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Hindu Nationalism and Student Politics

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad between 1947 and 1985

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Abstract: *Students in India have played politically significant roles both before and since independence. Organizations of both the left and the right attempted and at various points succeeded in mobilizing mass support among students. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the front organizations spawned by it, known collectively as the Sangh, have long been major proponents of Hindu nationalism and have considered students important. Despite this, the Sangh's relationship with students has not received systematic analysis. This article, using sources primarily produced by the Sangh, analyzes different aspects of the Sangh's relationship with students between 1947 and 1985. It attempts to demonstrate how during this period, primarily through its student front, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (All India Students' Council, ABVP), the Sangh was keen on gaining control and influence over student politics. To do so, the ABVP sought to strategically moderate its image. At times the agitational or Hindutva aspects of the organization were foregrounded while on other occasions or even simultaneously the ABVP was portrayed as a peaceful "organization with a difference" that was nonpolitical and interested in service activities.*

Keywords: student politics, RSS, ABVP, Hindu nationalism

This article attempts to understand the relationship that developed from 1947 to 1985 between students and the Hindu nationalist “family” of organizations headed by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), collectively referred to as the Sangh Parivar (or simply the Sangh),¹ and in particular its student front—the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), or All India Students' Council. Students, over the last two centuries, have often appeared as visible actors at times of great social and political upheaval, albeit playing starkly different roles. They were, for instance, on both

1 While “Sangh” and “RSS” are commonly used interchangeably, in this article Sangh refers not only to the RSS but the entire collection of organizations of which the RSS is the central authority.

sides of the barricades during the uprisings of 1848,² the most visibly active sections of the unrest of 1968,³ participants in anti-imperialist and anticolonial movements,⁴ and fervent supporters of right-wing movements throughout Europe in the interwar period.⁵ Similarly, in India, students have been important political actors playing multifarious roles since before independence. While students were part of the anti-colonial mass movements and proponents of revolutionary terrorism, they could also be found in the ranks of Hindu and Muslim communalist organizations.⁶ After independence, students continued to play contrasting roles and were a part of the movement against the Internal Emergency,⁷ contributors to violent ultra-left movements,⁸ and an important part of the leadership and support base of the Khalistan⁹ and Assam¹⁰ movements in the 1970s and 1980s. Organizations of both the left and the right attempted and at various points succeeded in securing mass support among students. In the present day, student politics continues to be a keenly contested space with many forces and organizations attempting to intervene.

The genesis of the Hindu nationalist movement in India can be traced to the end of the nineteenth century.¹¹ While there have been numerous individuals and organizations that subscribed to variations of this ideology, in the post-independence period, the Sangh has been its most significant flag bearer. The chief aim of the Sangh's ideological and political project can be summed up as the transformation of India into a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation). According to the RSS's second chief and most significant

2 Priscilla Robertson, "Students on the Barricades: Germany and Austria, 1848," *Political Science Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (1969): 367–79.

3 Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987).

4 Philip G. Altbach, "Perspectives on Student Political Activism," *Comparative Education* 25, no. 1 (1989): 97–110.

5 E. J. Hobsbawm, "Intellectuals and the Class Struggle," in *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays* (London: Phoenix, 1973), 245–66.

6 Anil Rajimwale, "Student Movement in India in the Nineteenth Century," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 49 (1988): 343–48; Anil Rajimwale, *History of Student Movement in India: Origins and Development (1920–1947)* (New Delhi: Manak Publications, 2001).

7 An "Internal Emergency" was imposed in India on June 25, 1975, by the president on "advice" of the prime minister, Indira Gandhi. This gave summary powers to the executive, which were utilized in stifling political opposition, the freedom of the press, and individual rights and liberties. See Gyan Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles: Indira Gandhi and Democracy's Turning Point* (New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2018).

8 Biplab Dasgupta, *The Naxalite Movement* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1974).

9 Hamish Telford, "The Political Economy of Punjab: Creating Space for Sikh Militancy," *Asian Survey* 32, no. 11 (1992): 969–87.

10 Meeta Deka, *Student Movements in Assam* (New Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1996).

11 Jyotirmay Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2011).

ideologue, M. S. Golwalkar (1906–1973), the Hindu nation had always existed and the task was to revive and revitalize it.¹² This was to be done through the development of a unified Hindu identity based on the myth of a shared culture, language, and history of all Hindus while preserving caste hierarchies and simultaneously demonizing the Hindu Nation’s “others”—particularly Muslims, Christians, and communists.¹³ While many different terms have been assigned to it, each with their distinct flavor, in this article the political-ideological project of the Sangh is referred to as Hindutva.

A marginal force in most parts of the country for many decades after independence, the Sangh emerged as an important player on the national political scene in the mid-1980s. It witnessed a meteoric rise both in organizational and electoral terms on the back of successful communal mobilizations,¹⁴ and its electoral front, the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People’s Party, BJP), was able to head and run a coalition government from 1999 to 2004. Although voted out of power in 2004, it has since returned to power and remained there ever since.

The BJP coming to power in 2014 as the head of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition government was accompanied nationally by an uptick in student protests, especially at so-called elite universities.¹⁵ The first major protest was against the appointment of a Sangh functionary, Gajendra Chauhan, as the chairperson of the prestigious Film and Television Institute of India. There were major protests by the students at the institute and a strike that lasted 140 days and received support from students in other parts of the country and also among those in the film industry.¹⁶ Soon after, in October 2015, under the guidance of the central government, the University Grants Commission (UGC) decided to discontinue a financial support program available to MPhil and PhD students at some fifty-odd central universities and “centers of excellence.”¹⁷ Protests dubbed the “Occupy UGC Movement” were initiated by Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) students in Delhi at the offices of the UGC. These spread to other cities, and protests were organized at the UGC’s regional offices in Kolkata, Allahabad, Pune, and

12 Madhav Sadashivrao Golwalkar was the second head of the RSS between 1940 and 1973 and is considered to be its most important ideologue. Shamsul Islam, introduction to *Golwalkar’s We or Our Nationhood Defined*, ed. Shamsul Islam (New Delhi: Pharos, 2017), 14.

13 Pralay Kanungo, *RSS’s Tryst with Politics: From Hedgewar to Sudarshan* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2017), 127.

14 Here “communalism” is, as commonly understood in the South Asian context, an attempt at constructing religious identities and inciting ill will between different religious “communities.”

15 While it is formally a coalition, the NDA is dominated by the BJP.

16 Aparna Bose, “10 Biggest Students’ Protests in History of Independent India,” *The Indian Wire*, January 8, 2020, <https://www.theindianwire.com/events/biggest-students-protests-in-independent-india-266169/>.

17 The UGC is a statutory body set up in 1956 charged with coordination, determination, and maintenance of standards of higher education in India.

Varanasi.¹⁸ Another large outburst of student protest took place at the University of Hyderabad—this was related to the death by suicide of a Dalit scholar, Rohit Vemula. Leftist and Ambedkarite student organizations held the ABVP, the local MP, and the Ministry of Human Resource Development responsible for Vemula’s death.¹⁹

Close on the heels of these protests, on February 9, 2016, at JNU, the ABVP interrupted an event organized by ultra-left students and groups, claiming that the event was “anti-national” and that anti-India slogans had been chanted. Mobile-camera videos of these protests were circulated on television but were later found to be doctored. The uproar led to the arrest of three leftist student politicians, including the JNU Students’ Union president, Kanhaiya Kumar, with officials’ invoking sections 124A (sedition) and 120B (criminal conspiracy) of the Indian Penal Code.²⁰ The arrests were followed by large-scale protests in the university and on the streets of Delhi, as well as demonstrations of global solidarity.²¹ Student protests against the Sangh’s activities continued into the second term of the BJP—most notably the agitation against the heavily criticized Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC).²² Beginning from the major universities in Delhi, the protests spread to other parts of India, and students faced brutal action from the police in both Delhi and Uttar Pradesh (UP).²³

Works on student politics in the colonial period have tended to focus on nationalist, socialist, or revolutionary developments.²⁴ The existence of organizations and political tendencies associated with Hindu and Muslim communalism has been noted only in

18 Kritika Sharma Sebastian, “Occupy UGC’ Stir Spreads across India,” *The Hindu*, November 3, 2015, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/occupy-ugc-stir-spreads-across-india/article7835175.ece>.

19 Zeeshan Shaikh, “FTII, HCU, JNU, Fergusson, NIT and Now Jadavpur: 6 Protests That Expose Modi Government’s Failure to Understand Students,” *India.com*, May 7, 2016, <https://www.india.com/news/india/ftii-hcu-jnu-fergusson-nit-and-now-jadavpur-6-protests-that-exposes-modi-governments-failure-to-understand-students-1166795/>.

