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Between the Boundaries of Asceticism and Activism: Understanding the Authority of the Sadhvis within the Hindu Right in India

Koushiki Dasgupta

Department of History, Vidyasagar University, Midnapore 721102, India; ppdd91@gmail.com

Abstract: Given the emergence of the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement in the early 1990s, a group of female ascetics and sadhvis displayed tendencies of eschewing conventional gendered images and reinforcing the ideals of virtuous motherhood and female warriorhood in an effort to establish women's alternative authority in the public and private domains. In order to galvanise women's participation in the public sphere, these sadhvis allowed women to assume roles that would otherwise be reserved for men on the grounds that men are no longer living according to their dharma. In reality, the sadhvis were reorganising the feminine space within a predominately masculine Hindutva movement by recommending a level of politicisation of women's private responsibilities in the public sphere with a distinctive articulation of particular gender stereotypes. Taking into account these factors, my aim in writing this essay is to examine the ramifications of the agency and authority that these sadhvis achieved while actively participating in the Hindutva movement. This paper also aims to find out which types of approaches they employed to address the conflicts between conventional womanhood, asceticism, and heroic femininity in the arena of public life.

Keywords: sadhvis; Hindutva; women; gender; activism; asceticism



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1. Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed an intense academic engagement with the Hindu right-wing movements in India and abroad. The Hindu right-wing organizations, also known as the Sangh-Parivar, derived their initial organisational structure from the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which, around 1923, sought to revive the essential tenets of Hindutva¹ or Hinduness. The concept of Hindutva was initially formulated a Marathi nationalist named V.D. Savarkar who published a booklet in the same name where he defined the term as a political ideology encompassing the cultural justification of Hindu nationalism (Hedgewar 1985). Embedded in the process of majoritarian cultural assertiveness, the articulations of Hindutva became more strident over time, and deployed certain gender images, icons, and themes to negotiate in the construction of a Hindu supremacist identity, mostly against the supposed enemies of the nation. Crucial to the construction of this identity and othering of the enemy minorities (Muslims/Christians), there was a spirit of a masculine desire to uphold the honour of the nation—envisioned as the Bharat Mata (mother-nation) by the Hindu nationalists. The metaphorical representation of the nation as a woman explains the gendered aspect of Hindu nationalism and indicates the possibilities of employing socially created notions of masculinity and femininity towards shaping male and female engagement in nation-building. Indian women have been incorporated into Hindu nationalism in three distinct ways. Firstly, they have been depicted as submissive markers of national identity. Secondly, women are seen as reproducers of national culture. Thirdly, Indian women have sometimes been portrayed as heroic militants engaged in socio-political struggle. A part of the Hindutva narrative that portrays women in the political context of Hindu nationalism as a passive national symbol reinforces the idea that the motherland needs to be protected by her heroic sons (citizen-warriors) through

relentless vigilance and sacrifice. An added dimension to this was the emphasis on versions of manliness and martial heroism by the Hindu men, particularly when it came to defending the Hindu women—the embodiment of national honour—from any threat of being vilified by the country’s purported enemies. It is pertinent to note that, in the discourse of the Hindutva movement, the agential ratings of men as virile-protective and women as passive and repositories of communal honour did not continue to be a rigid framework of gender positions across history. Instead, the possibilities for applying new meanings to the stereotypical images of men and women became obvious, even to the point of the creation of a new gender identity when necessary. The idea of arming women for both their own protection and the defence of the community has been seen revived or rearticulated by the Hindu Right in recent years. This idea has a strong historical foundation in the early 20th century construction of “*virangana*” women as part of the Hindu Sangathan movement.²

Given the beginnings of the Hindu nationalist movement during colonial times and its apex during the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign in the early 1990s, the assertion of women’s involvement and militancy ought to have a more thorough basis. As a side note, I would like to point out that, over the years, the involvement of women in the Hindutva discourse played significant roles in the functioning of the hegemonic agendas of the movement. These roles have encompassed a range of possibilities and have been associated with various issues. These issues were frequently the subjects of attempted resolution by holding onto the dual possibilities of women’s vulnerability and strength and passivity and activity in complementary ways, especially at moments of political crises. This is not meant to imply that women’s traditional roles were abandoned as they became militant activists; rather, it was because they upheld these roles in the first place and became fully integrated into the social environment in which they lived that the women assumed the role of militancy when it was called for. For instance, the increase in female involvement during the Ram Janmabhoomi movement attempted to reduce the tensions of holding to the dual possibilities of women’s agency through innovative manifestations of political activism. Some Hindu nationalists, and in particular a group of ascetics known as *sadhvis*, began to invoke the lineage of Hindu women warriors, who fought against foreign invaders, as a mobilisation strategy with explanations for why Hindu women should take part in political uprisings. The prevalence of the activist *sadhvis* who led the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation confirmed this “exclusive” category of women as one of the reliable supporters of the future Hindu *Rashtra* in India. Additionally, they provided fascinating insights into the ways gendered conceptions could arrive at a critical junction in the Hindutva discourse.

2. Female Ascetics in Hindu Society: Conceptual Underpinnings

In India, the term “asceticism” is used in a variety of contexts and does not always refer to renunciation. In general, ascetics seek a way that will free them from the fleeting world rather than the social world (*samsara*). Asceticism becomes renunciation when it is accompanied with the rejection of societal structures and roles. According to the existing literature, a woman’s decision to live an ascetic lifestyle is often influenced by dire social or economic circumstances rather than a religious conviction (Denton 1992; Ojha 1981; Khandelwal 1997). Women have historically had a harder time becoming austere than men and have frequently remained subject to harsh social judgement because of their not submitting to the Brahmanical standards of a dependent wife or submissive mother (Bevilacqua 2017). Secondly, women, being fundamentally dirty because of menstruation and childbirth, were likely to follow certain ritual actions, and due to their purportedly immoral nature, they must be guided towards the path of *stridharma* under the tutelage of a male figure (Bevilacqua 2017, p. 54). Because of continuous social opposition, the presence of women as ascetics remained low in all the historical ages; however, there were pieces of evidence to suggest that women followed the austere path, as sanctioned by various traditions and sects like Shakta, Shaiva, and Vaishnava. In modern times, changing historical context has improved the position of female ascetics, in that a group of them earned prominence in traditional monastic orders, and others occupied leadership roles

at moments of socio-political exigency. Despite that, female ascetics did not receive full recognition from the male-dominated hierarchy within a particular monastic order unless supported by special circumstances. Nevertheless, their unique character traits, leadership abilities, and accomplishments allowed them to earn recognition and acceptance. It is possible to point to the sadhvis associated with right-wing politics or working to advance the Hindutva cause as exceptional persons who managed to lead dual lives as activists and ascetics while making a notable impact on Indian politics.

