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Prayer and Power in the Sangh Parivar

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Prayer and Power in the Sangh Parivar*

Kalyani D. Menon**

While conducting fieldwork with women in various organizations affiliated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in Delhi (Sangh Parivar), I observed the frequency of group prayer not just at religious ceremonies, but also at rallies, *shakhas*, schools, and vocational training classes.¹ I quickly recognized that these rituals of prayer were not just expressions of piety, but were deeply inscribed with Hindutva politics. Indeed, ideas that have become hallmarks of right-wing Hindutva ideology² —that India belongs to Hindus and that Muslims and Christians have no place in the nation—were produced and reproduced through these performances. These instances revealed the power of religion as a medium of politics for the Sangh Parivar in India. A powerful force in the everyday lives of individuals, religion is more than an expression of devotion; it shapes peoples' understanding of themselves, of others, and of their world. Focusing on prayers, rituals, and other forms of religious expression written, recited, and performed by members of the Sangh Parivar, I examine how they employ rites, images, and concepts common in Hindu traditions, to disseminate their constructions of nation and subject and recruit new members into their exclusive imagined community (Anderson 1983).

The rise of religious militancy the world over, and the increasing assertion of the religious in the public sphere—whether one examines the politics of the Sangh Parivar in India or the religious right in the United States—suggests that expanding our understanding of the

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religious to include its frequent manifestation as a vehicle for political expression is critical at this historical moment. As Talal Asad (1993, 2003) and others (Butler 2011:71) have argued, the presumed separation of religion from politics, and the imaging of a public sphere shielded from religious influences (à la Habermas 1989),³ is itself the product of a prevailing religious imagination. Indeed, creating a disjuncture between the religious and the political cannot explain the resurgence of the religious in political life and implies, rather simplistically, that such expressions are simply corruptions of a “real” religion that can (and should) be disentangled from the political (see Asad 2003). Building on Asad’s key contention, that it is in the social and political world that religious symbols are invested with meaning (1993), I consider the religious practices of the Sangh Parivar as deeply political acts, *as a form of the political*, that intervene in the public sphere to construct the very nation that they claim as their *raison d’être*. Here I explore the relationship between prayer and power, tracing how religious acts performed by women in the Sangh Parivar produce and sustain their ideology in the public sphere.

While individuals engage in prayer and ritual for multiple and complex reasons, I focus on the political project of nation building to examine how religious expressions operationalize particular imaginings of nation and subjects that reiterate the normative constructions of the Sangh Parivar. Judith Butler has argued that our constructions of the world rely on “ritualized productions” (Butler 1993:13) which, like the religious acts described below, evoke particular ideological norms. Building on Derrida’s argument that a discursive structure requires repeated performance to sustain its existence (Butler 1997:13), Butler contends that the ontology of the gendered subject is produced through “ritualized productions” that continuously “cite” the discursive norms that create them and, in so doing, sustain their regulatory power and their existence (1993:13). Butler is clear that these “ritualized productions” are not simply a matter of choice, but are performed within fields of power (1993:95), what Michel Foucault calls the regulatory power of discourse (1980).

Prayers and rituals written and performed by Sangh Parivar women also occur within fields of power that regulate the performance and

enable the production of the nation and subject of Hindutva. Importantly, as Butler notes (1997:14), regardless of such regulatory power dissonant acts are always a possibility, instigating instability in ideological structures and heralding the possibility of change. However, while elsewhere I have examined the dissonant acts of Sangh Parivar women and analysed their potential significance (Menon 2010), in this essay I am concerned with how their religious acts produce and reproduce the movement's ideological norms. Drawing on a textual analysis of prayers and writings from pamphlets published by Sangh Parivar women's organizations, and on fieldwork conducted with women in various wings of the movement based in Delhi, I examine how religion enables women activists to position themselves as players in the construction of the Hindu nation, reiterate the normative constructions of the movement, and set in motion particular inclusions and exclusions that demarcate the boundaries of belonging.

