

‘You Call Us Goons! Have You Seen How *Their* Women Act?’: Gendering as a Protest Strategy among Hindu Nationalist Students in New Delhi

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ABSTRACT

Founded in 1949, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) is the largest political student organisation in the world. ABVP fights university elections, helps students navigate university bureaucracy, and conducts extra-curricular activities for students. It is one of the strongest arms of the largest and most influential coalition of Hindu nationalist organisations called the Sangh Family (*Sangh Parivar*) in promoting Hindu nationalist ideology to an extremely influential demographic: the young, university-educated, and urban populace. As a member of the largest Hindu nationalist organisation in the world, what does it mean to protest in the present political moment – with the knowledge that there is state and institutional support on your side? Ethnographic data and interviews show that gender plays a key role in how protests are organised and performed. In this article, the sites of the ABVP protest are deconstructed to illustrate two objectives: first, to lay out the preparations that go into ‘doing’ protest. Second, the strategies, micro-politics and navigations that show how protests are gendered. Gendering emerges as a strategy of assertion against women of the left and progressive groups.

Keywords: India, gender, Hindu nationalism, student politics, ABVP

INTRODUCTION

India has had a rich history of student protests and student-led interventions on issues of national importance that began in university spaces (Altbach, 1989; Pathania, 2018; Shah, 2004). Ideologically-aligned groups engaging on university campuses contribute to the vibrant student politics in India (Martelli and Parkar, 2018). Different groups lay claim to the campus space (through protest sites, walls, graffiti art, seminars, etc.) and on the student body through these initiatives. Protests become one of the ways in student parties *do* politics. In many cases, protests and counter-protests are held to declare ideological positions on issues in different forms: demonstrations, clashes, attacks through social media, and sometimes, physical violence.

Since 2016, there have been recurring events in India that have brought intense scrutiny over university campuses, inviting national and international attention (Nayar, 2020).¹ Polarising campuses sharply, the interventions from outside the university campuses have called upon members of the student community to explicitly declare their ideological affiliations; these events have compelled academics and scholars to widely discuss the idea and purpose of the university (Apoorvanand, 2018; Pathak, 2016). Is a university only for receiving education or is it a place for cogitating on radical new visions of the society? Some of the biggest questions that the university and its members have been grappling with are: What is nationalism? Who has the nation’s interests at heart? What can be spoken about and who can speak about it? And is university the place for intense debates on tradition versus new ideas?²

¹ Here, I refer particularly to the death of Rohith Vemula, a PhD scholar at the Hyderabad Central University in January 2016; the Film and Television Institute of India protests in 2014-2015; the ‘February 9’ incident at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi in 2016; the ‘Ramjas clashes’ in Delhi University in the following year, the Banaras Hindu University’s female students protesting the hostel regulations in October 2017; attacks on students in Aligarh Muslim University and Jamia Milia Islamia, and JNU attacks 2020, among many more.

² Pathania (2018: 18) also sees the present events in universities as assertions from students of marginalised communities ‘...producing a counter culture to the existing dominant culture’.

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There have been many student groups of different ideological positions engaging with these debates, taking to the streets to fight and protest. Among them are students from the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (All India Students Committee; ABVP), one of the most prominent student organisations in India. The ABVP was founded in 1949 as an affiliate of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteers Corp.; RSS). The RSS has been the most influential organisation leading the Hindu nationalist movement in India. The RSS also sits at the helm of the network of different Hindu nationalist organisations called the *Sangh Parivar* (Sangh family) – a network of affiliate organisations catering to different demographics and groups – each contributing to the Hindu nationalist vision of the nation in their own way (one of which is the current ruling party of India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party, BJP)). ABVP is a crucial member of the *Sangh Parivar* and it is uniquely positioned to cater to the movement in the way no other affiliate can: it caters to university students, brings discussions and vision of the Hindu nationalist thought to the campus, articulating them in the language that can appeal to young, educated students. ABVP, unlike other affiliates, allows both men and women to work together for the movement. The diversity of the student body in university campuses (gender, caste, region) also allows it to have a reach in demographics that are not as easily available to other affiliates. Further, ABVP alumni make up a large percentage of those who currently hold power in the government through their membership in the BJP. Thus, ABVP members have direct access to the corridors of power.

Women of the Hindu nationalist movement have increasingly acquired a crucial role in mobilising for the ideology (Basu, *et al.*, 1993; Katju, 2022; Sarkar, 1991; Sen, 2007). Their unique ways of contribution (such as using the domestic sphere for mobilisation, religiosity as a space to recruit new members etc) has been noted in the scholarship on women and Hindu nationalism. One crucial piece of the puzzle seems to be missing: how do young, urban, educated women, an extremely significant demographic to the *Sangh Parivar*, contribute to the movement? When it comes to active involvement in mobilisation and violence, the figure associated with the ABVP is typically of a Hindu male. Unlike other Sangh sisters (Tyagi, 2020), ABVP women do not keep religiosity at the forefront of their motivations for being a part of the movement. By understanding how ABVP women mobilise for the movement, we can achieve an insight into how young, educated, urban conservative women are furthering the cause of their ideology in the present historical moment.

In this article, I show how ABVP women are intimately involved in asserting the cause of Hindu nationalism in the space of the university. Through the personal biographies of the students in the movement, I will show how protests are a crucial site for socialisation into the Hindu nationalist movement. Through socialisation, student activists understand their required role during the protest and at the protest site. What emerge are different motivations, both personal and ideological, for being involved in protest and violence for the movement. Being involved in a protest and specifically being violent has the potential of future rewards from within the movement. The involvement of ABVP women has allowed the Hindu nationalist movement to perform two functions: first, they are able to identify a new antagonist, non-male enemies of the movement (women from progressive, feminist, left and anti-caste groups). Secondly and importantly, their active engagement in the protest site mediates the presence of Hindu nationalist men who increasingly need the presence of female bodies to assert themselves ideologically in the university space. This process that I refer to as 'gendering' is a strategy that is operationalised through the presence of ABVP women, where bodies at the protest site are identified and gendered, and this process determines the different ways in which opposing sections are engaged.

