



Sevā, Hindutva, and the Politics of Post-Earthquake Relief and Reconstruction in Rural Kutch

The phenomenal rise of Hindu nationalism in Indian politics is in part attributed to its grassroots work centered on a strategy of *sevā* (social service), which is operated through an array of Hindu nationalist organizations. Participation in service activities paves the way for an embedded form of mobilization that is seemingly unthreatening as it is subtle, nonviolent, and clothed in humanitarianism, in contrast to the more virulent forms of mobilization that are common to the politics of the Hindu Right. Based on empirical evidence drawn from three villages in rural Kutch, this article attempts to understand the ways in which participation in relief and reconstruction after the Bhuj earthquake of 2001 provided an opportunity for the Hindu Right to undertake a creative form of political mobilization that deepened and broadened its support. The disaster relief operation enabled Hindu Right organizations, including the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), to disseminate and consolidate their ideology of Hinduness (*hindutva*) and recruit new members. The role of the Hindu Right in relation to the state government in Gujarat is also critically examined. The article highlights the under-analyzed aspects of the moral complexity of evaluating the humanitarian work of the Hindu Right by drawing attention to the compassionate side of the movement.

KEYWORDS: disaster—earthquake—Hindu nationalism—Kutch—*sevā*—reconstruction—relief

Saffron scarves flung round their necks and pickaxes and shovels slung over their shoulders, the Hindu nationalist volunteers walk the streets of Bhuj, collecting the dead.... They belong to the RSS known for its discipline and efficiency.... The group has emerged as one of the leaders of the relief efforts in this devastated corner of western India where more than 10,500 people have been confirmed dead.... The effort has burnished the image of the RSS... (TOMLINSON 2001)

THE CATEGORY of “religion” has increasingly gained prominence in post-Independence Indian politics with the spectacular rise of the Hindu Right in the past three decades. Initiated by a small coterie in the 1920s, the ideology gained a national platform in the 1990s, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political arm of the movement, occupied the seat of power in Delhi. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a “cultural” body formed in 1925, is the foundational organization of the Sangh Parivar, which represents Hindu nationalist tendencies in modern India.¹

Hindu Nationalism’s advancement from the periphery to the center of Indian politics, especially its stunning victory in the 2014 general elections in India, has been facilitated by its remarkable adaptability to the changing sociopolitical landscape. The Parivar has adopted various methods, techniques, rituals, and forms of mobilization over the years in an effort to capture the popular Hindu imagination. This expansion was possible through the endeavors of numerous RSS affiliates, including its service (*Sewa Bharati*), educational (*Vidya Bharati*), and tribal welfare (*Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram*) wings, as well as *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (World Hindu Council, *VHP*). These affiliates work in coordination to promote their vision of *hindutva*, or Hinduness. Today the Parivar runs nearly sixty-seven thousand educational projects under different denominations, close to twenty thousand health projects, over nineteen thousand self-reliance projects, and over twenty thousand social projects.² It has also focused on “cultural” consolidation through its cultural centers (*samskar kendras*), literary associations, and temple renovation committees. Unlike the BJP, which attains visibility and importance primarily during elections, these cultural and social programs provide the Sangh Parivar with continuous and uninterrupted presence in the Indian public sphere (PANIKKAR 1999).

JAFFRELOT (2005, 211) suggests that *Hindutva* owes its success not only “to its ability to alternatively mobilize support in the streets on ethno-religious issues and

to make alliances with regional partners,” but also to its earlier grassroots work. These “on-the-ground activities” involve “a strategy of social welfare” often presented in the form of *sevā* (service). While various commentators have examined the origins, spread, and politics of the Hindu nationalist movement (BASU et al. 1993; HANSEN 1999; JAFFRELOT 1996; KANUNGO 2003; NANDY et al. 1995; ZAVOS 2000) little scholarly attention has yet been given to the political ramifications of its welfare activities, including during times of disaster.

In the Hindu tradition, *sevā* broadly denotes selfless service. *Sevā* could be directed toward society, an individual, one’s parents, God, or one’s guru (WARRIER 2003). In specific contexts, however, *sevā* assumes a distinctly political undertone. This article argues that far from being a benign practice, *sevā* in the Hindu nationalist tradition has played an important role in furthering the political project of Hindutva by reorganizing communities according to new Hindu political identities.³ JAFFRELOT (2005, 221) suggests that the strategy of *sevā* appears effective for two reasons. First, it facilitates an entry point for the RSS into those families who may not subscribe to the ideology of Hindutva, but may be open to supporting its social welfare work. Second, *sevā* helps secure the good will and patronage of some government bodies and philanthropists. This strategy of embedded mobilization becomes even more effective during disaster situations when the state often appears ineffective in providing relief and beneficiaries are particularly vulnerable. The deployment of humanitarian aid as a justification for political intervention is, as FASSIN and PANDOLFI (2010) have pointed out, a common strategy of states during times of disaster. My argument draws upon these insights into the politics of relief to address the domestic context of the work of the RSS.

RSS *svayamsevaks* (volunteers) have been at the forefront in providing humanitarian assistance since they undertook relief work for Hindu refugees during the Partition of India in 1947. Apart from facilitating the creation of a humanitarian image for itself, disasters have also provided opportunities for the RSS to undertake massive cadre building. The tradition of *sevā*, however, has not remained limited to providing emergency relief alone. It also included institutionalized welfare in the fields of education, health, and rural development. *Sevā* attained a stronger footing under the leadership of M. S. Golwalkar, the second organizational chief (*sarsaṅghcālāk*) of the RSS (hereafter also the Sangh), who recast the organization in a new mold in response to its ban in 1948 following the assassination of Gandhi by an ex-RSS member in 1948 (BECKERLEGGE 2003, 49). Golwalkar also tried to shed the image of the RSS as an upper-caste communal movement by diversifying its activities to provide targeted *sevā* to certain specific groups such as women, tribals, and Hindu “lower castes” by creating an array of affiliates.⁴ Apart from consolidating these groups under an overarching Hindu identity, the *sevā* activities of Sangh affiliates perform specific political functions such as countering Christian proselytizing activities in the tribal areas (KANUNGO 2008; SHAH 1999, 316; ZAVOS 2001, 83–84) and inculcating values of national awareness and character building amongst marginalized sections of Hindu society through a system of parallel education.

While critics of the Sangh Parivar have legitimately described the movement variously as “revivalist” (ANDERSON and DAMLE 1987), “fundamentalist” (MARTY and APPLEBY 1994), “communal,” and even “fascist” (GOYAL 1979), there is a need to move beyond these labels to understand how the Sangh functions as a broader civil society network. As DAVIS and ROBINSON (2012, 2–3) remind us, there is a need to recognize the “compassionate side” of conservative religious movements that provoke comparisons with “ineffective, corrupt or indifferent current governments,” and attract supporters with different local sensibilities, interests, and concerns. Journalist Chris Tomlinson’s quote in the epigraph in some ways is an acknowledgment of this compassionate aspect of the RSS. This analysis becomes particularly relevant in the context of a resurgence of religiously-inspired actors who have provided social welfare since the early 1990s and are blurring distinctions between the sacred and the secular (CLARKE and JENNINGS 2008).

This article explores the political ramifications of the relief and rehabilitation work of Hindutva organizations in three villages of rural Kutch, in the western Indian state of Gujarat, which was hit by an earthquake in 2001, estimated by the Indian Meteorological Department to have measured 7.7 on the Richter scale. The earthquake had maximum impact on the district of Kutch, and the disaster reconfigured the sociocultural, political, and economic landscape of the region in far-reaching ways. The recent work of Edward SIMPSON (2014) provides insightful analysis of this transition over the decade since the Bhuj earthquake. Beginning with the premise that “good work” after a disaster is never “neutral or innocent,” Simpson provides a detailed analysis of the ways in which the earthquake allowed a melee of interventions in Kutch, each competing with the others to impose their ideology on the survivors of the disaster. For Simpson, the relief and reconstruction work of the Sangh Parivar perpetuated social and economic vulnerabilities, exacerbated inequalities, segregated residential patterns, and promoted already dominant ideological frameworks. My own research in Gujarat also points to similar conclusions, highlighting the importance of calling attention to important aspects of continuity, rather than disruption, in political dynamics following the disaster.⁵ What remains under-analyzed in Simpson’s work, however, are the complexities of why so many in Gujarat perceived the Hindu Right’s relief work in a positive light. While it was certainly contested, many nevertheless saw the interventions as welcome improvements. It is important to provoke larger questions about current dominant and normative academic framings of Hindutva as a challenge to liberal democratic principles, in order to better understand the cultural logic of its widespread appeal. In this article I seek to explore the kinds of cultural anxieties to which Hindutva responds, which, regardless of how distasteful for researchers, nevertheless must still be acknowledged. Moreover, while Simpson’s work is not particularly directed at any organization, my focus is more specifically on understanding the ways in which the context of the disaster provided an opportunity to the Sangh Parivar to embark on a distinct form of mobilization.