The Children of Bharat Mata

Although there is a great deal of heterogeneity in the Sangh Parivar (Menon 2010, Hansen 1999),⁴ there are also certain ideas that are consistently reiterated in Sangh Parivar discourse. These include the imaging of India as a sacred land formed by the body of the goddess Bharat Mata and of Hindus as the children of Bharat Mata. Such constructions enable Sangh Parivar activists to link religion, territory and people and claim that Hindus have a privileged place in the nation. These ideas were often evident in performances of group prayer that I witnessed while conducting research—in their lyrics, in the personas of the worshipers, and indeed in the body politic created through performance. Most men and women present participated enthusiastically in singing hymns, performing *arti* (worship), making offerings, and taking *prasad* (blessed food) whether or not they were members of the particular Sangh Parivar group organizing the event. At these events, Sangh Parivar activists powerfully draw on religious ideas, images, and rituals that are already part of the everyday religious worlds of many Hindus in their efforts to appeal to followers and potential recruits, and disseminate their constructions of nation and subject.

To illustrate this I begin with an analysis of a prayer, authored by the Rashtra Sevika Samiti (henceforth, Samiti), a Sangh Parivar women's group founded in 1936 by Lakshmi Bai Kelkar to create a place for women in the movement. The prayer, "*Bharat Mata Ki Arti*" (Rashtra Sevika Samiti N.d.(b)), is from a pamphlet published by the Samiti:

Glory to Bharat Mata, Mother Glory to Bharat Mata
You gave us life, our kinship is indelible

You are Lakshmi, Durga, Jagadamba, Amba, Mother Kali
Those who worship you daily will receive happiness and
success

In the North, the Himalaya Mountains form your head
The Indian Ocean washes your feet in the South

Indian-ness is synonymous with our humanity, auspicious
mother of the world

Your love nourishes (*piyush*) us constantly, we get our life
from you

Hindustan is for Hindus, this is the true mantra mother
Those who worship you night and day, they gain *shakti*
(power), and give life to the nation

Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs and Vaishnavas, you are their
mother

We should leave aside differences, Glory to Bharat Mata

For the unity of the Hindu nation, Keshav ascends
The *shakti* of Lakshmi and Saraswati, vitalizes us

Our bodies, minds, and wealth are yours, Mother
everything is yours

By offering to you, what love is mine

If one daily sings a hymn of praise to Bharat Mata
One receives *shakti* in the body, devotion in the heart, and
strength and determination.⁵

In the prayer, the imaging of Hindus as the children of Bharat Mata



signifies a unified identity for Hindus across the diverse traditions of Hinduism in India and, as we shall see, across religious divides too. A relatively new form of the goddess, Bharat Mata has become central to Sangh Parivar attempts to depict India as a Hindu nation. As with most iconographic depictions of the Goddess Bharat Mata, in this prayer the body of the goddess is etched onto the topography of India, her head crowned by the Himalayas in the north, while her feet, in a gesture evoking Hindu ritual worship, are washed by the Indian Ocean to the south.

The writing, publication, and performance of the prayer operationalizes an image of India as Bharat Mata's body, superimposes culture on territory (see Ferguson and Gupta 1992), and by creating inclusions and exclusions, are deeply "political" acts (see Schmitt 2007). Indeed, following Butler, it is through repetitive performances like these that Hindutva constructions of the nation and the subject are produced, reproduced, and sustained in the world.

The prayer suggests that Bharat Mata is both the site of the nation and its source. She is mother and territory—providing not one, but two ineluctable links between Hindus and the nation. In a different prayer—the daily prayer of the Samiti—India is referred to as both motherland and sacred land (*matri bhumi* and *punya bhumi*), again referencing the dual nature of the connection of Hindus to India. Indeed, this representation — repeatedly cited in prayer, image, speech, and act—attempts to position Hindus as the privileged inheritors of the nation by implying that Hindus alone can articulate *both* a genealogical and a sacred claim to place. Thus, regardless of the intention of the participants, each recitation of the prayer makes a cartographic claim and sets in motion a particular construction of the national community apparently united by its relationship to the goddess. The prayer suggests that these are the children of Bharat Mata whose kinship with the goddess is indelible because she gave them life, and is strengthened daily through acts of worship. Who are these children? The prayer says:

Hindustan is for Hindus, this is the true mantra mother
Those who worship you night and day, they gain *shakti*,
and give life to the nation



Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs and Vaishnavas, you are their
mother

We should leave aside differences, Glory to Bharat Mata.