A comprehensive analysis of the role of the sadhvis in the Hindutva movement during and after the Ram Janmabhoomi movement revealed several factors. First, for these sadhvis, the definition of femininity had never been static; rather, they had exhibited tendencies of breaking away from conventional gendered images and reaffirming the ideals of righteous motherhood and female warriorhood in a bid to create opportunities for women's alternative authority in both the private and public spheres. Second, by drawing attention to the historical concerns about Hindu male effeminacy, these sadhvis frequently reminded Hindu males of their failure to uphold their purusha-dharma, or moral obligations to safeguard women during all phases of their lives (*Manusmriti*). Third, the sadhvis claimed that their involvement in politics was a result of the lack of morality in social order brought on by the threat of outside "enemies", as well as from the prevailing state of immorality (falling of dharma) in society. It compelled them to abandon their spiritual practises and make a quick shift from their position of divinity to the real world so that their aura of chastity and celibacy could aid in purifying the nation's ailing political system (News Public 1992). These Hindutva sadhvis gathered the necessary traits to make themselves appear as organic leaders of the community by associating themselves with the iconic position of a spiritual renouncer in Hindu tradition. In the 1990s, they hit on the idea of a Ram Rajya or dharma-rajya (ideal state) and eventually became the flagbearers of a Hindu Rashtra (a replication of Ram Rajya). Considering these elements, my goal in writing this essay is to explore the implications of the agency and authority that these sadhvis generated while actively participating in the Hindutva movement, as well as seeing what sort of strategies they adopted to resolve the tensions between traditional womanhood, asceticism, and heroic femineity in the public sphere.

The first part of this essay will focus on how organisations affiliated with the Sangh-Parivar, such as the Rashtra Sevika Samiti and the Viswa Hindu Parishad for Women, assisted the Hindutva movement in redefining traditional womanhood and emphasised the significance of a group of celibate women workers dedicated to the cause of nation-building. The Ram Janmabhoomi movement, which began in the early 1990s, allowed for a revival of the ideal of heroic womanhood thanks in part to the Durga Vahini, which was deeply anchored in the ideals of these organizations. A link between the mighty components of ancient asceticism and the violent action of pro-Hindutva women seems to be provided by the concept of heroic femineity. The idea of heroic femininity seemed to repurpose ancient conceptions of motherhood as an essential part of the Hindu nationalist scheme that takes control of female sexuality with the aim of creating nationalist subjects, when complemented by means of the image of warrior mother Goddesses. It came out that the Hindutva sadhvis used their ascetic personas as a reflection of their spiritual ability to restrain sexuality and as a means of self-representation as the pinnacle of morality and ethical conduct. However, they translate their special strength into stringent militant acts against the offenders when they become moved by the breaking down of the ethical standards in society and politics. The "ascetic" nature of female militancy may have had some impact on common Hindu women, although it is uncertain how much.

3. Constructing Righteous Womanhood in Hindu Society

The Hindutva sadhvis functioned from two distinct vantage points: as individuals with the potential to practise asceticism, and as representatives of right-wing politics. While their messages and activities as ascetic icons of Hindutva could be examined in reference to their relationship with right-wing politics, their individual presences as ascetics

could be read as being to what extent they fitted themselves well into the standards of “nationalist-womanhood” set out by the Hindu nationalist organisations. In order to start the discussion, it is important to see how traditional Hinduism has formed its ideas of Hindu womanhood, and how these ideas have been incorporated by Hindu nationalists into ideals of “nationalist-womanhood”. One of the connecting threads between traditional femininity and Hindu nationalist womanhood seems to be in the principles of female militancy that were ingrained in the ascetical framework of Hinduism. The use of female militancy as justification for fighting the “enemies” shows a purposeful and intentional strategy to encourage these women to take on more active and assertive positions within the movement. This is especially true for the female ascetics and celibate worker cadres. The subtleties of ascetic women’s political activism thus reveal an interesting intellectual underpinning.

In traditional Hinduism, the concept of femininity represents the underlying tension between *prakiti* (nature) and *shakti* (energy/power). The opposite of the cosmic entity, the *purusha*, or masculine, is represented by women as *prakiti*. Women as *prakiti* exhibit the qualities of a wife who is ingrained in the ideas of growth, riches, and virtue because they are the recipients of man’s seed. However, women’s definition of creation, fertility, and divinity as *shakti* is represented in the ideal of motherhood. (Wadley 1977, pp. 115–17). The good woman, according to practically all Indian classical works and folk traditions, is one who chooses to remain committed to her husband and her family, whether as a mother or a wife, rather than trying to escape the restrictions of society. The virtuous wives, as depicted in the images of Sita or Savitri, were expected to be obedient and devoted to their husbands, even during extremely trying periods in their personal lives. Law books and other literature provide many examples of how to be a good wife, but there are not many that show you how to be a good mother, since mothers—the image of controlled sexuality—enjoyed the possibility of becoming mother Goddesses who must be worshipped and feared (Wadley 1977, pp. 115–17). Even though they are revered in various ways, all the mother goddesses in the Hindu pantheon are manifestations of the same feminine force. For instance, the mother goddess Kali is portrayed by the components of fertility, creativity, and the nurturing principles of the mother, as well as the most potent aspect of *shakti*, or the life force (Ray Chaudhuri 1956, p. 126). She has been portrayed as the partner of Lord Shiva, who lies passively at Kali’s feet to subdue her energy or *shakti*. The mother Goddess Kali creates the contrasting imagery of assurance and terribleness, making her appear lost in her own grandeur and unapproachable to the male. (Ray Chaudhuri 1956, p. 130). The approach of the devotees should be that of becoming a kid returning to the strong mother for protection and release from the realities of life and death. This is how devotees should approach Goddess Kali, who is not limited by any familial ties. Goddess Durga, another potent image of divine motherhood, has a much kinder appearance than Goddess Kali but is just as violent and ferocious when evil forces are at work. In contrast to Kali, Goddess Durga personifies the spirit of familial love and concurs with her male counterpart Lord Shiva to continue the cycle of creation/*samsara*. While mainstream Hinduism cultivates all the images of women as *shakti* and *prakiti*, it elevates and reveres motherhood the most. Birthing may allow women to experience the cosmic energy from within, but biological motherhood does not necessarily have to be a requirement for women to be addressed as “mothers” or to become turned into a real-life representation of the Goddesses. For this reason, austere women who did not even adhere to traditional social norms have earned the status of a “guru-ma” for their followers. Oddly, *sadhvis*, especially those who operated within the *Hindutva* network, did not encourage women to eliminate overt indicators of feminine qualities to participate in public activism. Instead, they expected the average Hindu woman to cultivate her maternal attributes in a modified way to uphold order in the family, society, and country. I will come back to this point later.

