

Hindu Nationalism and the Political role of Hindu Women: Ideology as a Factor

Syed Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi

University of Peshawar, Peshawar

ABSTRACT

In The relationship of women to religious politics is not only paradoxical, it is also complex. Where it can be argued that religious politics has created opportunities for women, it can equally be argued that it has simultaneously undermined women's autonomy. Gender has emerged in Hindu nationalism as a politicised entity whereby Hindu women are depicted as the repositories of religious beliefs and the keepers of purity and integrity of the Hindu community. Hence, in order to understand the role played by Hindu women in Hindu nationalist politics, it is important to recognize the grass-roots of such politics and the form it has taken in recent years.

KEY WORDS: Hindu, Politics, Muslim, BJP & Violence

Introduction

Hindu nationalism, with its 'complementarity and contradiction' (Basu et al, 1993 viii), has long 'operated with two faces' (Basu et al, 1993: vii), a complexity that is echoed in the limited means of political assertion it provides for women. Though the movement presents 'a gentle face, symbolized in L.K Advani's beatific smile,' it also projects one that is 'angry, aggressive and savagely sectarian' as expressed 'in the speeches of Sadhvi Rithambara and Uma Bharati' (Basu et al, 1993: vii). While Hindu nationalism may preach both democracy and authoritarianism, its aim encapsulated in Savarkar's slogan to "Hinduize politics and militarize Hinduism" involves a 'specific construction of Hindu self – a virile, masculine, aggressively communal self' which is intolerant 'of other conceptions of Hinduism' (Basu et al, 1993: ix). This inherent conviction in Hinduism of a male ideal, challenges the notion that the provision for Hindu women's political assertion could ever be a simple issue on the nationalist agenda.

In order to assess whether Hindu nationalism has provided Hindu women with the means of political assertion or has been an ideology that has held them back we must first look at women's place in Hindu society. In addition we must determine what Hindu nationalism is and how it involves women, and then assess

the positive or negative attributes the movement has on the lives of women. Furthermore we will look into the issue of female Hindu militancy, how involved are women with this extreme religious ideology and whether it has awarded them anything.

The relationship of women to religious politics is not only paradoxical, it is also complex. Where it can be argued that religious politics has created opportunities for women, it can equally be argued that it has simultaneously undermined women's autonomy (Basu, 1998: 4). Gender has emerged in Hindu nationalism as a politicised entity whereby Hindu women are depicted as the repositories of religious beliefs and the keepers of purity and integrity of the Hindu community (Basu, 1998: 3). Hence, in order to understand the role played by Hindu women in Hindu nationalist politics, it is important to recognize the grass-roots of such politics and the form it has taken in recent years.

During the 1990s, communal violence witnessed the emergence of Hindu women as a crucial impulse for much of the partition violence was centred on allegations of abductions by Muslims. This led to the Hindu community dissolving into the figure of the threatened woman, and violence became necessary for the restoration of Hindu male honour. It is argued that the idea of the endangered Hindu woman was an extraordinarily potent weapon for violent mobilisation against the Muslims (Sarkar, 1998: 97). Such ideas were a direct consequence of Hindu nationalism, better known as *Hindutva*, evoked by powerful Hindu organisations such as *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) and *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP), including political parties like the *Shiv Sena* and the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP). Feminists and other Indian writers have equated the nationalistic policies of these parties to Italian and German fascism. They argue that Hindu fascism takes the form of *Hindutva*, whereby it seeks to seize political power and redefine India, not as a secular state, but as a purely Hindu nation. This automatically dismisses all other identities- primarily the Muslims (Mazumdar, 1995: 1). It may be worth noting here that the roots of drawing Hindu women into such politics began even before the Partition, although less explicitly. Hindu women came to symbolise the face of the Indian nation; they were depicted as the bold Hindu women with their face uncovered, wearing the national dress of the traditional sari, marching for the nationalistic cause (Rajan:1993). Moreover, by this time, women were strongly affiliated with religious and ritualistic activities which included visiting the temples, appeasing the deities and maintaining the faith. They were seen as the defenders and the guardians of everything that was Hindu. Soon, such practices also began to spread in the educational sphere. Religious teachings became quite central to the educational curricula of many girls' schools and women were encouraged to read the various Hindu mythologies, especially the *Ramayana*. It is also interesting to know that of all the versions of *Ramayana*, *Gandhi* selected one that stressed the chastity of *Sita*- the wife of *Ramayana*-who was upheld as the national ideal of Indian womanhood (Mazumdar, 1995: 5). This indicates that sentiments of including Hindu women in

the nationalistic ordeal had been building up for a long time serving mainly ideological purposes.