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork among ABVP students in two universities in Delhi. The fieldwork was conducted in 2019 and 2021-2022. In the article, I first briefly describe my fieldwork methodology. I then delineate how Hindu nationalist women have mobilised for the ideology and violence. To make my case for the importance of ABVP women, I discuss three 'events' and their key actors (two women, one man) to illustrate the biographies, motivations for being involved in the movement, and then describe their involvement in the protest 'event' and violence. Using the patterns of involvement, I show how gendering as a strategy is operationalised at the protest site.

In this ethnography, I relied on previous research contacts from another Hindu nationalist affiliate (the Rashtra Sevika Samiti (National Women Volunteers, the oldest RSS affiliate established in 1936) and social media to establish a connection with ABVP student activists or *karyakartas* (activist workers). Out of 30 main interlocutors, 18 self-identified as female and 12 as male. There were 20 Brahmin students, seven Other Backward Castes (Jats, Yadavs, and Gujjars), and three Rajputs.³ Among the 30 students, 15 came from a Hindu nationalist habitus (having kinship relations in the organisation) and were introduced to the ideology before joining the students' group. Educational level of the group was as follows: 10 doctoral students, 12 Master's students, and eight Bachelor's students. Barring two who were studying natural sciences, all of the students were studying Humanities and Social Sciences.

³ In my study, I did not encounter any Dalit students. I will not claim that there are no Dalit students in the ABVP, but predominantly, the organisation's caste profile in Delhi is dominated by upper-caste and OBC, middle-class students.

The study used ethnographic methods including participant observation and interviews. I conducted my data collection in two universities in Delhi: KOV and NU (names changed).⁴ I relied on snowball sampling to meet interlocutors and establish connections. I first conducted participant observation in public meetings, protests, demonstrations, in the common hang-out spots of Hindu nationalist students. After four or five meetings, I conducted a continuous series of in-depth interviews and got access to more intimate spaces and internal groups within the organisation. After data collection, I relied on thematic coding to organise my data. The data of this article comes from narratives of the ‘events’ and personal interviews with key participants from the ABVP, news reports, and social media of the interlocutors.⁵

Regarding my own identity, I introduced myself to my interlocutors as a north Indian woman who came from a middle-class urban family. I share caste, language, regional and gender markers with many of my interlocutors. My interlocutors seemed to be aware of how to place me in the caste hierarchy as my surname indicates a dominant caste status. I presented my institutional credentials as an international student in Germany and many times students approached me about further studies in Europe. I identify as a cis female. My identity, especially my caste position, allowed me access to spaces that would not be possible had it not been for my caste name's association with the movement. Further, my female identity allowed me into spaces and conversations with female students and many times, solo conversations with male members about the aspirations, masculinity and pressures they feel.

GENDER, VIOLENCE, AND IDEOLOGICAL MOBILISATION

The presence of women in ideological movements has produced scholarship that has consistently asked us to re-evaluate assumptions on how women participate in social movements, the roles they undertake, the impact on the larger feminist cause and differential definitions of agency and self-identity – be it religious movements, ethnic movements, electoral politics, and other forms of identity. In the subcontinent itself, there is a massive diversity in how women have participated in public life, and engaged with religious, ideological or political mobilisations (Sarkar and Butalia, 1995; Ciotti, 2006; de Alwis, 2002; Jeffery and Basu, 1999; Metcalf, 1999; Omvedt, 1990; Pawar and Moon, 2014; Roychowdhury, 2020; Sen, 2007). Ciotti (2006) argues that similarities in the way women across ideological spectrum participate points to the gendered sociological ways that they can participate in political life. *Seva* or service is an act of community service through volunteering. It aims to be an act of kindness and compassion towards those who are considered less privileged than oneself. ‘*Seva*’ encompasses within itself an idea of self-erasure and is an action for the benefit of someone else. An important aspect across the political spectrum has been the idea of ‘*Seva*’ as central to how women become political (Ciotti, 2006: 439).

Hindu Nationalist Women and Violence

Ideological assertions have inevitably produced different forms of violent mobilisations. Hindutva’s engagement with various forms of violence has been written about extensively (Basu, *et al.*, 1993; Engineer, 1985, 1994, 2002). Hindutva’s women, like women in other ideological projects, have regularly articulated their ideological demands through the language of violence, what Sarkar and Butalia (1995: 6) have referred to as the ‘feminisation of violence’. Durga Vahini (Chariots of Hindu goddess Durga; an affiliate of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (Global Association of Hindus, VHP)) women have been actively propagating their ideology through street vigilantism and involvement in riots (Katju, 2002; Saluja, 2022). Sen (2019: 745) calls such assertions ‘urbanoid enactments’⁶. Shiv Sena women have been documented to be involved in the post-Babri Mosque (1992) demolition riots in Bombay (Bedi, 2006; Sen, 2007). Sen (2006) has shown how Shiv Sena women (and here I also take into account other Hindutva women) carry out the ideological agenda and bring their own ‘feminised’ forms of violence to the fore: they are active in public spaces; in the same fight as men, they perform the role of ‘myth-making’, ‘rumour-mongering’ and ‘image building’ (Sen, 2006: 28).

But what makes the ABVP case interesting and relevant to the subject of gender and activism today? Gendered forms of participation are mediating the way ABVP engaged with oppositional groups on campus. ABVP women are creating newer avenues for women’s expression of Hindutva in university and urban spaces, an aspect that had

⁴ The university names have been changed to protect the identity of my interlocutors.

⁵ This article is part of a chapter in my doctoral thesis on the role of protests and violence to the personal and ideological project of the ABVP members. In the chapter, I classify three different kinds of protest engagements that the ABVP does on campus. These protest forms are differently structured and are in service of achieving different goals. The first type of protest is what I call ‘registering dissent’ against university administration and other educational institutions. These protests help establish ABVP’s role as an organisation that works for students’ benefit. The second type of protest (described here) is called ‘Clashes’. These are protests that happen when two student groups violently engage with each other on the university campus. This protest clearly demarcates the ideological positions of the different groups. The third type of protest is in the service of the ideology and invites unprecedented ideological mobilisation from within and outside the university campuses.