Part of this modification process began long ago, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when a masculine Hindu identity was primarily built against the lusty and dangerous Muslim “other”—the purported kidnappers from whom the Hindu women

were to be safeguarded. Added to this was the anxiety about declining numbers of the Hindus as reflected in the census reports. The shrinking demography of the Hindus coincided well with the growing perception of “dying Hindus” and hyper-masculine Muslims in early 20th century writings (Mukherjee 1909). To buck this trend, some Hindu nationalists affiliated with groups like the Arya Samaj, Hindu Mahasabha, and others have recreated and invoked masculine representations of Hindu warriors, particularly those from the so-called martial communities like the Marathas, Sikhs, and Rajputs, who had been engaged in warfare with Muslim rulers. Charu Gupta referred to the reports of Hindu women and widows being abducted in colonial north India in the 1920s and 1930s, when the local press launched a campaign against the supposed kidnapping of Hindu women by Muslims and the alleged conversion of Hindu women to Islam. Hindu men were urged to organise and develop the Hindu society through the “sangathan” movement and acknowledge the necessity of creating a new female identity in response to these tales and rumours of Hindu women being denigrated by arrogant Muslims. In addition to their positions as mothers of patriotic, warrior sons, the new Hindu women would be empowered by militant traits for self-defence. “Every sister who joins the army of this revolution called the *Sangathan*, should have a sharp knife with her which she can use whenever she needs. . . . It is a prime religious duty of all the women who enter the army of *Sangathan* to be able to defend their chastity and honour,” observed *Sangathan Ka Bigu*, one of the Hindu nationalist publications (Gupta 1998, p. 732). The main argument that women need to be empowered because they are the embodiment of a community’s dignity resonated perfectly with the gendered norms of the society, yet the model of *nari-shakti* proposed by the early Hindu nationalists did not successfully contest the limitations on women’s exposure, and on their potential to engage in Indian political culture. It looked challenging to achieve social legitimacy in favour of women’s heroic actions in the public realm unless the operative capacities of women had been infused with the spirit of a moral authority with the potential to become a social critic and political activist. With a few additions and adjustments, the Hindutva organisations strived to accord women’s agency with new connotations in the second half of the 20th century. This contributed to the social legitimacy of heroic femininity.

4. What Effect Did Hindutva Have on Women?

The early ideologues of the RSS, like V.D Savarkar or M.S Golwalkar, might have patronised the fundamental identity of women as the breeders of future Hindu warriors or as perpetual victims, but their successors in the Sangh network did not refrain from employing new representations of women adorned with arms and masculine valour (Golwalkar 1939). This was in keeping with the Hindu nationalist ideal of a militant Hindu woman (*virangana*) like Rani Laxmibai or Durgavati, who fought their adversaries to defend their own honour as well as the honour of their family, community, and country. With the old values of women being adapted on a new model of Hindutva, the scope of women’s agency appeared to have been extended. Rashtra Sevika Samiti, the RSS’s women’s wing founded in 1936, did not completely replicate the RSS’s presentation of women as the suffering *Bharatmata* (mother nation)—a helpless victim who was constantly in danger of sexual assault and in need of protection from her warrior sons. Instead, she has been given various qualities akin to those of the goddesses Kali or Durga so that she may protect herself from any attack or danger. Previously, the idea that Hindu men lacked masculine courage could have been used as a valid argument in favour of women practising the art of self-defence; however, in the Rashtra Sevika Samiti’s discourse, the idea that women would take training on marital arts or discipline the body appeared to be a conscious choice to protect the female body—the alleged marker of the nation’s honour and dignity. The most crucial part was played by the Samiti, however, in regard to the formation of a group of unmarried women workers known as *pracharikas* to disseminate the Samiti’s values in distant places (Raychaudhury 2017, pp. 46–47). In my visit to a north Kolkata apartment in 2015, where regular assemblies of the Samiti were organised with Hindu women, I found

that the speakers or the *sevikas* frequently used references from legendary heroic or valiant women to reinforce a particular view of women as strong, courageous, and potentially militant in their beliefs and actions. Mahua Dhar, an organiser, and representative of the Samiti, however, did not clearly address whether the collective narrative of belligerent motherhood or women-warriorhood promoted by the Samiti aligns with the personal identities or subjectivities of individual women workers and especially the celibate *pracharikas*. These celibate *pracharikas*, those who evolved as a standard model of female renunciation within the greater network of the Hindu nationalist movement, exercise a certain level of autonomy, but this autonomy is confined within the boundaries set by the Hindu religious and cultural context. The celibate workers of the Samiti might have appropriated the ideals of heroic femininity or women-warriorhood as symbols of female strength and courage as depicted in Hindu mythology or history, but, as defenders of Hindutva, they restrict their own freedom based on a perceived sense of threat from the Muslim community. During an informal conversation with Smt Sunita Bhatia, the *prantkaryavahika* (regional secretary) of the Samiti, at a training camp in Rajgarh, Delhi in 2018, she conveyed insights into individual understandings and interpretations of Hindutva. Adhering to a self-practicing standard of celibacy grants the *pracharikas* an amount of leadership authority in order to raise awareness among common Hindu women about their traditional responsibilities within the household, while the former's celibate status and competence in physical fitness contribute to their ability to be proficient in self-protection and self-defence. Most of my respondents present at the training camp as regular *sevikas* of the Samiti, however, informed me about an intriguing dilemma that they encounter as they navigate the complex interplay between traditional gender expectations and their role in furthering a broader ideological agenda. This dilemma underscores the intricate and multifaceted nature of their involvement in the Samiti's activities.