The first stanza asserts that Hindustan belongs to Hindus.⁶ Who are these Hindus? The second stanza suggests that Hindus are those who can trace their genealogy to Bharat Mata and consciously identifies Jains, Buddhists, and Sikhs as the children of Bharat Mata. While the nation, and the political cartography of “India” is a product of modernity and should not be projected back into the 7th – 4th centuries BCE when Jainism and then Buddhism emerged, or even into the 16th century when Sikhism was founded, the claim here is that religions that emerged on the territory of India are Hindu. Indeed, for many Sangh Parivar activists I spoke to, Hindus are primordially linked to the territory of an India that spills beyond its modern borders—what they call *akhand Bharat* or undivided India. As Payal, a young woman in the Samiti informed me, “A Hindu is anyone who loves India. Hindus were the original inhabitants of the land around the Indus River and we are all their descendants. If we love the land that is called “Bharat” (India) stretching from the Indian Ocean to the Indus River, then we are Hindus. It is not only a religion. We should stop thinking in terms of sects.”

Important here is Payal’s assertion that “Hindu” is not a religious identity, but a genealogical one that grounds Hindu claims to India. It includes not just those who religiously identify as Hindus, but also those who the movement wants to embrace within the reach of the nation. Her claim is a reiteration of the image captured in the prayer composed by her organization—that Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Vaishnavas are *all* the children of Bharat Mata, are *all* Hindus, and are *all* part of the Hindu nation. Although Jains, Buddhists, and Sikhs might balk at being labeled Hindu, the prayer operationalizes in the world the national community envisioned by Samiti women.

The stanza contains an easy glossing of distinct religious traditions (Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism) with a Hindu sect—the Vaishnavas. While the singling out of Vaishnavism over other traditions of Hinduism may have something to do with its popularity in contemporary India—

particularly given the resurgence of Vishnu's incarnation Rama for many Hindus in North India as a direct result of Hindutva mobilization⁷—an implicit suggestion here is that Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism are not distinct religious traditions, but akin to sectarian affiliations within Hinduisms.

This construction of the national community is central to the Sangh Parivar and has been reiterated in the practices of many of its groups for decades. For example, let us turn for a moment to a hot July afternoon in 1999, when I attended a “Vedic” *yajna* (fire sacrifice) in New Delhi organized by the Sangh Parivar organization—the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). Called the “*Yajna* for National Safety,” the ritual was being performed against the backdrop of the Kargil War being fought between India and Pakistan from May to July 1999. As I walked under the canopy that had been constructed for the event, I saw that it was filled with people, mostly young boys, seated on red *daris* (rugs) spread over the concrete driveway outside the annex to the Constitutional Club on Rafi Marg. The young boys, from different schools affiliated with the VHP in Delhi, were reciting Sanskrit verses (*shlokhas*) in unison. In their midst was a smaller group of eight men, later joined by two more, seated near a metal container which enclosed the fire for the ritual sacrifice. I was informed that these men included the two priests performing the fire sacrifice, the head of the Rashtriya Sikh Sangh (National Sikh Organization), a Sikh representative from the Gurudwara Committee,⁸ the head of the VHP cow protection movement, a former lieutenant general and a former colonel of the army, and a representative from the Bharatiya Janata Party, which was then heading the National Democratic Alliance, NDA for short, that was in power at that time.

The use of the ancient Vedic ritual of the fire sacrifice in modern India is an interesting point in itself. The actual Vedic ritual is rarely performed nowadays, in part because of the many rules and specifications required by it. Conceived in the ancient manuals of ritual composed between 1500–600 BCE, the rite was central to Vedic Hinduism and required the offering of substances like ghee into the sacred fire. Stephanie Jamison argues that the fire sacrifice was always performed by priests on behalf of a married male householder

(*yajamana*) who was required to have his wife present at the ritual (1996:30–32). In Vedic contexts, all those participating in the ritual would have to be in a state of ritual purity. While clearly the concept of a “Hindu” is a modern one, all those participating in the ritual would probably have subscribed to a shared religious lexicon.