⁶ Please refer to footnote 20 for Sen’s conceptualisation of ‘urbanoid enactments’ (Sen, 2019).

until now been assumed to be under the domain of their male counterparts. As I will show in the article, ABVP women are now crucial to the project of Hindutva on-campus.⁷ They are the ones mediating the presence of their fellow male activists against ideological opponents, even protecting them from perceived threats from the 'other women' (elaborated later in the article).

Anamika, Manoj, and Barkha: Urban, young, educated Hindu nationalists⁸

I have chosen three *karyakartas* and related events to illustrate the changing ways in which young people engage in violence on university campuses and their engagement with the Hindu nationalist movement. Anamika, Manoj, and Barkha, are enrolled in a prestigious university in Delhi. All three have had a well-to-do upbringing in upper-caste and middle-class households and their identity markers are representative of many of the interlocutors in the study. Through these case studies, I will demonstrate how students enter the movement, negotiate their position and find their roles within the protest landscape. The events I will discuss are protest clashes. I define clashes as a violent interaction between opposing student groups on the campus on an issue of ideological importance and to assert political dominance. During clashes, the site of the protest is largely on campus, many a times with police presence. Through such clashes, I show the importance of ideological assertion to the project of Hindu nationalism on campus and for the individual activists of the ABVP. In the cases I discuss, the participants were progressive groups (left aligned, feminist) versus Hindu nationalist ABVP. Here, I will discuss individual participation in three events: the 'T-tree' event (name changed, 2019), Ramjas violence (2017), and KOV university attacks (2020; university name changed). In all the cases above, the fight was ideological (against the 'left') and in favour of specific values: against those who question 'traditions', uphold caste rituals, and those who question the idea of the nation. What emerges from the data are the ways in which members recognise their role, invest time and energy to perform it, and use this participation as symbolic leverage for their future in the movement. In this article, the focus would be to demonstrate that members are socialised into the organisation through protest and a marker of this socialisation is understanding gendered ways of participation in the protest site.

Anamika, 'the stone thrower'

While waiting around the 'help desk' (a space where new university aspirants can find help and information about the university from students' volunteers), two friends of an ABVP member spoke amongst themselves.⁹ A young woman, Anamika, had just passed them, walking in step with an excited student and nervous parents. As she passed, one of the students turned to the other, lowering his voice and said, 'She is the one who threw the stone!'. The girl widened her eyes. 'Her?', she inquired. 'Yes, she's the one who threw stones,' her friend confirmed. He turned to their friend in the ABVP, who was the young woman's batch mate in the college but evidently lower in the hierarchy of the ABVP college unit. He affirmed, adding 'There was blood'.

Anamika is a 20-year-old Brahmin woman who comes from a BJP and Sangh family. She is a student at a college in a university in Delhi. The incident when Anamika allegedly threw stones was the incident of the 'T-tree *Pooja*' (prayer), a 'tradition' that has continued from 1953 at her elite NU college. Every year on 14 February, the boys hostel conducts a ritual where a newly crowned 'Mr. Fresher' (first year resident of the college hostel) leads a prayer. The hope for the prayer is that those involved find a partner and 'lose their virginity' in the next six months. Two famous personalities are chosen by a vote in the boys' hostel and their posters are whom the prayers are addressed to. The female personality is called *Damdami Mata* (*Damdami* mother) and the *arati* (prayer song) is sung to her. College students recount that there was an addition of using condoms as balloons to promote 'sex education'. Over time, the condom balloons have found a place in the ritual as well. After the formal prayer, the members of the boys' hostel burst these balloons that are previously filled with water and whoever receives the meagre water shower is considered 'blessed'.

A few days before the T-tree celebration in 2018, a group of women from within the college objected to the ritual. Referring to themselves as the 'Progressive' Front, they opposed the misogynist and sexist practices of the

⁷ I am limiting myself to analysing Hindutva women's presence on the streets, although increasingly, women from the movement have been intricately involved in mobilisation online. Online as well, women are mobilising for the cause, raising awareness, targeting those who are antagonists to the cause and defending their ideology. Online spaces become crucial for articulating alternate stories, facts and rumours, especially before and after violent events. Artefacts such as videos, photos and text message chains are crucial for carrying the agenda, as was seen in the case of JNU attacks in 2020. See also: Meghnad, Goyal and Malik (2020).

⁸ All the names of research participants have been changed to preserve anonymity.

⁹ A 'help desk' is a way to help new students in universities navigate university rules, bureaucracy, and gain information about university life. Since there is a literal desk used to mark the space, the activity is called 'Help desk'. Both the university administration and student groups have their own help desks. The help desk becomes a physical space where senior students/members of the student parties provide information to new students and parents. Due to the ever-changing rules during university admission procedures, a broken system of accommodation and no real help for new students in a metropolis, a 'help desk' provides crucial support.

tradition: the voting of the female body that would represent *Damdami Mata*, the use of the phrase '36-24-36' in the prayer song (as an expression of desire for a perfect female body). As matters were discussed in the college 'Parliament' (the electorally-chosen, student run parliament of the college), two opposite sides stood firm on their point. There were students who wanted the tradition to go on and those who wanted it gone. Deliberations brought into discussion the objected lyrics but to no avail. There were students who believed that a 'Brahmanical tradition' that upheld sexism needed to be gone. On the other side were students who asked the former to learn to take a joke and respect the tradition of the college.