Perhaps in an effort to resolve this conundrum, the women's wing of the Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Durga Vahini, started promoting direct action, rather than a slow but consistent transformation of society in the manner of the Samiti, from the early 1990s. The popularity of the Durga Vahini, however, did not necessarily translate into sustained and consistent activism. One factor contributing to this challenge is the limited scope of their membership, as the organization primarily allowed women between the ages of 15 and 35 to join. The VHP served as a source of guidance and leadership continuity for Durga Vahini, given the latter's potential struggles in maintaining a consistent leadership structure due to its age-restricted membership. It is interesting to note that since its founding in 1964, the VHP, one of the major Hindutva outfits, has shared a longstanding association with the *sadhus* and the spiritual leaders. For a long time, the ascetics associated with the any of the politically inclined organizations like that of the VHP primarily championed a disengagement from political power and formed an "anti-politics" vocabulary against what they saw as moral decay in the country's dominant political culture (Raychaudhury 2022, pp. 949–50). The VHP ascetics may have adhered to the conventional traits of an ascetic lifestyle, such as renunciation of the material world and self-discipline, yet their actions did not appear to be a stereotyped representation of those who live outside of society. Hindutva ascetics proved to be nearly identical to the image of traditional *akhara*-based militant ascetics, who performed various forms of physical exercise and confronted the enemies whenever there was an assault upon their religious and economic interests. Contrary to the "out worldly-passive" ascetics portrayed in colonial records, the Hindutva ascetics surfaced to public consciousness as being intensely interested with socio-political affairs (Farquhar 1925; Lorenzen 1978, p. 63; Pinch 2006, chp. 1).

The Hindutva ascetics of the 20th century, however, partly based on images of heroic ascetics from Dashnami/Naga communities in pre-colonial India, developed a great deal of a nationalist flavour based on the *karma-yoga* (disinterested self-less action) teachings of the *Gita*. Ideals of self-control and selfless service served to recast these ascetics as "masculine" heroes who were engaged in a *dharmayuddha*—a battle for righteousness, as exemplified by the fight for national liberation during colonial times and the Hindutva's war to restore

India to her Hindu grandeur. Since the late 1980s, the VHP partnered with ascetics from the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad, a group of Hindu monastic orders, when the Sangh Parivar sought their involvement in the effort to reclaim the Ram Janmabhoomi at Ayodhya and capitalised on the religious appeal of those monastic orders to transform Hindutva into some sort of holy endeavour. These ascetics took on leadership roles, influenced their followers, and introduced disciples who would go on to become future leaders of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. For example, Swami Paramanand Giri, the first Vice-President of the VHP's Marg Darshak Mandal, showed himself to be the impetus behind enrolling a few women disciples who later developed into sadhvis and went on to become very radical in the Hindutva movement (Banerjee 2003). The Ayodhya affair resulted in a much longer conflict, due to the assertion that Lord Ram was born there, as well as the fierce Muslim opposition to the Ram temple problem. Since the country's independence (1947), the issue of who owns the disputed parcel of land has been legally unresolved; only in the 1980s did the VHP realise that some sadhus' support for the Ayodhya agenda would be extremely advantageous, and the BJP also adopted a strategy of recruiting sadhus to serve as party spokespersons. The VHP sadhus started contesting elections on BJP tickets in the 1990s, and this move projected a strong representation of Hindutva ideology. In contrast to the male sadhus, the engagement of sadhvis with the Hindutva movement was not as transparent or smooth (Pradhan 2009, p. 11). Unlike their male counterparts, female sadhvis did not have an established route to authoritative positions within the religious order. However, the Ram Janmabhoomi movement provided an unprecedented opportunity for these sadhvis to attain power and prestige within the Hindutva movement and highlighted the transformative potential of the movement in providing a space for marginalized voices, especially the so-called "low caste" female ascetics, to rise to positions of authority and influence. Many of the female ascetics within the Hindutva movement emerged from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly from rural north India. They often came from backgrounds that had been historically marginalized and excluded from the English-speaking elite circles of power. Despite their presence and influence in certain regions, these female ascetics had little impact in most of the southern and eastern Indian states, and they were unable to adequately represent the broader spectrum of peripheral voices within Hindu society.

5. Political Activism of the Hindutva Sadhvis

Hindutva organizations have consistently maintained a clear distinction between their general female workers and other women who exercise a form of ascetic power to vocalize opposition against societal decline. By preserving a distinct leadership style, this ascetic category of women may have simultaneously provided intriguing insights into the methods of self-making for themselves and for the ordinary Hindu women. Let me have a quick look at their political profile first.

During the Ram Janmabhoomi event in Ayodhya at the start of the 1990s, two female ascetics, Sadhvi Rithambara and Sadhvi Uma Bharti, became the movement's leading protagonists. Reportedly, Sadhvi Rithambara was born into a poor, lower-caste rural family in Punjab and left home at a young age under the tutelage of her guru, Swami Paramanand Giri. After embracing the life of an ascetic, Rithambara moved into the domain of the Sangh-Parivar, mostly in her capacity as a *pracharika* in the Rashtra Sevika Samiti. Her connection with the Sangh-Parivar, especially with the VHP, became far more prominent during the election campaign of the BJP in the late 80s, and she established herself as one of the most attractive speakers, evoking the message of Hindu Rastra in a fresh, spontaneous manner (Rithambara 2018). Sadhvi Uma Bharti, a feisty speaker and BJP politician, came into contact with Sangh politics at a young age. Born in an agriculturalist family at Madhya Pradesh, she grew in close association with the Sangh-Parivar and joined the BJP early (Ghosh 2022). After receiving sannyasa diksha under the tutelage of Rajmata Vijayraje Sindhia in 1992, she ventured into the Babri Masjid demolition affair at Ayodhya. "Immediately after my deeksha", Uma Bharati recalled, "I was given the responsibility