Major Hindu nationalist organisations such as the BJP, RSS and the VHP have active women's organisations. The *Rashtra Sevika Samiti*, a branch of the RSS, stresses virtues such as physical strength and courage and provides paramilitary training for some women but its major objective is to inculcate the ideals of Indian womanhood. Where the RSS provides drills for men warning them of threats to Hinduism, similar drills are also catered to arm young women. Anti-Muslim and anti-Christian sentiments are promoted and marches are frequently held with Hindu sacrificial rituals honouring Mother India who is deified as a goddess modestly dressed in a sari, seated on a lion while holding a saffron flag. Such images are common Hindu nationalist images and the message is always the same: India is in crisis, Muslims are treacherous imperialists multiplying and Hindus need to reorganise themselves to defend the Hindu religion and the Motherland. Communalised nationalism then gives Hindu supremacist groups the legitimacy to develop political Hinduism as a vehicle for nation-building and hence laying the foundations for Hindu fascism (Mazumdar, 1995: 7-11).

In the 1980s, the BJP, RSS and the VHP launched an extremely aggressive movement which also witnessed several women activists, several of who were in local and national leadership positions. It does not end here though. The VHP is reaching out to women volunteers who will fight on the front lines as in Ayodhya. These women are mostly those from upper and middle-class backgrounds and well educated. The RSS women members are given a thorough ideological training as well as physical and military training. The women learn to speak in public and conduct speeches. There are even sessions wherein the RSS version of Indian history is taught, religious lessons where particular hymns and prayers are recited, as well as lessons confined to the uses of guns and swords. They are dressed in saffron clothing and declare they are 'sparks of fire' dedicating their lives to struggle on the front lines as at Ayodhya. In Ayodhya, women activists claimed, 'we have come here to shower blood', 'for each volunteer killed we are going to kill a thousand' and 'blood in return for blood' (Mazumdar, 1995: 14-17). This implies that anti-Muslim attitudes are always reiterated at every opportunity.

Teachers are trained for *Rashtra Sevika Samiti* schools and members are also trained to become informal counsellors and leaders among the women of their kinship groups and neighbourhoods. They teach the battered women to accept their situations and blame themselves for their misfortunes. They discourage divorce and legal action, silencing protests through invocations of Hindu patriarchal examples- the legendary wives who accept their fate with a smile. Radical women's organisations for women's liberation, teaching women to think for themselves, are often condemned and result in the social isolation, emotional deprivation and insecurity of women who form part of them. On the other hand, the RSS organisations guarantee the safety and protection of women who become members. It can be observed then that the RSS gender ideology is a form of

submission to patriarchy, in which the Samiti enhances the cause of the RSS. Furthermore, the forms of violence that women engage in depict a sharp resemblance to specifically male forms of Hindu violence. For instance, the tearing open of the wombs of pregnant Muslim women and gang rapes of Muslim women (Sarkar, 1998: 99-102). While women's bodies are shaped for healthy reproduction, the daily ideological training that the RSS provides is concerned with opening women's minds to *Hindutva* politics (Sarkar, 1998: 99).

Some analysts have been keen on highlighting that women have only been included symbolically into the national body politic since no nationalism has ever allowed men and women the same access to resources of the nation-state. Nationalism legitimises the dominance of men over women. The images of women enshrined as Mother and the rhetoric about the nation-as-woman further intensifies male-male arrangements and an all-male history (Menon, 1998: 16-17). The BJP is an example of this attitude. It has been argued that the BJP supports women's independence when it finds politically convenient. On the one hand, it advocates women's rights where as on the other, it defends the conservation of Hindu conceptions of women's place. An example of this is the close association of the BJP with the sati of Roop Kanwar in 1987 where it sought justification for sati in Hindu scriptures, idealised women's roles as dutiful wives and accused feminists for being increasingly westernised (Sangari:1991). Moreover, the BJP is criticised for being less concerned with women rights than to the denial of Muslim rights. It is essential to note that while it draws attention to the inequities of Muslim law, it is remarkably silent about the discriminatory traits of Hindu law (Basu, 1998:174-178). Also, in the vital phase of nationalism during 1991, women served as successful emissaries of private-domain religion into the public realm and of the BJP's supposed religious commitments into the home and the family. During this phase, BJP leaders felt that women's electoral support would affirm the party's religious commitment because women were observed to be more devout than men, or so they claimed (Basu, 1998:180).

Feminists and critics of Hindu nationalism have remarked that although women may derive significant empowerment from Hindu nationalist politics, this empowerment ultimately fails to challenge the gendered power imbalances within the patriarchal Hindu family (Banerjee, 2006:62). Banerjee accepts that *Hindutva* women, like men, participate actively in riots and demonstrations, but once the turmoil is over, they do not disappear completely from the political sphere. They remain quite vigorous in encouraging the ideas of the Hindu nation. At the same time, it is surprising that women are never viewed as active, sexual beings within this nationalistic discourse. Consequently, a major problem associated with women as formulating a category in the *Hindutva* politics is the deliberate silence on the structural violence of a woman's life emerging from her sexuality within patriarchy. In addition to this, power relations within the structure of the family are never questioned and inequity within the family is conveniently ignored for it is maintained that an examination of such forms of violence will dismantle the

notion of the spiritual, non-confrontational, Hindu family which forms the basis of the nationalist narrative. Hindu nationalist parties while making Hindu women more active in the political sphere, preach women to accept the ideals of traditional gender hierarchy. It is retorted that if women do not perform their cultural role in a proper manner, then the family suffers and then the nation. Feminism, an alien westernised concept, is highly disregarded and believed to be the enemy of the Hindu family. Indian feminists challenge the notion of the harmonious Hindu family and so assume that women do not and should not belong to the family and the nation in its present form (Banerjee, 2006: 62-78). *Hindutva*, then, encourages the Hindu women to think not in terms of individual rights, but in terms of responsibility to the Hindu nation (Basu, 1998:179).