The primary argument that I make here is that contrary to its characteristic forms of communal mobilization, such as *yātrās* (processions), hate speech, riots,

and “reconversion” attempts, the broader context of social welfare and the specific context of disaster relief allow the Sangh Parivar to engage in more nuanced forms of enlisting support. Participation in relief and rehabilitation paves way for an embedded form of mobilization that is seemingly unthreatening as it is subtle, nonviolent, and clothed in humanitarianism in contrast to the more virulent forms of mobilization. In this article I explore the ways in which the proactive humanitarian responses of the RSS and its affiliates helped the organizations earn goodwill from various quarters and provided it with opportunities to undertake massive fundraising and recruitment of new cadres. Disaster aid mobilization thus provided Hindu nationalism a face lift.

The work of the Sangh Parivar in the aftermath of the earthquake involved a complex interplay of religion-culture-politics in ways that are not easily disentangled. Even though the RSS’s stated goal is to protect the Hindu religion (*dharmā*), and build a robust Hindu nation (*rāṣṭra*), and despite the use of specific symbols of worship that give it a “definitive ‘Hindu’ character” (NAIR 2009), it has always maintained that it is a cultural group. The concept of the *hindū rāṣṭra* is constructed around the idea of a Hindu culture which is identified as the national culture. Thus “culture,” rather than “religion,” is the catchword of the Sangh. The recourse to culture, a seemingly unproblematic category in comparison to religion in India, is advantageous as it encompasses practically everything ranging from customs, rituals, and festivals to political behavior. In this way, the Hindutva political project makes a back door entry through culture. The religious dimension, to the extent that it exists as a distinct domain, is instrumentally appropriated from outward forms of the Hindu religion.

In what ways does *sevā* offered during times of distress help the Sangh Parivar in furthering its political agenda? This article answers these questions in two parts. First, I trace the evolution of the idea and practice of *sevā* in the Hindu nationalist movement in light of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Hindu reform and revivalist movements. I then illustrate my argument by focusing on the Sangh Parivar’s activities following the Bhuj earthquake of 2001.

SOCIO-RELIGIOUS REFORM MOVEMENTS AND HINDU SAṄGATHAN

Though Hindu Nationalism as a movement acquired momentum in the early twentieth century, its roots can be traced to several socio-religious reformist and revivalist movements that emerged in nineteenth century colonial India. Colonialism introduced several important developments to the Indian sub-continent such as improved communications, orientaling perceptions based on simplistic classifications of communities, missionary activity leading to proselytization, the printing press, and the decennial census; all of which in their complex interaction led to the crystallization of what Kaviraj has described as “enumerated communities” (KAVIRAJ 1997, 330–31). These communities perceived the Christian missionaries and the British colonial power as conjoined threats to their indigenous culture and, in an effort to combat this, adapted Western organizational

models (GOLD 1994, 533). In the process, Hinduism, just like the other religious communities, underwent a drastic transformation and became increasingly unified and homogenized from being “a juxtaposition of flexible religious sects” (THAPAR 1985) in the pre-colonial period.

The colonial government’s portrayal of Hinduism as an “orthodox,” polytheistic religion and the proselytizing efforts of Christian missionaries provoked a series of socio-religious reform movements including the Brahma Samaj (1828) and the Prarthana Samaj (1867), which sought to rid Hinduism of social evils such as casteism, polytheism, child marriage, and *satī*.⁶ Alongside these reformist movements, a revivalist wave gained momentum that was expressed through the formation of organizations such as the Arya Samaj (1875) which sought to salvage Hinduism by referring to an imagined age of an idealized past (the Vedic period) when Hinduism was uncorrupted by the polluting influences of Islam and Christianity.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, an assertion of Hindu identity was witnessed through the formation of several groups of *saṅgathans* (efficient organizations of patriotic men) revolving around gurus (spiritual leaders) who attempted to constitute a new community of believers of Hinduism, “to query the role of the colonial state on one hand and its dominant religion, Christianity, on the other” (PATEL 2010, 105). Patel has argued that the Hindu *saṅgathans* emulated two key features that they believed were the strengths of Christianity—the process of building a Church-like congregation called missions, and the tradition of providing social services (PATEL 2010, 105).

The Christian missionary relief work in India introduced an important shift in the nature of service in that the process of relief came to be organized increasingly around what BARNETT and STEIN eds. (2012) describe as modern “principles of rationality.” In the Hindu tradition, service had always been more in the nature of personal charity, best captured through the idea of *dānā puṇya* (charity that leads to a gain in spiritual merit). In a break from this tradition, Hindu reformers emulated Christian missionaries by establishing parallel institutions of social service. They started providing humanitarian assistance during famines, plagues, and epidemics and also established schools, orphanages, and hospitals. Thus, while *dānā* was a deep-rooted “living tradition” of Hinduism (WATT 2005), it was metamorphosed to a more modern form of service that came to be defined as *sevā*.

The service and reform activities contributed toward the creation of a nascent nationalism with strong Hindu characteristics. This Hindu consolidation included symbolic activities such as *yātrās* and the public celebration of Hindu festivals such as Ganesh Chaturthi⁷ which had previously been a private affair. Groups such as the Arya Samaj resorted to *śuddhi*⁸ in a bid to win back those Hindus who had converted to Christianity, a tradition which had hitherto never been part of Hinduism. In the early twentieth century, the enactment of the Morley-Minto reforms of 1909 which introduced separate electorates on religious lines, the Montague Chelmsford reforms that reinforced religious representation, the perceived failure of Gandhi’s Non-Cooperation movement, and religio-militant based mobilizations such as *śuddhi* led by the Arya Samaj and *tablīgh* movement (propagation of Islam) led by

certain Muslim organizations exacerbated tensions between Hindus and Muslims, the two largest religious communities in India (KANUNGO 2003, 35–37).

It was in this backdrop that Hindutva was codified for the first time in 1923 when V. D. Savarkar laid down geographical, racial, and cultural criteria for Hinduness (SAVARKAR 1969). Dr. K. B. Hedgewar, an admirer of Savarkar's definition of a Hindu, founded the RSS in 1925 to promote a corporate and unified *hindū rāṣṭra* (nation). The newly formed RSS was influenced by preceding Hindu *saṅgathans* and retained their emphasis on *sevā*. Under the aegis of the RSS and its Parivar, the concept of *sevā* was deployed to fortify Hindu communities against the two major religious minorities—Muslims and Christians.

THE TRADITION OF *SEVĀ* IN THE RSS

The institution of *sevā* has been an integral part of the Sangh since its formation. It was under Hedgewar that the first public act of service was performed by the RSS when in 1926 the young *svayamsevaks* monitored a rowdy local celebration of Ram Navami.⁹ *Svayamsevaks* established queues, distributed water to devotees, and protected them “from those who would batten upon the innocent” (BECKERLEGGE, 2003, 40). For this occasion, Hedgewar chose both the name and a uniform for his new organization (ANDERSON and DAMLE 1987, 35): Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh literally means “a national organization of (self-motivated) volunteers.” These volunteers wore white shirts, khaki shorts, and black khaki caps.¹⁰ Hedgewar envisioned the creation of the RSS as a militant male volunteer group and operationalized this vision through physical training and character building of the *svayamsevaks* in the *śākhās*.¹¹

The Partition in 1947 of the Indian sub-continent into two countries along religious lines, and the mayhem that followed, provided the RSS with fertile ground for communal mobilization. Under Golwalkar's leadership, the Sangh formed the Hindu Sahayata Samiti (Hindu Aid Committee) that played a major role in organizing relief and protection for the Hindu refugees who were fleeing from East and West Pakistan. *Svayamsevaks* were assigned to guard Hindu homes and even manufacture handmade grenades in anticipation of Muslim attacks. This demonstration of “dedication, sacrifice and organizational capacity” during the riots enabled the RSS to establish its image as the Savior of Hindus and helped it to expand its influence (KANUNGO 2003, 55). A large number of these refugees, who prospered in the new country and were indebted to the RSS, became reliable sources of funding for the organization (ANDERSON and DAMLE 1987, 49). In 1950, the RSS employed a similar modus operandi in providing relief to Hindu refugees from East Pakistan and earned the goodwill of the Bengali Hindus. In subsequent years, the involvement of the RSS in disaster relief and rehabilitation after several major natural disasters across the country (prominently during the Assam earthquake of 1950, the Punjab floods of 1955, the Tamil Nadu cyclone of 1955, the Anjar earthquake of 1956, the Andhra cyclone of 1977, the Latur earthquake of 1993, the Odisha super cyclone of 1999, and the Bhuj earthquake in

2001) brought it in direct contact with a large number of people who were introduced to the concept of Hindutva through either RSS *śākhā* activities, camps, or community discourses. The following section illustrates this phenomenon in detail by examining the role of the Sangh Parivar in three villages of rural Kutch after the Bhuj earthquake of 2001.