20 Prabir Purkayastha, “Violence against JNU Is an Attack on the Indian Nation,” *NewsClick*, February 18, 2016, <https://www.newsclick.in/india/violence-against-jnu-attack-indian-nation>.

21 “JNU Events Signal Culture of Authoritarian Menace,” *The Hindu*, February 16, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/‘JNU-events-signal-culture-of-authoritarian-menace’/article14084416.ece?homepage=true>.

22 The CAA, passed in 2019, amended the Indian Citizenship Act to provide an accelerated pathway for citizenship for Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Buddhist, and Christian migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. The amendment is widely criticized for excluding Muslims. The proposed NRC is to be an official record of all legal citizens. To be included on the list, a person would be required to present a specific set of documents.

23 Ali Chougule, “The Changing Face of Student Protests,” *Free Press Journal*, January 20, 2020, <https://www.freepressjournal.in/analysis/the-changing-face-of-student-protests>.

24 Rajimwale, *History of Student Movement*; R. K. Roy, *Scholar Rebels: Gandhian Nationalism and the Emergence of Student Politics in Bengal: 1920–44* (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2013); S. K. Mittal, “The Role of Meerut College in the Freedom Struggle of India,” *Social Scientist* 7, no. 4 (1978): 35–56.

passing,²⁵ and we know very little about their organization, demands, and activities. Although immediately after independence some early literature did mention new trends of “popular nationalism” based on “cow worship, vegetarianism, respect for parents, and caste,” this form of student politics was not the primary focus.²⁶ Even though Philip Altbach and Anil Baran Ray paid somewhat greater attention to the Sangh and the ABVP,²⁷ and supplied important insights regarding the political and communal nature of the ABVP, the period they covered did not extend beyond 1968. A vast literature is devoted to the study of Sangh and Hindu nationalist politics, including works that focus on different aspects of the development of Hindu nationalism in the colonial period,²⁸ on the organization and politics of the RSS,²⁹ on the various constituents of the Sangh,³⁰ on particular regions or states,³¹ and on violent manifestations of the Sangh’s politics.³² However, even within such a wide variety of studies, the Sangh’s student front and the Sangh’s relationship with students remain largely unexplored.

This lack of scholarly focus could be viewed as the success of a strategy, discussed below, of appearing innocuous while still contributing to the Sangh’s development. While the Sangh has been involved in student politics almost since its inception and students have played a role in its survival and development at critical junctures, they have often not been *visible* components of its rise. Therefore, perhaps, students have generated less interest than more immediate causes such as communal rioting. Alongside this, the general tendency to view students and student politics as inherently progressive could also be seen as contributing to the absence of literature on the Sangh and student politics.

25 Philip G. Altbach, “The Transformation of the Indian Student Movement,” *Asian Survey* 6, no. 8 (1966): 448–60; Anil Baran Ray, *Students and Politics in India: The Role of Caste, Language, and Region in an Indian University* (Columbia, MO: South Asia Books, 1978).

26 Joseph Di Bona, “Elite and Mass in Indian Higher Education: The Case of Allahabad University,” in *Turmoil and Transition: Higher Education and Students Politics in India*, ed. Philip G. Altbach (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 317.

27 Philip G. Altbach, “Rightist Swing among Indian Students: The Vidyarthi Parishad and the Indian Student Movement,” *Peace News*, no. 1493 (February 5, 1965); Ray, *Students and Politics in India*, 180.

28 Sharma, *Hindutva*; John Zavos, *The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

29 Kanungo, *RSS’s Tryst with Politics*; Felix Pal, “Similarity Heuristics in the Indian Far Right: How the RSS Obscures Its Operational Scale,” *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 3, no. 1 (2025): 79–102, <https://doi.org/10.5070/RW3.246>.

30 Christophe Jaffrelot, ed., *The Sangh Parivar: A Reader* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

31 Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics, 1925 to the 1990s: Strategies of Identity-Building, Implantation and Mobilization (with Special Reference to Central India)* (London: Hurst, 1996).

32 Sumit Sarkar, “The Fascism of the Sangh Parivar,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 5 (1993): 163–67.

These speculations could be further substantiated through research focusing on the nature of academic inquiry into the Sangh.

This leaves only one variety of literature on the Sangh and its involvement in student politics—works produced by academics closely involved with the Sangh. Much of this literature blurs into self-portrayal, in which these works uncritically reproduce information from written Sangh sources and interviews with members of the Sangh.³³ In addition, the Sangh has always attempted to present the ABVP in whatever light suits its interests. The “true character” of the ABVP is portrayed as being ungraspable, the organization spoken of as having many facets, being difficult to understand, and impervious to analysis.³⁴

Given the Sangh’s interest in student politics, the paucity of literature on the subject, and contemporary popular understandings, this article inquires into different aspects of the Sangh’s relationship with students between 1947 and 1985. It challenges a simplistic and historically inaccurate understanding of this relationship. I argue that while the anti-student character of the Sangh may be apparent today, the Sangh has historically not dismissed students and student politics as irrelevant. On the contrary, throughout the period under study, students were recognized as politically influential, and the Sangh was interested in gaining student support, establishing its control over the student movement, and orienting it toward Hindutva politics. These attempts to control student politics were not always straightforward and varied in form depending on the context. In elaborating on this, I note the emphasis on the agitational aspects of the ABVP as part of its frequent direct engagement with Hindutva politics. I then focus on the simultaneous attempt to maintain a façade of the ABVP as a peaceful, nonpolitical “organization with a difference” through various means.

Prior to engaging with the Sangh’s involvement in student politics, the importance of organization is discussed. That organizing was a central part of both RSS ideology and its political strategy is clear from the utterances of its leaders and ideologues.³⁵ It is also noted by different studies.³⁶ The RSS was banned on February 4, 1948, five days after Mohandas Gandhi’s assassination. The ban was withdrawn on July 12, 1949, after the RSS adopted a written constitution and agreed to function “openly.” However, the RSS remained a

33 Walter Andersen and Shridhar Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism* (London: Westview, 1987); Binodinand Jha, *Student Organizations and Politics: A Case Study of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad* (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1998).

34 *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad 60 Varsh (1949–2009)* [60 years of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad] (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, 1999), 27.

35 For example, Balasahab Deoras, *Hindu Sangathan: The Need of the Nation* (New Delhi: Suruchi Sahitya, 1979); M. S. Golwalkar, *From Red Fort Grounds* (New Delhi: Asia Press, 1967).

36 D. R. Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (New Delhi: Radha Krishna Prakashan, 1979), 175–76; Kanungo, *RSS’s Tryst with Politics*, 68.

“semi-secret organisation,”³⁷ and its internal organization, methods of promotion and decision-making, and relationship with its front organizations all continued to be “shrouded in secrecy.”³⁸ Therefore, while recognizing that studies have suitably addressed the question of organization in the RSS,³⁹ some of its basic characteristics and unique features are worth reiterating. The organization of the RSS, the structure of the Sangh, and the ABVP’s position in it are laid out in the first section.

Focusing on the period between 1947 and 1985 requires explanation. Political independence in 1947, the ban on the RSS in 1948, and the establishment of the ABVP in 1948–1949—all of which were significant to the Sangh and its relationship with student politics—make this an appropriate point to commence the analysis. Similarly, certain significant developments around 1985 make it a suitable end point. Among these are the steep rise of communal politics in general and around the Ram Janmabhoomi movement in particular,⁴⁰ as well as the beginnings of economic liberalization under the Rajiv Gandhi government.⁴¹ With respect to student politics, the most significant development was the implementation of the New Education Policy from 1985 onward, which cleared the road for the progressive commercialization of higher education.⁴² Students were confronted with different concerns, questions, and issues that necessarily had an impact on student politics. This article is, therefore, restricted to developing an understanding of the Sangh’s relationship with students in the period prior to these developments.

A quick note on sources: This article is based on fieldwork I conducted during the course of my DPhil. To understand the Sangh’s relationship with students the primary focus is on a variety of documents generated by the Sangh. These are important to understanding the kind of picture the Sangh presents of the ABVP, as well as to exploring the contradictions and inconsistencies in that picture. These include online and offline ABVP publications, especially the ABVP’s versions of its history that were available on the organization’s

37 Aijaz Ahmad, “India: Liberal Democracy and the Extreme Right,” *Indian Cultural Forum* (blog), September 7, 2016, <https://indianculturalforum.in/2016/09/07/india-liberal-democracy-and-the-extreme-right/?fbclid=IwAR3xDQcpP10jtEhrCXau60uoRcCRpikbJyoNroAsEVCTAwui4Fnb3hFUPKE>.