of mobilising crowds in Ayodhya. ... From Amarkantak, I went to Ayodhya where the Babri structure was demolished and from there I was sent to jail along with Advani-ji" (Ghosh 2022). Even though Sadhvi Rithambara and Uma Bharti both advocated stirring up communal tensions throughout the country during and after the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, they contributed to the development of a new language of authority for women that would soon follow. Interestingly, Rithambara decided to leave party politics after the Ram Mandir incident, while Uma Bharti continued to evolve as a politician in parliamentary politics (Sansad Lok Sabha TV 2018).³ Adopting a hard-line/radical approach towards Hindutva, both asserted that after destroying the Babri mosque—the alleged symbol of a Muslim atrocity committed at the location of Lord Rama's birth—they would reinstate the splendour of the Hindu past by erecting a Ram temple there (Jaffrelot 1996, p. 396). Tearing down the so-called symbol of Muslim tyranny—the Babri mosque—these sadhvis, like true radicals, threatened the existing status quo of Congress politics, provided a plausible explanation for the existential shortcomings of the Hindus, and attempted to replace the symbolic presence of a historic blunder—the Babri mosque—by an authentic representation of the Indian (Hindu) self—the Ram temple. Their enchantment with Hindutva politics was pursued with an ethical content that could have translated into political capital for the political front of the Sangh Parivar—the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP); however, the party's distancing of itself from the communal undertone of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement in later years compelled these radical sadhvis to take a balanced approach towards the Hindutva movement.

The legacy of Sadhvi Rithambara and Uma Bharti continued unabated in subsequent generations of sadhvis, however. Hindutva ascetics lost their solidarity after failing to find a solution for the Ayodhya affair. Few of the so-called low-caste OBC sadhvis like Uma Bharti or Sadhvi Niranjana Jyoti, those who initially contributed to the movement but eventually integrated into the wider political landscape. This indicates a shift from their initial participation in a specific movement to a more inclusive political engagement. In the subsequent phase of sadhvi activism, younger individuals within the Hindutva movement adopted more extremist viewpoints.

Despite their attachment with the BJP, Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur, Sadhvi Prachi, Sadhvi Annapurna, Sadhvi Saraswati, Mahamandaleswar Sadhvi Aastha Ma, Sadhvi Kamal, Sadhvi Deva Thakur and others set out to create a rhetoric of violence by using communal hate speech rampantly and fostering anxiety in the secular culture of the country. They may have acted in accordance with the radical principles of the sadhvis involved in the Ayodhya episode, yet they continued to incite political discomfort in the country by fostering racism, xenophobia, and interreligious hostility targeting a certain religious community. In their discourse of violence, the revivalist elements of Hindu nationalism, or the very core of *desh-bhakti*, appeared dormant. They are the "extremist" representatives of Hindutva in modern India, as I have described them.

6. Strategies of Self-Making: The Saffron Women of Hindutva Politics

Notwithstanding the differences in their approaches and the patterns of their involvement in the Hindutva movements, it would be quite convenient, first, to see how these Hindutva sadhvis implied a degree of politicization of the private roles of women in the public sphere by a unique articulation of certain gender stereotypes. By clarifying the significance of motherhood as an ascetic notion and a nationalist concept without contradicting the conventional expectations of women's biological motherhood, the sadhvis were reorganising the feminine space inside a primarily masculine Hindutva enterprise (Banerjee 2003, p. 176). Since politics itself represents a masculine space in Indian culture, the representation of women capturing an ideal form of femineity seems to be always in tension with the political space. Women embracing biological motherhood contradicts celibacy, or even taking a militant stand in the public sphere. Motherhood, in all its forms, aims to maintain order in the family, society, and nation. It also avoids potential criticism for women's transgression of socially assigned gender norms when they engage in public

activities. Interestingly, these sadhvis revealed that conventional male cultural norms of behaviour should have seeped into the public roles of women, not in isolation of the traditional tropes of womanhood, but rather directly or implicitly. For them, the image of the heroic woman embodying the qualities of bravery and dedication are often associated with the commitment of the mother figure.

Hindutva sadhvis in general had the freedom to defy gender roles because of their virtue and perceived holiness; however, they reduced their individual female agencies to the ideological foundation of the Sangh-Parivar mostly by choice and not by any compulsion. They had to take care, nevertheless, to create a pathway for common Hindu women to participate in the body politic of Hindutva. During the height of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, Rithambara offered women a genuine chance to change the immoral nature of society by exposing them to militant actions through a group known as the Durga Vahini, founded in 1991 under the auspices of the VHP. By teaching young, single women martial arts, self-defence drills, lathi playing, and other skills, it invested in the concept of a “strong” woman who could combat all forms of societal injustices. The official website of Durga Vahini declared, “It is expected from the Durga’s of Durga Vahini that they. . . . launch our nation on to the path of progress; to create a Dharmic atmosphere and to re-establish Dharma by destroying all the wicked and crooked people like Durga Devi did in the ancient times.” (www.vhp.org). (vhp.org). Given her role as a heroic demon-slayer Goddess, Durga was a good fit for the aspirations of Hindu women. She is a committed wife and mother who prioritises her homely affairs, yet in times of need, she steps outside to exterminate male devils. Importantly, she returns to her tranquil space of home after fulfilling her militant public roles (Kovacs 2004).

Although Rithambara emphasized the value of the self-defence training sessions at the Durga Vahini camps, she also seemed to exaggerate the inherent fear of assault among women, particularly from hostile strangers by highlighting the significance of the self-defence training programmes at the Durga Vahini camps. Living with concerns about the sanctity of the female body led women to lose faith in the state-run systems of public safety and motivated them to become independent learners of self-defence (Sen and Jasani 2021, p. 32). Durga Vahini successfully recreated the image of Goddess Durga among the ordinary Hindu women as if they were supposed to fight a battle for the restoration of dharma (righteous order) against the Muslims—who were portrayed as endangering the moral order. When Durga Vahini’s violent training sessions were portrayed in the context of the majesty of the Hindu Goddesses, it greatly increased the courses’ appeal to the vulnerable and marginalised Hindu women. Coincidentally, the majority of Hindutva sadhvis came from lower-middle-class households, backward castes, and reserved castes. The sadhvis’ social vulnerability may have served as a context-specific motivation for including them in the larger Hindutva discourse. In times of necessity, these sadhvis may be observed leveraging their positions of authority to provide new meanings to the latent edifice of *stri-dharma* that had long been in use in society. Hindu men’s failure to uphold their desired roles helped women to cultivate the spirit of militancy, which seems to be regarded as righteous because it was intended to compel men to carry out what they were supposed to do.