THE RSS IN GUJARAT

Gujarat, often considered the “laboratory of Hindutva,” is one of the main strongholds of the Sangh Parivar. The evolution of Hindutva in Gujarat parallels that in other parts of India, though the first branch of the RSS was established only in 1940 in Rajkot (SUD 2012, 123–24). In 1951, the political wing of the movement, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, was established in the state. Sewa Bharati, the service wing of the RSS, was established in 1979 to respond to the Morbi floods in the Rajkot district of Gujarat. During these floods *svayamsevaks* garnered a good reputation for efficient and effective relief. Since then, Sewa Bharati has consistently engaged in relief work during times of disaster, as well as providing a range of other social services.

The wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971 created widespread anti-Muslim feeling among upper caste Hindus that were further cultivated by the RSS with the support of organizations such as the Hindu Religion Protection Committee (Hindu Dharma Raksha Samiti) (SHAH 1998, 245). The Sangh’s participation in the *navnirmāṇ* movement¹² and in the anti-reservation riots of 1981 and 1985 enhanced its popularity in the public domain. It was also successful in gradually incorporating lower caste Hindus within the Hindutva fold, a strategy that further reinforced divisions between Hindus and Muslims.¹³ The launch of the Ram Janambhoomi movement in 1984 facilitated an intense period of religious mobilization through *yātrās* organized by the BJP in several states of India, including Gujarat. These *yātrās* led to a series of communal riots from the late 1980s until the early 1990s and further helped the Sangh Parivar consolidate its position in Gujarat.¹⁴ Finally, the BJP’s victory in the 1995 state assembly elections and its successive return to power in the consecutive elections have helped Hindutva to firmly entrench itself in the sociocultural and political imagination of the people.

THE BHUJ EARTHQUAKE

On 26 January 2001, India’s 51st Republic day, Gujarat was hit by a severe earthquake that caused extensive destruction to life and property. Around 20,000 people across the state lost their lives, over 167,000 people were injured, and about half a million people were left homeless (SINHA 2004). The towns of Bhuj, Bhachau, and Anjar that are located in the district of Kutch suffered the maximum impact due to their proximity to the epicenter.

When the earthquake struck many government officials were on leave for the Republic Day holiday and police and fire personnel were busy assisting with secu-

city arrangements for parades and other celebrations (EIDINGER ed. 2001). Despite this, within twenty-four hours of the disaster, the central government launched a massive rescue and relief operation by mobilizing the Indian Army, the Air Force, and paramilitary forces such as the Border Security Force (BSF) and the Rapid Action Force (RAF). The earthquake was declared a national calamity. Finances and relief supplies were expedited to the disaster zone.¹⁵

The speed with which the central government acted after the earthquake may partly be attributed to the fact that the BJP occupied the seat of power both in the state of Gujarat and in Delhi (through the National Democratic Alliance, a coalition of thirteen political parties led by the BJP). The Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority (GSDMA) was quickly established to coordinate the relief and reconstruction efforts. The state government also took the unprecedented step of enacting the Gujarat Disaster Management Act 2003 to manage future disasters. Soon after the earthquake, international and local NGOs, corporations, government departments, neighboring state governments, political parties, and other civil society networks engaged in rescue and relief operations, including providing medical aid, opening community kitchens, and providing temporary shelter, food, and other essential items. The relief situation was characterized by intense competition among donors who sought positive publicity, and government bureaucrats scrambled to figure out effective mechanisms for governance and coordination.

One solution deployed during the reconstruction phase was to allow private agencies and NGOs to “adopt” villages as part of a public-private partnership. Reconstruction was then carried out by the private agency with the Gujarat government contributing around 50 percent of the funds (SUD 2001). However, village adoption further exacerbated competition among donors over securing rights for rebuilding particular preferred sites. Issues of caste, religion, and certain social configurations were more attractive to some agencies than others. SIMPSON (2004, 140) argues that organizations closely aligned with the BJP in Gujarat were allocated the most “prestigious sites.” Yet, conversely, the presence of diverse and competing aid agencies enhanced the agency of some villagers who were able to play organizations off each other. Even so, donors of varying types sought to use their relief to impact the social, cultural, political, and economic landscape of the Kutch region. Such was the case for the network of organizations associated with the RSS and the Sangh Parivar.

THE RSS'S RELIEF WORK

The SEWA BHARATI booklet *Punaḥ Nirmāṇ Cunaūtī* (n.d.) states that on 26 January 2001, RSS *svayamsevak*s all over Gujarat were getting ready to prepare for *rāṣṭra jāgrāṇ abhiyān* (national awareness initiative) and *bhārat mātā pūjā* (worship of Mother India) in celebration of Republic Day. Soon after the tremors stopped, this “ready army” of *svayamsevak*s was deployed in rescue operations. More than 20,000 *svayamsevak*s from all over Gujarat, many of whom had lost family and friends in the earthquake, jumped into action to assist in rescue, medi-

cal, and cremation tasks. In Bhachau, Kutch, where the impact of the earthquake had been the severest, a hospital named after Hedgewar (the founder of RSS) was set up on 1 March 2001, with sixty beds and four operation theaters for the earthquake victims. *Svayamsevaks* also opened numerous community kitchens and set up tents for people across Gujarat.

Accounts of *svayamsevaks* reveal that local RSS leaders were involved in carrying out the initial mobilization of relief efforts. They assumed the role of coordinators to mobilize village youth for relief. This was done of their own volition. Messages were spread through word of mouth for *svayamsevaks* to assemble on a common ground. Many brought along friends and relatives who had no prior affiliation with the Sangh. Volunteers were then organized into groups and allocated different tasks. All groups reassembled in the evening and reported the status of their work to the chief coordinator. The primary task of the volunteers at this stage was to rescue people from under the debris, provide first aid to the injured, start community kitchens, arrange for temporary shelter, and distribute relief kits. *Svayamsevaks* of all age groups, including children, were involved in performing various kinds of *sevā*. As one *kāryakartā* (Sangh worker) stated, many *bal* (child) *svayamsevaks* assisted doctors in dressing the injured patients, while the older *svayamsevaks* were entrusted with more difficult tasks such as removing debris, pulling out dead bodies, and cremating them.¹⁶ He also claimed that within three days of the earthquake the RSS was providing daily food rations for over five thousand people in Anjar and Bhuj. A month after the earthquake, volunteers from other parts of Gujarat started arriving. Only during the reconstruction phase were engineers, consultants, and laborers engaged on a paid basis.

A few days after the disaster an RSS control room was set up at Hedgewar Bhavan (the Sewa Bharati head office in Ahmedabad) and nodal officers were appointed to coordinate relief activities. Ten other centers were also established for assessing requirements, dispatching material to relief centers, and daily stock taking. Several senior leaders of the RSS such as Seshadri and Sudarshan (*ex-sarsaṅghcālāks*) came down from Ahmedabad, Delhi, and other parts of the country to visit the affected people of Kutch.¹⁷ The relief period lasted for about three months during which time Sewa Bharati functioned as the umbrella organization for the RSS, while trustees and Sangh office-bearers managed and monitored the operation. The VHP on the other hand functioned partially as a parallel system and conducted its fundraising and operational activities separately from the Sewa Bharati.

A prominent theme in the accounts of several *svayamsevaks* was the active support of the government. Sewa Bharati claims that the district collector sought their help for the cremation of dead bodies a day after the catastrophe and that Air Force authorities cooperated with Sewa Bharati to transport injured people to Mumbai and Pune for treatment. Sewa Bharati also worked particularly closely with other Hindu organizations, including the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, VHP, Mata Amritanandamayi, and the Ramakrishna Mission.