38 Aijaz Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present: Ideology and Politics in Contemporary South Asia* (London: Verso, 2000), 171.

39 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*; Kanungo, *RSS’s Tryst with Politics*; Pal, “Similarity Heuristics.”

40 The Ram Janmabhoomi movement was spearheaded by the Sangh from the mid-1980s, through its many affiliates, centered around reclaiming the alleged birthplace of Lord Ram (an important deity in Hinduism) in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. While many lives were lost in the riots that accompanied the movement, the Sangh gained both organizationally and electorally as a result. For more, see A. G. Noorani, ed., *Destruction of the Babri Masjid—A National Dishonour* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2015).

41 Venkatesh Athreya, “Some Implications of ‘The New Economic Policy,’” *Social Scientist* 13, no. 7/8 (August 1985): 18–26.

42 Dinesh Mohan, “New Education Policy: Promises, Promises, Promises,” *Economic And Political Weekly* 20, no. 38 (September 1985): 1615–19.

website. Digital and print publications of Sangh affiliates, including the RSS, Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), as well as writings and speeches of Sangh ideologues such as Golwalkar and Deoras on subjects like the importance of students and organization, were also studied.⁴³ Works produced by academics closely involved with the Sangh, such as Walter Andersen and Shridhar Damle on the RSS,⁴⁴ or Binodinand Jha on the ABVP,⁴⁵ are read in the same manner as other published Sangh sources. It was, however, not possible to get access to either RSS or ABVP records despite multiple attempts. This can be attributed to both the Sangh's penchant for opacity and the generally poor archival practices of student organizations in India. Therefore, the English-language organ of the RSS, *Organiser*, was thoroughly examined for the period between 1947 and 1993. This magazine contains a wealth of material, with numerous editorials, opinion pieces, and articles written by important Sangh functionaries belonging to various Sangh affiliates. Some pieces were, or at least claimed to have been, authored by ABVP officeholders of the time.

Organization

RSS and Sangh

The RSS is hierarchically organized, with the *shakha* (branch) being the smallest fundamental unit. The *shakha* has its own internal hierarchical structure and includes under a hundred male Hindu members called *swayamsevaks* (volunteers).⁴⁶ It congregates daily under the RSS flag, and following the RSS prayer there are physical exercises, marches and drills, and sermons on “problems affecting the national life.”⁴⁷ The *shakha* is supposed to act as a training and recruiting ground, inculcating RSS ideology as well as cultivating a sense of brotherhood among *swayamsevaks*.⁴⁸ Formally, above the *shaka* are *samitis* (committees) organized broadly in terms of geographic scope from the *mandal* (local) to the *prant* (state) level, each consisting of representatives from *samitis* below them. At the all-India level is the Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha (ABPS), which consists of delegates chosen by the states. Although the ABPS is constitutionally the top-most body of the RSS, real power rests in the hands of the Central Working Committee.⁴⁹ In terms of individual leadership positions, the *sarsanghchalak*, while

43 Madhukar Dattatraya Deoras, also known as Balasaheb Deoras, followed Golwalkar as the head of the RSS in 1973 and continued in that position until 1994.

44 Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*.

45 Jha, *Student Organizations and Politics*.

46 Kanungo, *RSS's Tryst with Politics*, 68.

47 M. S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts* (Bangalore: Vikrama Prakashan, 1966), 333–34.

48 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 176.

49 Kanungo, *RSS's Tryst with Politics*, 74.

constitutionally given a nominal position as the “the guide and philosopher” of the RSS,⁵⁰ sits atop the RSS hierarchy and is the “real lord and master of the entire network.”⁵¹ The *sarsanghchhalak* is not elected but is chosen by the previous one and remains in the position until his death. Below him is the *sarkaryavah*, the “*sarsanghchhalak*-in-waiting.”⁵² At all other levels of the RSS’s organization there are the positions of *sanghchhalak* and *karyavah*. Although occupants of the former have complete authority under the RSS constitution,⁵³ they are “ornamental figureheads,” and the latter exercise power within the organization.⁵⁴ While these positions are formally open for elections, as Pralay Kanungo notes, even if conducted, in the RSS setup, elections are meant to be neither free nor democratic.⁵⁵

A major condition for lifting the ban placed on it after Gandhi’s assassination was that the RSS stay limited to the “cultural” field. Accordingly, its written constitution stated that “the Sangh, as such, has no politics and is devoted purely to cultural work.”⁵⁶ Despite this, the RSS remained present in Indian politics through the establishment of a network of front organizations—now also known collectively as the Sangh. Padmaja Nair calls these organizations the “sectoral affiliates” that make up a crucial component of the RSS’s influence, “provide a foothold for the RSS in critical sectors,” and become means of “promoting the core agenda of the Hindu Rashtra.”⁵⁷ Prior to independence, only the RSS and an organization of women supervised by it, the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, existed.⁵⁸ After independence, the first three major organizational projections of the RSS were the ABVP (focused on students), the BJS (focused on parliament), and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (focused on trade unions), all formed between 1949 and 1955. Over time many important organizations targeting different sectors were established. Shamsul Islam has cited an RSS publication that lists as many as forty organizations created by the RSS.⁵⁹ It was because of these “sectoral affiliates” and the

50 RSS constitution, article 12, reproduced in Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 210.

51 Goyal, 184.

52 Kanungo, *RSS’s Tryst with Politics*, 75.

53 RSS constitution, article 16, reproduced in Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 212.

54 Kanungo, *RSS’s Tryst with Politics*, 75.

55 Kanungo, 74–75.

56 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 207.

57 Padmaja Nair, “Religious Political Parties and Their Welfare Work: Relations between the RSS, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Vidya Bharati Schools in India,” Working Paper No. 37 (Religions and Development Research Programme, University of Birmingham, 2009), 38.

58 Tanika Sarkar, “Heroic Women, Mother Goddesses,” in *Women and Right-Wing Movements: Indian Experience*, ed. Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia (New Delhi: Zed Books, 1995), 184.

59 Shamsul Islam, *RSS Primer Based on Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh Documents* (New Delhi: Pharos, 2014), 38.

RSS's overarching control over them that, as D. R. Goyal puts it, the RSS was "nothing if not political."⁶⁰

The RSS generates full-time activists, *pracharaks*, who are dedicated to expanding the organizational reach of the Sangh and are the "kingpins" of the Sangh's organizational network.⁶¹ According to the RSS constitution *pracharaks* are full-time workers who receive no remuneration and whose "mission is to serve the society."⁶² Although not mandatory, they are usually unmarried. The *pracharaks* have their independent hierarchical order; there are no elections, and they are selected by *pracharaks* above them. They are also responsible only to the higher-level *pracharak* and not to local *shakha* officers,⁶³ making them "a communication network outside the 'constitutional' system."⁶⁴

Pracharaks, in working with affiliates, form the key link for the expansion of the RSS through front organizations as well as a means of exercising authority over them. When a new organization is required to be formed, "a suitable *pracharak* is detailed for it."⁶⁵ In already existing organizations, *pracharaks* occupy key posts such as general secretary and organizing secretary, while the ceremonial ones are reserved for trusted sympathizers and notables. Also, *pracharaks* working with front organizations are responsible to their superior *pracharaks* and not the organization with which they are connected. It is, as Kanungo concludes, by manning crucial organizational positions of various affiliates "with its committed *pracharaks*" that the "RSS ensures organizational harmony and coordination."⁶⁶

Being controlled by the RSS in this manner, the different Sangh affiliates cannot be viewed as functioning independently. As Aijaz Ahmad has argued, there is no "fundamental political difference among the fronts of the RSS"; there is simply "a division of labor within a cluster of fraternal groupings" and the distinction among the fronts is not "real" but "merely procedural."⁶⁷ At the same time, the RSS is not a "simple cohesive organization" but, having established the Sangh, a "well-integrated system of organizations."⁶⁸ Being organizationally enmeshed in this way, there can be a transfer of political gains between different affiliates of the Sangh. Gains made in any component

60 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 186.

61 Goyal, 182.

62 RSS constitution, article 17, reproduced in Goyal, 212–13.

63 Goyal, 182–83.

64 Kanungo, *RSS's Tryst with Politics*, 79.

65 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 184.

66 Kanungo, *RSS's Tryst with Politics*, 84–85.

67 Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present*, 288–89.