The important point here is that the VHP fire sacrifice, while purportedly a “Vedic” ritual did not meet these specifications. For one, the male “sacrificers” did not have their wives present — indeed there were only six women (including myself and the VHP women I had come with) present in the audience. While some of the sacrificers arrived before me, the two who arrived later simply walked off the street, took off their footwear, and seated themselves near the sacred fire with no attempt at purification. The point here is not that the VHP was performing the ancient ritual incorrectly. Rather, I highlight these differences so we can think about the meanings and implications of this particular performance of the ritual. Rituals are not just reflections of static religious worldviews, but, as Victor Turner argued many years ago, can set in motion new understandings of the world and of communities (Turner 1969, 1975). More recently, scholars like Saba Mahmood and Lara Deeb have shown us how central rituals are to articulating politics, constructing subjectivity (Mahmood 2005:119–124), and imagining new forms of community in the modern world (Deeb 2006:104–105, 129–164; Dempsey 2006: 191–208, van der Veer 1994). The VHP fire sacrifice too was a complex cultural production that hoped to disseminate the Sangh Parivar’s understandings of community and subjectivity, even as it provided an occasion for devotional expression.

The VHP performance of the fire sacrifice enabled its members to suggest that the Hinduism they subscribed to was not modern at all, but rather derived from the Vedas. Yet, while ostensibly committed to infusing “Vedic” values in Hindu society, a project that both reveals and reinforces the strongly upper-caste biases of the Sangh Parivar, VHP activists clearly have their own notions of what “Vedic” Hinduism is. Indeed, while the deployment of the term “Vedic” is a claim to authenticity enabling the Sangh Parivar to identify with an ancient upper-caste Sanskritic ritual practice, the disregard for ritual purity and the



inclusion of Sikhs, illuminates the construction of a new nationalist Hinduism that can bind together people from disparate traditions. This ritual, as indeed the prayer to which I will return momentarily, attempts to create a political identity that can potentially unite many Hindus belonging to diverse traditions, and also Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains.⁹ Butler argues that the ontology of the subject is produced through performative acts that cite specific constructions of the world (1993). Both the Samiti prayer and the VHP fire sacrifice “cite” a particularly Hindutva construction of the world, and are central to understanding the Sangh Parivar’s appeal, reach, and expansionary power in contemporary India.

Shakti, Hindus, and “Others”

Nationalism, as the late postcolonial scholar Eqbal Ahmad often asserted, “is an ideology of difference” (Barsamian 2000:2). While Sangh Parivar prayers and rituals produce an imagined Hindu nation, they simultaneously produce difference and enable the exclusions on which this Hindu nation is built. As such, these rituals and prayers can be understood as a form of the political, generating notions of community and belonging that are built around difference (Schmitt 2007). Returning once more to the Samiti, and its prayer, *Bharat Mata ki Arti*, the Hindu concept of *shakti*, power, is used to generate this politics of difference between Hindus and “others”. In one reference to *shakti* the prayer states: “Those who worship you night and day, they gain *shakti*, and give life to the nation.” The daily prayer of the Samiti, which all members are required to memorize, refers to Bharat Mata as *vishwashakti*, the *shakti* of the universe, and asserts that she created “this great Hindu nation” (1999b:5). The implication of these assertions are worth examining.

Susan Wadley defines *shakti* as a “female generative force ... fundamental to all action, to all being in the Hindu universe” (1980a:ix). Wadley argues that, “every being of the universe embodies its share of *shakti*”, and consequently “everything in the universe is potentially a powerful being” (1975:55). In Wadley’s analysis, deities like Bharat Mata, have more power than ordinary human beings, and it is precisely this power that defines how humans should act relative to deities

(Wadley 1975:55,186). Thus it follows that people's access to *shakti* is not unconnected to their place in the world and shapes how others must act relative to them (1975:184). If this is so, in these Samiti prayers what is being said about the relationships between Hindus and the goddess, and, importantly, between Hindus and "others"?