The relief operation also provided an opportunity to the Sangh Parivar to undertake massive fundraising from various quarters. By the RSS's account, more

than 22,000 donors, domestic and international, contributed to the earthquake relief and rehabilitation work by Sewa Bharati. The prominent donors from within the country included the state governments of Jharkhand and Goa, Jankalyan Samiti Maharashtra, Lions Club (USA), Chinmaya Mission (India and USA), and Bajaj Auto. The Sangh Parivar's international fundraising bodies such as Sewa International UK, Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh in UK, and India Development and Relief Fund (IDRF) in America effectively mobilized and facilitated this process. Similarly, VHP raised funds through the organization's counterparts in the UK and the USA. An important contribution was made by the Indian (mostly Gujarati) diaspora community settled in the UK, USA, and Canada.¹⁸ Fieldwork in Kutch revealed several stories of how some Kutchis living abroad had contributed generously towards the reconstruction of their native villages. A majority of these donors channeled their funds through Hindu organizations like the Sewa Bharati, VHP, and Swaminarayan Sanstha. Asghar Ali ENGINEER (2002) explains this phenomenon by arguing that Indian émigrés try to overcome their sense of rootlessness by being ultra-Hindu, contributing liberally to Hindutva organizations, and providing volunteers to its overseas organizations. It is also necessary to take into account the fact that most Indians view the state as being corrupt and inefficient which motivates them to donate to private actors.

The public image of the Sangh Parivar received a tremendous boost after the earthquake relief. The Sangh Parivar exploited this opportunity to revamp its tainted image from being a communal organization to an effective and efficient humanitarian actor. RSS publications highlight the secular nature of relief offered by *svayamsevaks*. The NGO SEWA BHARATI specifically highlights a “group of Muslim volunteers” (2001; page numbers unavailable) whose assistance was turned away by Muslim families in Rampar village because the RSS had already provided relief to them. Similarly, the RSS' weekly publication, *Organiser*, carried several stories of peoples' changed perceptions of the Sangh after the earthquake. In one such story an orthopedic surgeon who worked closely with the RSS is quoted as saying that his prior impressions of the RSS and VHP were that they were only concerned with temple construction and that these views had been changed as a consequence of witnessing their remarkable relief work (KUMAR 2001, 4). Even to this day, while countering allegations relating to discrimination of relief, Sewa Bharati activists frequently highlight that eight houses in Chapredi village were allotted to Muslims.

The rescue and relief efforts of the RSS earned them accolades from several quarters. All stakeholders who were interviewed across Bhuj and Anjar unanimously extolled the work of the *svayamsevaks*. A senior editor of *Kutch Mitra* stated in an interview:

rss people came from all over Gujarat and all over India during this phase. I have always seen them in action in times of calamity and disaster, they come and work very hard to retrieve the dead bodies and dispose them. They have very threadbare requirements and plunge themselves into action. I have seen

their work also during the Morbi floods, the cyclone in 1999. They come from nowhere and then they go back without claiming any credit or claim.¹⁹

Several media reports and community accounts echoed these claims, emphasizing particularly the praise the RSS garnered vis-à-vis an ineffective state (NAQVI 2001; LOUIS 2001, 909). Like other grassroots community organizations, the RSS's familiarity with the terrain and their access to local networks enabled it to be better placed than the state to provide effective and immediate relief.²⁰

But this praise was not unqualified. The same media outlets which acknowledged the contributions of the Sangh in providing earthquake relief also noted that the RSS had used the tragedy as a publicity exercise by positioning itself as a major donor of relief aid. With a BJP government in place, the relief actors backed by the Sangh were able to access a large chunk of the funds earmarked for relief and rehabilitation. More critical accounts have alleged that the RSS provided discriminatory relief and only catered to the Hindu population. In an article in the *Financial Express*, Kul-dip NAYAR (2001) alleged that Sangh activists had engaged in providing discriminatory relief by organizing relief camps in selective Hindu pockets and deliberately neglected lower caste Hindus and Muslims in some areas. He also alleged that "the RSS and the VHP activists have 'hijacked' relief supplies in Kutch. The government appears to have connived at such flagrant instances of bias and prejudice."

A Bhuj-based senior Muslim Congress party leader said that the relief process had been completely captured by the RSS-VHP cadres who concentrated their efforts only in Hindu dominated areas.²¹ This was corroborated by a news report published in the *Milli Gazette*:

The RSS and VHP are almost running a parallel government. They have their own network and have quickly set up a good organizational structure. They have representatives at the airport to take charge of the government relief being brought by countless Indian Air Force sorties. In fact, they are working in tandem with the revenue officials of the district administration and the officials who have come in from Gandhinagar and Ahmedabad. It is apparent that the BJP's government ... has co-opted the Sangh Parivar and have, therefore, roped in its cadres in a big way for the relief operations ... the government relief camps have also been taken over by the RSS/VHP cadres. (SHASHIKUMAR and VARGHESE 2001)

The report goes on to say that the largest community kitchen in Bhuj was functioning in the Swaminarayan temple where food was offered to anyone who stood in the queue. However, beneficiaries, many of whom were also Muslims, were being asked to chant "Jai Swami Narayan" (Victory to Swami Narayan) or "Jai Shri Ram" (Victory to Lord Ram) by the RSS and VHP cadres. Similarly, in Jubilee Ground in Bhuj where relief materials were being piled everyday and where food was being prepared round the clock, the VHP cadres led the slogan-shouting and asked everyone to join in when they shouted "Jai Shri Ram" (SHASHIKUMAR and VARGHESE 2001).

Two further reports have alleged that relief funds raised by the Sangh Parivar from the Indian community abroad have been misused for furthering the Hindutva

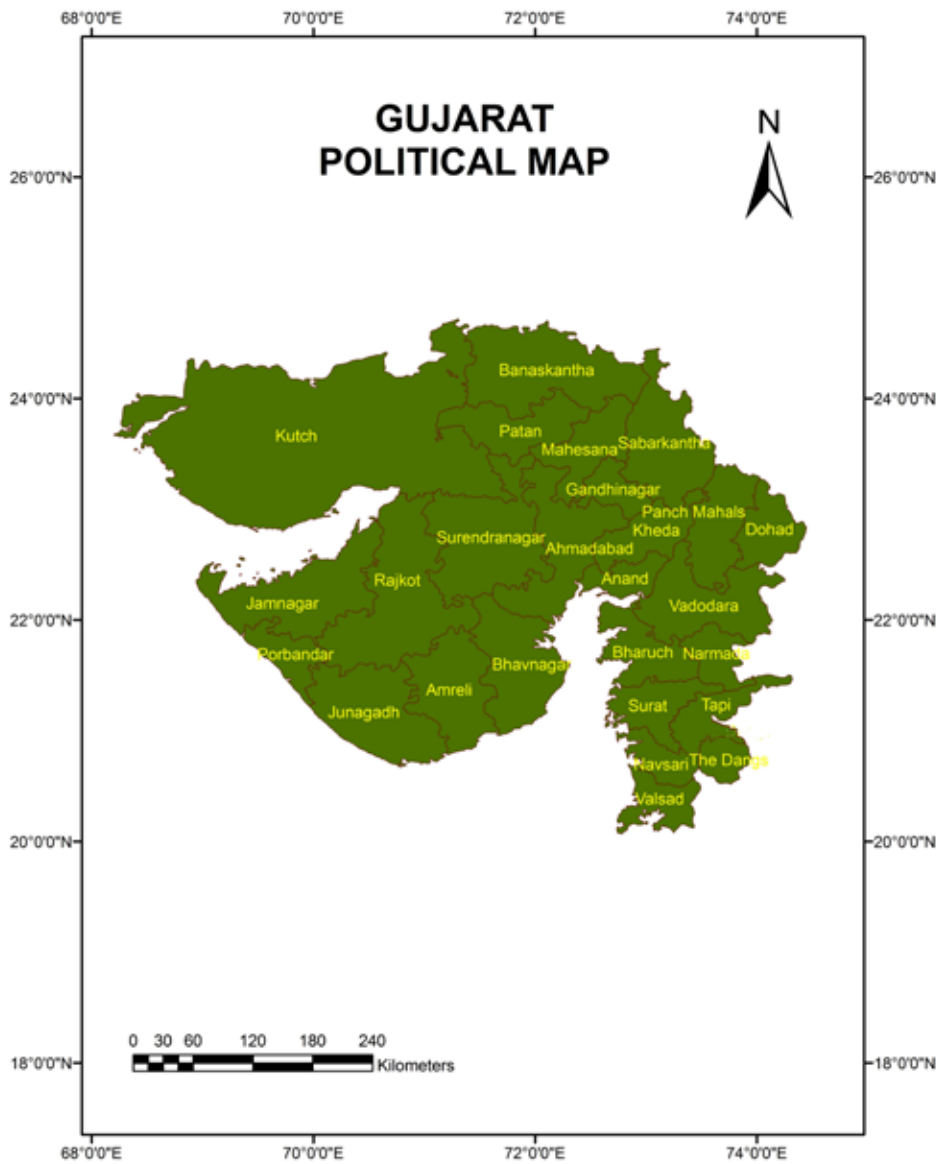


FIGURE I. Source: Arvind Pandey (based on 2011 Census of India data).

