

2009

## Saffron, Spice and Everything Nice?: A Study of Women in Hindutva

Deepti Shenoy

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Shenoy, Deepti (2009) "Saffron, Spice and Everything Nice?: A Study of Women in Hindutva," *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*: Vol. 14 , Article 13.

Available at: <http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol14/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [rscroggin@scu.edu](mailto:rscroggin@scu.edu).

## Saffron, Spice and Everything Nice?: A Study of Women in *Hindutva*

Deepti Shenoy

---

### Introduction

The Hindu Nationalist Movement, or *Hindutva*, a traditionally masculine bastion, has been subject to a quiet but significant assault on its core philosophy. Interestingly, this attack has come from within the movement, in the form of a near insurgency. Women have penetrated its ranks and carved unique niches for themselves and have started focusing on creating a more inclusive agenda. Women in *Hindutva* catapulted themselves into positions of power within the movement in the 1990s, and this has significantly changed the face of the movement. Though the transformation into a democratic and feminist *Hindutva* is far from complete, women have made their mark and helped to chart a positive course for its ideology.

*Hindutva* begins with the belief that India has always been and should be a Hindu *rashtra*, or nation. It is firmly rooted in the conviction that citizens of India must accept a cultural, if not religious Hinduism. This explicitly religious affiliation has often led leaders of the *Hindutva* movement to adopt fundamentalist, or anti-feminist, stances on women's issues.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have underlined many instances of the movement

---

<sup>1</sup> Ram Puniyani, "Degrading Women," *The Times of India*, 9 September 1999.

Saffron, Spice and Everything Nice? 135

herding women into particular, limited, roles.<sup>2</sup> At first glance, one may understandably wonder what would lead women to accept such an ideology.

Feminist scholars have both documented the extensive participation of women in organizations that subscribe to *Hindutva* ideology and, in many cases, voiced their belief that this participation is not empowering for women. To quote Meera Sehgal, paramilitary training offered to women within the movement is “more effective in constructing an alarmist, besieged mentality rather than the self-confident and self-reliant one proclaimed by the Samiti’s discourse of empowerment.”<sup>3</sup> Sehgal focused and based her conclusions on the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, a women’s wing of one particular *Hindutva* organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. When one examines the situation of women within *Hindutva* over time and across various organizations, however, it appears that they are more empowered by their participation in these organizations than one might imagine. A comprehensive examination of the role of women in the many disparate organizations that come under the saffron banner of *Hindutva* reveals two things. First, the definition of femininity and the role of women within the movement have, far from remaining static, evolved greatly over time. Second, the different roles played by women in different organizations demonstrate that the saffron women come in different hues. Rather than allowing themselves to be defined by any particular

---

<sup>2</sup> Meera Sehgal, “Manufacturing a Feminized Siege Mentality: Hindu Nationalist Paramilitary Camps for Women in India,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 36 (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Sehgal, *Manufacturing a Feminized Siege Mentality*, 179.

notion of femininity within the movement, women expand the concept of femininity to reflect their various disparate actions and beliefs. By refusing to be limited by a restrictive definition of femininity, women behave as active agents within the movement. Women within *Hindutva* shape the movement as they carve a place for themselves within it. Throughout their participation in the movement, women have conformed to some extent to their organizations' evolving requirements. This paper argues that by making themselves indispensable in this way, *Hindutva* women have carved unique niches for themselves and, on a larger scale, contributed to the empowerment of women in terms of rejecting traditional roles for less restrictive ones.

### **Saffron Beginnings: Early *Hindutva***

The establishment in 1925 of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) marked the crystallization of a movement based on a spirit of Hindu revivalism that can be traced back to the late 1800s. Hindu revivalism is associated with resistance to British Christian missionary activity in the 1800s, Hindu misgivings about Muslim mobilization during the Khilafat Movement in the 1920s, and the desire of upper caste Hindus to perpetuate their worldview.<sup>4</sup> Following the establishment of the RSS by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, *Hindutva* became an established movement working toward the defined goal of reclaiming India as a Hindu *rashtra*.<sup>5</sup>In the course of this

---

<sup>4</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 12-14.

<sup>5</sup> Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, 33.