Anamika was part of the college students who were proud of this tradition and wanted to it continue because of its value as a college ritual. As the students of the 'Progressive' front grew in number and gained support from outside the college, the college students who were batting for the tradition became insistent on holding the celebration as well. A day before the event, a fight broke out between the two groups at the site of the tree. There was violence between the students, men and women. While the Progressive students found numerical support from *Pinjra Tod* (break the cage; a progressive Feminist group in Delhi) and the Students Federation of India (SFI; student affiliate to the Communist Party of India-Marxist), Anamika involved her connections in the ABVP from outside her college. Her seniors from the organisation rushed to her aid and found her physically fighting women who did not agree with her. 'I was bleeding and crying', she recalled. Manoj, the senior who rounded up the ABVP members to go fight, remembered reaching the college and immediately 'getting to work'. During the 'T-tree protests', Anamika is remembered as the only girl defending the tradition. In the three days of this fight, she says she received threats from as far as her home state of West Bengal and intimidation in her student residence. 'My hair tie fell down when the leftists pulled my hair!', she says, and immediately also claims that she saw a young student almost die in the protests. Claims of sexual harassment flew from both sides, but no formal complaints were made.

Anamika is an ABVP member from her high school years. Although she comes from a Brahmin Sangh family, where her uncle and father are both associated with the BJP, she secretly sought out the local ABVP leaders on her own to become a member. Her parents wanted her to solely focus on her studies but her attraction to the ideology compelled her to seek more. When she was 16 years old, she reached out to the National Secretary of ABVP. He responded to her and assured her of making her a part of the 'movement'. She was connected to a local Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM; BJP's youth wing) leader. He in turn directly connected her to two ABVP members who lived close to her home.¹⁰ They met outside her home, careful to keep in mind that her parents were not fully aboard with the idea of her joining. Anamika fondly recalled that the two ABVP seniors took her out for ice cream. She became a member that day – by submitting her yearly membership fee of 2 rupees (less than 2 cents) and as a mark of initiation, she was given a booklet about the ABVP. She has now been a member of the organisation for four years.

Anamika's family originally comes from Sylhet, Bangladesh. It was her grandfather's father who moved to Silchar, Assam, 'much before' the Partition in the subcontinent.¹¹ ¹² She believes in the fight for those who came before 1971, the ones who do not have the documents, the Hindus. 'But where will the Hindus go?', she asks. And the consistent stand of the Sangh: that India is the home for Hindus perhaps gives her a reason to believe that she has a place here. She grew attached to the 'values' from home: values such as 'patriotism' (as a desired, natural value) and sacrifice, respect for soldiers, respect for the Mother Nation, being a good citizen and to work for the 'disadvantaged'. These could be acquired common values from nationalised schooling but coming from a Sangh home meant that she had another structure to identify these values with. She has an 'emotional attachment' to the ideology. Her association with ABVP is not restricted to her loyalty for the organisation – it is for the ideology, an ideology of 'Golwalkar, Savarkar, and Swami Vivekanand'.¹³

Anamika is now the co-convener of the ABVP in her college unit. I first met her during 'help-desk' season (during university admissions in June-July). She did her duties on the move, shouting instructions to her ABVP

¹⁰ This also demonstrates the relatively smooth networks between different Sangh affiliates across the country and the role that personal connections play in retaining interested members in the organisation.

¹¹ The focus on the temporal indication of 'much before' India's partition in 1947 is to stress on her connection to India, as opposed to the stigma carried by migrants who have crossed borders after the Partition, especially in the eastern states of India.

¹² She spent her early years in Assam, fully aware of her identity as a Bengali there. She has over time understood the aggression towards immigrants in Assam, come to dislike the rhetoric of 'all Bengalis in Assam are Bangladeshis', the conflicts that took place in 1965 and 1971. She remembers hearing about United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), a radical organisation working towards an independent Assam. She understands that they (ULFA) want 'everyone out' – Hindu or Muslim.

¹³ Here, she is referring to key ideologues of the Hindu nationalist movement in India: Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (1906-1973), the second head of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh; Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966), the author of 'Hindutva: Who is a Hindu' (1923) and a key member of the Hindu Mahasabha; and, Narendranath Dutt (1863-1902), also known as Swami Vivekanand, was a monk who followed the Ramakrishna Mission, a Hindu reform movement from Bengal, India.

juniors as she walked on with the parents inside the college. She was never stationary. First, she would make contact with a parent and their ward at the college gate. Then she would walk with them rapidly to the assigned classroom where admissions were taking place. On the way, the parents would almost pick up their steps to match hers. She would exclusively address the parents, asking them where they were from, what their ward's percentage is, and their 'category' (referring to caste category, relevant for admission formalities).¹⁴ In the meantime, the parents would ask her opinion on the college, hostels, and student accommodations. She would take them to the entrance of the class, and wait outside (the 'help-desk' volunteers were not allowed inside admission rooms). Once she saw that they are settled inside the room, she marched her way to the college gate to start the process again. Sure enough, once the parents were done with admissions, they would seek her out and thank her, many times asking their ward to take 'Didi's number' (*Didi*, older sister) and asking *Didi* to keep an eye out for their child – a tried and tested strategy that has helped retain Sangh memberships for decades.

What was her motivation for getting involved in violence of the T-tree clashes? Was it mere retaliation as she claims, or is there something more to the act of defending a tradition? In this particular case, she opposed the women because they were from 'the left' – disparate groups that came together against the defenders of tradition. This clash inevitably became a 'right' versus 'left' debate, 'tradition' versus 'progressive' ideologies. She faced repercussions: intimidation and a threat of suspension from the college. And there were rewards: she was a valued *karyakarta*, her seniors in the organisation knew her well, and she now held sway in the internal politics of her college as well. The violence of T-tree is the incident that Anamika is known for: she threw stones and physically fought, and it resulted in her contribution to ABVP getting recognition in the college where it did not even have a fully-working college unit. But her aim is not the ABVP, it is national politics, to work for the ideology: 'I will stay for the ideology, not for the organisation'.

Anamika's presence at the protest site allowed for two forms of assertions: first, Anamika played an instrumental role in articulating a traditionalist and ABVP's position on the issue. Further, it mattered more that she repeatedly asserted that as a woman this event did not offend her. As students who were not partisan now remember it, it was a fight between 'leftist women' and 'ABVP men', led by Anamika. In the T-tree incident, Anamika articulated her role as a female conservative voice on campus, positing herself as a single-voice against the women with the oppositional view. Anamika represents how women in the ABVP are claiming their ideologies and carving out distinct spaces as Hindu nationalist voices on campus. Secondly, in the actual clash that took place between students, ABVP men would have had to seriously re-consider participation in engaging with opposing women due to the bogey of sexual harassment. The presence of their own female members made the space more accessible to them as the sexual harassment bogey could be then used from both sides.