agenda and in fomenting violence against Muslim and Christian minorities. *The Foreign Exchange* by SABRANG COMMUNICATIONS (2002), an organization founded in 1993 by activist journalists, explores the links between the India Development and Relief Fund (IDRF), a Maryland based charity, and the Sangh Parivar India. The report alleges that relief funds raised for the Bhuj earthquake were administered along communal lines and were channeled to those that pursued a Hindutva political agenda. A London-based group, Awaaz: South Asia Watch (ASAW), later released a similar report alleging that Sewa International UK and the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) had by “fraudulent means” raised £2.3 million for Sewa Bharati’s reconstruction work which was redirected to furthering the RSS’s political agenda. These reports did little to tarnish the image of the Sangh as they were widely considered problematic for their supposed bias against the Hindu Right and for insubstantial evidence.²² Yet, despite this, the reports were correct to point out that the massive relief operation allowed opportunities for the Sangh Parivar to further its political agenda.

THE SANGH PARIVAR’S RELIEF AND RECONSTRUCTION IN THREE VILLAGES

As part of the private-public partnerships and village “adoption” scheme (discussed above) initiated by the state government, there were two broad approaches to reconstruction. The first was when private agencies only provided building materials to the local communities, who then constructed the houses with their own labor. The other approach involved contractors being employed by the private agency with the approval of the *pañcāyat* (local government) to carry out the work (KHERA 2002). In the latter scheme, the donor agency not only rebuilt houses but also *pañcāyat ghars* (meeting rooms for local governments), schools, places of worship, health centers, and so on. Sewa Bharati in partnership with Sewa International and VHP America embraced the second approach and reconstructed fourteen and eight villages across Gujarat respectively. In the remainder of this article I address the impact of this work in three villages. Chapredi, renamed Atal Nagar, and Mitha Pasvaria were both adopted by Sewa Bharati. VHP America adopted Lodai, which was renamed Keshav Nagar.²³

Before the earthquake, all three villages consisted of semi-*pakkā* (permanent) or *kaccā* (mud) houses, a primary school, a *cabutra* (bird tower), a temple, and a few shops. The population ranged between 800–1200 people in each village. Hindus were the clear majority community in each with Ahirs,²⁴ an ethnic group classified as Other Backward Class (OBC)²⁵ by the government of India, being the dominant caste group followed by Dalits (Scheduled Castes),²⁶ who were about 10 percent of the population. Brahmins or the upper castes were only a small percentage. Muslims comprised less than 10 percent of the total population in Chapredi and Lodai, while Mitha Pasvaria had no Muslim population. While more than 90 percent of the community owned land and pursued agriculture as their chief occupation in all three villages, a small percentage of the community, particularly Dalits

and Muslims, also worked as daily wage earners. Almost all Ahir families owned livestock such as goats, cows, and buffaloes.

In all three villages, local *svayamsevaks*/VHP activists were the first to initiate rescue and relief by mobilizing the community youth. RSS members reported in interviews that discipline imbibed in the *śākhās* helped them to organize efficiently after the earthquake. Sangh Parivar leaders took upon themselves the role of advocates and protectors of the villagers. They galvanized support to drive away Christian NGOs, negotiated with government officials on the amount of compensation to be paid for damages, and facilitated acquisition of land for reconstruction of new villages.

Although several agencies provided relief to these three villages, the choice of adoption for reconstructing the villages was made strategically, from either side. These villages were “natural” choices for the RSS and the VHP as they already had a strong support base since before the earthquake. The RSS had carried out regular *śākhās* in Mitha Pasvaria and Chapredi since the early 1980s and VHP activists began actively organizing a Hindu *saṅgathan* in Lodai later the same decade.²⁷

Villagers in all three villages reported that the rebuilding of their houses started within six to eight months of the earthquake after meetings between the donor agency and the *grām sabhā* (village assembly) of the respective village. Senior leaders of the Sangh and VHP visited these villages regularly during the planning process to discuss housing layout, design, and mode of allocation. While other agencies had offered to rebuild their houses, community members stated that they were more comfortable with Sewa Bharati and VHP due to their familiarity with the organizations. While the processes followed for adoption were perceived as being largely participatory in nature, certain decisions were perceived as imposed by the donor agency. One such issue was the purchase of land for the new villages. Residents of Mitha Pasvaria mentioned that landowning farmers were forced by the government and donor agency to sell off their land at throwaway prices. Senior RSS leaders convinced the farmers to make available their land for the greater good. Some members of the Dalit and Muslim community in Mitha Pasvaria and Atal Nagar mentioned that their participation in meetings with the donor was minimal as all major decisions were taken by the *sarpāñc* (village head) and his advisors, who were Ahirs.

Reconstruction work was initiated with a Hindu ritual called a *bhūmi pūjā*²⁸ led by the donors. In Keshav Nagar, Praveen Togadia (VHP President) and Suresh Mehta (former Chief Minister of Gujarat) attended the *bhūmi pūjā* with over ten thousand villagers. The ritual was followed by a large community feast. It was on this occasion that the village was renamed “Keshav Nagar” after Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS, on the recommendation of Togadia. Similarly, Chapredi became “Atal Nagar” after Atal Behari Vajpayee, then Prime Minister of the BJP-led national government. *Bhūmi pūjā* in several other villages were also attended by senior leaders from the Sangh Parivar such as Sudarshan (then Sar-sanghchhalak of RSS) in Mitha Pasvaria, and Atal Bihari Vajpayee (then Prime Minister) and Keshubhai Patel (then Chief Minister of Gujarat) in Atal Nagar.

The inauguration ceremonies included speeches by the chief guests and other Sangh and BJP leaders who used these occasions to mobilize political support. At

times, these fora were also used by political leaders to assist in meaning making of the earthquake by taking recourse to Hindutva narratives. On the occasion of the laying of the foundation stone in Mitha Pasvaria village, *sarsaṅghcālāk* Sudarshan called upon the community to make Mitha Pasvaria a self-reliant and model village. Sudarshan criticized the growing tendency of blindly following “Western culture” and called for the need to recognize the interrelationship between humans, animals, birds, and trees which had been earmarked by Hindu forefathers as “vehicles to our deities.” Western culture, he stated, did not respect this relationship and as a consequence there had been massive deforestation and the massacre of cows, which led directly to natural disasters such as earthquakes.²⁹

POST-EARTHQUAKE HOUSING PATTERNS

All the houses in the newly constructed villages were *pakkā* in texture, had at least two rooms, and a toilet and bathroom with drainage facilities within the courtyard and a gate. Residents of Atal Nagar said that Sewa Bharati decided to build three types of houses in consultation with the *grām sabhā* (village council), with house sizes depending on the extent of prior land ownership.³⁰

On the basis of this differentiated classification several families managed to get more than one house as the land was owned by different family members. Houses built on plot sizes of 228.6 meters (equivalent to 250 yards) and above have three rooms while the other houses have two rooms. Since most Ahirs in the village owned land, they were allotted larger houses while Muslims, Dalits, and other lower castes received smaller houses. A similar classification of house and land size was reported in interviews in Mitha Pasvaria. In Keshav Nagar, on the other hand, all villagers were allotted a standard house with two rooms, one kitchen, and one bathroom built on a 200 meter plot. People in all the villages stated unanimously that they did not have to pay anything for the construction of the houses.

In keeping with patterns from the old villages, houses in the new villages except Mitha Pasvaria were segregated according to communities in which, for example, all houses of Ahirs were clustered together. According to interviews with some members of the Dalit community in Mitha Pasvaria, a system of ghettoized housing for the Dalits had originally been planned by Sewa Bharati too.³¹ However, following a Dalit protest, a decision was made to allocate houses on the basis of a draw system. The design of the newly reconstructed colonies exacerbated religious ghettoization. While Mitha Pasvaria, according to the locals, had always been a Hindu village, Lodai and Chapredi had significant Muslim populations. When Keshav Nagar was reconstructed none of the Muslims from the older village moved in, while in the case of Atal Nagar only eight families were allocated houses. In effect this made the two new villages into Hindu hamlets. Moreover, while some villages built by non-Sangh Parivar donors have retained the earlier pattern of segregated housing based on caste and religion, none of the village communities opted to stay outside the new colonies.³² This reinforces the possibility that

the villages built by the Sangh Parivar were conceptualized as Hindu villages, the actualization of which made the Muslim community reluctant to move in.