Saffron, Spice and Everything Nice? 137

endeavor, the RSS established several sister organizations, including the Rashtra Sevika Samiti (Samiti) in 1936, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in 1964, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1980. The RSS is professedly apolitical and focuses on the central goal of establishing the cultural Hindu *rashtra*, while the VHP focuses on the preservation and propagation of Hinduism as a religion. The BJP, as a national party, is explicitly political, and, therefore, often treads a more religiously and culturally neutral path. The organizations, while structurally similar and considered affiliated, are still separate, each with its own leaders and specific goals. Each has one or more women's wings that are, again, affiliated but in many ways separate. These various organizations are collectively known as the Sangh Parivar.

Even a cursory look at the early years of *Hindutva* reveals a marked emphasis within the movement on masculinity and a concomitant relegation of women to a narrow and limited role. The imagery of nation as motherland is likewise pervasive in early *Hindutva* writings. M.S. Golwalkar, a prominent RSS leader, effusively wrote of India, "This is our sacred land, Bharat, a land whose glories are sung by the gods... well, this is the mother of us all, our glorious motherland."<sup>6</sup> Within this framework, with the nation viewed as mother and female, Hindus, particularly those within the Sangh Parivar, were envisioned as brave masculine soldiers standing ready to do battle for her. Golwalkar's book, which adjures Hindu men to be "men with capital 'M'" (sic) and goes into great detail

---

<sup>6</sup> M.S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts* (Bangalore, India: Vikrama Prakashan, 1966), 81.

about how to mould men with a mission, demonstrates the masculinist bias inherent in early *Hindutva*.

The way the RSS was conceptualized and organized reflected this early masculine focus. The fact that it was originally formed as an all male organization, and that women, rather than being integrated directly into the RSS, were brought into the Samiti, a separate wing, meant at the very least a basic gender segregation. The choice of saffron as their banner color was inspired by the flag of the legendary Hindu hero Shivaji, and metonymically to the *sadhus* and *sadhvis*, or religious renunciates, of Hindu tradition, who were always garbed in saffron. The system of *shakhas*, or local groups, which the RSS instituted, and the emphasis on exercise, discipline, physical and strength training reflect the early *Hindutva* masculine focus. Golwalkar considered one of the greatest problems in Hindu society to be the fact that, as he put it, "In dress, in habits, in literature and in every aspect of our day-to-day life 'modernism' has come to mean effeminacy."<sup>7</sup> Golwalkar thus encouraged his followers to reject what he perceived as western modernity, and to embrace traditionalism. Traditional gender roles were key to the kind of traditionalism he advocated, and this required that men within the movement distance themselves from what he perceived as effeminacy in the rest of society. The decidedly masculinist emphasis of early *Hindutva* is reflected in the attempt of men within the Sangh Parivar to carve out a masculine identity while rejecting what they considered feminine.

While the Sangh Parivar was crafting an ideal masculine identity, it was likewise defining femininity.

---

<sup>7</sup> Golwalkar 230.

## Saffron, Spice and Everything Nice? 139

Golwalkar, drawing on the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, states, “When the five Pandavas went to see Kunti, their mother, before the war of Mahabharata, she blessed them saying, ‘Go ye all to battle. This is the occasion for which Kshatriya women give birth to sons’...Let every mother speak in the same heroic strain to her sons even now.”<sup>8</sup> The distinction between women as passive, resigned mothers and men as active, brave warrior sons is clear. The fact that this is one of the sole references in Golwalkar’s book to cultural expectations of women or definitions of femininity underscores the fact that at the time the maternal role was the primary role open to women within *Hindutva*. The other role Golwalkar defined for women was that of devoted, self-sacrificing wife. Moreover, *Hindutva* tended to herd women more towards the private sphere than the public one. Pralay Kanungo notes,

The RSS did not approve of any overt political role for women during the Golwalkar era. It could not swallow the fact that the highest political office in India was held by a woman. The RSS mouthpiece *Organiser* described Indira Gandhi’s rule as disastrous and admirably quoted Napoleon: ‘A statesman has his heart in his brain; a woman’s brain is generally in her heart.’<sup>9</sup>

### **Ram Janmabhoomi: A Turning Point**

While the role of *Hindutva* women has always been to some extent fluid, the *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement

---

<sup>8</sup> Golwalkar 271.