68 Kanungo, *RSS's Tryst with Politics*, 85.

of the political-organizational network can be devoted to accruing gains in another.⁶⁹ An illustration of this is the contribution of the Sangh's service and social welfare affiliates such as Seva Bharti and Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram. These allowed the Sangh to first make inroads into constituencies that were inimical to it and then to convert the gains made by these affiliates into electoral success for the parliamentary front.⁷⁰

ABVP

The ABVP (All India Students' Council) has its own organizational pyramid, from a branch at a single educational institution up to the central council, each with its own general and executive councils. The latter, consisting of a few nominated members at each level of the organization, hold the real decision-making power. In terms of leadership, the president and secretary are elected by the general councils, while the office bearers such as the vice president, joint secretary, and treasurer are appointed by the president. However, in much the same manner as other Sangh affiliates, the RSS has a stranglehold on the ABVP's organization. At the all-India level the senior organization is "heavily RSS."⁷¹ Further, the office of organizing secretary at each level in the organizational hierarchy, "the most powerful [position] in the organization," is reserved for *pracharaks*.⁷² It is the all-India organizing secretary, an RSS *pracharak*, with a "central team" serving as an "extra-constitutional body" that decides all important policy matters. At lower levels of the hierarchy, RSS *pracharaks* similarly orchestrate the organization's activities from the position of organizing secretary.⁷³

While the ABVP identifies as "primarily a student organization," it is "open to all sections of the educational community."⁷⁴ According to the ABVP constitution, in addition to all students over the age of twelve, who are eligible to be members, all nonstudents interested in the "educational problems of the country and in the welfare of students" can also become "associate members" of the organization.⁷⁵ As a result, members and workers of the ABVP include "students, teachers as well as educationists."⁷⁶ What is worth noting is that not only are teachers included as members but they

69 Aparna Mahiyaria, "Right Wing and Street-Theatre: From Censure to Co-Option," *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 41, no. 3 (2021): 305–20.

70 Tariq Thachil, "Embedded Mobilization: Non-State Service Provision as Electoral Strategy in India," *World Politics* 63, no. 3 (2011): 434–69.

71 Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*, 123.

72 Jha, *Student Organizations and Politics*, 37.

73 Jha, 38.

74 Satish Marathe, "Vidyarthi Parishad Stands for 'Lokniti' and Not 'Rajniti,'" *Organiser*, July 11, 1977.

75 Jha, *Student Organizations and Politics*, 36.

76 O. P. Kohli, "ABVP—Potent Force for Social Change," *Organiser*, July 20, 1974.

also have a permanent position in the organizational structure of the ABVP. While RSS *pracharaks* occupy the posts of general secretary and organizing secretary, the offices of president and vice president at all levels of the organization are frequently occupied by teachers so as to “guide” students, although this is not constitutionally mandated.⁷⁷ Thus, during the period under study, Bal Apte and O. P. Kohli, both university teachers and important RSS functionaries, were all-India presidents of the ABVP.⁷⁸

Finally, being a part of the wider Sangh, the primary task of the ABVP, just as any other Sangh affiliate, is not organizational expansion for its own sake but furthering the Sangh’s political project. Apart from contributing by mobilizing participation in the initiatives or agitations of other Sangh affiliates, the highest priority of the ABVP is that of “indoctrination” by “exposing” students to the Sangh’s ideology.⁷⁹ By doing so it organizationally connects what the Sangh considers to be an important section of the population to its politics while also creating new bearers for that political project. At the same time, being a part of the Sangh’s organizational network, the ABVP has access to organizational, financial, mobilizational, and ideological resources of the entire Sangh.

Agitational and Hindutva Politics

Agitational-Political Feint

Since very early on, students were considered important by the Sangh. They were, those close to the Sangh have asserted, among the “first members of the RSS,” which the organization used to “recruit other adherents” and “to establish RSS units outside Nagpur.”⁸⁰ Neutral observers have noted a strong element of student support for the RSS following its foundation. Seen as a foil to Muslim separatism, the RSS was encouraged by Hindu nationalists within the Indian National Congress to conduct its activities at Benares Hindu University (BHU) and was allotted a building within the campus in 1938, providing it with a foothold to influence students as well as participate in university politics.⁸¹ From the end of the Quit India Movement (circa

77 “ABVP Leader Held under MISA Freed by Allahabad High Court,” *Organiser*, March 29, 1975; Jha, *Student Organizations and Politics*, 37–38.

78 “Student Leaders Warn Indian Govt.,” *Organiser*, September 28, 1974; “Vidyarthi Parishad Puts Up Massive Show of Student Power,” *Organiser*, November 23, 1974.

79 Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*, 120.

80 Andersen and Damle, 117–18. The RSS was founded at Nagpur in 1925.

81 Ray, *Students and Politics in India*.

1944) till around the time of independence students close to the RSS were active in the All India Students' Congress.⁸²

The ABVP was formed in the context of the ban placed on the RSS in 1948. Those close to the Sangh suggest that with no way of carrying out its activities, the RSS turned to its student members.⁸³ Guided by *pracharaks*, "front groups" consisting of students were established on campuses. Soon after, these groups, primarily located in northern India and Bombay, were brought together to form the ABVP. While there is a certain lack of clarity among Sangh sources regarding the foundation date of the ABVP, it would be safe to conclude that the ABVP was formed at some point between 1948 and 1949.⁸⁴ In conditions where RSS activities were banned, the ABVP was thus originally conceptualized as a "substitute for the shakha."⁸⁵ After the ban was lifted, the ABVP remained a full-scale organizational projection of the Sangh into the student domain.

Following independence, students' importance was recognized by the then *sar-sanghchalak*, M. S. Golwalkar, which is clear from his writings on the subject. Even while being consistently critical of contemporary student politics and viewing students as swept away by "destructive revolutionary forces" and indulging in "constant agitation," Golwalkar insisted that to call students "disruptive" (*updand*) was not only "wrong but also not productive."⁸⁶ For him the "real problem" was to convert students into "virtuous citizens for great social construction."⁸⁷ It was the ABVP, functioning within the university, that was to be the vehicle of change for students. Its role would be to guide the students away from "all forms of anti-nationalism" and "constant agitation."⁸⁸ The ABVP was to "inculcate values and knowledge" in

82 Philip G. Altbach, *Student Politics in Bombay* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1968). The All India Students' Congress was an umbrella student organization with students of various ideologies participating.

83 Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*, 117–19.

84 For 1948 as the foundation year, see "History: Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad," ABVP (official website), accessed March 23, 2018, <http://abvp.org/history>; "ABVP Since 1949," ABVP (official website), accessed March 18, 2018, <https://www.abvp.org/ABVP/Since-1949>. For 1949, see "Vidyarthi Parishad Has 600 Branches," *Organiser*, March 9, 1974; Raj Kumar Bhatia, "Silver Jubilee Year of Vidyarthi Parishad," *Organiser*, May 4, 1974; *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad 60 Varsh*.

85 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 104.

86 Adheesh Kumar, ed., *Shri Gurujii Aur Yuva* [Gurujii and youth], n.d., 14. This is a small booklet in Hindi in which a Sangh functionary has compiled letters and other writings of Golwalkar on youth and students. No publisher or date of publication is given, but a copy can be downloaded from Archives of RSS: <https://www.archivesofrss.org/GurujiiBooks.aspx>.

87 Kumar, 19.

88 Kumar, 14–15, 18.

students and extend the work of the Sangh by increasing *shakhas*.⁸⁹

Despite this, not a great deal can be found in either contemporary or later Sangh sources about the activities of the ABVP between its founding and the mid-1960s. This can perhaps be attributed to the fact that most activities of the ABVP in its first decade were local and “lacked an [a]ll-India character.”⁹⁰ Toward the end of the 1960s a drastic shift in ABVP policy and activities led to a narrative that sought to create the impression that the main activities of the ABVP were “constructive” and that the ABVP “tended to avoid campus politics and student protests.”⁹¹ According to this narrative, it was only sometime after 1965 that the ABVP took the decision to participate in student politics and union elections.⁹² This assertion, repeated ad nauseum, is a fundamental part of the Sangh’s version of the ABVP’s history.⁹³ The reality, however, seems to be somewhat different.