We may find Sadhvi Rithambara continually asking Hindu men to demonstrate their masculinity: “if you do not awaken, cows will be slaughtered everywhere. You will be responsible for these catastrophes, for history will say, Hindus were cowards. Accept the challenges. . .” (Kakar 1996). In a similar vein, Uma Bharti urged: “Throw off the cloak of cowardice and impotence. . . learn to sing songs of valour and courage. . .” (Sethi 2002, p. 1551). More recently, when VHP leader and BJP ally Sadhvi Prachi urged Hindu women to have four or more children, she once more brought up the subject of emasculating Hindu men. These Hindutva sadhvis kept returning to the strategy of reversing *stri-dharma* in order to energise and legitimise women’s involvement in the public sphere. The exploration of an alternative form of authority by these sadhvis established a connection to an exclusive desire for masculine traits in and around the concerns about Hindu male effeminacy. The

Hindutva movement's inherent masculinity was palpable for the common women and sadhvis who were active in it. They had no intention of evolving into men. They simply used heroic models of asceticism and femininity to build an exclusive type of authority.

Rithambara and Uma Bharti's strategies of self-making also involved an extension of their ascetic morality towards rescuing the country from its current immorality (News Public 1992). Through harsh "masculine" speeches Sadhvi Rithambara reminded of her audience that the ascetics had been forced to come out of their out-worldly refuge only to restore the state of *dharma* in society, and in this sense, whatever means the ascetics were employing must be treated as part of their spiritual-moral journey. Thus, warrior womanhood was conceived to be an extension of asceticism and femineity: just to reflect on the urgency of establishing the *dharma-rajya*/Hindu Rashtra. "Do you think we want votes? We saints became the emperors of the universe simply by virtue of our claim to the omniscience of Vyas. We do not want political power in Delhi. We want our Ram. We want our Ram Janmabhoomi", suggested Sadhvi Rithambara in one of her public statements (Sethi 2002, p. 1551).

7. Sadhvis Feeding Hindutva after Ayodhya

Hindutva ideology has encouraged a narrative of Hindu suffering and opposition to the religious outsider since before colonial times. The ubiquity of this never-ending depiction of oppression demonstrates how, when the nation is in danger, turning into a warrior woman appears essential for the ordinary Hindu women. As previously indicated, the Hindutva sadhvis utilised their position of pious authority to foster a sense of solidarity, outrage, and hurry, inspiring their followers to engage in physical and verbal acts of violence. Following the Ayodhya incident, they persisted in pleading with women to create a bond between themselves and society so that it would be equally abhorrent to offend or denigrate either. The BJP started to distance itself from the Ram Janmabhoomi movement after the widespread frenzy that followed the demolition of the mosque in Ayodhya. Being a political party, the BJP was aware that if it wanted to continue having power in government, it needed to shift its attention away from the Ram Janmabhoomi controversy. After the Babri mosque was demolished, the women's branch of the BJP adopted a more accepting stance towards the Hindutva cause, but the Durga Vahini and the Sevika Samiti continued to hold onto their radical positions. Nearly all notable Hindutva sadhvis inherited the heritage of resistance from these two women's organisations. A few of them, however, managed to gain political power inside the party in virtue of their individual identity and charismatic endeavours.

It is worth mentioning that, during the Mandal phase of Indian politics (in the mid-1990s), when caste identities gained renewed political significance, and the Mandal Commission recommendations aimed to provide reservations for lower-caste communities in education and employment, the Hindu Right was compelled to address the marginalized voices of lower-caste women. In response to these changing dynamics, the Hindu Right adopted complex strategies towards leveraging these women's identities, either as "low-caste" individuals or as part of the broader "Hindu identity," for political purposes. The Hindutva leaders, however, ensured that such individual levels of authority could in no way spoil the existing social equilibrium; rather, they preferred to promote more lower-caste members into the rank-and-file of the BJP, and formed alliances with parties representing the lower castes. (Dhawan 2019, p. 139). Uma Bharti, who was associated with the VHP from 1969, joined BJP in the 1980s, and later provided effective militant leadership to the Durga Vahini. She continued to hold important political positions both in her home state Madhya Pradesh and in New Delhi. In her lifelong political journey within the Hindutva circle, she received rejection and invitation from the BJP several times, and successfully handled the power dynamics inside the Sangh-Parivar on issues of caste, gender, and Hindutva (NDTV 2006; Times Now 2022).

Following in the footsteps of Sadhvi Uma Bharti, Sadhvi Niranjan Jyoti, who was born in the Nishad community in the Uttar Pradesh village of Partaura in 1967, helped

the BJP to gain support from the Dalit and other underprivileged groups in this politically significant state in the early years of the 21st century. A disciple of Swami Achyutanand, Sadhvi Niranjana Jyoti gained prominence as a “katha-vachak” or storyteller at a young age and according to reports, was influenced by Sadhvi Rithambara and the VHP, particularly during the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. After winning her first assembly election in 2012 on the BJP’s ticket in Uttar Pradesh, she finally managed to enter the Lok Sabha in 2014 and was appointed as a Minister of State. Her performance as a renouncer and as a BJP worker demonstrated a transgression of sex-typed roles, in which Niranjana Jyoti had been granted the privileges of masculine speech, as evidenced by her use of violent metaphors and aggression towards the religious ‘others’. At a public rally in 2014 in Delhi, the Sadhvi uttered a profanity while stating, “*Aapko tay karna hai ki Dilli mein sarkar Ramzadon ki banegi ya haramzadon ki* (You must decide whether you want a government of those born of Ram or of those born illegitimately). (The Indian Express 2014). On her subsequent appearances in riot-torn parts of east Delhi, Niranjana Jyoti continued to warn the enemies with words like: “*bhagwan Shyamsundar ka chakra sudarshankesaamne jo aayega woh bachega nahai* (Whoever comes before the chakra of Shyamsundar, will not live.” (Dasgupta 2015). Despite being a powerful political figure having a significant following, Niranjana Jyoti worked to undermine the pluralist culture of the society and appeared to be constantly eager to jeer and incite the common people. She could be cited as part of the next generation of sadhvis who found employing extremist beliefs and emotions to sustain the spirit of Hindutva in the first two decades of the 21st century.