Despite her recent provenance, the depiction of Bharat Mata as the *shakti* of the universe is consistent with representations of the goddess found in many Hindu traditions. While there are many goddesses in Hinduism, many Hindus consider them as various manifestations of the one — Devi — who embodies *shakti*. In *Bharat Mata ki Arti*, Bharat Mata is depicted as one of a constellation of ancient forms of the goddess (Lakshmi, Durga, Jagadamba, Amba, Kali, Saraswati) worshipped throughout India.

The prayer constructs a landscape vitalized by Bharat Mata's *shakti*, and repeatedly asserts that the children of Bharat Mata are imbued with her *shakti* through daily prayer. Here the act of prayer is represented as an act of production, not just devotion, one that generates *shakti*. For instance, the last line claims that daily hymns of praise to the goddess will enable 'shakti in the body, devotion in the heart, and strength and determination'. This belief in the productive capacity of prayer is reiterated in other Samiti documents. In a discussion about the importance of prayer in a Samiti pamphlet, the author notes:

Prayer is of great importance in the life of a Hindu. Performing daily prayer is the key to recalling goals and awakening *shakti*. Swami Vivekananda used to say that if even a weak person repeats daily at a specific time, 'I am strong' then after a while s/he (*vah*) truly becomes strong. Sister Nivedita had the same view. She used to say, 'for a few moments daily, in the prescribed manner at an established place, joined together with one thought if we meditate with Bharat Mata in our hearts, then *shakti* will burst out there'. Sister Nivedita's saying became true when Dr. Hedgewar instructed Hindu youth to assemble daily at an established place to perform Bharat Mata's prayer.

Vandaniya Mausiji showed Hindu women this path to awakening *shakti* in 1936. Bharat's (India's) girls (*kanya*) also began to say the daily prayer at the instruction of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti. [Rashtra Sevika Samiti n.d.(a):8]¹⁰

The author suggests that both Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS, and Lakshmibai Kelkar (referred to here as Mausiji), the founder of the Samiti, saw a connection between the daily performance of group prayer and the awakening of *shakti* in the hearts of Hindus in India. Indeed, as Corinne Dempsey has shown in her ethnography, *The Goddess Lives in Upstate New York* (2006:41–43,45), this connection between prayer and power is made in many Hindu traditions wherein ritual acts like prayer are believed to forge a connection between devotees and god, while also enabling the production of sacred power within individual devotees and in the world. Thus, drawing on prevalent Hindu understandings of sacred power, the above excerpt suggests that rituals of prayer not only instigate a change in inner disposition, but also, performed in groups, effect change on the exterior — on the group, on the nation, on the world.

While the prayer claims that Hindus gain and produce *shakti* through daily worship, it also implies a more corporeal connection between Hindus and the goddess' *shakti*. For instance, it states, 'Your love nourishes us constantly, we get our life from you.' In the original Hindi prayer, the word used to convey the idea of nourishment is *piyush*. *Piyush* refers to Biestings (colostrum), the first milk given by a cow (or other mammal) to her calf, which is packed with nutrients and antibodies to boost immunity and strength. The prayer claims that Hindus are sustained by Bharat Mata's *piyush*, a substance that has a formative influence on their constitution, and, in that sense, is constant, the very source of their *shakti*.

While, there are many discordant tones within the Sangh Parivar (Menon 2010), a normative construction that forms the very bedrock of the movement is that India is a Hindu nation. It is this idea that is articulated in this prayer, through the claim that Hindus' access to *shakti*—through birth *and* through worship—gives them a privileged claim to the nation. But what of those who are not Hindu? Do they