The validity of the claims made by feminists does not go without questioning. Some have argued that the representation of women's militancy lacks empirical evidence and is simply a work of the ideological agenda of the scholars involved (Menon, 2003:20). This ideological agenda serves to undermine and discredit political parties like the BJP and its allies. Through her ethnographic research in the cities of Meerut and Bombay, Menon investigates the circumstances that lead to communal violence and the extent to which women participate in them. She concludes that ordinary women rarely participate in violence-neither Hindu nor Muslims. Moreover, she calls for an urgent distinction between ordinary Hindu women and the leaders and members of political parties such as the BJP. In addition, most of the violence that women, both Hindu and Muslim, engage in is purely defensive, when they feel threatened (Menon, 2003:21-26). Menon claims that the critics of *Hindutva* politics are 'deeply disturbed the *Hindutva* project is no longer an article of faith...but is on the verge of becoming the new "mantra" of civil society' (Menon, 2003: 30). These critics, she states, had relied on the vigour and resilience of India's secular policies, but are now shocked to discover that this commitment to secular values was purely shallow and limited. She agrees that there is a new generation of women leaders in India in political parties such as the BJP who preach inflammatory and divisive politics, but their efficacy in mobilising Hindu women to violence against Muslims is limited and non-existent. In fact, they apparently seem to have restricted success in mobilizing even Hindu women to their other politico-religious causes. In her research, she discovered that the ordinary women often blamed the governing classes for the political turmoil in India (Menon, 2003:32-35). 'It is all a fight over political office' and the women leaders and members of the political parties, 'are not ideologically or emotionally involved in anything' (Menon, 2003: 36). Menon insists that while it is certain that some of the women leaders of the BJP and its allies explicitly preach hate and violence against the Muslims, this does not necessarily imply that the ordinary women who vote for these parties or who find its *Hindutva* ideology engaging are guilty of violent political activism. The evidence is too conflicting, making it impossible to discern any clear associations or causal connections (Menon, 2003: 47). This indicates that

understanding the position of Hindu women in Hindutva politics is complicated. Usually, the educated, upper caste and high class women are seen to be forming part of the ideological workings of such politics while ordinary women participate for mere survival (Parthasarathy: 1998).

It is a fact that gender and communalism are inextricably linked and, while patriarchy may well 'remain sacrosanct' (Mazumdar, 1995: 20) within the Hindu nationalist movement, female identities have come to symbolize the two distinct faces of India. This distinction between the Hindu woman with her face uncovered, wearing the national sari and fighting for the nationalist cause, and the conservative 'burqa-clad Muslim excluded most of the time, from public space by her community' illustrates the relative political freedom of the former. However, this does not deny the fact that a Hindu woman's ability to assert herself politically is ultimately limited by gender associations inherent in Indian culture. Chatterjee notes that the 'identification of social roles by gender' corresponds with social separation of 'space into ghar,' the outside world as 'typically the male domain,' and bahir,' the home that is female in representation (1989: 624). Furthermore, Mehta claims that the relationship between the body and nationalism heightens the challenge facing politically motivated women. As 'communal violence centers maleness and sexuality in one specific part of the body,' the phallus, 'representative of power, control, penetration, language and strength,' it follows that women lack the qualities necessary for assertion (2006: 222). Following this line of reasoning, Hindu women would always be considered politically subordinate to men as an extension of their association with the private sphere and of their bodies with nurture as opposed to power.

The gender ideology of Hindutva, a factor that touches the very essence of Hindu nationalism, reinforces the 'supremacy of the family over the individual' with the implication that 'family considerations should reign supreme,' not only in marriage, but in 'career' (Basu et al, 1993: 78). Thus, in practical terms, a Hindu woman's ability to assert herself politically is limited by the philosophy it is based on. The World Hindu Council, or the VHP, founded in 1964 by Golwalker as a means of uniting 'all Hindu religious sects under a single umbrella' (Basu et al, 1993: 64) 'asks Hindu NRI (Non-Resident Indian) mothers' explicitly 'not to opt for professional careers' (Basu et al, 1993: 78). Hindu goddesses are also deployed to promote the inactive female ideal by appealing to religious sentimentality. Sita's chastity as inspiration for Hindu wives, for example, was referred to by the RSS sangha chalak at Khurja as a means of allowing husbands 'to go away on long business trips with an untroubled heart' (Basu et al, 1993: 79). In this way, 'the business interests of a commercial class' rely on, and exploit, 'Hindu norms of conjugality' and, in turn, curb the presence of females in the public sphere (Basu et al, 1993: 78).