Yet it is difficult to say with certainty whether Muslim communities were left out on purpose by the donor. Residents interviewed in the old village did not suggest any deliberate attempt to keep them out of the new colonies. A few people from Lodai stated that they did not want to leave their old village as their houses were intact. One also cannot generalize any attempt at deliberate discrimination based on the community profile, except perhaps in Keshav Nagar where none of the Muslims moved from the older village of Lodai. But even there several Hindus also decided to stay back in Lodai and so this was not exclusive to the Muslim community. Some respondents also mentioned that they had rebuilt their houses with compensation received from the government or with assistance from other donors.

Despite these denials of discrimination, however, one does sense a feeling of disquiet while interacting with the Muslims in Atal Nagar. The eight families live in a cluster, far removed from the center of the village, and have Dalits as their closest neighbors. They are extremely guarded about their expressions and vociferously maintain that they live in “harmony” with the majority community. One Muslim resident in Atal Nagar stated: “We do not have any problem here. We go along with all the decisions that are taken by the village *pañcāyat*.”³³ This emphatic acceptance of the present state of affairs is, in effect, a kind of disciplined silence. It illustrates the extent to which Muslims in Atal Nagar exist in a marginal and precarious place such that even raising the specter of disagreement is avoided. They almost seem grateful that they have been allowed to live in a Hindu dominated settlement. Certainly, RSS activists in this village continuously drew attention to the fact that Sewa Bharati had graciously accommodated these eight Muslim households.

The facilities in the new villages are unanimously regarded as an advance on the pre-earthquake situation, with new roads, primary schools, bird towers, community halls, *pañcāyat ghars*, drainage systems, and a twenty-four-hour electricity supply with very rare power cuts. Running water is also available for at least two to three hours each day. Mitha Pasvaria and Keshav Nagar have a primary health center within the bounds of the village that are frequented by a doctor twice a week. Keshav Nagar also has a veterinary clinic, a water hole for animals, and a pond. Keshav Nagar and Atal Nagar particularly stand out in terms of their spacious complexes and amenities.

In addition to the above, both Sewa Bharati and VHP also carefully manicured the physical landscape with a definitive Hindu character. Grand *praveś dvars* (entrance gates) demarcate a clear boundary between the new settlements and the old village, along with those who stayed behind. They also serve to remind the villagers of the generosity of the donors. Since Ahirs are devotees of the God Krishna, the donors installed a statue of the God atop the *praveś dvars*. The construction of ostentatious *gośālās* (cowsheds) has a symbolic significance as Hindus regard the cow as sacred and the protection of cows is an important political agenda in the manifesto of the Hindu Right. Similarly, Hinduism is inscribed in memorial

plaques and the boundary walls of houses, which are imprinted with images of Hindu gods and goddesses. These physical and public displays of Hinduism contrast with the old villages. Both Lodai and Chapredi, for example, are devoid of such public displays of Hindu symbolism.

All three villages also now have grandiose temples occupying prominent sites. Keshav Nagar has four temples, Atal Nagar has two, and Mitha Pasvaria has one. While the older villages also had temples, they were far more modest structures compared to the new structures. Though a few Muslim families also live in Atal Nagar, there is no mosque in the village. Muslims in Atal Nagar continue to visit the mosque in the old village (Chapredi). Local RSS activists claim that during the planning of reconstruction, Sewa Bharati had told the villagers that a mosque would be built if all Muslims from the older village Chapredi shifted to Atal Nagar. This, as already discussed, did not happen. Muslims in Atal Nagar, however, did not validate this information.

Though the new settlements are distinctly more modern in terms of architecture and amenities, they continue to perpetuate societal inequalities based on caste and religion. This process of religious ghettoization was not a new feature instigated by the relief and reconstruction work, but rather a further aggravation of a long-standing dynamic. The increasingly sharp demarcation between Hindu and Muslim communities is particularly apparent in Keshav Nagar and Atal Nagar. The earthquake relief presented an opportunity for the Sangh Parivar to insinuate itself more deeply into the affairs of village life and to perpetuate religious and caste-based hierarchies. Sangh Parivar activities did not intend to disrupt inequalities as this would be counter to its wider political goals inspired by a traditionalist vision of Hindu nationalism.

In a revealing account, a member of the Dalit community in Mitha Pasvaria mentioned that the upper caste community would initially not allow Dalits to visit the village temple and even discouraged them from attending community feasts.³⁴ When this was brought up before the RSS, they distanced themselves from this issue. This was reiterated by a native of Atal Nagar who stated that while the local community occasionally meets with the leaders of the Sangh to seek their advice on developmental issues of the village, the latter does not interfere in any of the community's social issues.³⁵ This strategy of noninterference in selective issues helps maintain the status quo and the conservative ideology of Hindutva.

CURRENT ACTIVITIES OF THE SANGH PARIVAR

The rehabilitation work in the three villages opened up a continuous channel of engagement between the Sangh and the villagers. Members of the RSS and many villagers claimed that even nearly twelve years after the earthquake they have retained close connections with each other. This has been achieved through a series of mechanisms. RSS activists are active and visible participants in local Hindu festivals such as Janmashtami, Diwali, and Holi.³⁶ They also organize sports competitions, blood donation camps, and other patriotic programs. VHP activists in

Keshav Nagar said they help organize the annual *trīśūl dīkṣā* (trident initiation), involving self-defense training, including the use of tridents, for young Hindu men. Sewa Bharati and VHP have organized *grām vikās* (village development) programs including initiating the Kutch Kala Sewa Trust, a women's self-help group which provides employment through training in traditional embroidery. Just as important, several villagers also stated that they often approached the donors whenever in need of advice or even money. A VHP activist of Keshav Nagar confirmed this and said that the party tried its best to help the needy by arranging for assistance in cash and kind.

An important outcome of the RSS's relief effort was that it helped in the recruitment of new members. Interviews in Kutch revealed that many were inspired by the work of the "men in khakhi shorts" who had been the first to provide assistance after the disaster. According to a young man from Ratnal village, in Anjar block:³⁷

RSS has always had a strong presence in our village. Young boys of our village would often participate in the weekly *śākhās*. Somehow I always stayed away from *śākhā* activities.... On the day of the earthquake, the local RSS leader in our village organized us into groups of five; we together rescued about 50 people who were trapped under rubble, transported them to a nearby medical clinic, and even cremated the bodies of those who were dead. Our village lost around 160 people that day. All the houses were damaged. Some 8–10 people died in my arms alone.... I was very impressed by the work of the Sangh that day. Since then, I have become an active member.

RSS relief efforts helped build a new cadre of *svayamsevak*s who, out of gratitude or respect, sought to be inducted into the organization. According to Sangh activists this was an incidental outcome of their good work and not a result of *a priori* planning. They admitted however that the *śākhā* activities of the organization spiked immediately after the earthquake, and that this momentum was sustained only in those villages that were reconstructed by the Sangh Parivar.

RSS members continue to organize regular *śākhā* activities in the villages. This is also a primary mechanism of recruiting new members into the Sangh. According to an RSS activist, the process of strengthening a Hindu *saṅgathan* is a time-consuming exercise.³⁸ Boys as young as eight years old are encouraged to attend the *śākhā*, which is usually conducted every Sunday in an open field. These boys are provided with physical training and introduced to nationalist discourses through songs, prayers, and games. Instead of any direct reference to religion, the emphasis is on protecting the *hindū rāṣṭra* from the enemies. They are advised to lead a moral life and abstain from alcohol, womanizing, and other activities the RSS regards as immoral. *Svayamsevak*s are also involved in *sevā* activities such as organizing blood donation camps, cleaning *gośālās*, or organizing community feasts during Hindu festivals. These activities help build feelings of solidarity and fraternity amongst the group. Regular attendees are encouraged to bring in their friends and siblings. While attendance fluctuates depending on agricultural and educational activities, for many families attending the *śākhā* has become a part of their daily lives and the

śākhā serves as a community space for people to meet and interact. Once a *śākhā* stabilizes over a period of time, the RSS attempts to create a larger *saṅgh maṇḍalī* (Sangh group) that may cut across villages. These *maṇḍalīs* serve as discussion platforms where members organize meetings around topical issues that concern national security and patriotism. Members displaying dedicated interest and leadership qualities in *maṇḍalīs* and *śākhās* are groomed for further leadership in the Sangh through attending RSS camps. These members are intended to be the torchbearers (*mārgdarśak*) of Hindutva ideology.