<sup>9</sup> Pralay Kanungo, *RSS’s Tryst with Politics: From Hedgewar to Sudershan* (Delhi: Manohar, 2002), 160.

of the 1980s and 1990s offered women an unprecedented opportunity to break out of the traditional feminine role that had been defined for them within the movement. In the years immediately following the Partition of India, the Sangh Parivar was compelled to moderate its rhetoric for fear of being banned by a fiercely anti-communalist Congress. The bans instituted on the RSS after the assassination of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in 1948 and during the State of Emergency declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975 reinforced these fears. In the 1980s, however, two factors came together to result in widespread legitimization of *Hindutva* across India: the weakening of the Congress government's opposition to communalism and the increased militancy of minorities, including the Muslims (who pushed for and brought about the institution of Muslim Personal Law, under which Muslims were subject to *Shariat* rather than a Universal Civil Code) and Sikhs (who were agitating aggressively for the construction of a separate Sikh state).<sup>10</sup> The Sangh Parivar's return to a more hardline stance is reflected in the adoption in 1984 of the issue of reclaiming the *Ram Janmabhoomi* temple in Ayodhya as a central goal for the organizations. The construction of the temple envisioned by the Sangh Parivar would have involved the repossession of a piece of land which was home to a sixteenth-century mosque called the Babri Masjid, which was not being used in the 1980s as a site of worship. The dismantling of the mosque would have been a necessary first step in the construction of the temple. The Sangh Parivar justified this on the basis that the mosque had been built

---

<sup>10</sup> Jaffrelot 331-332.



Saffron, Spice and Everything Nice? 141

by the Mughal conqueror Babar over the ruins of a destroyed Hindu temple.<sup>11</sup>

The *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement was unique in the history of *Hindutva* in the sense that it unified Hindus in the movement in a common, definable and more immediate goal than the more abstract and long-term notion of a Hindu India. While the movement was gaining critical mass, women were able to join the mainstream as active players in the common endeavor. They were able for the first time to participate in various ways, as planners, organizers, and activists. While the roles individual women played were multi-faceted, there was a relative homogenization of women's roles within the various organizations under the saffron umbrella. For instance, while Sadhvi Rithambhara, a member of the VHP's Sadhvi Shakti Parishad, had gained significant notoriety as a rouser of communal passions, in line with her organization's relatively hardline philosophy, Uma Bharti, a member of the more political BJP's Mahila Morcha, participated in similar ways. Both Bharti and Rithambara became prominent symbols of the movement, aggressively calling Hindu men to action. The Babri Masjid was visualized by *Hindutva* activists as a remnant of a time when the nation had been conquered by foreign invaders (the Mughals) and it was thus seen as a blight on India's honor. Given the fact that in *Hindutva* ideology the nation is conceptualized as feminine, the symbolism of women calling on men to defend their own and their country's honor would have resonated significantly with *Hindutva* men. In one instance, Sadhvi Rithambhara declared, "You keep saying that

---

<sup>11</sup> Jaffrelot 363.

you will sacrifice yourselves. But before we sacrifice ourselves we will compel 'others' to sacrifice themselves. We will not only shed our own blood but we will also make the blood of 'others' flow."<sup>12</sup> This newly aggressive stance was a clear departure from the more benign role of resigned wife or mother that had been defined for women in the movement in the early years.

The immediate project of reclaiming the country's honor (as the *Hindutva* leadership perceived it) by removing the stain they viewed the Masjid as being on its landscape, required women, as living symbols of the feminine nation, to become aggressive in their demands that Hindu men defend them. The resigned, self-sacrificing image of passivity that women were earlier asked to project within the movement would hardly have resonated with the men in such a way as to draw them into violence.

Capitalizing on the *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement's needs and requirements, therefore, women within *Hindutva* came out of their virtual *purdah* in droves, taking on newly active roles within the movement. In 1992, a number of *Hindutva* activists broke through barriers and dismantled the Babri Masjid. Thousands of *Hindutva* women participated in the demolition. Women who had previously been adjured to be passive homemakers became proponents of violence. A *Washington Post* article from the time documents women as having "turned their wrath on journalists, beating dozens of reporters and smashing cameras in a rush of violence against the news media unprecedented in

---

<sup>12</sup> Kumkum Sangari, "Consent, Agency and Rhetorics of Incitement," *Economic and Political Weekly* (May 1993), 879.

Saffron, Spice and Everything Nice? 143

this part of the world.”<sup>13</sup> Paradoxically, some of the *Hindutva* women also shielded journalists and photographers from the fury of the mass hysteria. Hundreds of female activists threw themselves on the streets in an attempt to stop police troops from reaching the site at which the demolition was taking place.