It appears that the BJP and the Sangh Parivar sought to mobilize the influence and authority of low-caste women ascetics in order to establish a connection between the traditionally privileged upper-caste segments of their support base and the marginalized lower-caste communities. This strategy was aligned with the goal of presenting a cohesive and inclusive image of Hinduism and society by downplaying the significance of caste-based identities and historical injustices that continue to shape people’s experiences. However, the involvement of Hindutva sadhvis from low-caste backgrounds in leadership roles contributed to a more diverse and representative leadership within Sangh-Parivar organizations, such as in the Samiti, where Brahmins historically held dominance, and the Durga Vahini, which has seen a significant representation of individuals from the Baniya caste. During the latter part of the 20th century, the legacy of the first generation of Hindutva sadhvis persisted strongly. However, there was a noticeable shift in focus from constructive activism to a greater emphasis on sporadic reactionary political initiatives.

8. Towards Extremism: Leadership and Narratives

Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur, one of the main defendants in the Malegaon Blast case from 2008, is the most well-known of the subsequent generation of extremist sadhvis. She established early connections with the RSS, Durga Vahini, and the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad. Later, in or around 2008, she joined a new militant group called the Abhinav Bharat (Jaffrelot 2010, pp. 51–58). Unlike Sadhvi Rithambara, who spent most of her time fighting the Islamic invaders in Ayodhya in a metaphorical war, Sadhvi Pragya has been accused of joining a real terror attack by copying the strategies of Islamist jihadists (The Indian Express 2008). The Sangh-Parivar’s ideology appeared to be supportive of the development of an extremist strain of Hindu nationalism in practice, even though the BJP never acknowledged the presence of a concept like Hindu militancy that is, in theory, comparable to Islamic terrorism in the country. For this reason, in 2008, the BJP supported Shiv Sena’s decision to provide the Sadhvi with legal assistance and offered to nominate her as a BJP candidate (India Today 2008). While on bail, Sadhvi Pragya won her first election by a large margin (The Economic Times 2019). The BJP leaders skilfully branded her as a “victim” of a Congress conspiracy in the face of heated backlash from every camp, and reduced media debate on the Malegaon terror attack. When the National Investigating Agency gave her a clean chit in the Malegaon blast case, Pragya Singh Thakur, the disciple of Avedeshananda Giri of the Juna Akhara, was taken back into its fold and offered every

right of the order (Mani 2018). Despite having an antagonistic but articulate influence within the Hindutva group, Sadhvi Pragya had been incapable of seriously enjoying the implications of her saintly authority. Being targeted and cornered by the existing structure of the Akhil Bhartiya Akhara Parishad (ABAP), she decided to form a new akhara, the Bharat Bhakti akhara, in 2019, with herself as the Mhamandaleswr and head of the akhara. Renamed as the Acharya Purnachentanand Giri, Sadhvi Pragya Thakur declared her new akhara to be open to all seers and devotees who would jointly protect the sanatana dharma removing the differences of caste, creed, and religion (Mani 2019). She refused to seek any recognition from the ABAP. Unlike the Durga Vahini or the Sevika Samiti, the new akhara of Sadhvi Pragya seemed to appear a pure ascetic akhara; however, her efforts combined her saintly values with an array of political pursuits like the decision to contest an election even after becoming the Mahamandalesar, which exposed her to harsh criticism from the ascetic community.

It appears that a deeply patriarchal hierarchy of the BJP used sadhvis like Pragya Singh Thakur to propagate their electoral ends but never offered them a proper platform to promote a pro-woman agenda. Even though Thakur declared her suffering and that battle against the enemy Muslims is a battle for all the Hindu women, she reduced her gender activism to the model of a heroic femininity paired with her Hindutva values, vested in the traditional rhetoric of protecting “our” women from “them”. Her aggressive responses to various media sources on love-jihad (the luring and duping of Hindu women into love and marriage by the covert, lustful Muslims) or her provocation of Hindus to be prepared against the enemies continued to expose her extremist position. “Keep weapons in your homes, if nothing else, at least knives used to cut vegetables, sharp. . . Don’t know what situation will arise when”, suggested Sadhvi Pragya while speaking at a Hindu convention in 1922 (ANI 2022). While advocating hatred for Muslims and Christians, she may have produced an extremist paradigm for the Hindutva movement’s hyper-militant activity, but she also lost sight of the core principles of ascetic morality.

The same may be said of all the extremist sadhvis who established a new discourse of extremism in which common women were converted into right-wing fighters and female ascetics into belligerent activists. Sadhvi Prachi, a leader of the VHP and state convenor of the SSP in Uttar Pradesh, is a militant sadhvi of the new generation who was arrested for inciting racial conflict during the Muzaffarnagar riots in 2013, but continued to make provocative comments on numerous occasions. My experience at the *Matri Shakti Sammany Sammelan* on 26 February 2023 at the Tilak Inter College in Firozabad, Uttar Pradesh appeared to be informative. I observed that the audience, which was primarily made up of young female students and local women, found this contentious sadhvi to be rather appealing. In addition, the presence of the regional administration officials offered Sadhvi Prachi a certain level of credibility with the BJP led government at Uttar Pradesh. In keeping with her typical logic, she suggested that to be able to easily escape social vices like love-jihad, Hindu women ought to become *sanskari* (virtuous) mothers and raise *sanskari* daughters. A simple sociocultural initiative aimed at teaching moral lessons to Hindu mothers morphed into a politically driven program that targeted a certain religious group. She spoke with conviction, and the audience applauded. A detailed examination of her remarks would show that she successfully integrated calls for a political action against the religious “others” with traditional ideas of moral parenting, and successfully implied a connection between religion and politics. “Those who do not chant *Bharat Mata ki jai* or *Vande Mataram* insult national flag and those who engage in Cow slaughter have no right to live in India”, suggested Sadhvi Prachi in another public gathering in the Bahraich region of Uttar Pradesh in 2015 (India Today 2015). Following such extremist lines of action, another female ascetic called Sadhvi Annapurna, a *mahamandleshwar* of the *Niranjani* Akhara and General Secretary of the Hindu Mahasabha, made a public appeal for a violent action against religious enemies at the Dharam Sansad of Haridwar in 2021. “Like (Nathuram) Godse, I am ready to be maligned, but I will pick up arms to defend my Hindutva from every demon who is a threat to my religion” (The Wire 2021). Sadhvi

Saraswati, the President of the *Sanatan Dharma Prachar Seva Samiti* and one of the star campaigners of the Sangh-Parivar, went on to castigate the beef-eaters and the seculars as “enemy”, and suggested that, “*Pehle Hindu ko hi Hindu banana hai* (first we need to convert a Hindu to Hindu)—that is our biggest challenge today... Since the day I was born, I had two resolutions. One is to build a temple for Lord Ram and the other to end cow slaughter in India” ([India Today 2021](#)). All these extremist sadhvis, mostly in the BJP-ruled states of India, including Mahamandaleswar Sadhvi Aastha Ma, Sadhvi Kamal of the Rastriya Gau Raksha Dal’s women’s wing, and Sadhvi Deva Thakur of the Hindu Mahasabha, exercise significant power and influence among a variety of segments of the Hindu community.