Contradiction emerges within the nationalist movement between the 'flamboyant militancy of the new woman activist of the Hindu Right,' and the 'continued austerity within the *Rashtrasevika Samiti* and even in the domestic

ideology of new Hindutva' (Basu et al, 1993: 79). The paradox between the assertive and the oppressed Hindu woman is encapsulated in the image on the Samiti journal's front cover of 'two helpless, crouching women' besides a 'young, rather grim-faced woman' wearing the Samiti uniform (Basu et al, 1993: 44). While resonating with ideas of empowerment, it also implies that women are being brought into the 'public space in a regimented, colourless, grim manner' in a campaign 'of blind hatred geared to produce citizens of an authoritarian Hindu Rashtra, on the ruins of secular, democratic politics' (Basu et al, 1993: 44). In reality however, the challenge presented by even the most extreme example of female political assertion often centres around surrender rather than achievement. Work by female poets such as Shraddha Suman Mala, sold in the VHP's Ayodhya office, 'celebrates sacrifices by mothers and wives of martyrs' (Basu et al, 1993: 80). In this way, even suggestions of political assertion may be illusionary and representative of limitations on a grander scale.

Hindu women's under-representation in government has been attributed to political apathy although the subordination of their issues is more likely the result of the precedent set by the nationalist movement and 'pressures from communal forces' (Kishwar, 1989: 6) in general. It is clear that there is a desire among Hindu women for political assertion despite evidence that confirms their relative absence at government level. Even in the face of a new visibility of women's issues in the media' (Kishwar, 1989: 3), few concrete amplifications have been made to their political status. This was highlighted effectively by their 'peripheralisation' in the 1989 elections, where there was a decline in female parliamentary representatives 'from 44 to 27,' as well as 'the complete absence of any women's issue on the electoral scene' (Kishwar, 1989: 3). In this way, women are seen just one of many 'deprived section[s]' in India with a 'list of demands' (Kishwar, 1989: 3). Thus, Mazumdar's contention that the nationalist struggle has resulted in greater female responsiveness than women's protest represents a simplification of a more complex issue. Even Pramila Dandavate, the only woman at national level who has attempted to make women's issues 'her main political plank,' had her candidature withdrawn 'in favour of a *Shiv Sena* candidate' who stood 'on a blatantly communal platform' (Kishwar, 1989: 6).

The majority of women involved in the nationalist movement operate via sister branches of a larger patriarchal, parental organization as a means of granting and, arguably, limiting their political assertion. Even the RSS, though 'virtually unique among modern Indian socio-political organizations in being exclusively male, established the *Rashtrasevika Samiti* for women in 1936 (Basu et al, 1993: 41). However, when one considers the All India Democratic Women's Association, not founded until 1981, the Samiti's growth has been relatively slow. In 1993, for example, the *rashtrasevikas* represented approximately 'one lakh' compared with '29 lakhs' members in the AIDWA (Basu et al, 1993: 41). This suggests that, for Hindu women, political involvement has been, and perhaps still is, more symbolic than assertive. Despite 'daily shakhas providing physical-cum-

intellectual training,' *rashtrasevikas* are referred to more modestly than their *swyamsevika* male counterparts, to whom they are 'related but subordinate' (Basu et al, 1993: 41). Militant political mobilization is left predominantly to the RSS, while females of the *Rashtrasevika Samiti* assert themselves far more subtly with a focus upon spreading the Hindutva ideology through 'sustained kinship and neighbourhood contact with non-*rashtrasevika* women' (Basu et al, 1993: 42). As a means of mobilizing housewives and education, or conditioning, children to the cause, Hindu nationalist groups combine the Nazi philosophy of 'with the cradle and the ladle' with that espoused by their Hindu heritage that 'the husband be a song' and the wife simply 'a verse.'

Though many primary Hindu parties including the BJP have sister branches which imbue traditional female domestic roles with political and ideological import as a means of holding them back from political assertion, the importance of their involvement cannot be underestimated. The high profile participation of up to 20,000 women in a single day of demonstrations at Ayodhya in 1992 (Basu et al, 1993: 70), many of whom were trained by the *Samiti*, provides a case in point. Similarly, their visible contribution to the Bombay riots of 1993, which involved surrounding police stations to successfully obtain the release of arrested 'fascists,' coupled with lying down in the street to prevent fire engines reaching burning Muslim houses has helped increase their perceived political significance. Though such open confrontationist action by women is not universally accepted by members of the Hindu nationalist movement, it has been supported by the young in disregard of opposing elders. The creation of the *Durga Vahini* as a female equivalent of the *Bajrang Dal*, which is responsible for training boys 'as a reserve force for agitational activities' (Basu et al, 1993: 68) by the *VHP* illustrates further a move towards an increase in active female participation.