The newly varied and militant roles played by women in the *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement brought them into a level of prominence they had never before achieved. As Amy Waldman described it, “After seeing the fervor of women leading up to and culminating with the 1992 destruction of the mosque in Ayodhya, Hindu nationalists also have tried to harness the power of women as militants.”<sup>14</sup> In the years following the incident, women’s organizations within *Hindutva* came to play a more prominent role within the movement, and women themselves came increasingly to the forefront as leaders.

Another outcome of the *Ram Janmabhoomi* incident was a parting, to a certain extent, within the Sangh Parivar between the more explicitly religiously affiliated organizations (the VHP and the RSS, in particular), and the more politically oriented BJP. The days immediately following the demolition of the mosque witnessed large scale riots that left around three thousand people, Hindus as well as Muslims, dead.<sup>15</sup> Horrified at this outbreak of communal violence, many potential supporters began to turn away from the BJP.

---

<sup>13</sup> Molly Moore, “When the Mob Turns Against The Messengers; After Mosque Assault, Hindus Attack Journalists,” *Washington Post Foreign Service* (December 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Amy Waldman, “Win an Election? Tough Part is the Nomination,” *New York Times*, December 5, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Jaffrelot 460-461.

On December 15<sup>th</sup>, the BJP led governments of Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh were disbanded by the Congress-led national government. V.K. Rai states:

After the destruction of Babri mosque, the BJP leadership began to realise the limitations to religious mobilization. It found that the crowds in election meetings did not respond to the virulent anti-Muslim speech and did not approve of the actual destruction of the mosque or the 'Ekatmata Yatra' (march for unity) of the VHP.<sup>16</sup>

The BJP came to realize that it would have to change its strategy if it wanted to remain relevant in the Indian political context.<sup>17</sup>

### **Saffron Split: Ideological Divergences after 1992**

The BJP began, therefore, to moderate the religiosity of its rhetoric in order to distance itself somewhat from the *Ram Janmabhoomi* issue. In this, it differed from the RSS and VHP, which continued to hold dear the goal of reclaiming the primary Hindu sites of worship on which mosques were based. As a result, there was something of an ideological split between the organizations; thus, a VHP leader states, of the 1993 election, "There were some differences in the high commands of the BJP and the VHP. VHP and RSS are purely Hindu minded and pro-Hindu bodies while the BJP, being a political body, certain Muslims are also

---

<sup>16</sup> V.K. Rai, "In Search of a New Balance: Caste, Region and Community in Uttar Pradesh," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2406.

<sup>17</sup> Jaffrelot 480.

Saffron, Spice and Everything Nice? 145

members of it, so their perspectives are to some extent different from our outlook” (sic).<sup>18</sup>

The ideological divergence that occurred between the political and religious sister organizations was mirrored in the divergent trajectories of women under the saffron umbrella. While women within the VHP’s Durga Vahini and the Samiti continued to adopt relatively provocative and hardline positions, those within the BJP’s Mahila Morcha considerably softened their stances and adopted a more secular approach. This contrast is captured when one examines the stances of three women in particular: Sadhvi Rithambara (on the religious side), and Sushma Swaraj and Uma Bharti (on the political side).

Sadhvi Rithambara became the founder and leader of the VHP’s ultra militant women’s wing, the Vahini, in 1991. Her vision of militant womanhood involved equipping women with a much more intense training in the martial arts. This involved indoctrinating the members to shed all traces of passivity and to be prepared to fight to defend their own and the country’s honor. During the *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement, Teesta Setalvad notes, members of the Vahini were given *katars*, sheathed knives, and adjured by Rithambara to defend themselves, if need be, and to “ensure your *katars* taste blood.”<sup>19</sup> After 1992, the Vahini remained the most militant of the *Hindutva* women’s organizations, and among those most committed to religious and cultural Hinduism. Rithambara

---

<sup>18</sup> Jaffrelot 489.