belong? A conversation I had with an elderly woman in the Samiti illuminates these questions. Speaking of Muslims and Christians, she told me, ‘They were all Hindus once. After all before they became Muslims and Christians they were Hindu, weren’t they?’ Here, the relationship of Muslims and Christians to the nation/goddess is mediated through the claim that they were once Hindu. In the same conversation, the woman said she had no problem with Muslims as long as they stopped turning to Mecca to pray and realized that god was in India and not elsewhere. While such an act would clearly be proscribed for Muslims for whom only god (not a nation or territory) must be worshipped, the woman suggests that they demonstrate loyalty to India by worshipping the land as Bharat Mata. According to this woman, the unwillingness of Muslims to worship Bharat Mata daily reinforces her imaging of them as disloyal children who now claim allegiance to other gods/places. This, in her mind, structures their relationship to the nation. Indeed for her, as for many others in the Sangh Parivar, Muslims and Christians may be able to claim a genealogical link, but they cannot breach the sacred boundaries of the Hindu nation.

Urvashi provided a slightly different take on the relationship between Hindus and ‘others’ in India. A member of the VHP, the organization at the forefront of the Ramjanmabhumi movement,¹¹ her words highlight the multiplicity of views within the Sangh Parivar while still reiterating the normative construction that India is a Hindu nation. I quote her below not to underscore the now banal argument that—to borrow from Laclau and Mouffe—no culture or ideological system is a ‘sutured totality’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:106), but because it is this very multiplicity that is central to understanding the dominance of the Sangh Parivar in India (Menon 2010). As I argue in my book, this multiplicity enables different wings of the movement to address and recruit different constituencies. Speaking of the proposed Rama Temple, Urvashi said:

Hindus felt that there was a Ram temple on his birthplace. But when they are trying to build the temple there then others should not object.... When in our country all this is not there, our country is such that no matter what blood (*khun*) you belong to you are free to live like that. We are a free

country. So others do not have the right to come and live in our country and interfere and disturb us. This country is a country for Hindus.

Here, Urvashi argues that India belongs to Hindus and suggests that this belonging is grounded in a primordial claim linked to blood. In her mind, although people of all 'bloods' can live here according to their customs, it is imperative they remember that it is Hindu blood that courses through the veins of the nation. Where earlier Muslims were viewed as disloyal children, here they are conceived as unrelated to Hindus. In Urvashi's mind, Muslims and Christians can follow their religions and build their places of worship in India even though, in her view, 'in our country all this is not there'. However, she believes it is important for them to not 'interfere' with Hindu sentiments and claims to place. In Urvashi's words, Muslims and Christians are irrevocably 'other', infused with foreign blood and therefore definitively cast outside the boundaries of the nation. Yet, for the purposes of this essay, it is important to note that despite these differences, the constructions of social order in Urvashi's statement also reflect the religious ideology disseminated in Samiti prayers. Indeed, these examples illustrate Talal Asad's point (1993), that the social, the political, and the religious reinforce each other, make each other meaningful, and in that sense are inseparable.

Shakti and Hindu Nationalist Women

Returning now to the Hindu concept of *shakti*, in the last section of this essay I want to discuss how this common Hindu concept is used to recruit Hindu women into Samiti politics. According to a lesson in a Samiti pamphlet designed to train young girls, Samiti founder, Lakshmibai Kelkar, believed that women have the goddess' *shakti*. The lesson states, 'Women are always considered weak but she [Kelkar] used to say that mothers have [Goddess] Durga's *shakti*' (Rashtra Sevika Samiti 1999a). The suggestion that women have the goddesses' power is not unusual in traditions of Hinduism, and Kelkar's suggestion that mothers are strong because they have Durga's *shakti*, would resonate with many Hindus (see Hildebeitel and Erndl 2000:11).

In Lakshmi Bai Kelkar's view, women's superior powers come from accepting the roles and responsibilities of motherhood, as defined by many in the Sangh Parivar — being self-sacrificing and chaste, raising children nurtured in the values of the movement, and being committed to the Hindu nation (see Bacchetta 2004, Sarkar 1995, Basu 1995). Mamta, a young woman affiliated with the VHP's Durga Vahini,¹² clarified that having *shakti* is very different from the freedoms that many women might want today. She said, 'Girls today want to be free. We ask them, do you want to be free or strong "[*mukti ya shakti*]'"? In Samiti discourse, *shakti* is a divine power that comes from the goddess and inspires women to act. The daily Samiti prayer says, 'It is by your compassion that we have the means to unite to support this divine path'. Later the prayer asks, 'Create in us the divine *shakti* with which we can destroy depravity and bad tendencies. (With the knowledge of self restraint and love)¹³ we can urge our fathers, sons, kinsman/friends (m. *bandhu*), and husbands to follow the moral course' (Rashtra Sevika Samiti 1999b:5).