Given its proximity to Pakistan—frequently described by the Hindu Right as the “enemy state”—one of the primary agendas of the Sangh in Kutch is border security. The Seema Jankalyan Samiti (Border Welfare Committee), which was started in Kutch after the earthquake by an RSS *svayamsevak* from Rajasthan, is a key actor in the mobilization and militarization of the border communities. This is done through a series of educational and cultural activities which effectively balkanize Hindu and Muslim communities in the region. A senior journalist from Bhuj, on condition of anonymity, revealed in an interview that since the pre-earthquake days, the Dalits who resided in border villages had served as informers to the police and the Border Security Force (BSF) if they encountered suspicious activities. The Muslims residing in these villages allegedly did not favor this and would thus harass the Hindus by forcing them to adopt Islamic customs and culture. The intervention of some Muslim NGOs in this area after the earthquake apparently led to greater consolidation of the Muslims. Activists from Sewa Bharati therefore stepped in to salvage the Hindus and started various *sevā* projects in this region. An RSS leader mentions the following:

The Muslims used to disturb the Hindu Dalits there as they are a minority, by interrupting their weddings, teasing girls, leaving their cattle to graze in Hindu farm lands.... Many Hindus had started leaving that place after their houses were destroyed in the earthquake. We (RSS) then went there and reassured the Hindus that we were on their side. We assured them of our support and convinced them to stay there as it is important from a security point of view.³⁹

Apart from sporadic activities such as installing some water tanks, providing rations, installing tarpaulin as roof coverings during monsoons, buying utensils for young couples during their weddings, organizing medical camps, and so on, the Sangh has also started longer-term projects for the Hindu Dalits in collaboration with the Seema Jankalyan Samiti. These include various ritual practices⁴⁰ and educational initiatives, with the latter involving attempts to inculcate patriotism in the hope that students will become part of a paramilitary reserve force that can be activated in a crisis. Through these initiatives the Sangh seeks to heighten Hindu consciousness amongst the lower castes and also consolidate opposition to the enemy state. Because this state is closely aligned in the popular imagination with Islam, border security practices tend to readily conflate the identity of Muslims residing near the borders with opposition to Pakistan.

The Sangh’s rhetorical attack on Muslim Pakistan is part of a broader patriotic project aimed at restoring the glory of an idealized Vedic Golden Age of the Indian

state. To help achieve this vision the BJP political machine has fiercely contested state and parliamentary elections. Hindu residents of the reconstructed villages, with only a few exceptions in Lodai, stated that they consistently voted for the BJP even before the earthquake rehabilitation. While the Sangh's active role in relief and reconstruction did not create this loyalty, it did help deepen it. An important reason for this is the non-distinction in their minds between the BJP, VHP, and Sewa Bharati. Appreciation for the reconstruction work thereby fed into the BJP's political project. As a young man of Atal Nagar said: "The party has built this village for us and has always helped us in need. We therefore unanimously vote for the BJP."⁴¹

An important political shift that occurred after the earthquake was that the new villages voluntarily adopted the *samras* (absorbed, common interest) scheme. Introduced in 2001 by the state government, the *samras* scheme is a system of political representation whereby a *sarpanč* is chosen through mutual agreement without an election process.⁴² The scheme has been fiercely criticized as a move to destroy grassroots-level democracy. The ruling BJP government defends it on the grounds of encouraging harmony. The system has obvious benefits for the majority community groups and similarly further marginalizes minority groups. It should not be seen as coincidental that all three villages adopted this scheme soon after the earthquake relief in which the BJP was prominent, both directly and through association.

COMPETING MOBILIZATIONS?

While the above account may seem to suggest that the Hindu Right has successfully hegemonized their ideology, there are also signs of competing mobilizations initiated through contact with other relief and reconstruction agencies, as well as with ongoing commercial and industrial actors. A resident of Mitha Pasvaria⁴³ from the Scheduled Caste community said that his brief association with Action Aid (an NGO) as a volunteer for their Right to Food and Justice Programme during the earthquake relief phase inspired him to build awareness in his community and to negotiate with the *grām sabhā* for their rights. The efforts of this young man and a couple of his friends forced the *grām sabhā* to take cognizance of the Dalit community's perspectives on village issues. This example provides a classic illustration of one of the biggest challenges to the RSS ideology: the assertion of the lower castes whose culture is far removed from the Great Tradition of Brahminical Hinduism that the RSS seeks to instill in them. Recent Dalit movements have defied the need for Sanskritization and argue instead that the untouchables should stand on their own and eradicate the caste system (JAFFRELOT 2008). In Atal Nagar, which only has a small Muslim population, a newly arrived *maulāna* (Islamic teacher) has also sought to mobilize the Muslim community through evening lessons on the Qu'ran. His presence stirred considerable local controversy, and when asked for an interview he was extremely circumspect, noting only that he was merely visiting a family friend and, in his spare time, helping provide guidance to young Muslims. The limited impact and precarious nature of these com-

peting mobilizations should be seen as evidence of the increased power of the Sangh Parivar in the region since the 2001 disaster.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have demonstrated that the Hindu nationalist movement's phenomenal success in Indian politics can be partly explained through its service programs (*sevā*), which are operated through an array of RSS-affiliated organizations. I illustrated my argument by examining the processes of relief and rehabilitation undertaken by the Sangh Parivar following the 2001 Bhuj earthquake. The extensive relief work carried out by the RSS *svayamsevaks*, in contrast to inefficient state machinery, generated goodwill and accolades for the organization. It also provided an opportunity for the Sangh to establish and strengthen its contact with beneficiaries, civil society agencies, donors, Indian diaspora communities, and the media. The Sangh Parivar strategically used this opportunity to position itself as a humanitarian actor and downplay its image as a divisive communal agitator.

Rather than a radical disruption to pre-earthquake patterns, the disaster, and the relief and reconstruction operation that ensued, resulted in developments that, while consequential, were not in themselves novel, as they mapped onto social patterns that had been emerging since well before the disaster. The majority of Hindus residing in the three villages examined in this article had long been sympathetic toward the RSS and Hindutva ideology. The disaster operations nevertheless provided opportunities to further deepen and broaden their support of the movement. One of the outcomes of the increasing salience of Hindu nationalism, coupled with issues stemming from the design and implementation of housing reconstruction, was that communal divisions became further entrenched. Of particular importance was the relationship between Hindus and Muslims which became increasingly fraught after the disaster. In this sense, the work of the Sangh Parivar after the earthquake can rightly be regarded as a form of insidious aid.

In the aftermath of the disaster, the RSS not only bypassed the state but also complemented it. The use of public-private partnerships during reconstruction blurred the distinction between the Sangh and the state. Further, because the BJP was the state government at the time, the distinction between the Sangh and the state certainly did not conform to simplistic secular-versus-religious framings.⁴⁴ Examining the case of Kutch forces reflection on the extent to which analysts understand relationships between grassroots-level civic organizations, national-level voluntary associations, diasporic networks, and state agencies in the case of contemporary India and the political, social, religious, and humanitarian ramifications of these ambiguities. The ambiguities are yet further multiplied when it is recalled that the Sangh Parivar formally downplays its identification with "religion," preferring to regard itself as engaged in "cultural" and patriotic activities to promote their vision of Hindutva.

The role of the Sangh Parivar in the Bhuj disaster points to an important feature of large religious/cultural organizations in disaster situations: grassroots-level

informal networks which operate through civil society are powerful actors in providing humanitarian aid. While the relief and rehabilitation work of the Sangh was characterized by a definite political agenda, one cannot overlook the caring or compassionate side (DAVIS and ROBINSON 2012) of the movement, which was demonstrated through the organization's deep involvement with the local communities' immediate needs soon after the earthquake. Many residents in the communities themselves regarded the work of the RSS as both effective and efficient. RSS volunteers undertook rescue and relief operations before even that of the formal state. Long after the period of reconstruction was over, members of the Sangh continued to maintain a cordial relationship with the communities. For many of the villagers, the Sangh acts as a conduit between the village and the government and even as a sounding board for deciding on important social issues.