Although gradual and socially limited, non-confrontationist work by the *Samiti* has resulted in 'extremely intensive mobilization' in the form of 'family-to-family, mind-to-mind percolation of Hindutva' (Basu et al, 1993: 42). Passive political tactics are also deployed by the *Matri Mandal* department, an affiliate of the *VHP* that works with older women. Citing as its 'real purpose' the training of workers 'in related but minor frontline work,' it takes the form of charity work, 'visit[ing] critically ill' people, 'comfort[ing] relatives in distress and prepar[ing] food for those patients who do not receive delicacies from homes' (Basu et al, 1993: 69). Although such forms of political assertion utilize women within the private sphere is subtle, the potential impact of working from the bottom up in this way is significant. The combination of 'informal discussion in homes' and 'the *bauddhik* programme in shakhas' by the *Rashtrasevika* has provided conservative Hindu women with 'mental food' as a means of laying the foundations for their deceptively 'sudden' and 'spontaneous entry' into 'public spaces in an aggressively communal cause' (Basu et al, 1993: 43).

To describe the emerging Hindu female militancy as a 'new phenomenon' is an exaggeration which is being used to manipulate and hold women back from

political assertion (Menon, 2003: 21). As a proponent of this view, Menon holds parties such as the BJP and its allies, 'known collectively as the *Sangh Parivar*' (2003 partly responsible. In addition, intellectuals that 'view themselves as "the sole voice of secularism in India," are also at fault as they tend to focus their academic discourse upon the violence of Hindu women as a means of discrediting Hindu nationalist parties (Menon, 2003: 21). Thus, though attempting to fulfil a very different 'ideological agenda,' both exaggerate female militancy in order to achieve propagandist aims. The BJP and Shiva Sena continue to manipulate the truth as they 'try to make anti-Muslim violence legitimate and respectable' by 'appealing to [the Hindus'] worst prejudices and by systematically promoting mistrust and hatred among different groups' (Kishwar, 1989: 8). For example, the Shiva Sena 'claims to "get things done" with the implication that violence will be used if necessary and that 'only a ruthless strong man' is capable of doing so (Kishwar, 1989: 7). In this way communal conflict is based upon falsehoods which, in turn, create a heightened sense of vulnerability amongst women. The violence intrinsic to the Hindu nationalist ideology causes women to choose to back away from political assertion and into the domestic sphere. 'Even when it is Muslims who are being killed, many Hindus genuinely believe that they are under attack,' leaving the women 'scarcely less afraid to step out of their house' than the Muslim women (Kishwar, 1989: 6). Thus, the realisation of their true potential on the political scene can only be achieved if the ideology itself is altered and 'violence is somehow curbed' (Kishwar, 1989: 7).

The complex character of the Hindu nationalist movement is exposed by its use of nationalist propaganda, while also exaggerating the reality of female political assertion. The ideological aim claimed by the BJP and its allies to defend the *Bharat Mata*, or Mother India, against the 'fundamentalist' (Kishwar, 1989: 7) Muslims is another tool designed, in part, to inspire political assertiveness in Hindu women who 'have to feel that they're doing something moral before they are brought out onto the streets' (Menon, 2003: 21). In this way, the Hindu nationalist ideology of Hindutva is fundamentally political by being, 'not so much a religious consciousness as a nation state consciousness,' based upon the notion that 'other communities' are 'bent on breaking [India] up' (Gupta, 1991: 60). Though the media attention given to prominent female leaders such as Uma Bharati and Sadhvi Ritambara is disproportionate to their limited numerical presence, these women nonetheless represent and epitomize the pinnacle of female political assertion, and potential, in the Hindu nationalist movement. At the same time however, their 'inflammatory speeches' arguably serve to promote the illusion that such assertion is widespread. The majority of 'ordinary ladies don't [even] take part in communal riots' (Menon, 2003: 26). Furthermore, much of their perceived participation is, in fact, passive as was the case in the Bombay riots of 1992-3. Here, '*Shiva Sena* women were very willing to stand by and see violence being perpetrated on Muslims' but were not actively involved like those

affiliated with the Republican and Congress parties 'who actually led mobs to burn and loot' (Menon, 2003: 47).

Within Hinduism women are considered to be lower than Dalits in the caste system - their recognition and position in Hindu culture holds little power and many are treated as second class citizens. In a patriarchal society, women have been and still are constantly defined by the men in their lives; they are somebody's wife, daughter or sister. Hindu ideology presents women with the core belief that either praises or vilifies them, either they are a good wife, or daughter who is under the control of men or they are sexually free and a danger to society. (Wadley, 1977:117)

Banerjee argues Hindu nationalism defines women in a similar manner. She illustrates that "Women enter this masculine environment through roles such as heroic mother, chaste wife and celibate warrior." (Banerjee, 2006:62) While the Hindu nationalist manifest expands roles for women, many traditional expectations remain in place. One theme that Banerjee recognises is the desexualisation of women.

This portrayal of women whilst accurate is in some cases is exaggerated. Certainly in urban areas of India, one could argue more westernised areas, such as Mumbai, New Delhi, Pune expectations for women are not as limited (Sharma: 2002). Hindu women have been exposed to more education and different cultures allowing for more personal and sexual freedom.