Without explicitly publicizing their involvement, the ABVP and the Sangh all the while remained involved in politics. From an ABVP source we know that the organization’s first demands were that the country be called Bharat, the national anthem be the “Vande Matram,” and Hindi be the “link language” (*sampark bhasha*).⁹⁴ All of these were political demands discussed in the Constituent Assembly at the time.⁹⁵ Further, studies have noted how RSS student sympathizers participated in gheraos and protests, and how RSS-backed candidates contested elections at Allahabad University after independence.⁹⁶ Additionally, the ABVP was involved in rioting in multiple cities during this time, including in Jabalpur (1960),⁹⁷ Aligarh (1961),⁹⁸ and Allahabad (1963),⁹⁹ as well as in series of protests at BHU in the 1950s and 60s.¹⁰⁰ Even from this cursory ac-

89 Kumar, 18.

90 Jha, *Student Organizations and Politics*, 46.

91 Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*, 119.

92 “ABVP to Keep Clear of Union Elections,” *Organiser*, June 18, 1978.

93 “ABVP Major Events,” ABVP (official website), accessed March 23, 2018, <http://abvp.org/major-events>.

94 *Akshil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad 60 Varsh*, 10.

95 Granville Austin, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1966).

96 Di Bona, “Elite and Mass.” In India, a “gherao” is a protest where workers prevent managers or employers from leaving the workplace until their demands are met.

97 Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist Movement*.

98 Joseph Di Bona, “Indiscipline and Student Leadership in an Indian University,” *Comparative Education Review* 10, no. 2 (1966): 306–19; Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist Movement*.

99 Di Bona, “Indiscipline and Student Leadership.”

100 Ray, *Students and Politics in India*.

count, it is clear that the ABVP had never not participated in politics. The organization's involvement seems to have been either actively concealed or not highlighted. The official decision to participate in agitations and elections was, therefore, not as much of a radical alteration of policy as Sangh sources would have one believe.¹⁰¹

The shift that did occur was a tactical one, most likely a response to conditions that developed in student politics of the time. There was an upsurge in student protests over poor living conditions and academic issues,¹⁰² as well as student involvement in wider politics through, for instance, the Naxal Movement and the student agitation in Orissa.¹⁰³ Under these conditions, in a bid to remain relevant and not lose ground to emerging groups, the earlier policy of not acknowledging the ABVP's involvement in student politics was abandoned and instead one finds an emphasis on student participation in wider politics alongside more direct and publicized interventions by the ABVP.¹⁰⁴

The ABVP, from 1969 onward, began to issue statements in support of demands for a greater role for students in university administration.¹⁰⁵ It also began to openly participate in students' union elections. Nevertheless, the assertion in the *Organiser* that the ABVP was a "dominant factor" in student elections across the country by 1978 is an exaggeration.¹⁰⁶ The ABVP did, however, manage to win a significant number of elections, particularly in northern India. Among these were elections at Rajasthan University,¹⁰⁷ BHU,¹⁰⁸ Lucknow University,¹⁰⁹ many colleges across UP,¹¹⁰ and at Delhi University (DU) on multiple occasions,¹¹¹ which, given its location in the national capital, was politically important.

There was also emphasis on the agitational aspects of the ABVP. It was projected as an organization that had a national presence and would take up issues of "national"

101 Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*, 119.

102 Surajit Mazumdar, "The Post-Independence History of Student Movements in India and the Ongoing Protests," *Postcolonial Studies* 22, no. 1 (2019): 16–29.

103 See Dasgupta, *Naxalite Movement*, and *Report of the Commission of Enquiry Orissa Students' Agitation in 1964* (Home Department, Government of Orissa, 1966).

104 That the ABVP's official change in position was guided by this is to an extent even recognized by Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*, 118–19.

105 "Vidyarthi Parishad Complains to Education Minister VKRV Rao against Vice-Chancellor Raj," *Organiser*, August 8, 1970; "Mighty Meet of Vidyarthi Parishad," *Organiser*, November 15, 1969.

106 "ABVP to Keep Clear of Union Elections."

107 "Vidyarthi Parishad Leads in Rajasthan," *Organiser*, October 26, 1974.

108 "BHU Must Be Rid of Violence and Goondaism," *Organiser*, June 5, 1971.

109 "Lucknow University Union Elects Vidyarthi Parishad Men as President & Secretary," *Organiser*, September 20, 1969.

110 "Vidyarthi Parishad Captures 110 Students' Unions in U.P.," *Organiser*, February 2, 1974.

111 "The Importance of Delhi University Elections," *Organiser*, September 8, 1973.

interest. To that end, soon after the change of policy an all-India student march was organized at Delhi in September 1970. A report in *Organiser* claimed over five thousand students, including many from outside Delhi, participated. According to this report, students marched through central Delhi and a thirty-member delegation submitted a National Charter of Demands to the vice president of India. A signature campaign, in which over two hundred thousand signatures were collected, was claimed to have been carried out on a national scale.¹¹² The charter, which included demands for a common civil code for all citizens, manufacture of an atomic bomb, and regaining lost territories occupied by enemy countries,¹¹³ aided the projection of the ABVP as an organization with “national interests.” The successful organization of the march was utilized to further build the image of the ABVP as the largest student organization in the country—one that not only fought for the interests of students but also had concerns that were related to national and international politics.¹¹⁴

At the same time, leaders of the Sangh and the ABVP also began to advocate for a more active, political role for students. Slogans such as “Students are not citizens of tomorrow but of today” (*Chatr kal ka nahi aapitu aaj ka nagrik hai*) and “Student Power Nation’s Power” (*Chhatra Shakti Rashtra Shakti*) were coined.¹¹⁵ Terms like “social transformation,” “revolutionary process of social change,” and “restoration of democracy” came to be frequently used to imply that the Sangh was not only amenable to student participation in politics but encouraged it. At its Silver Jubilee Conference in 1974, the all-India vice president of the ABVP, Bal Apte, reportedly called upon students, referred to as “educated youth citizens,” to “participate in the revolutionary process of social change.”¹¹⁶ He asserted that organized students would “grow into a potent force for social change and smash the corrupt and anti-social elements.” Therefore, “the slogan for the new-era” was to be “Student Power—Nation’s Power.”¹¹⁷ Writing as the all-India president of the ABVP, O. P. Kohli made the same point in more or less the same words, asserting that educated young citizens had “a significant part to play in the revolutionary process of social change.”¹¹⁸ An editorial in *Organiser*, following the Navnirman agitation (see below), noted the participation of students, calling this a “fresh breeze,” and stated that the involvement of students in politics should be wel-

112 “246,900 College Students Demand Right to Work and Vote at 18,” *Organiser*, September 26, 1976.

113 “Poster of ABVP’s Chalo Delhi: Students’ Grand March to Rashtrapati Bhavan,” September 1970, U. No. 0086718, X/1/1970/Office of the GS,38, Gujarat State Archives, Gandhinagar, India.

114 “Chhatra Shakti,” *Organiser*, November 16, 1974.

115 *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad 60 Varsh*, 11.

116 “‘Student Power Is Nation’s Power’—Prof. Bal Apte,” *Organiser*, July 27, 1974.

117 “Student Power.”

118 Kohli, “ABVP.”

comed.¹¹⁹ Another piece in *Organiser* urged students to “intervene in politics” and “save democracy,” as students were the ones who retained “some idealism and a freshness of outlook.”¹²⁰ Sangh leaders like Atal Bihari Vajpayee explicitly encouraged students to get involved in politics with statements like “academic career and politics are not water-tight compartments” and “even if you try to remain aloof from politics, politics will not allow you to do so.”¹²¹ This continued after the Emergency of 1975, as Satish Marathe, all-India joint-secretary of the ABVP, wrote in *Organiser* in 1977 that students were to be the “vanguard of social transformation.”¹²² The ABVP executive in the same year “emphasised the importance of mobilization of student power for all round transformation of the society.”¹²³ And the 1979 ABVP Conference resolved that it was “student power” that had “a great role to play” in the “strengthening of democratic institutions.”¹²⁴

The narrative of the ABVP as playing a leading role in three major movements of the 1970s—the Navnirman agitation, the Bihar agitation, and the struggle against the Emergency—was also forcefully championed. The Navnirman agitation in Gujarat began in January 1974 with student protests in Ahmedabad and escalated into a widespread agitation that resulted in the resignation of Gujarat’s chief minister and later the dissolution of the state legislative assembly. While the Navnirman agitation was ongoing, students in Bihar protesting political corruption began to demand the end of the government. With Jay Prakash Narayan providing leadership, the movement developed in the following months into one against the sitting prime minister, Indira Gandhi. On June 25, 1975, when the Internal Emergency that gave far-reaching powers to the executive was imposed, many important opposition leaders were detained almost immediately. Both the Navnirman and Bihar agitations were said to have contributed to this.¹²⁵ What followed was close to two years of abuse of power, in which the government clamped down on political opposition with arrests and persecution, violations of civil liberties, and muzzling of the press across the country.