By attending to this compassionate side of the Sangh Parivar, and by acknowledging not only the effectiveness of their disaster relief work but also the groundswell of appreciation that this generated within Hindu communities in Kutch, my purpose was not to rehabilitate the image of the Hindu Right in contemporary scholarship. Rather, I have sought to highlight under-analyzed aspects of the moral and religious complexity of evaluating the role of the RSS' humanitarian work in the aftermath of the Gujarat earthquake. Despite the richness of his ethnographic description and the sophistication of his analysis, SIMPSON'S (2014) recent political biography of the Gujarat earthquake remains deeply skeptical of the possibility of any compassionate contributions amidst the diverse relief and humanitarian efforts of Hindutva activists. A greater openness to such possibilities and the appreciation of the humanitarian contributions of such actors, however politically distasteful, is nonetheless important for developing our understandings of the work of diverse religious/cultural actors in disaster relief and reconstruction.

NOTES

1. The RSS and its affiliates are collectively referred to as the *sangh parivār*, meaning the "family of Sangh."

2. All figures are taken from Rashtriya Sewa Bharati's *Annual Bulletin* dated 11 April 2013 and therefore need to be approached with a certain degree of skepticism as these may be significantly embellished for the sake of organizational publicity.

3. My argument builds upon Tariq THACHIL'S (2011) recent work on the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram in Chhattisgarh. Thachil shows that the provision of *sevā* works as an electoral tactic that helps Hindutva to make inroads among lower-caste voters in Chhattisgarh. However, he argues, far from being just another form of clientelism, the provision of service works as a strategy revolving around quotidian social interactions that help to win political support through a depoliticized framework.

4. The caste system in India, which is based on the ancient *varṇa* system, is a process of social stratification which divides the Hindu community into four mutually exclusive, hereditary, and occupation specific groups: Brahmins (priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders, money lenders), and Shudras (manual workers).

5. On the importance of such continuity, see HOFFMAN (1999); HOFFMAN and OLIVER-SMITH (1999); and HENRY (2011).

6. This is the erstwhile Hindu custom of burning a widowed woman alive on her dead husband's pyre.

7. This is the Hindu festival celebrating the birthday of the elephant-headed Lord Ganapati or Ganesh.

8. The term refers to a purification ritual. The Arya Samaj adopted it as a technique to reconvert those Hindus who had converted to Christianity or Islam.

9. Ram Navami is a Hindu festival that is celebrated to mark the birth of Lord Ram.

10. BASU et al. (1993) have argued that British Indian police and army uniforms inspired the ones adopted by the RSS.

11. *Śākhā* literally means "branch." It is the lowest unit in the organizational hierarchy of the RSS. Its primary function is to orient the *svayamsevaks* to the ideology of Hindutva through physical training, games, songs, and lectures.

12. The *navnirmāṇ* movement was a student-led protest against rising prices and political corruption which garnered high levels of participation from civil society.

13. For a detailed analysis see Ashish NANDY et. al (1995, 104).

14. For several years, Ayodhya, a city located in the state of Uttar Pradesh in India, has been the site of a religio-political conflict in India which revolves around access to a site traditionally regarded as the birthplace of the Hindu God Ram on which the Babri Mosque is said to have been built by the Mughal Emperor Babur after demolishing a Hindu temple which had stood there. In 1984, the VHP launched the Ram Janambhoomi (birthplace) movement in order to "reclaim" this site. The movement eventually led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 by Hindutva activists.

15. In less than a week following the disaster the Gujarat Government had received US\$105 million, of which US\$81 million was from the National Calamity Compensation Fund, US\$18 million from the Prime Minister's Relief Fund, and US\$6 million from the Chief Minister's Relief Fund (LAHIRI et al. 2001).

16. Interview with Ajay Singh, Sewa Bharati activist, Bhuj, October 2012. The names of all interview respondents have been changed to pseudonyms in order to protect their identity.

17. Interview over email and telephone with Mohan Patel, Karyalaya Pramukh, Sewa Bharati, Ahmedabad, September 2012.

18. Several studies in recent times have highlighted the strong support base of the Sangh Parivar amongst the Indian diaspora. See for example SHUKLA (2001); CHATURVEDI (2005); and KATJU (2005).

19. Interview with Manoj Chauhan, Senior Editor of the local newspaper *Kutch Mitra*, Bhuj, 13 September 2012.

20. After the Pakistan earthquake in 2005, for instance, the local extremist groups such as Lashkar-e-Toiba/Jamat-ut-Dawa, Al Khair Trust, Al Khidmat Foundation, Al Rasheed Trust, and the Al Safa Trust were among the first to respond to the humanitarian need of the affected people, long before the government was able to provide relief assistance (REALE 2010).

21. Interview with Kunal Joshi, Bhuj, September 2012.

22. For a criticism of the IDRF report see NUSSBAUM (2008, 306–14).

23. The data for this section are largely drawn from interviews conducted with several community members, *svayamsevaks*, VHP activists, village elders, and leaders and personal observations in the three villages under study.

24. The Ahir identify themselves as herdsmen of Lord Krishna and claim Mathura and its neighborhood as their original habitat. They believe that they came to Gujarat from Mathura with Lord Krishna.

25. The term “Other Backward Class” (OBC) is an official classification used by the Government of India to denote castes that are educationally but socially disadvantaged.

26. The term “Dalit,” which literally means “grounded” or “oppressed,” is used interchangeably with the term “Scheduled Castes” and is used to define all historically discriminated communities of India who were considered “untouchables” for being below the line of ritual purity as they lay outside the traditional *varṇa* system.

27. Similar dynamics were at work for those villages adopted by non-Sangh agencies. Jawaharnagar (originally called Juran and renamed after ex-Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru) was rebuilt by the Congress Party as the village has traditionally been a Congress stronghold. Organizations such as Caritas worked collaboratively with Kutch Vikas Trust (both Christian NGOs) in Raidhanpar, where the latter had been working for several years.

28. This is a Hindu ritual conducted before initiating new construction projects to seek the blessings of Goddess Earth to ward off obstacles.

29. The reference to the massacre of cows should be understood in the context of persistent efforts by the Hindu Right to politicize cow protection and to ban cow slaughter in India. Sudarshan’s speech was reported in RSS Sar Sanghchalak’s visit in Gujarat. See Press Note, 17 April 2001. Available at <http://hvk.org/archive/2001/0401/105.html> (accessed 8 August 2012).

30. The classification was as follows: a 100 sq. ft. (30.48 sq. m.) plot for individuals possessing no land; a 250 sq. ft. (76.2 sq. m.) plot for individuals possessing 3–4 acres of land; a 400 sq. ft. (121.92 sq. m.) plot for individuals possessing more than 5 acres of land.

31. Interview with residents of Mitha Pasvaria village, Anjar Block, September 2012.

32. Cases in point include Jawaharnagar, adopted by the Congress Party, and Raidhanpar, adopted by KVT and Caritas.

33. Interview with Mohammed Amir, resident of Atal Nagar, Bhuj Block, September 2012.

34. Interview with Eklavya Kumar, resident of Mitha Pasavaria, October 2012.

35. Interview with Hetal Ben, resident of Atal Nagar, September 2012.

36. Janmashtami is a Hindu festival that celebrates the birth of Lord Krishna. Diwali is the festival of lights which commemorates the return of the Hindu God Ram, his wife Sita, and his brother Lakshmana from a fourteen-year exile, as told in the *Ramayana*, an ancient Hindu epic. Holi is the festival of colors celebrated in spring.

37. Interview with Swaraj *bhāī*, *svayamsevak*, Ratnal, September 2012.

38. Interview with Ishaan *bhāī*, Sewa Bharati activist, Ratnal, October 2012.

39. Interview with Ishwar *bhāī*, Sewa Bharati activist, Bhuj, September 2012.

40. For example, *rakṣā bandhan* is a Hindu festival during which traditionally a sister ties a *rākhī* (sacred thread) on the wrist of her brother as a mark of her affection which is then reciprocated by the brother taking a vow to protect his sister. Seema Janakalyan Samiti has reinterpreted this ritual by organizing a ceremony whereby women in the villages tie *rākhīs* on BSF personnel as a mark of sisterly affection and gratitude for protecting the nation and to reassure the BSF that “they are not alone.”

41. Interview with Gokul *bhāī*, resident of Atal Nagar, September 2012.

42. Under the scheme the state government provides financial incentives for villages to appoint all-women *pañcāyats* (BHAN 2012).

43. Interview with Kunal Joshi, resident of Mitha Pasavaria, October 2012.

44. Recent studies have shown that the secular and the religious can no longer be treated as binaries, and that they are in fact enmeshed, mingled, and mutually constitute one another (BARNETT and STEIN 2012). It is crucial to remember that relief work carried out by the state is not necessarily devoid of political or religious dynamics.

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