Manoj, 'the (Hindu) nationalist'

Earlier, ghee (clarified butter) was sold with the label as is. When people started mixing something in the ghee, it had to be differentiated with 'desi ghee' (indicative of purity). Ideally, everyone should be a nationalist if you are living in this country. But if there is a difference between nationalists and if it helps 'you' to differentiate us like that, then go ahead. I don't like the idea of being a 'Hindu nationalist'. We are just activists. But if you compare us to other organisation, for examples the slogans raised at JNU, then we are definitely nationalists. Hence if you need to differentiate the ghee from 'desi ghee', then one definitely needs these labels.¹⁵ (Manoj, 25-year-old, Brahmin male *karyakarta*, DU)¹⁶

Manoj comes from a middle-class family of Indian National Congress members. But his immediate family is a Sangh family: Brahmin, who generally are convinced that the Congress 'plays minority politics', and that there is an inherent bias amongst intellectuals against the Hindus in India. When he was growing up, he asked his father about the Gujarat riots in 2002. He must have been 8 or 9 years old. His father asked him a question in return: whose report had he heard? 'Entire families got burnt in Godhra and people did not find the space to speak about their sorrow. No media house went to the families of the train victims', he states. 'That moved me. I saw that even those channels that are now pro-BJP did not raise these issues'. Now he is on a path of course correction, making

¹⁴ As part of affirmative action, government and government-funded institutions in India have spaces reserved for historically oppressed communities. Caste is one such category. Depending upon the state and national list, different castes are categorised into groups: General (dominant castes), Other Backward Castes (OBCs), Scheduled Castes (SCs), and Scheduled Tribes (STs). To claim the seats in educational institutions for reserved categories, students have to produce the relevant caste certificate.

¹⁵ JNU is Jawaharlal Nehru University, a research university in Delhi. The slogans he is referring to are alleged 'anti-national' slogans that were raised at an event to mark violence in Kashmir on 9 February, 2016.

¹⁶ Manoj's analogy explains his discomfort of being called a 'Hindu nationalist'. He believes that they are nationalist and that the word 'Hindu' is given by outsiders. In this way, he can present his ideology as free from religion and present it as a universalist project. Further, I wonder if we can use the dichotomy of pure and diluted clarified butter to also extend the prevalent practices of caste.

sure that the ‘unheard’ side is heard in every way possible. Manoj wears his ideology on his sleeve, as he likes to call it. It emerges in his speeches, examples he chooses to give, the plays he chose to participate in, and the poetry he chooses to read (most often aloud). He was the lone vocal and openly Hindu nationalist student in his elite college in NU. He gradually found students who agreed with his views, but never publicly. He recounted an incident with a teacher who admired his poetry. On learning about his political views, the teacher asked him why he as a ‘good’ boy associated with a ‘dirty’ ideology. ‘I told him that you have described me as a “good” boy in a “dirty” ideology. Both are your words. I laughed and walked away’, he recalled. During his undergraduate studies, Manoj became more convinced of the ideology of his father and became active about his beliefs. During the time, he did not need to be a part of the ABVP to show the side he was on – he liked the feeling of being ‘unique’ for his ideology is his college. It was only after he joined a postgraduate course at the Faculty of Law that he officially became an ABVP member.

Manoj does not like the word ‘goon’ associated with the ABVP. The association of ABVP men (and now, women) with the word is prevalent and does not seem to be going away anytime soon. It is this image that makes men in ABVP careful when clashing with people in protests: that they would be unfairly judged. ‘You call us goons. Have you seen how *their* women act?’, he asserted. Men like Manoj say that they have to work extra hard to keep the image at bay. In 2019, Manoj appeared in a video, where he is seen kicking and abusing a student who was standing by, watching an anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protest in NU. A member of the ABVP runs up from behind Manoj, trying to hold him back while he shouts abuse and kicks. Then, there is commotion – the person taking the video starts screaming as we see students running in all directions. ‘These ABVP goons are attacking students’, the voice pants as she warns students to run in the opposite direction. Manoj was the first ‘senior’ to respond to Anamika’s call for support at her college a year earlier. And a year before that, when the violence at Ramjas College broke out, Manoj went to the scene to make sure his side was heard. He says that the violence they faced did not surface as much as it did for the other side. ‘We were beaten too!’, he says exasperated. And there is ‘proof’: videos and photos of the blood that was shed from the side of the ABVP. This ‘proof’ collected and retrieved at a moment’s notice, put in a folder called ‘Ramjas’ in his phone. Two days before the Delhi riots in 2020, Manoj circulated a video of himself on WhatsApp, speaking to a news channel, threatening anti-CAA protestors. ‘You have been talking to me for so many days, have I been a goon to you?’, he asked me. It was not a question where he needed a response. My response was assumed no.

What draws Manoj to violence? What does he gain from his physical presence in a fight between ‘left’ and ‘right’? What gives him the confidence to make the first move? Apart from the assurance offered by masculinity, clearly there is a knowledge that exists before making the move that physical intimidation and physical and verbal violent tools are available to him. A way to explain Manoj’s insistence on using violence comes from a need to give his ideology the upper-hand. It is not an ideology that he just came into – it defines his life entirely, from the friends he has, to how he becomes political and the career choice he has made. It encompasses his family and what his father stands for, what he has stood for his entire life. A defence of the ideology is the defence for his way of life.

In this case, gender plays a role in how men like Manoj participate in the protest site. First, Manoj’s discomfort with the stigma of being considered a ‘goon’ has been cemented from ABVP’s and his own involvement in campus violence. But now, there are more antagonistic women on protest sites directly fighting to make their claim. While seeking out men among those antagonists is a strategy, it cannot begin until there are women alongside already engaging other women. Secondly, for men, there is also an idea of honour and masculinity in not physically fighting women. Therefore, men like Manoj can be completely free to participate when there are people who they perceive as men on the other side. But when there are women, the strategy needs to be reconfigured.