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

herself continued to take a hardline stance after the *Ram Janmabhoomi* incident. While she never again achieved the notoriety she had at that time, she continued to be a prominent ideologue within the Vahini. While the target of her vitriolic attacks in the early 1990s was the Indian Muslims, during the later 1990s, this was also broadened to include the Indian Christian missionaries. Rithambara, along with the VHP's Swami Brahmananda, said in 1999 "that John Paul II could visit India" on the express condition that "he put an end to induced conversions of Hindus to Christianity in India."<sup>20</sup> Rithambara's continued militancy is evident in the fact that she courted arrest on multiple occasions during the course of the 1990s by making inflammatory statements calculated to arouse communal passions among the Hindus.<sup>21</sup> Her continued preoccupation with communal rabble-rousing was very much in line with the goals and commitments of her own organization (The Vahini, and by extension, the VHP). Rithambara was making it increasingly clear that she was not going to recede into the political wilderness once the need of the hour had been met.

While Rithambara, and the Vahini, continued to adopt a martial stance after 1992, the BJP women began to moderate the intensity of their rhetoric considerably. The contrast between the divergent trajectories of the more religious *Hindutva* women and the more political ones is starkly evident when one

---

<sup>20</sup> "VHP Sets Terms for Pope Paul's Visit," *Hindustan Times*, October 22, 1999.

<sup>21</sup> Hindu Nun Calls Mother Teresa 'Magician,' Arrested," *Agence France-Presse*, April 25, 1995.

Saffron, Spice and Everything Nice? 147

considers Uma Bharti, who, like Rithambara, had become a prominent symbol of the *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement. During the latter half of the 1990s, Bharti moved increasingly into the political arena, and concomitantly distanced herself from her earlier belligerent stance. She rarely referred to the *Ram Janmabhoomi* question and even explicitly stated in 1998 that two other previously contested Hindu holy sites, Kashi and Mathura, would not be on her party's political agenda.<sup>22</sup> The softening of her earlier anti-Muslim perspective is showcased in her 1999 statement that she would reach out and offer her assistance to all, including Muslims. She commented at the time, "I have already told them clearly that I will not wear a green dupatta around my neck to please them. Nor have I asked them to wear saffron."<sup>23</sup> Green and saffron representing, respectively, the Muslim and Hindu communities, the statement was evocative of Bharti's desire to reach out to the other community while acknowledging their deep-seated differences. Her newly moderate stance echoed her organization's adoption, after 1992, of a more neutral and mainstream position. Uma Bharti continued to be a leading voice in *Hindutva* discourse throughout the 1990s.

Taking into account the varied stances of the saffron women after the *Ram Janmabhoomi* incident, two things become clear: that women were increasingly able to empower themselves through participation in *Hindutva* organizations, and that through these

---

<sup>22</sup> "Mathura, Kashi Not on BJP's Agenda," *Times of India*, January 9, 1998.

<sup>23</sup> Archana Masih and Vaihayasi Pande Daniel, "When They See Me, Even Chain-Smokers Stub Their Cigarettes," *Times of India*, September 18, 1999.

positions of power, they were able to empower other women, albeit in different ways. Simply by virtue of being prominent, powerful leaders within the movement, women like Rithambara and Bharti would surely have inspired other Hindu women both within and outside the organizations to transcend the limitations of the traditional role that had previously been defined for them. The different perspectives and positions these women brought to the table lent complexity to the movement's definition of femininity. Amrita Basu, speaking of *Hindutva* women leaders, notes that:

None of them is particularly nurturing... Regardless of the personal hardships they may have experienced, they depict themselves as powerful agents rather than passive victims... Moreover, these women's backgrounds and life histories do not conform to a singular model of Indian womanhood.<sup>24</sup>

While, in Golwalkar's time, femininity was defined within *Hindutva* as simple, self-sacrificing passivity, the variety of roles played by Bharti, Rithambara and other leaders of the movement expanded this definition considerably. During the *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement, both Bharti and Rithambara were especially noticed for their incendiary, passionate rhetoric aimed at inciting Hindu men into violence. While Bharti later took on a role of almost diplomatic rapprochement, Rithambara continued to define herself as a militant guardian of Hindu values. In her essay, Basu con-

---

<sup>24</sup> Amrita Basu, "Feminism Inverted: The Gendered Imagery and Real Women of Hindu Nationalism," in *Women and Right-Wing Movements: Indian Experiences*, eds. Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia (London: Zed Books Limited, 1995), 159.



Saffron, Spice and Everything Nice? 149

cludes that women within *Hindutva* play a more complex role than one might imagine. Bharti and Rithambara's experiences would appear to bear out this assertion.

