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# Victimhood and Hindutva Ideology

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in India

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## Abstract

Collective memory and victimhood as mobilisation tools for group identification have been garnering interest within studies of nationalism. Applying this to the context of religious national ideology, this paper aims to examine victimhood in the discourses of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in India, and how it is manufactured towards Hindutva or Hindu nationalism. A discourse-historical approach to document analysis of vision statements and speeches by members of the RSS has been conducted using a post-structuralist lens to International Relations. Hindu society and India, as the key objects of victimhood, have been argued to be threatened by an elite, religious others and India's colonial past. These have been linked to an emotional appeal to convince Hindu society particularly of its integrity to Indian national identity and links the victimhood of the nation to the victimhood of its people. It has further been analysed how this appeal is driven towards a religious nationalist argument basing Hindutva at the core of Indian society through a reawakening of Hindu society itself.

**Key words:** *Hindutva, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Victimhood, Discourse-Historical Approach, Post-structuralism, Religious Nationalism*



## Introduction

The vastly diverse ethnic, religious and linguistic backdrop of India has made it a perplexing case study in nationalism and nation-building, often defaulting to primordial explanations of inherent differences resulting from its diversity (Jaffrelot, 2013, p. 495). Language, region and tribe are integral to the diversity of Indian identity. When combined with the wide spectrum of faiths, this means that religion has often been a source of segregation and conflict. Different regions and sub-zones complicate the emergence of a unified identity due to the myriad of linguistic and cultural differences (Xaxa, 2016, p. 223). The independence struggle of the 1900s particularly saw a movement where national sentiments clashed with regional sentiments of aspirations for linguistic and cultural communities to fill the void of a unified national identity (Xaxa, 2016, p. 225). This led to the growth of a nationalism based on Hindu identity, perpetuated primarily by the organisation Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) under the name of Hindutva (Andersen & Damle, 1987, p. 72).

The paramilitary organisation RSS promotes India as a “Hindu nation”, through the political ideology of Hindutva – defining the cultural identity of India through Hindu identity. For the founder, Hedgewar, a fundamental change in social attitudes in the state was necessary for a revived India, a change that would be made possible by a cadre of nationalists. A system of myths, rites and symbols are used to fuse the individual’s identity to that of the larger Hindu community. The political character of Hindu nationalism derived heavily from preparation for salvation, much like European millennial movements. This organisation has formed the ideological institutional core of the Hindu nationalist movement since 1925, and has since operated on a country-wide scale (Tiwari, 1987, p. 79).

The organisation originates from the background of communal violence between the Hindu and Muslim community in the region of Nagpur. This formed the basis for their argument that Hindu communities needed to develop a more confrontational stance (Andersen & Damle, 1987, p. 72). It has often been studied how Hindu

nationalists in India view Muslims as their victimisers, despite always being a majority in the country, through the memory of being a subject to cultural subordination and oppression by ‘Muslim invaders’. Collective victimhood along with ingroup identity and emotions led to Hindu reactions in conflict situations to tend towards revenge rather than reconciliation (Tripathi et al., 2019, p. 32). A very large part of the history of the subcontinent has been characterised by invasions by Muslim rulers, subjecting Hindu populations to cultural and administrative subjugation. The destruction of temples and looting of temple wealth during medieval times is cemented as an experience of humiliation (Tripathi et al., 2019, p. 33).

The divide between the communities further deepened with British rule, as the empire pronounced ruptures in order to suppress resistance from either group (Tripathi et al., 2019, p. 33). For many historians, the ‘Muslim other’ came to be created during this period and the partition which was infamously characterised by communal violence (Tripathi et al., 2019, p. 34). Historical memories of past events feed into the emotions of the collective and thus create a victimhood of the community as a whole for the Hindus in India. These historical memories have been portrayed to thus consolidate identities and develop the image of the ‘rival group’ as the other (Tripathi et al., 2019, p. 35). Historical narratives have been linked to identity narratives as unpleasant memories of victimisation are used for celebratory purposes, like in the case of memorials, where ingroup solidarity is strengthened through the recollection of past sufferings (Tripathi et al., 2019, p. 36). Victimhood and its ideological manifestations outside of populism studies have been relatively under-studied, especially within the empirical case of Hindu nationalism.