Barkha, ‘the follower’

Anyone who knows her would know it was her: in the checked shirt with a long scarf covering her face, holding a steel rod and surrounded by *Bhaiyas* (kinship term to denote older brothers; a way to address older male members in the organisation) who she knew would protect her. When the initial videos and images from the attacks in a prestigious university in Delhi emerged (2020), Barkha was the only person whose involvement everyone was sure of. Her name became emblematic of the incident: the girl who was violent, the girl who threatened to beat other women (and possibly did), the girl who caused infrastructural damage to one of India’s most prestigious universities right in the heart of the capital. She was the girl who was willing to be violent for the Hindu nationalist ideology.

The night her name did the rounds in the media, she uploaded a ‘status’ on WhatsApp, the messenger service, the only place where she was active after the incident. It was a video message from a female Commonwealth Games medal recipient and sports personality who supported the ‘retaliation’ by ‘nationalist’ students against ‘*vampanti*’ (communist) ‘anti-national’ students. The next day, there was another message supporting the ‘reaction’, a tweet by an ABVP national executive member. She then went off-the radar on social media. Two days before the Delhi riots in 2020, ABVP held its state conference (*prant adhiveshan*) in Delhi. In the conference, all high-ranking members of the ABVP in all of Delhi campuses and members of the National Executive came together

for the routine meeting. The *Abhiveshan* is a celebratory affair: there is decoration, photo opportunities, new post holders chosen, and an address by the National chief. All the ABVP members uploaded photos and videos showing how they participated in the event. The seniors uploaded parts of their speeches. Campus level post holders uploaded pictures with the chief guest and 'candid' shots that showed them in event proceedings. And ABVP members like Barkha uploaded pictures of her with different *Bhaiyas* and *Didis* (older brothers and sisters, a way to address older members) who had 'supported' her. There were pictures of her beaming other ABVP members. Then there was picture of her with Manoj, calling him her 'backbone' and keeping her safe 'during the most difficult time' in her life (referring perhaps to the backlash against her after her name became prominently known after these attacks).

Barkha was 19. She was in her second year of undergraduate studies. She comes from a Brahmin family that supports the BJP. She did not know about the Sangh or what it stands for. She knows the BJP and believes in its 'positive impact' on the country. She knows that *Bhaiyas* in ABVP are nice and protective. She trusts her seniors in the organisation. And she is deeply interested in how power plays out during university elections, even though she cannot vote in it (her college does not participate in university elections). In programmes organised by the ABVP, she is usually with a senior, following them around and doing as she was told. Since she has moved away from family to go to college in Delhi, she has relied heavily on the network of her ABVP seniors to find her feet in the big city. She visits them at home, is beloved by their parents, and attends their family weddings. For her, ABVP is her family in Delhi. Her life is in the ABVP. She attends protests, all ABVP events, and has her own circle of influence now in her college and in the ABVP, and perhaps even the larger Sangh family.

When she volunteered to go across the city to threaten those who were bothering the project of her *Bhaiyas* and *Didis* organisation, she knew she was doing it because no harm would come to her. When the Delhi Police could not locate the attackers, Barkha was protected by the highest powers in the organisation, safely kept in Manoj's home until the storm blew over. When Barkha decided that violence was a method, she was not doing it for the ideology but for the thrill of pleasing her seniors. Validation drew her to authority figures in the organisation and her efforts have paid off: she has become more vocal in the ABVP. She is different from Anamika and Manoj, for whom the ideology needs actions to be defended. She is not naïve that she follows an authority figure and does what they say. She knew who to ally with and now, even after there is proof that she was involved in the violence, she is visible, not hiding, and there is no police case registered against her.¹⁷

Barkha as a single female figure surrounded by men wielding sticks and rods represents how crucial she is to the violence. Her presence allowed for entry into women's quarters in the university campus. In videos of the incident, she is the one verbally engaging with women who were registering their anger against this violent act. I think that her uploading videos of the female supporter of the ideology after the incident also helps make the women more visible in the movement. During fieldwork, ABVP members voiced concerns about women traditionally being more 'attracted' to the 'left' or feminist groups. By making women like Barkha and Anamika visible, they are creating space for more women to join them. Further their presence shows (standing alongside their male counterparts) that there are active women Hindu nationalists who are not afraid of physical violence.

MOTIVATIONS FOR PROTEST AND VIOLENCE

I wanted to be a part of something, that people listen to me- to speak about my ideology and the ideology I adhere to. (Anamika, 20-year-old, female ABVP member)

In these three biographies, there are multiple reasons that emerge for being involved in the movement. What also emerge are the different ways in which young Hindu nationalists navigate their involvement in the protests and the larger movement. Both Manoj and Anamika are driven by a need to speak about their ideology. Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (1906-1973) was the second Sanghsanchalak (head of the organisation) of the RSS and one of the revered icons of Sangh thought. In his book, *Bunch of Thoughts* (Golwalkar, 1966), he writes that there are three 'internal threats' to the Hindu nationalist movement and its patriots: Christians, Muslims and Communists. Anamika believes in this classification and upholding the Hindu nationalist fight for tradition takes precedence when she decides how she will fight the progressive group. As mentioned earlier, the fight is situated in the context of the historical Hindu nationalist movement as the enemy shared an alliance with the communist ideology (among many others who fought the ABVP during the clash). For Manoj, a Hindu nationalist, it is most natural, an obligation, to love your country. The position that the organisation and its networks have on contemporary politics has allowed him confidence to make the first move when fighting during protests. His desire emerges from giving

¹⁷ While Barkha has not had to deal with police or judicial action, India has consistently recorded low rankings in terms of press and academic freedoms. Civil society members, academics, activists and artists, have been jailed, threatened and even, died in custody (see also: Pheroze, 2022).

his ideology an upper hand during these clashes and protests. For Barkha, she is fighting for the ideology of her *Bhaiyas* and *Didis*, thereby showing how the movement retains connections and mobilises them for action.