Whilst the dominance of men over women and femininity is evident within Hindu culture, since Independence women have slowly started to gain power through politics. In fact the current number of representatives in India's parliament Lower and Upper house who are women is 10.7% and 9.5% respectively. However how much this is attributable to the Hindu nationalist movement is debatable, it is difficult to establish a causal link between the two.

Within Indian politics many nationalist parties have grown to prominence, they preach for India to become a wholly Hindu nation rather than a secular nation. Mazumdar characterises this as Hindu fascism, and that its goal is to annihilate all Muslims and obliterate all traces of Indo-Islamic culture and identity. (Mazumdar 2005, pp2) This ideology is promoted by extreme nationalist groups such as the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) or the Shiv Sena who are known to incite violence against Muslims. These political parties are ideological parties interested only in advancing an ideological agenda. More mainstream nationalist parties like the BJP appear tolerant and politically centre towards Muslims and other religions; this is likely to come out of a desire to win elections and governmental power rather than religious understanding.

"It is important to acknowledge that the notion of militancy, within the context of Hindu nationalism, is contested. Social organizations such as the VHP and RSS and political parties such as the *Shiv Sena* and BJP all represent aspects of militant Hindu nationalism. However, ideological differences exist among them." (Banerjee 2006, pp64)

Banerjee reiterates this as well as establishing that there are two separate political spheres within Hindu nationalism each with their individual goals and philosophies.

We will now examine the question of whether either of these political groups has allowed women to assert themselves politically. There are a number of female politicians who have gained political favour through nationalist parties; an example of this is Uma Bharti, who has risen in political ranks due to her nationalistic ideology and rhetoric. Bharti was associated with the BJP; she contested her first parliamentary elections in 1984 and was defeated. She then successfully contested the *Khajuraho* seat and retained it in elections conducted in 1991, 1996, 1998 and 1999. Although forced to resign as Chief Minister in 2004 from the coalition government due to a scandal involving the Hubli riot case, Bharti is a clear example of a successful female politician.

In addition to female politicians who have gained seats, other political activists have gained public exposure for women and the nationalist movement. *Sadhvi Rithambara* is a well known Hindu political activist, a member of the RSS who has been credited as one of many leaders who incited Hindus to demolish the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992.

Menon puts forward that the female politicians of the BJP, such as Bharti, have done nothing to actively help Hindu women. She offers the view that the desire to incite violence from the new generation of female leaders in India who preach inflammatory, divisive politics has proved to be ineffective and has not resulted in the mobilisation of Hindu women. (Menon 2003, pp32) Their prejudice and angry rhetoric clearly does not reach and affect all women. Despite this, it is hard to deny that successful Indian woman in politics have provided role models for younger generations; it is hard to deny their influence as inspiration for Hindu women.

However having Hindu women in positions of power has not necessarily translated into political assertion across India. Their principles are dominated by Hindu ideology; furthermore it is a Hindu ideology that is controlled by political parties with their own specific agenda that may not pertain to the goals of women.

Banerjee underlines that Hindu nationalism is continually masculinised, she explains that Indian men were taught certain characteristics of manliness from the British Empire which have carried over to modern times. These include physical and marital prowess as well as chivalry and ideas of honour, this in turn caused a desire to defend their motherland; advocates of this perspective like V.D. Savarkar "called upon Indians to be men and wrest their motherland from the British with force if necessary." (Banerjee 2006, pp67) This view of masculinity and nationalism has lasted and permeated the nationalist movement. The ideology and principles of the RSS and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (or VHP) both embody specific notions of Hindu masculinity, assertion and aggression.

From their political participation it is evident that women are not entirely excluded from the political arena. In the context of Hindu nationalism women are

crucial to the movement; their role involves maintaining classic female Hindu stereotypes such as the chaste wife or heroic mother who is there to protect the manly Hindu warrior. They help portray to the outside world what Hindu nationalists are fighting for, the perfect Hindu family. This attitude often clashes with followers of feminist nationalism.

“Indian feminists view such feminine activism with suspicion because the considerable empowerment women may derive from Hindu nationalist politics ultimately does not challenge the gendered power imbalances within the patriarchal Hindu family.” (Banerjee, 2006:62)

For Indian feminists the patriarchal structure of the Hindu family is a burden on women that conveys ideas of shame and sexual respectability as a means of controlling them. This view is reiterated by Basu who argues that “Religious politics has created opportunities for women’s activism while simultaneously undermining women’s autonomy.” (Jeffrey and Basu 1999: 04)

Whilst it may seem that Hindu women are relegated to traditional roles, within the RSS and VHP there are female factions who are called the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti (allied with the RSS) and the Sadhvi Shakti Parishad (allied with the VHP) which “enable a female presence in the discourse of Hindu nationalism in multiple ways that cannot be dismissed as false consciousness or temporary activism.” (Banerjee, 2006:69) These women are trained to participate in riots and “they perform, interpret and disseminate models of female activism in ways that are innovative and invigorating” (Banerjee, 2006:70)