Apart from inspiring women simply by virtue of their presence as leaders, *Hindutva* women in different organizations empowered women within their own spheres in unique ways. Rithambara, coming from a religious background, drew on established definitions of femininity and transformed the traditional role of mother from one of passivity into one of power. A 1998 *Times of India* article reported that the Sadhvi, speaking at a VHP function, "called upon womenfolk to awaken and put up a brave fight against atrocities on women and unite to face challenges," and "said no politician can solve the problems of society, and it is only a mother who can set right our ills."<sup>25</sup> Rithambara's adjuration to women that they fight to protect themselves and her endorsement, as Vahini leader, of programs to train *Hindutva* women, reflect her view of the feminine as active rather than passive. Although many of the social evils that she listed as threatening to women, including beauty contests (an insult to feminine dignity) and Muslim men (who, she felt, could convert Hindu girls and draw them away from their faith), were rooted in traditional values, the fact that she was encouraging women to use non-passive modes of resistance indicates a departure from Golwalkar's and the earlier *Hindutva* definition of femininity. Her establishment in May 2003 of Vatsalya Gram, which she describes as "a village of maternal

---

<sup>25</sup> "Women Can End Evil In Society, Feels Sadhvi," *Times of India*, October 27, 1998.

love,” in Uttar Pradesh, is another example of her empowering women through transforming traditional values. The village operates as both a widows’ home and an orphanage, and is based on the concept of creating families held together by maternal love through bringing destitute women and motherless children together. While rooted in traditional ideals of the importance of motherhood, the project empowers the women and children it takes in by offering them health care, education, and vocational and spiritual training.<sup>26</sup>

While Rithambara, in line with her allegiance to Vahini ideology, has sought to empower women within the framework of a relatively traditional socio-cultural schema, the BJP women who have attained a level of acceptance within their own organization, have focused their efforts on economic and political parity for women. In the space opened up for women in *Hindutva* in the aftermath of the *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement, another female leader, Sushma Swaraj, came into prominence. Swaraj for the most part exemplified the paradigm of the *Hindutva* woman who throughout her career took on whatever agency the party required of her, while continuing to systematically rise within its ranks. With few exceptions, she maintained a diplomatic stance and established herself within and outside the party as a political figure of repute. However, even Swaraj notably sounded a strident note on occasions when the party was on the offensive, one example being the uncharacteristically

---

<sup>26</sup> Param Shakti Peeth, “The Project,” Vatsalya Gram: A Village of Maternal Love, <http://www.vatsalyagram.org/project.htm>.

Saffron, Spice and Everything Nice? 151

extreme posture she adopted when Sonia Gandhi, the widow of slain Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, was projected as an opposition Prime Ministerial candidate by the Congress Party. At the time, as a recent *Express Buzz* article reports, Swaraj “threatened to shave her head and eat only peanuts in a gesture of mourning if Sonia Gandhi became prime minister after the Congress-led coalition won the 2004 parliamentary election.”<sup>27</sup>

By aligning themselves with party policy and making themselves indispensable, leaders such as Bharti and Swaraj rose through the ranks and assumed positions of power. From this standpoint they began increasingly to work for the empowerment of women outside the party. One instance of an almost monolithic consensus of women across party lines was the Women’s Reservation Bill, introduced in September 1996. Women of all major political parties came together to endorse a bill that if passed would ensure that 33 percent of seats in Parliament would be reserved for women. Bharti and Swaraj were vocal and unequivocal proponents of the bill. In November 1996, Swaraj declared, “We have to force the issue. The male mentality and male dominance cannot go on forever... Male-style politics, marked by corruption and inefficiency, must end.”<sup>28</sup> Bharti spoke repeatedly of the need to harness women’s capabilities. In a stunning departure from earlier representations of a woman’s role within *Hindutva*, she stated in 1998,

---

<sup>27</sup> “Sushma Swaraj Not Worried About Daughter Going to Pub,” *Express Buzz*, February 25, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Abhik Kumar Chandra, “Indian Women Politicians Relaunch Battle of the Sexes,” *Agence France-Presse*, November 19, 1996.

It is claimed that empowering women would ruin the domestic environment; that they would neglect their homes and children. But if a woman's affection is a result of being in bondage, if her love emerges from compulsion, from the fact that she is something of a bonded labourer, then that is not love. That is the love of a bonded labourer. Genuine affection can spring only from economic independence. So give her economic independence.<sup>29</sup>

After the *Ram Janmabhoomi movement*, women were able to use their newfound prominence and power as leaders within the BJP to begin to shape the direction in which *Hindutva* ideology evolved. In becoming vocal proponents of women's political, social and economic equality, BJP women were beginning to transform gender relationships within and outside the movement.