There were not only rewards gained for the movement and the ABVP when these young *karyakartas* protest and fight other student groups on campus. There are material and symbolic rewards that come to the *karyakartas* for being involved in protests like these. The role that they played in a successful protest can be used to leverage later for lobbying for positions in the organisation. For example, for Anamika, she was able to establish ABVP, hitherto a marginal force in her college, as a strong student party after the T-Tree incident. She was able to take absolute control of the unit and use this to gain influence at the campus-level politics of the ABVP. For Manoj, the ideology comes to represent him, his choices, his entire milieu. A defence of the ideology is a defence of his way of life. His constant availability to the organisation's initiatives also allows him access to the networks of power within the organisation and always a position at the campus-level to make crucial decisions. Similarly, Barkha, after her involvement in the aforementioned attacks has managed to accrue her own circle of influence in the organisation now. I suggest that after seeing the symbolic and material gains accrued by those who are violent for the ideology, Barkha makes an active decision for potential future benefits by choosing to be violent.

GENDERING VIOLENCE AS A STRATEGY

I have seen with my own eyes, how 'their' (meaning 'left') girls attack 'our' boys during protests. After that they threaten them with a sexual harassment case. (Adivi, KOV university ABVP unit (30-year-old, Brahmin female activist))

Aspirations and motivations to fight for the ideology are gendered. Further, how young people adapt to fight for it, the tools they choose to use, definitely are. One of the strategies that has emerged in ABVP's protest landscape is the conscious gendering of protest structure and site to achieve protest aims, primarily against progressive and feminist groups. It was after Ramjas that the idea of 'goons' as being assumed a male *karyakarta* changed for the ABVP. Nazar (21-year-old female ABVP member, Brahmin) pointed out the need for female *karyakartas'* body occupying the protest landscape thus:

During Ramjas, it was the girls who gave the fight to the communists. They occupied the front stage. Vindhya *Didi* (a senior female activist in the organisation) showed that commie girl (a girl from a communist-leaning student party) that ABVP girls are not less.

Vindhya achieved a meteoric rise in the organisation after she directly engaged with a prominent female student politician from the left during the Ramjas clashes. During the T-tree protests, Anamika is remembered as the only girl defending the tradition. She threw stones and physically fought women from the opposing side. There was hair pulling, slapping, kicking, hitting, and verbal abuse from both sides.

In the T-tree protest, Manoj appeared alongside other ABVP members to defend the stand taken by Anamika and other students. Manoj was there to intimidate and rely on physical strength to 'win' the protest. But it was a conundrum since most of his opponents were women. ABVP members spoke of how 'women from the left' specifically sought ABVP men in protests to first engage them in physical violence and then press charges of sexual harassment. Thus, one of the strategies of ABVP men in recent years has been to hold their hands up so that there is proof. There are also video recordings and photos to illustrate how 'left women' use the bogey of 'sexual harassment' to malign 'good men from the ABVP'. Now, Manoj's presence at the protest site with a heterogeneous composition (especially women from antagonist groups) relies on the female ABVP *karyakartas* to mediate his presence and action there.

During my data collection, a trend that emerged was the specific roles performed according to the gender identities of ABVP members. What do I mean by gendering of a protest? Here, I define 'gendering' as assuming, identifying and then taking action accordingly, based on presumed gendered characteristics of femininity and masculinity and how that affects bodies in a protest space. This is a strategy that has emerged in the way that ABVP mobilises for protests. First, it is the conscious deployment of female ABVP *karyakartas* to assert control of the protest to engage women in other student groups. This is done as a 'tit for tat' measure since traditionally ABVP has a more traditionally male-oriented, masculine image. Secondly, as is evident from Adivi's quote above, it is also a strategy to recognise women in other student groups as using tools to disparage or undermine the male *karyakartas* of the ABVP. In this analysis, what emerges is the singling out and creating of 'the other women' as a threat to the protest of the ABVP and the reputation of ABVP men. The threat of 'sexual harassment' as a legal recourse hangs in the air like a bogeyman – used by 'other women' against ABVP men. I find that when it comes to clashes, gendering is one of the most essential tools to claim the space, assert dominance and take control of the narrative of the protest. The recognition of and assuming an opposite gender is crucial to manoeuvring the protest. It is through this calculation that further steps can be deliberated: sexual violence and harassment at the site of the

protest, a proven strategy to malign opposite groups. The participation of women is used to consolidate the position of male protesters. Female ABVP *karyakartas* come to the rescue of their male counterparts between female antagonists – mainly to prevent them from being ‘falsely’ implicated in charges of sexual harassment. Women’s bodies in this scenario become the site of contested honour – right-wing women protecting the honour of men through a surveillance of the bodies of the ‘other’ women. The body of the female *karyakartas* becomes the site through which ABVP men can protest and protect themselves.

The participation of Hindutva women in violence is not new, nor is their presence in the urban, public space (Katju, 2022; Pahuja, 2012; Saluja 2022; Sarkar, 1991; Sen, 2019). The imagination of perceived violence in different affiliates may vary but being physically adept at defending the ideology has been one of the core aims of the women’s affiliates in the *Sangh Parivar*.¹⁸ What makes the ABVP case interesting and unique is that firstly, unlike other Sangh affiliate organisations like the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, Durga Vahini, etc., these women receive no training in engaging in threats of physical violence.¹⁹ Secondly, unlike the other affiliates, the young women have to engage in physical confrontation in the public space, mainly on the university campus but other spaces in the urban landscape as well (for example, clashes with the police or other organisations). Thirdly, these women are fighting their antagonists alongside the male *karyakartas* of the organisation, unlike any other affiliate in the Sangh family. Lastly, these women are the primary mediators of violence in the university space between non-Hindutva women and ABVP members. Without their presence, the ABVP men would not have such a fluid access to this confrontation. Female *karyakartas* like Anamika, Barkha, and Vindhya, are now essential to the protest landscape of university politics that is propagated by the ABVP.

