then you must say Vande Mataram), *har ghar bhagwa chayege* (every house shall turn saffron). As such, female online influencers and more traditional pop culture celebrities drive the popularity of Hindu nationalist discourse and politics.

Thinkers

Thinkers are the intellectuals who are heavily embedded in the creation and propagation of extreme and radical right ideas, even justifying violence.¹¹³ Fiery religious female leaders who use inflammatory remarks to radicalize and exhort masses, fall into this category. VHP leader Sadhvi Prachi has succeeded as a top female instigator after Uma Bharti and Sadhvi Rithambara. Prachi's ideas about establishing a Hindu nation includes demanding that Hindus make India Muslim-free¹¹⁴, asking Muslim women to marry Hindu men,¹¹⁵ and appealing to Hindu women to have four children, and not 40 puppies, like Muslims.¹¹⁶ These provocateurs has been shielded by the BJP from legal action and have even been given a ticket to contest in elections. Prachi, a member of the RSS's Rashtriya Sevika Samiti, was accused of inciting communal riots in 2013 – which claimed 50 lives and displaced 40,000 people – through her provocative speeches in the Muslim majority city of Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh in 2013.

There are several other less popular thinkers who keep the kettle boiling with their radical narratives. For example, at the time of the raging debate over beef consumption and lynchings of Muslims in 2016-2017, Sadhvi Saraswati, the president of Sanatan Dharma Prachar Seva Samiti, called for public execution of guilty Muslims. She

¹¹³ Kristy Campion, Women in the Extreme and Radical Right: Forms of Participation and Their Implications, pg 7

¹¹⁴ Its time to rid India of Muslims, Sadhvi Prachi says in communal strife torn Roorkee, Scroll, 8 June 2016, [It's time to rid India of Muslims. Sadhvi Prachi says in communal strife-torn Roorkee](#)

¹¹⁵ Muslim women should marry Hindus to escape halala, says Sadhvi Prachi, Indian Express, 2 August 2018, [Muslim women should marry Hindus to escape halala, says Sadhvi Prachi | India News - The Indian Express](#)

¹¹⁶ Asked Hindus to have 4 children not 40 puppies; VHP Sadhvi Prachi, Hindustan Times [Asked Hindus to have 4 children, not 40 puppies: VHP's Sadhvi Prachi | Latest News India - Hindustan Times](#)

attended several Hindu gatherings issuing a call to publicly hang those eating beef and to arm Hindus to protect themselves. "If we do not stock arms, we will be destroyed in future," she said.¹¹⁷ At a religious conference in Chhattisgarh in 2021, Sadhvi Vibhananad incited sexual violence against minorities by exhorting Hindu men to "rape and impregnate Muslim women if Muslim men cast even a glance at Hindu girls." Despite video of her speech going viral on social media,¹¹⁸ there was no police action taken against her. The only intervention against her insidious remarks came from the national women's commission.¹¹⁹ In another religious conference in Haridwar, Sadhvi Annapurna, the head of the Niranjani Akhara and a general secretary of the Hindu Mahasabha, issued a call for genocide of Muslims: "If you want to finish off their population then we are ready to kill them...even if 100 of us are ready to kill 20 lakh of them, then we will be victorious." Pandey was arrested by the Uttarakhand police but even after her comments sparked outrage, she defended her speech as guided by her desire to protect the motherland.

Conclusion

The examination of the roles women play in the Hindutva movement, through the lenses of violent actors, activists, promoters, and thinkers, offers one possible framework for understanding women's multifaceted participation in political movements. This categorization, while useful, also presents certain limitations that merit consideration. The category of activists, for instance, is a broad category that captures the diverse range of women's engagement in the movement, from organizing and participating in rallies to disseminating propaganda. While it encompasses a wide array of activities, the term "activist" can sometimes blur the distinction between different types of engagement, such as intellectual versus on-the-ground activism, making it harder to assess the specific impacts of different forms of participation.

Applying such categories to women's involvement in other movements could capture their participation beyond mere support roles, recognizing their active contributions to shaping and advancing political agendas. However, the specific context of each movement—its goals, cultural backdrop, and the societal position of women—significantly influences how these roles are manifested and should be interpreted. In other movements, especially those operating in different cultural or ideological settings, these categories may need more considered application. As Hindu nationalist political discourse has infiltrated socio-political life in India, it has beguiled

¹¹⁷ Sadhvi Saraswati: Hang those who eat beef, Hindus must stock arms in homes, 15 June 2017

[Sadhvi Saraswati: Hang those who eat beef, Hindus must stock arms in homes](#)

¹¹⁸ Alishan Jafri, Twitter https://twitter.com/alishan_jafri/status/1488875434783608833

¹¹⁹ NCW notice to Sadhvi Vibhanand Giri for making remarks against Muslim women <https://theprint.in/india/ncw-notice-to-sadhvi-vibhanand-giri-for-making-remarks-against-muslim-women/820403/>

women from across the socio-economic spectrum to rally for the ultimate goal of establishing a ‘Hindu Rashtra’. Presently, the participation of women in the right-wing movement in India is at its highest. Women are more willing to insert themselves in furthering Hindutva’s exclusionary, hateful, and divisive agenda, and participate in communal conflicts than ever before. And they are doing it without upsetting the deep-rooted patriarchy of the country. Indian feminist scholars, horrified at the participation of women in the demolition of the Babri mosque and the subsequent riots, have contended that the right-wing movement offers a limited sense of emancipation to the middle-class and lower income group of women who aspire to be in politics or in public spaces. Noting the paradoxical self-limiting and violent self-empowerment, Tanika Sarkar believes the movement prepares women to be a citizen of an authoritative Hindu Rashtra to undermine secular democratic politics.¹²⁰

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The Hindu nationalist movement has claimed that it is promoting a progressive position on women’s rights, all the while weaponizing women as the key to pushing back against a so-called Muslim population explosion. Several pieces of legislation put forth by the BJP have also, in varying ways, contributed to communal tensions. Some claim that laws like the “Triple Talaq bill” (banning the practice of Muslims divorcing their wives by saying talaq, the Arabic word for divorce, three times),¹²¹ the proposed population control bill (which proposes a two-child policy),¹²² and the Uniform civil code are aimed to single out Muslims as regressive and blame the community for causing population explosion.¹²³ Hindu nationalists differentiate themselves from Christian conservatives and Islamist fundamentalists who seek to regulate women’s sexuality and reproduction. However, they do seek to regulate women’s fertility by demanding they have more children in the service of the nation, and controlling who they can marry through the love jihad legislation. Neither right-wing organizations or female influencers have trained their guns at the deep rooted conservative patriarchal foundations which continues to dictate the lives of Hindu women. The BJP women’s wings – the VHP or the Durga Vahini – organize physical training for women’s self-defense but they have not used their aggressive politics to root out real violence of female feticide, honor killing, or atrocities and deaths over dowry payments that confronts the everyday lives of Hindu women. While these organizations ideologically indoctrinate¹²⁴ women to commit themselves to Hindutva’s vision and culture, the question of whether women’s subjugated status would actually improve under Hindu Rashtra remains doubtful.

¹²⁰ Tanika Sarkar, *The Woman as Communal Subject: Rashtrasevika Samiti and Ram Janmabhoomi Movement*