The Sangh took up the task of emphasizing the ABVP’s role in the Navnirman and Bihar agitations even while the one in Bihar was in its early stages. In July 1974, O. P. Kohli proclaimed the “prominent role” that the ABVP had played in Gujarat and was

119 “The Gujarat Revolution,” *Organiser*, March 16, 1974.

120 Vashitha, “Student Power Can Break the Vicious Circle,” *Organiser*, August 3, 1974.

121 “Atal Bihari Addresses Bombay Youth Rally,” *About Us*, September 25, 1970.

122 Marathe, “Vidyarthi Parishad.”

123 “Vidyarthi Parishad to Shun Power Politics, Work for Total Revolution,” *Organiser*, June 13, 1977.

124 “Vidyarthi Parishad Launches ‘Lok Abhiyan’ to Educate the Voter,” *Organiser*, December 16, 1979.

125 J. C. Shah, *Shah Commission of Inquiry: Interim Report I* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1978).

continuing to play in Bihar,¹²⁶ while an *Organiser* editorial claimed that the ABVP “was at the vanguard” of both agitations.¹²⁷ This continued after the Emergency with the executive council of the ABVP passing a resolution that “recalled the active role played by the ABVP” in these movements.¹²⁸ With respect to the Emergency, the ABVP was similarly presented as having “spearheaded the students’ movement . . . leading to the fall of the Emergency regime.”¹²⁹ The organization was said to have worked “under different names” and “enlightened the educational community at large” of the “evil machinations of the coterie in power.”¹³⁰ Individuals belonging to the ABVP were claimed to have been “lone voice(s) of protest,”¹³¹ and it was alleged that “hair-raising atrocities” were committed against them.¹³² Such language attempted to create the impression that the ABVP was by far the most active, and sometimes the only, student organization resisting the Emergency.

While the true extent and nature of the ABVP’s involvement in these movements is debatable, this question is beyond the scope of my investigation here. What is significant, however, is that the Sangh had gone from denying that the ABVP played any role in politics to amplifying and greatly exaggerating its agitational aspects and its involvement in the most important political movements of the time. As discussed below, care was taken at the same time not to overplay this agitational-political feat.

Hindutva

There were also numerous occasions on which the Hindutva politics of the ABVP came to be foregrounded. Apart from the communal rioting, of which the ABVP was a part, we find the organization taking up other familiar issues of Sangh propaganda. Among these was the demand for a Uniform Civil Code (UCC),¹³³ which was a constant since at least the time the ABVP came out with its charter of demands in 1970. It was particularly active in taking up the matter of the UCC in the aftermath of the Shah Bano Supreme Court case (1985), which resulted in legislation regarded as discriminating against Muslim women.¹³⁴ The ABVP accused the government and “Muslim groups”

126 Kohli, “ABVP.”

127 “Chhatra Shakti.”

128 “Vidyarthi Parishad to Shun Power Politics.”

129 “ABVP to Keep Clear of Union Elections.”

130 Marathe, “Vidyarthi Parishad.”

131 Aryabhata, “Emergency Reign of Terror in Delhi University,” *Organiser*, July 4, 1977, 7.

132 Vipra, “Sacrifices That Tired out the Emergency Regime,” *Organiser*, June 4, 1977, 11–12.

133 For more on the UCC, see Peter Ronald Desouza, “Politics of the Uniform Civil Code in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 48 (November 28, 2015): 50–58.

134 For the Shah Bano case, see Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Shah Bano Controversy* (New Delhi: Orient, 1987).

of attempting to “whip up communal frenzy” in the name of Muslim Personal Law and demanded the implementation of a UCC as the only lasting solution.¹³⁵ Similarly, the trope of “Bangladeshi Muslim infiltrators” became a consistent mobilizational issue from the late 1970s. Thus, while supporting the Assam agitation, the ABVP claimed that the agitation was “neither communal nor anti-Bengali, nor secessionist but only against foreign infiltration.” Yet it simultaneously stated that it could not be helped if the “infiltrators” were “mostly Bengali speaking Muslims,” and if Muslims were leading a counter-agitation with the blessings of the ruling party.¹³⁶ Muslim infiltration was used by the ABVP to mobilize in states such as Bihar,¹³⁷ Tripura, Rajasthan, and Gujarat,¹³⁸ as well as in cities with a significant Muslim presence such as Hyderabad.¹³⁹

The ABVP also linked Urdu to Muslims and protested against promotion of the language. For instance, when the UP state government decided in 1981 to recognize Urdu as a second official state language, the ABVP, claiming that “the poor people of UP” would have to “bear the burden of financing” the change, led an agitation against it.¹⁴⁰ At the same time, it made allegations that portrayed the UP government, the police, and Muslims as being allied on the issue against the peaceful protestors. Communal feelings were intended to be whipped up in this manner. There is a long history of Hindi and Urdu being co-opted by cultural nationalists, both Hindu and Muslim, to create polarization in northern India.¹⁴¹ By associating Urdu with Muslims in protesting the recognition of Urdu as a state language, the ABVP was agitating against what the Hindu right calls “minority appeasement.”

The ABVP was also a consistent critic of minority institutions—Christian and Muslim—and the special status accorded to them under the Indian Constitution. Its All India Conference of 1980 warned against “the monopoly of foreign missionaries on the system of education in the tribal areas” and called on “student power to mobilize tribal opinion” against it.¹⁴² Similarly, the ABVP’s 1985 conference “cautioned against the Christian communal activities.”¹⁴³ A regular focus of ire was Aligarh Muslim University,

135 “New Education Policy Must Tackle Problems of Illiteracy, Poverty and Unemployment—ABVP,” *Organiser*, November 24, 1985.

136 “ABVP for Constitutional Solution of Foreigners Issue,” *Organiser*, June 1, 1980.

137 “Vidyarthi Parishad to Re-Enter Union Elections,” *Organiser*, June 19, 1982.

138 Jha, *Student Organizations and Politics*, 48–53.

139 “Foreign Transmitter in Osmania University,” *Organiser*, May 12, 1985.

140 “ABVP Opposes Urdu Imposition on UP,” *Organiser*, January 27, 1981.

141 Alok Rai, *Hindi Nationalism* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2001).

142 “ABVP to Work for Harijans, Tribals . . .,” *Organiser*, November 16, 1980.

143 “New Education Policy Must Tackle Problems.”

which was called, among other things, “All Muslim No University,”¹⁴⁴ “Mini Pakistan,”¹⁴⁵ and “a den of communalism and a hotbed of intrigues and conspiracies.”¹⁴⁶ At times Muslim students and faculty of the university were accused of inciting riots and violence to get rid of Hindu students.¹⁴⁷ Not limiting its criticism to specific universities, in 1985 the national executive of the ABVP demanded a reconsideration of “the whole question of minority institutions” to curb their “separatist character.”¹⁴⁸

There was thus a strategic promotion of the political-agitational aspects of the organization as well as the foregrounding of Hindutva demands. The propensity of the ABVP to alternate between the extremism noted above and moderation, which is explored in the next section, is not unique to the organization but is consistent with that of other parts of the Sangh, including the RSS.¹⁴⁹

“Organization with a Difference”

Alongside the promotion of Hindutva and its agitational-political aspects, there was the attempt to project the ABVP as an “organization with a difference”—one that was “nonpolitical” and that conducted constructive service activities.

A Nonpolitical Organization

Despite the ABVP’s forays into various forms of politics there were simultaneous proclamations of reluctance toward indulging in *rajniti*.¹⁵⁰ It was asserted that “all the evils [in education]” had their “roots in politics,” and that “delinking of politics and education” was a must.¹⁵¹ This meant opposition to the “involvement of students in politics.”¹⁵² Even when the ABVP was actively projected as an important part of the agitations mentioned in the previous section, or following the Emergency when it openly “appealed” to “youth and student communities to work for the victory of the Janata Party,” a

144 “Aligarh Is All Muslim and No University,” *Organiser*, August 28, 1969.

145 “Aligarh Muslim University Very Much Needs to Be Indianised,” *Organiser*, April 18, 1970.

146 “The Agean Stables of Aligarh University Must Be Cleared,” *Organiser*, May 29, 1971.

147 “Aligarh Muslim University Is Playing Politics with Riots,” *Organiser*, December 10, 1978; “AMU’s Involvement in Recent Violence,” *Organiser*, May 20, 1979.