For these women this freedom allows performing martial arts and portrays them as citizen warriors alongside men, it empowers Hindu women. However this empowerment is limited, it does not include having power over their own sexuality and their position is the celibate warrior alone. This can be viewed as another construct to control female sexuality which is seen as dangerous. Wadley concurs with this sentiment; she argues that Hindu women are presented as either the kind wifely figure whose sexuality is transferred to men so is portrayed as fertile and benevolent. Or if a woman has control of her sexuality she is potentially destructive and malevolent. (Wadley, 1977:116-117) In order to become a warrior these women must defeminise, they “symbolically and practically shed outer markers of their femininity.” (Banerjee 2006:70) Hindu women are physically active; they are encouraged to be politically assertive yet are still required to relinquish part of themselves which denies them total empowerment.

Female participation in Hindu Muslim riots as stated previously has been illustrated by Banerjee. The RSS and other nationalistic groups have been acknowledged as key motivators who organise and order Hindus (men and women) to incite violence and hatred against their Muslim neighbours. The link between Hindu nationalism, women and violence cannot be argued as a positive one. The connection to violent activism and racial profiling that has been inherent within *Shiv Sena* and the RSS is a major political deterrent.

Menon specifically looks at female militancy and Hindu women's participation in riots, her research looks at the cases in Meerut and Mumbai. She understands and highlights the difficulty of establishing a connection between the mobilising activities of nationalist parties and Hindu women's militancy. (Menon, 2003: 21) Within her study of communal violence of Meerut she interviews witnesses, "both men and women who consistently maintain that ordinary women are never involved in violence." (Menon, 2003: 25) There are many Hindu women who choose to follow the violent practices of the RSS, however Menon strives to stress that being associated with Hindism and the BJP does not automatically make one a militant .

On the other hand Mazumdar illustrates the horrors and vicious behaviour of Hindu women towards Muslims. "Women led mobs and dragged Muslim women and children into the streets, applauded their gang rapes and joined men in stoning Muslim women and setting them on fire" (Mazumdar, 1995:02). Menon does not deny the roles of women in some protests, but does question why average Hindu women would get involved when they did not want their husbands to participate in riots.

The use of violence and militancy is a prominent aspect of Hindu nationalism, certainly within extreme parties. This violence however does not allow for women to have their political or personal freedom. It accounts for the destruction of property, perpetuating fear in communities for those who do not take part.

Whilst militancy plays an important role in Hindu nationalism and does affect women, another issue that has helped women gain independence from men and political assertion is education (Jaffrelot: 1999). Higher education for many Hindu women allows them to gain autonomy from a religion and movement that dictates several aspects of them. However this is not at the expense of dutifully performing their traditional roles within their marriage and home life; Banerjee questions whether the women are really convinced of the Samiti's (RSS's) ideology or "do they accept that getting up early to cook meals and wash clothes, before they go to work or university is the price they pay for their choice" (Banerjee 2006, pp71) There is certainly a catch for wanting more out of yourself other than religious devotion, but it is through these institutions such as the Samiti who "provides them with a language to order and accommodate social, gendered change."

Conclusions

Hindu nationalism, based upon the Hindutva ideology, is comprised of contradictions that have provided women with the means of political assertion while simultaneously holding them back from achieving total liberty. As a result, the political assertion of Hindu women has thus far been limited. Its ideological inconsistency is encapsulated in the contention within the RSS with regard to its female Samati members. While Jagriti,' the Samati Journal, continues to 'glorif[y] Hindu womanhood in the conventionally revivalist manner,' it 'also occasionally

carries fairly sympathetic accounts of contemporary women's movements' (Basu et al, 1993: 43). Until these conflicting conceptions of women can be resolved, women's participation in politics will be limited to the private realm rendering their actual levels of assertion difficult to ascertain.

Female political icons such as *Bharti*, *Indira Gandhi* and *Rithambara* are important figures for Hindu and Indian women. They along with women who participated in India's general elections are evidence of women who are involved in the political process. It is apparent that women have gained significant political tread and have access to opportunities that previous generations of women did not enjoy. This change is particularly obvious in urban areas however the cause of this change is not solely because of Hindu nationalistic parties. Furthermore political power has yet to affect all women throughout the subcontinent.

Hindu nationalist groups, predominantly the female factions that focus on the religious education of women have allowed women to break out of traditional stereotypes. However the idea of being a women or feminine is still viewed with apprehension whilst they are independent from the men in their lives, they are not in complete control over themselves.

India centres on homo-social culture; there still are huge gender divides within its society that is constantly perpetuated through Hinduism and Hindu nationalism (Kalyani, 2010: 27). These gender issues are prevalent within nationalist parties as mentioned throughout this paper. Political involvement aside, there is still a marked difference in identity for Hindu men and women.

While women can gain independence through education and certainly groups such as "The Samiti by no means advocates that women remain at home sheltered and powerless" (Banerjee 2006, pp71-72) they are expected not to disorder gender stereotypes radically. Hindu nationalism has provided women with a variety of platforms to gain political and personal assertion, sometimes at the expense of denying another aspect of them.