### Conclusions

The trend of *Hindutva* women utilizing their own power to empower others continued and intensified after 2003. A spate of bills introduced by Sushma Swaraj in Parliament in 2006 and 2007 illustrate this. The bills addressed a wide range of issues, including preventing cruelty and sexual harassment against women within and outside the workplace, preventing child prostitution, enforcing basic education for girls, especially among the poor and lower caste, and protecting widows.<sup>30</sup> This continued commitment to

---

<sup>29</sup> Uma Bharati, "Not a Woman's World: Case For OBC Representation," *Times of India*, July 17, 1998.

<sup>30</sup> V.K. Agnihotri, "Rajya Sabha Parliamentary Bulletin Part II, June 12, 2008," Rajya Sabha Bill Office, <http://164.100.24.167/bul1/211/07092007.htm>.

Saffron, Spice and Everything Nice? 153

addressing women's issues demonstrates that for many *Hindutva* women, the empowerment of women, whatever that may mean in their particular (religious or political) spheres, is a priority.

Scholars such as Sikata Banerjee and Paola Bacchetta have argued that *Hindutva* women achieved minimal gains for the feminist cause because despite being empowering for them personally, the movement reinforces sexist stereotypes. Meghana Nayak paraphrases Bacchetta as having said, "These women find ways within Hindu nationalist discourse to become political agents, yet they necessarily 'ensure [sic] their own confinement within the Hindu nationalist order."<sup>31</sup> While it is admittedly true that fundamentalism and sexism continue to play a part in *Hindutva*, it is also significant that the contributions women such as Swaraj, Bharti and Rithambara have made to the cause of women's empowerment have increased exponentially over time. *Hindutva* women tend to come from extremely religious, traditional families, and the organizations themselves reflect the traditional values of their members and leaders.<sup>32</sup> Out of necessity or conviction, the women maintain an outward commitment to traditional Hindu values, but they have altered the ideologies inherent within the movement in subtle though powerful ways. Simply by bringing issues such as women's empowerment through physical training

---

<sup>31</sup> Meghana Nayak, "The Struggle Over Gendered Meanings in India; How Indian Women's Networks, the Hindu Nationalist Hegemonic Project, and Transnational Feminists Address Gender Violence," *Women and Politics* 25 (2003): 84.

<sup>32</sup> Paola Bacchetta, "Militant Hindu Women Reimagine Themselves: Notes on Mechanisms of Expansion/Adjustment," *Journal of Women's History* 10 (1999): 130.

and reservations for women into *Hindutva* discourse, the saffron women have introduced a new focus that was never part of the movement's original ideology. They have also begun to criticize the patriarchal power structures that were part of the very essence of the movement early on.

The argument that *Hindutva* organizations promote sexism in terms of gender binaries, furthermore, holds better for some organizations than others. While religious organizations under the saffron umbrella, motivated as they are by religious concerns, do emphasize traditional values, the BJP as a political party often does not. Even within religious organizations such as the Vahini and Samiti, however, the increased attention paid to women's issues reflects a great stride forward within the religious or traditional sphere.

Although many feminist scholars have offered perceptive critiques of the sexism within *Hindutva* organizations, it is also within the scope of a feminist analysis to recognize the subtle but significant gains women have made. While these organizations are far from being models of gender equality, one need only look at the stark contrast between the *Hindutva* definition of femininity before the *Ram Janmabhoomi* incident and the multiple and varied definitions women leaders have crafted in recent years to realize the extent of the impact women have had and continue to have on the movement. Sifting through these multiple discourses, there emerges the possibility that the very democracy within which both the *Hindutva* and feminist movements have grown and gained vigor will be the ultimate winner. This visible instance of *Hindutva* women discovering ways to empower themselves within an otherwise confining system could

Saffron, Spice and Everything Nice? 155

conceivably serve as a model for other underprivileged groups. In the process, it is reasonable to hope that the moderate and mainstream voices will provide the dominant discourse.

*Deepti Shenoy is a senior at Santa Clara University triple majoring in Religious Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, and History. She is also an Ethics Center Teaching Fellow at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics. She is particularly interested in issues of gender and feminism within the context of South Asian history and plans to pursue graduate studies in History after graduating in December 2009.*