CONCLUSION

The physical act of coming together for members in ideological groups (such as protest sites) act as a glue for more concrete socialisation in the organisation and the ideology (Virchow, 2007). There are three reasons that primarily emerge for members’ partaking in such violence: for the defence of the ideology; for knowledge of having state/support of the authority; for material and status benefits, alongside the creation of closeness with powerful members in the organisation. The link between the motivation to be part of the organisation, the ideology, and violence is not evident with the membership of every member. Not every member chooses to become violent. What emerges paramount here is that members who can be violent in the ABVP are primarily those that have previously existing connections that will enable safety from repercussions – the informal networks in the local hierarchy as mentioned earlier (for example, because of having the support of powerful seniors in the organisation or having support from the State). All of the members here received a light admonishing from authorities, but their networks enjoy good relationships with the local police. There is also a connection between one’s own aspiration within the organisation and material or status benefits that will be achieved through the violence. There is the higher status of members who are seen being visibly violent among their peer group. Therefore, visual proof of one’s involvement and injuries, a repetition of the specific ways in which they were hurt is repeated to build a ‘legend’ that is mythologised when the situation demands.

In this article, I have attempted to show how members are socialised into the organisation through protest. A signifier of socialisation within the organisation is to understand one’s role in the protest. As shown, male and female members perform specific roles in the set-up of the protest. They gender a space and identify their opponents. Gendering of the protest site and identifying of female and male bodies also emerges as a crucial strategy during protest clashes. Further, in the recent past, the image of the ‘goon’ as indicative of a male activist has also begun to change. Female *karyakartas* are essential to the feminine gendering in producing successful protests during clashes. This recognition comes at the backdrop of ABVP members asserting a masculine image and accompanying tendencies of violence, vandalism and vigilante behaviour. The ‘goon’ image was typically associated with male members, but is now being appropriated by women also – women who do not hesitate to use physical violence and vandalism to assert themselves. They typically engage with opponent women in a protest site, while male members are assumed to be engaging with competing men. The script goes haywire when the opponents do not follow the same strategy of gendering the protest site.

Foster (2003) focuses on the role of the body and its potentials in her work on strategies from different progressive movements. She articulates different forms of action that the body takes, depending upon the role and

¹⁸ For example, for women in the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, the perceived violence is against the Hindu women’s honour. On the contrary, the perceived violence among Durga Vahini women is against those who threaten Hindus and Hindu ideals.

¹⁹ ABVP runs an initiative called ‘Mission *Sabasi?* (Mission Bravery). In this, young women are given self-defence training. This initiative, modelled on other Sangh women’s affiliate trainings, is directed against physical and sexual harm from men in the public space. I found no mentions among ABVP women between the cursory training from initiative and the ABVP women’s actions at protest sites.

nature of the protest. She moves away from classical theories that suggest that the body in a state of protest is almost unthinking, instead showing how the body has been used strategically in the service of the political protest. There are two findings from her work that I find helpful in locating these strategies in the larger protest infrastructure. First, the body is carefully thought about. The Hindu nationalist body, especially presence of antagonistic female bodies, finds itself reconsidering tactics and redefines the structure of the protest. Second, protests are not spontaneous eruptions (Foster, 2003: 395) but strategically planned. Thus, what these strategies also point to is the anticipation, possible visualisation, and preparation for the protest. By making sure that there are female ABVP members, holding the hands up to avoid contact with the antagonistic female body, and using documentary evidence, are all in preparation to sustain the protest and thereby, feed the movement.

A related aspect that can be discussed here is: does the presence of female Hindu nationalist bodies enable more mobility for other marginalised bodies in the public protest sphere? Phadke, *et al.* (2011) have argued about the positive impact on women's mobility through the presence of different bodies in the public space. The act of being present, as we have seen progressive women's movements across South Asia take up this idea, have allowed for increased mobility in the public sphere (Kirmani, 2020; Phadke, 2020; Saeed, 2018). But does the presence of ABVP women align with this finding? Here, I would like to bring in another finding from Basu (1999: 10):

The relationships between agency, activism, and empowerment are complicated and often contradictory. Women's agency may strengthen systems of gender segregation, and women's activism may heighten identification with their roles as mothers. Women's activism may also empower women from particular communities but at the cost of deepening religious and ethnic divisions amongst them.

Many times, when women participate in violence, we are left to understand whether the actions are agential, and perhaps, feminist. Borrowing from Basu's explanation, I propose that presence of more female bodies does not automatically increase access for other marginalised bodies in the public space. ABVP women are quite clear that they are fighting for the furthering the presence of Hindutva. Further, female *karyakartas'* presence is allowing for a male assertion that would not have been as possible had it not been for former's presence.²⁰ Anamika fighting for the T-tree ritual is an act of defending tradition and honour, in line with her Hindu nationalist beliefs. Similarly, Barkha's presence is allowing for a more emboldened presence of her male counterparts in the protest space. In this case, the activists were very clear that their fight was for tradition and against a 'feminist' interpretation of the event. In this way, this clash is significant because it illustrates to us how conservative women do politics in university or historically-assumed progressive spaces. What emerges is that ABVP women mediate the presence and actions of ABVP men in protest sites. Therefore, women who are protesting the Hindu nationalist ideology become the most formidable enemy of all the protesting ABVP members. These protests could take place just with women (with the absence of men). But without women, these protests would not be possible. For the larger Hindu nationalist cause, these women should be seen as making an equal claim on the ideology and the organisation. They are the new agents of Hindutva.

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²⁰ Sen (2019) in her study of Shiv Sena women calls the public assertion 'urbanoid enactments'. She uses the case of vigilantism of the women on the street to argue that this is one of the ways the poor women access urban space and fight men on the streets to increase access and mobility. Although it is done in the language of 'populist politics of the city' (Sen, 2019: 745), it is a 'convoluted' way that allows women to access the urban space. She writes, 'Right-wing politics' and its legacy of violent self-defense becomes a temporary crutch for women to articulate their desire for security...'. While this is furthering the cause of mobility (albeit, complicated and convoluted), ABVP women's intervention in the streets is increasing the visibility of Hindutva women and conservative students, completely in the service of the organisation and personal goals.

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