148 “ABVP’s Call for Withdrawal of Gujarat Agitation,” *Organiser*, June 26, 1985.

149 Shamsul Islam, *Hindu Nationalism and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (New Delhi: Media House, 2017), 88.

150 *Rajniti* is frequently used to refer to electoral politics but can also be derisively used to mean “politicking.” Marathe, “Vidyarthi Parishad.”

151 B. K. Kelkar, “Revive the National Education Movement,” *Organiser*, December 29, 1985.

152 “ABVP Warns of Explosive Situation in Education Field,” *Organiser*, June 21, 1981.

nonpolitical image was projected.¹⁵³ It was repeatedly emphasized that the organization was not interested in “power politics.”¹⁵⁴

At the level of student politics, in attempting to appear nonpolitical there were periods during which the ABVP officially did not participate in union elections. This was the case for the first decade and a half of the ABVP’s existence, and after the formation of the Janata Party government in 1977. In May 1978, the ABVP’s executive council decided to withdraw from elections for the “timebeing [*sic*].” The stated reason was that “demands of the present situation in the educational field” made it “imperative for the ABVP to take initiative” and “free the educational sphere from partisan politics.”¹⁵⁵ The ABVP continued officially to not participate in union elections till the policy was formally reversed in 1982. In reversing the policy, the ABVP claimed that it had withdrawn from elections to “set our house in order and strengthen the inner vitality of the organization,” and that now it had proved that a student organization could “work and continue to grow, even when it ignores the union elections.”¹⁵⁶

On closer scrutiny, however, the ABVP’s claim of staying aloof from elections cannot be taken at face value. Even while its activists had been officially prohibited from taking part in electoral activities, ways were found to circumvent this. This was through front organizations owing allegiance to the Sangh that were formed to contest elections, and which disappeared soon after. An example of this was Janata Vidyarthi Morcha (JVM) at DU, which in the absence of the ABVP contested elections at DU from 1978 onward. It was described by *Organiser* as “the student wing of the BJP,”¹⁵⁷ leaving little doubt as to its affiliation. When the ABVP formally returned to the electoral fold, it contested together with the JVM for a short period before the JVM disappeared.¹⁵⁸ At Himachal Pradesh University, its method was not to contest but to “give support to good independent candidates,”¹⁵⁹ who more often than not would be close to the Sangh. Moreover, in 1981 the ABVP at its national executive meeting altered its policy regarding union activities. Its members were encouraged “as students” to “influence the election process and the activities of the student unions,” thus creating further opportunities for intervention without a formal policy of participation in elections.¹⁶⁰

153 “Vidyarthi Parishad to Shun Power Politics.”

154 “Vidyarthi Parishad to Shun Power Politics.”

155 “ABVP to Keep Clear of Union Elections.”

156 “Vidyarthi Parishad to Re-Enter Union Elections.”

157 “Why JVM Men Swept Delhi University,” *Organiser*, September 6, 1981, 1.

158 “ABVP-JVM Alliance Sweeps DUSU Polls,” *Organiser*, September 26, 1982, 2.

159 “ABVP Teaches Reds a Lesson in Simla,” *Organiser*, September 13, 1981, 5.

160 “ABVP Warns of Explosive Situation.”

During times that the ABVP did openly contest elections, the halo of being nonpolitical was still sought and participation in the electoral process was couched in terms of being a necessary compromise for the benefit of the student community. It contested elections “to prevent the forces of anarchy from capturing the unions” and to provide the “right type of leadership” so that the problems of the university could be solved “with [a] constructive approach.”¹⁶¹ Other student organizations were supposed to only be interested in power while the ABVP would use students’ unions “to shape the national destiny on the basis of youthful aspirations in the best traditions of India’s culture and civilization.”¹⁶²

Further, involvement in wider politics in varying capacities came to be justified through the idea of “national reconstruction.” The ABVP had, it was asserted, unlike other student organizations, a “distinct personality”: it was “national in character.”¹⁶³ The argument was that post-independence nationalism required one to be involved in “national reconstruction,”¹⁶⁴ and that that was the ABVP’s goal. While the ABVP repeatedly emphasized this,¹⁶⁵ its meaning was left vague. A contemporary source, for instance, defined it as “reconstructing different aspects of our national life with a view to enabling the country [to] reach the highest point of glory.”¹⁶⁶ Later on, “National Reconstruction” was said to be “nothing but the social transformation and that is awakening the spirit of National Consciousness, Nation first attitude, unconditional love for the motherland ‘Bharat’ and self-respect among the people.”¹⁶⁷ Being so ill-defined, national reconstruction could include a variety of ABVP activities, and all sorts of politics came to be justified as attempts toward a nonpolitical “national reconstruction.”

Moreover, while other student organizations were alleged to have been “launched as fronts of certain political parties”¹⁶⁸ and were “mere shadows of their political bosses,”¹⁶⁹ the ABVP, it was claimed, was “an independent student body engaged in helping students.”¹⁷⁰ That the ABVP maintained a “strict aloofness from any political party affiliation” was

161 Kohli, “ABVP.”

162 “Silver Jubilee Year of Vidyarthi Parishad.”

163 Kohli, “ABVP.”

164 Kohli.

165 E.g., Marathe, “Vidyarthi Parishad”; “Student Power”; Eknath Ranade, “Challenge before the Youth,” *Organiser*, January 4, 1975.

166 Kohli, “ABVP.”

167 “Hum Hai ABVP” [We Are ABVP], ABVP (official site), accessed April 4, 2022, <https://www.abvp.org/ABVP/Hum-ABVP-hain>.

168 “Chhatra Shakti.”

169 “Vidyarthi Parishad Training Students as ‘Citizens of Today,’” *Organiser*, April 9, 1974.

170 “Vidyarthi Parishad Training Students.”

routinely asserted despite its clear organizational links with the Sangh.¹⁷¹ Accusations of being the student wing of the BJS (1951–1977) were rebuffed by claiming that although the two “agreed on many matters,” this was “more in the nature of agreement on perceived truth in national affairs than on *any organizational link-up*.”¹⁷² How, it was rhetorically asked, could the ABVP, “an independent and autonomous organization of students” that was “started independently,” indeed “years before,” possibly be a student wing of the BJS?¹⁷³ During the Janata period, with the party constituent of the Sangh having merged with the Janata Party, the ABVP maintained its unaffiliated appearance by not formally joining a Janata-aligned student or youth organization, asserting that it would not be a part of “any front or platform which will directly or indirectly work as a wing of any political party.”¹⁷⁴ Following the formation of the BJP (1980), in much the same manner as it did with respect to the BJS, the ABVP continued to assert that it was not a student wing of the party.¹⁷⁵

It must be noted that while the ABVP was never officially a student wing of a political party—and it is necessary that this distinction be understood—claims that distance the ABVP from party politics must also be recognized as disingenuous. In the context of the Sangh Parivar’s organizational structure, the fact that the ABVP was not directly affiliated with either the BJS or the BJP is of little significance. With the RSS at the top of the Sangh hierarchy, it was through the leadership of the RSS that the different affiliates were closely linked organizationally. The ABVP was, therefore, very much a partisan organization.

The Role of Service Activities

In claiming that the ABVP was an organization with a difference, there was an emphasis on its “constructive” approach and its organization of “nonpolitical” programs and activities.¹⁷⁶ These included initiatives and schemes of financial or other forms of aid to students, such as fellowship centers,¹⁷⁷ book and scientific equipment banks,¹⁷⁸ reading rooms,¹⁷⁹ free

171 Kohli, “ABVP.”

172 “Chhatra Shakti.” Emphasis added.

173 “Chhatra Shakti.”

174 Rajat Sharma, “Janata Should Desist from Direct Involvement in Students Movement,” *Organiser*, April 6, 1979.

175 Kanchan Srivastava, “Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad Is Not the Students’ Wing of BJP: Shreehari Borikar,” *DNA*, November 6, 2014, <https://www.dnaindia.com/mumbai/interview-akhil-bharatiya-vidyarthi-parishad-is-not-the-students-wing-of-bjp-shreehari-borikar-2032512>.

176 “Well Done ABVP,” *Organiser*, June 25, 1978.

177 “Silver Jubilee Year of Vidyarthi Parishad.”