It is important to note that the prayer not only suggests that women have divine *shakti*, but also that this *shakti* enables them to change the world around them, indeed to operationalize Hindutva politics in their social milieus. These texts suggest that the goddess' *shakti* gives women an important role in the nation, centering women— particularly chaste, married women—in Samiti ideology. This centering of women is also echoed in songs taught to members of the Samiti (Rashtra Sevika Samiti 1999c:17):

Get up sisters the country's mother (Vasundhara) is calling
 In your veins flows the blood of Siya Ram,
 Mother Jija, Lakshmi and noble Rajputis
 If you start walking then all of India will start walking with you.¹⁴

Here it is women who must lead the nation by recognizing their connection to deities like Rama and Lakshmi, and to women like Shivaji's mother Jijabai, and heeding the call of Vasundhara, the nation's mother. This centering of women in Samiti discourse, as Paola Bacchetta notes (2004), creates a place for women in the nation and potentially draws women into the movement. Most importantly,



women's power is depicted as essential to realizing the political aspirations of the Sangh Parivar, and their acts—however chauvinistic, exclusionary, and violent—are portrayed as a response to the goddess' call and enabled by her power.

Whether drawing on prevalent notions of *shakti*, understandings of the goddess familiar to many Hindus, rites of worship performed in many Hindu traditions, or rituals like the Vedic sacrifice which are greatly revered, members of the Sangh Parivar use religion to disseminate their ideological norms. Like those belonging to the religious right in other countries and contexts, for Sangh Parivar activists, religious imagery and practice are a powerful means of political expression. In an India fractured by differences of class, caste, religion, sectarian affiliation, region, ethnicity, and education, to speak of 'a' Hindu community is an absurdity. And yet, it is an absurdity that the Sangh Parivar is keen to remedy since religious identity is their basis for political mobilization. Using religious symbols and practices from multiple sects, drawing on concepts and rites of worship that are shared by many, members of the Sangh Parivar attempt to build community, in this case one marked by upper caste ideologies and violent exclusions.

As an institution so germane to the everyday existence of so many, religion provides a common language through which organizations within the Sangh Parivar can recruit new members. Indeed, it is precisely because religion is so central to how people imagine their worlds and construct their selves that it continues to be a powerful force in the public sphere. And yet, the public sphere is a space of contestation, one in which the forces of purity and exclusion vie against those of acceptance and pluralism. Ultimately, which of these forces prevails will be determined by ordinary people who choose, often against powerful forces of compulsion, to dissent. In South Asia, where boundaries between religious traditions are fluid (Gottschalk 2000), where powerful traditions of debate and contestation exist (Marsden 2006), and where there is a strong tendency towards what Michael Carithers calls polytrophy, wherein people turn to multiple traditions to deal with issues that confront them in their daily lives (Carrithers 2000:833–834), the possibility of more inclusive conceptualizations of community remains in the face of violent assertions of exclusion.

Conclusion

People engage in religious acts for complex reasons. Most of the members of the Sangh Parivar I worked with were deeply religious. Their participation in group prayer was often motivated by profound devotion, even if it was also inspired by other sentiments like the desire for camaraderie, the pleasures of belonging, the pressure of conformity, the compulsions of habit, or the politics of the movement. Yet regardless of intent, their acts enabled what Butler calls ‘ritualized productions’ that cite Hindutva norms and thereby enable and mobilize its constructions of India as a nation of Hindus with primordial ties to the nation, where Muslims and Christians can only ever be ‘others’ and cannot belong. The two Sikh gentlemen sitting around the tin can fire might well have resisted the idea of inclusion in a ‘Hindu nation’, and their participation in the ritual might simply illustrate the ‘polytropy’ that Michael Carrithers (2000) argues is the norm in India. However, their placement amongst a group of sacrificers still enabled an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983) that included Sikhs and Hindus, but excluded ‘others’. Someone singing the prayer to Bharat Mata might look askance at the erasure of Muslims and Christians from the list of those who could claim to be the children of Hindustan. But as the words tumble from their lips to join the lusty tones of others singing in unison, they still cite a construction of India that places Muslims and Christians beyond the nation’s boundaries.