Moreover, it can also be observed that Hindu nationalism has been a divisive force empowering women for mostly ideological reasons. Most of the Hindu women nationalist organisations are run by men and it is men who provide training to women to attain their purely ideological aims, that is, to attain Hindutva (Mines, 2010). Images of Sita and other goddesses depicted as serving the Hindu nation and dying for the Hindu religion are common images, evoked to recruit women in this venture of Hindu nationalism. Political organisations such as the BJP, RSS and the VHP have been successful in enhancing the role of women in Hindu nationalist politics, but this does not necessarily empower women. In fact, as many feminists and other critics have urged, Hindutva politics has ideologically played a significant role in withholding women's liberation. Moreover, such politics seems to preach hatred and exacerbates the delicate religious situation in India- it encourages hostility and antagonism amongst the Hindus and the Muslims, keeping the ordinary civilians under constant threat and fear. Other theorists have also argued that it is mostly the educated, upper caste and higher class women who

become active participants in such politics. The ordinary Hindu women have no choice. Believing in Hindutva policies ensures bread on their table. In order to understand the part played by women in Hindu nationalism, it is important to understand the Hindutva ideology first. It then goes to show that these organisations use women not only symbolically (in myth and art) but also quite literally so as to cater their extremist and nationalist cause.

Bibliography

<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

- Banerjee, Sikata. 2006. 'Armed Masculinity, Hindu Nationalism and Female Political Participation in India.' *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 8(1): 62-78.
- Basu, Amrita. 1998. 'Hindu Women's Activism in India and the Questions it Raises.' A. Basu and P. Jeffery (ed.). *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicised Religion in South Asia*. London: Routledge: 167-180.
- Basu, T. Datta, P. Sarkar, S. Sen, S., 1993. *Khaki Shorts Saffron Flags*, New Delhi: Orient Longman Limited.
- Chatterjee, P., 1989. Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: The Contest in India. *American Ethnologist*, 16 (4), pp. 622-633.
- Hansen, T. B., 1996. Recuperating Masculinity: Hindu nationalism, violence and the exorcism of the Muslim 'Other.' *Critique of Anthropology*, 16, pp. 137-172.
- Jaffrelot, C. 1999, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s : Strategies of Identity-building, Implantation and Mobilisation (with Special Reference to Central India, India) : Penguin Press.*
- Jaffrelot, C. ed, 2007. *Hindu Nationalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kalyani, Menon, 2010, *Everyday Nationalism: Women of the Hindu Right in India*, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press
- Kashmir Group. 2002. *Mother in the Hindu Heritage*. [Online] (Updated 07 February 2010) Available at: http://www.kashmirgroup.com/kpi/kpi_one.jsp?sino=563 [Accessed 12 February 2010].
- Kishwar, M., 1989. Violence and the 1989 Election: Implications for Women. *Manushi Journal*, 54-5, pp. 1-9.
- Mazumdar, Sucheta. 1995. 'Women on the March: Right-wing Mobilisation in Contemporary India.' *Feminist Review*, no.49: 1-17.
- Mehta, D., 2006. Collective Violence, Public Spaces, and the Unmaking of Men', *Men and Masculinities*, 9 (2) pp. 204-225.
- Menon, Ritu. 1998. 'Reproducing the Legitimate Community: Sexuality, Secularity, and the State in Post partition India.' A. Basu and P. Jeffery (ed.). *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicised Religion in South Asia*. London: Routledge: 16-17.
- Menon, Usha. 2003. 'Do Women Participate in Riots? Exploring the Notion of 'Militancy' among Hindu Women.' *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 9(1): 20-47.
- Mines, P. Diane; Lamb, Sarah, 2010, *Everyday Life in South Asia*, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Sarkar, Tanika. 1998. 'Woman, Community and Nation: A Historical Trajectory for Hindu Identity Politics.' A. Basu and P. Jeffery (ed.). *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicised Religion in South Asia*. London: Routledge: 97-102.
- Sikata Banerjee, 2006 'Armed masculinity, Hindu nationalism and female political participation in India', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol 8 No.1, pp62-83
- Wadley, S. S., 1977. Women and the Hindu Tradition. *Signs*, 3 (1), pp. 113-125.

South Asian Studies 28 (1)

Parthasarathy, D., 'Women, Communal Violence, and Rights Rhetoric', *Manushi*, no. 129.
<http://www.indiatogether.org/manushi/issue129/rights.htm>

Rajan, R. S., (1993) *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture, and Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge).

Sangari, K. and Vaid, S., (1991) 'Institutions, Beliefs, Ideologies: Widow Immolation in Contemporary Rajasthan', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 26, no. 17.

Sharma, K., 'Surviving Violence, Making Peace: Women in Communal Conflict in Mumbai', in Kapadia, K., (2002) *The violence of development: the politics of identity, gender and social inequalities in India* (London: Zed Books).

Biographical Note

Dr. Syed Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi teaches at the Department of International Relations, University of Peshawar, Peshawar-Pakistan.