The ambiguities surrounding Sadhvi’s militant participation in the Hindutva movement—saintly on the one hand and antagonistic on the other—provided a strategical notion of women’s agency that supports verbal and physical depictions of violence in daily politics. Simultaneously, sadhvis like Rithambara, Sadhvi Prachi Arya, Sadhvi Kamlesh Bharti, and Sadhvi Manorama—all them pro-Hindutva ascetics from various religious sects and orders—continued to express their concern for various socio-economic problems, primarily during the Akhil Bhartiya Sadhvi Sammelan—a meeting of the sadhvis affiliated to the VHP and connected to a common platform called the Sadhvi Shakti Parishad (SSP) ([Bevilacqua 2017](#), p. 74). Until now, the SSP has served as a connection point for the right-wing sadhvis representing various facets of the Hindutva movement, in addition to uniting Hindu sadhvis on a single forum.⁴ Sanatani gurus, militant radicals, radical activists, rebel saints, and other pro-Hindutva sadhvis were all protected by the SSP, which also promoted various styles of leadership among these female ascetics. By claiming a sort of strategic alliance with the Hindu Right, these sadhvis flipped the script on their traditional subject position, one which was built around the gendered norms of Hindu nationalism, and eventually gave new meanings to women’s agency as part of a shifting category of cultural relationships both “within and alongside” the dominant discourse of Hindutva ([Arzan 2010](#), p. 54). Despite its close ties to these extremist-militant sadhvis, the BJP frequently believes that it is prudent to distance itself from their purportedly “controversial” statements. By publicly boasting about their extensive political connections when necessary, these sadhvis run the risk of being branded as representatives of a fringe faction within the larger Hindutva network. Additionally, the BJP favours their use in times of elections, particularly when the party feels the need to support *rastravad* and *desh-bhakti* emotions as vital components of Hindu nationalism. The sadhvis thus provide BJP with a special appeal of selflessness and sacrifice that distinguishes the party from other political parties, notably the Congress.

9. Concluding Remarks

In general, the idealised figure of an ascetic in the VHP represented a male character who symbolised the highest form of masculinity in virtue of his refraining from sexual acts and was regarded as an alternative source of authority, one different from priestly power and state power. However, the entry of female ascetics in the greater discourse of Hindutva highlighted their femininity, which accorded them a special power position in the movement. In virtue of their ascetic chastity and purity they seemed far more acceptable as organic leaders of the community and capable of providing a unique leadership for common Hindu women. Irrespective of their style of action in various phases of the Hindutva movement, nearly all these sadhvis invoked the power of warrior mother-Goddesses to motivate ordinary women so that the women can take on activist roles without subverting the fundamental principles of womanhood, while actively creating the space they operate in. By rejecting the normative articulation of a “space” that reflects distinct boundaries between “activism” and “asceticism” in their alleged deployment to the right-wing Hindutva movement, the sadhvis helped to broaden the definitions of women’s agency in the nationalist mainstream. In their capacity as the defenders and saviours of the “national culture,” sadhvis explored the implications of a particular form of agency—daring and rancorous, and apparently impulsive—while involving themselves in the reproduction

of traditional gender relations by fuelling the image of a warrior Goddess like Durga or Kali.

During times of communal unrest, the sadhvis repeatedly cited colonial stereotypes of effeminate, passive, and licentious Hindu men against strong and aggressive Muslim males to reinforce the collective complaints of Hindu women about men in both their community and the Muslim community. In addition to these connotations, the sadhvis continued to be helpful in preserving the Hindutva doctrine in the public's mind, particularly with their efforts to gradually demonise Muslims through claims of polygamy, love-jihad, population growth, and other things. However, these extremist sadhvis selectively used their power only to advance the Hindutva ideology, showing little concern for actual women's problems, regardless of religious affiliations. This is not to downplay the threat posed to the emancipatory spirit of feminism by any form of women's power motivated by hatred, militancy, or violence. Over the long term, a deceptive and fragile pattern of empowerment was fostered by the immediate paradox of an acclamation of both ascetic submission and militant activism, as well as the ways it was merged into the Hindutva doctrine.

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Notes

- ¹ The term Hindutva, popularised by V.D Savarkar in 1923, means Hindu-ness. It forms the structure of the belief system called Hindu nationalism and seeks to become a movement working towards the objective of reclaiming of India as a Hindu Rastra. The right-wing Hindu nationalist organizations used the ideology of Hindutva to establish Hindu cultural supremacy in India.
- ² Leading Hindu nationalists like Swami Shraddhananda, M.N. Malviya, V.D. Savarkar and others championed the idea of a sangathan, or organisation, as a means of uniting Hindus. The entire Sangathan movement was organised and carried out in the name of the Hindu Mahasabha in the 1920s.
- ³ Ten days after the destruction of the Babri Masjid, Prime Minister Narsimha Rao appointed the Liberhan Commission to probe into the demolition and the communal riots in its aftermath. The Central government led by Prime Minister Narsimha Rao passed the Acquisition of Certain Areas at Ayodhya Act and acquired 67.7 acres of land in and around the Babri Masjid complex.
- ⁴ The Sadhvi Shakti Parishad was established in 1998. The official website of the ([Viswa Hindu Parishad 2021](#)) claims that this parishad was formed with an aim of creating a sense of social unity, equality, concordance, and mutual progress to achieve both the material welfare and spiritual well-being" for the "Hindu sisters and mothers".

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