In a world witnessing the resurgence of the religious right, we need to examine more closely how social movements use the power of religion to draw people into their embrace and include them in their performances and constructions of the world. Prayers written, recited, and heard daily by Samiti women, or grand Vedic fire sacrifices performed and witnessed in an extraordinary moment of war, reiterate, cite, and thereby perpetuate the Sangh Parivar’s constructions of self and ‘other’, of nation and subject, and of inclusions and exclusions that provide the bedrock for extreme violence in contemporary India. It is in this sense that the Sangh Parivar’s religious practices are best understood *as a form of the political*, that can generate the exclusionary cartographies of nation and belonging that sustain the Hindu Right in India.

Notes

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² I am drawing on definitions of right wing political movements by Bacchetta and Power 2002:4 and Durham and Power 2010:2.

³ In later years, Habermas examines the relationship between religion and the public sphere (Habermas 2011).

⁴ For more on the Sangh Parivar see Sarkar 2002, Jaffrelot 1999, Basu 1995, Sarkar 1995. For more on the Samiti see Bacchetta 2004.

⁵ Lakshmi, Durga, Jagadamba, Amba, Kali, and Saraswati are Hindu goddesses. Vaishnavas are a Hindu sect that considers Vishnu the Supreme Being. Keshav is another name for the Hindu god Krishna.

⁶ The juxtaposition of Hindus and Hindustan casts India as a Hindu land. Although the term Hindustan (literally, Hindu place) has been used to refer to India for millennia, until the modern period, the term 'Hindu' designated a religiously diverse group of people living south of the Indus River. Shifting understandings of terms like "Hindu" and "Hindustan" enable Hindu nationalists to stake their claim to the nation by asserting a primordial connection.

⁷ For more on the resurgence of Rama see van der Veer 1994.

⁸ A Gurudwara is a Sikh house of worship.

⁹ It is important to note here, that while such rituals and prayers attempt to

create Hindu unity, their caste and regional biases may render such attempts only partially successful.

¹⁰ A Hindu renouncer of the Ramakrishna Order, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) is credited with bringing Hinduism to the west in his speech at the World Parliament of Religion in Chicago in 1893, and for trying to reconcile the principles of renunciation with those of nationalism during the Indian independence movement (Khandelwal 2004:115). Sister Nivedita (Mary Elizabeth Noble) was born in Ireland in 1867. She joined Swami Vivekananda's Ramakrishna Order and supported Indian nationalism during colonialism. Hedgewar was the founder of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Vandaniya (venerated) Mausiji (mother's sister) refers to Lakshmibai Kelkar, founder of the Samiti.

¹¹ The Sangh Parivar claims that the mosque, built during the reign of the Mughal emperor Babur (1526–1530), stood at the birthplace of God Rama. While secular scholars dispute this, Sangh Parivar activists claim that a temple marking Rama's birthplace was destroyed to build the mosque and must be 'rebuilt.' The movement to build the temple has fueled violence between Hindus and Muslims in India since the 1980s.

¹² Durga Vahini is an organization for girls and young women affiliated with the VHP.

¹³ Parenthesis in original.

¹⁴ Siya Ram refers to Sita and Rama of the ancient Hindu epic, the Ramayana. Mother Jija (Jijabai) is the mother of the 17th Century Hindu king Shivaji. Hindu nationalists believe, rather simplistically, that he fought against Muslim rulers to establish a Hindu kingdom in India (for more see Menon 2005). Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth and Vishnu's consort. Rajputis are women of the Rajput warrior caste in northern India.

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