178 Kohli, “ABVP.”

179 “ABVP Observes Dr. Ambedkar’s Punyatithi as ‘Samata Divas,’” *Organiser*, December 28, 1980.

coaching, hostels,¹⁸⁰ and conducting entrepreneur workshops.¹⁸¹ There were felicitations for “first class first students,”¹⁸² as well as music, debate, and painting competitions held at educational institutions.¹⁸³ Additionally, there were programs that involved students as volunteers, such as “Students for Rural Reconstruction.” This was a “national project” that began in 1977, in which students would go to “backward villages, urban slums, Harijan bustees and tribal areas,” first to study “these peoples’ problems” and then to “help solve” them.¹⁸⁴ Student volunteers were also mobilized for relief work in areas affected by natural calamities.¹⁸⁵ Finally, in the arsenal of service activities was a program launched in 1966 by the ABVP called the Student Experience in Interstate Living—“a unique venture for promoting . . . integration among youths from different states.”¹⁸⁶ As a part of this program, students from northeastern states lived with families in different parts of the rest of India for a year.

It has not been uncommon for Sangh affiliates to utilize such “service” or “welfare” activities to their advantage. Golwalkar articulated the concept of “Positive Hinduism” after the RSS was implicated in Gandhi’s assassination. This “enhanced the position of seva (service) as an organizational priority of the RSS,” and through service activities the Sangh sought to “rehabilitate the RSS and its affiliates in the eyes of India’s politicians and people.”¹⁸⁷ Studies have also focused on service-oriented affiliates like Seva Bharti, Vidya Bharti, and Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, which provide basic education, health care, and other forms of aid to people and in areas that other Sangh affiliates have been unsuccessful in reaching and that have often been ignored by the state. They have assisted the Sangh in expanding its sphere of influence and in bringing it electoral success.¹⁸⁸

Similarly, service activities in the context of the ABVP were not simply used to bolster its image as an organization with a difference carrying out nonpolitical, constructive work,

180 “Vidyarthi Parishad Has 600 Branches.”

181 Eknath Ranade, “Vidyarthi Parishad Holds Entrepreneurs Workshop,” *Organiser*, January 19, 1978.

182 “Morarji Desai Marvels at Vidyarthi Parishad’s Discipline,” *Organiser*, January 7, 1970; “Chhatra Shakti”; Kohli, “ABVP.”

183 “ABVP Curtain-Raiser for International Youth Year,” *Organiser*, January 13, 1984.

184 “New Vidyarthi Parishad Project: Students for Rural Reconstruction,” *Organiser*, November 12, 1977.

185 “Vidyarthi Parishad Has 600 Branches”; Ravindra Pawar, “Vidyarthi Parishad Boys Fight Drought in Maharashtra,” *Organiser*, April 28, 1973.

186 “Vidyarthi Parishad ‘My Home Is India’ Meet Makes History in Gauhati,” *Organiser*, January 15, 1978.

187 Gwilym Beckerlegge, “Saffron and Seva: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh’s Appropriation of Swami Vivekananda,” in *Hinduism in Public and Private: Reform, Hindutva, Gender and Sampraday*, ed. Antony Copley (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 31–65, at 49.

188 Christophe Jaffrelot, “Hindu Nationalism and the Social Welfare Strategy,” in Jaffrelot, *Sangh Parivar*, 211–24; Thachil, “Embedded Mobilization.”

but also to attract students to the organization. Aparna Mahiyaria has explained how in the absence of the possibility of recruiting students directly to its more extreme demands and often violent methods, service activities allowed for an engagement with a wider student constituency and brought them into the ABVP's and the Sangh's organizational reach.¹⁸⁹

Conclusion

This article has tried to demonstrate, firstly, that far from having an inherent animosity toward students, the Sangh, during the period under study and primarily through the ABVP, was keen on gaining control and influence over student politics. Secondly, in pursuit of this goal, the ABVP sought to strategically moderate its image. At times the agitational or Hindutva aspects of the organization were foregrounded, while on other occasions or even simultaneously, it was portrayed as a peaceful "organization with a difference" that was nonpolitical and interested primarily in service activities. The success of this image meant that the ABVP grew exponentially in the 1970s and by the mid-1980s was one of the largest student organizations in India.

Finally, within the literature, students have frequently been assumed to be inherently progressive, left-wing,¹⁹⁰ anti-status quo,¹⁹¹ oppositional,¹⁹² and anti-establishment.¹⁹³ Historically, however, as different works have recognized, this has not been the case. In East Asia, students ran the "gamut from stridently socialist to right-wing, religiously identified, ethnicist, and more."¹⁹⁴ In Germany by 1931, even before the Nazis came to power, the right enjoyed majorities in student councils in most German universities. The German Students' Union was the first national organization that fell to the Nazis.¹⁹⁵ Conservative religious movements also played an important role in Pakistan from the 1970s onward, where a significant number of students were attracted to Islamic revivalist movements.¹⁹⁶

189 Mahiyaria, "Right Wing and Street-Theatre."

190 Seymour Martin Lipset, "Editorial," *Comparative Education Review* 10, no. 2 (1966): 129–31; Seymour Martin Lipset, *Rebellion in the University* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972); B. Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement, 1960–1974* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2014).

191 Lipset, *Rebellion in the University*.

192 M. Burawoy, "Consciousness and Contradiction: A Study of Student Protest in Zambia," *British Journal of Sociology* 27, no. 1 (1976): 78–98; E. Aspinall and M. L. Weiss, "Understanding Student Activism," in *Student Activism in Asia: Between Protest and Powerlessness*, ed. M. L. Weiss and E. Aspinall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 1–32; M. E. Boren, *Student Resistance: A History of the Unruly Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

193 Philip G. Altbach, "Student Politics in the Third World," *Higher Education* 13, no. 6 (1984): 635–55; E. Shils, "Indian Students: Sadhus Rather than Philistines," *Encounter* 17, no. 3 (1961): 16.

194 Aspinall and Weiss, "Understanding Student Activism," 19.

195 Geoffrey J. Giles, *Students and National Socialism in Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

196 Matthew J. Nelson, "Embracing the Ummah: Student Politics beyond State Power in Pakistan," *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 3 (2011): 565–96.

Similarly, in Egypt, students were prominent supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood immediately after World War II.¹⁹⁷

The characterization of students as having an inherent predilection for certain political tendencies has had an influence on the literature on student politics. As Edward Aspinall and Meredith Weiss self-critically note, works on student politics “may tend to privilege comparatively radical and/or leftist” movements.¹⁹⁸ However, there do exist important—in some cases, classic—studies on right-wing student politics. In the German context, we have the works of Geoffrey Giles,¹⁹⁹ whose focus is particularly on Nazi student politics; Michael Steinberg,²⁰⁰ who traces the history of German student politics from the student fraternities of the nineteenth century to the Nazi takeover; and Willibald Karl and Wolfgang Zorn,²⁰¹ who compare student politics of the 1960s and 1970s with those of the Weimar years. These are in addition to studies of “white collar fundamentalism” in Nigeria,²⁰² of anti-communist students in Indonesia,²⁰³ of fascist groups in Italian universities,²⁰⁴ and of pan-Islamist student organizations in Pakistan,²⁰⁵ to name only a few. This article, as a study of a popular right-wing student organization and of student politics that was frequently pro-status quo, is an addition to this corpus and challenges the widely held notion of an inherently progressive student politics.

197 Altbach, “Student Politics in the Third World,” 649.

198 Aspinall and Weiss, “Understanding Student Activism,” 19.

199 Geoffrey J. Giles, “University Government in Nazi Germany: Hamburg,” *Minerva* 16, no. 2 (1978): 196–221; Giles, *Students and National Socialism*.

200 Michael Stephen Steinberg, *Sabers and Brown Shirts: The German Students' Path to National Socialism, 1918–1935* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

201 W. Karl, “Students and the Youth Movement in Germany: Attempt at a Structural Comparison,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 5, no. 1 (1970): 113–27; Wolfgang Zorn, “Student Politics in the Weimar Republic,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 5, no. 1 (1970): 128–43.

202 E. Obadare, “White-Collar Fundamentalism: Interrogating Youth Religiosity on Nigerian University Campuses,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 45, no. 4 (2007): 517–37.

203 S. Sapiie, “Student Activism and Strategic Identity: The Anti-Communist Student Action Front (KAMI) in West Java, Indonesia, 1965–1966,” in *The Third World in the Global 1960s*, ed. S. Christiansen and Z. A. Scarlett (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), 182–97.

204 Luca La Rovere, “Fascist Groups in Italian Universities: An Organization at the Service of the Totalitarian State,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 34, no. 3 (1999): 457–75.

205 Nelson, “Embracing the Ummah”; Iqbal Haider Butt, *Revisiting Student Politics in Pakistan* (Gujranwala, Pakistan: BARGAD, 2009).