While collective victimhood has been explored extensively within populist contexts of right-wing parties and as a constructive concept (Jacoby, 2015, p. 2), the purposeful manipulation of victimhood within ideology has been underdeveloped, despite victimhood featuring as a strong device within right-wing nationalist ideologies (Jacoby, 2015, p. 2). Thus, this paper attempts to investigate how the invocation of victimhood



is used to justify a particular representation of national identity through an empirical focus on the RSS in India, lending itself to the research question: *How is victimhood employed by the RSS to promote Hindutva ideology?*

The RSS in particular has been chosen as the subject of analysis as it forms the ideological core of the Hindu nationalist movement in contemporary India. Anti-colonial nationalism, as is evident in the case of the RSS, uses the logic of past injury along the lines of past victimhood and oppression that drives the aim for re-empowerment and future glory (Al-Ghazzi, 2021). As an ethno-religious nationalist group, it is the centre of the group of organisations and parties titled the ‘Sangh Parivar (Family)’. Included in this family are the RSS, the Bajrang Dal, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Guelke, 2021, p. 1). The BJP and its leader Narendra Modi have remained in power for over a decade, continuing on the path of the ‘Hinduisation’ of the country. Aligning itself ideologically with Hindutva, the BJP’s populism has been argued to target the minority more than the elite, thus garnering the support of the elites and the Hindu oppressive castes. Through Modi’s rule, Hindu nationalism as an ideology has become deeply ingrained in Indian society, and while the analysis of the political wing could be used in exploring populist narratives, the ideological basis for their actions, as found in the RSS, have been chosen as they can offer a socio-cultural examination of the phenomenon (Guelke, 2021, p. 2).

## Literature Review

Within the post-structuralist tradition, national identity forms the basis of nationalism, and the ‘us’ in the discourse surrounding victimhood (Armstrong & Tennenhouse, 1993, p. 51). When viewing discourse as a specific series of representations and practices that produce meanings, identities and social relations, language and its usage becomes integral to understanding key social processes (Campbell & Bleiker, 2016). Otherness, or what one is not, becomes key to defining oneself, based on identity narratives that draw

from history to treat individuals as characters in a plot (Inac & Unal, 2013, p. 223). The pitting of ‘us’ against ‘them’ acts in these cases as a powerful mechanism of social and political cohesion, group identification and solidarity (Berezin, 2021, p. 239).

On the link between a lack of a ‘national identity’ and this perceived gap that Hindutva attempts to fill with its ideology, Varshney (1993, p. 227) has argued that Hindu nationalism has been reactionary to secessionist nationalism in Kashmir and Punjab, and secular nationalism. The vacuum created by the lack of a singular ‘Indian identity’ has intensified competition between nationalist projects. To Hindu nationalists, Hinduism is the source of India’s identity, a Hindu being described by India as one’s territorial homeland and also “holy land” (Varshney, 1993, p. 231). Building a “united” India, one that is Hindu, where those following other religions are assimilated is thus the key mission of nationalism on religious lines in the country (Varshney, 1993, p. 231). Thus, viewed as a project of fusing faith and religion into a unified whole with modern political ideology, the nation is configured as an object of worship.

In historical victimhood, the aforementioned frames of ‘us’ and ‘them’ get projected into meta-historical narratives based on temporal logic that contain “evidence” of contemporary self-victimisation. This allows the implementers of such narratives to proclaim the existence of a golden age and a past that has been snatched, thus arguing for a brighter future where the victim or the historical underdog will prevail (Al-Ghazzi, 2021). In postcolonial contexts, the narrative of overcoming national victimhood at the hands of a coloniser is at the centre of historiography, a formulation that has been adopted by nationalist groups to legitimise their actions.

Within this understanding of nationalism and the logic of perceived victimhood, memory politics can be viewed as a site of meaning-production. There exists here an implicit ideological component, i.e. the production of a pre-existent national identity. Collective memory and the act of remembrance itself are contingent upon the dynamics of the group one is a member of, and their subsequent interactions determine the



ways one constructs meaning in historical events (Malinova, 2021). Thus, sites of memories can be created, where memories are ‘crystallised’ and ‘transmitted’ from one generation to the next. The incorporation of a primordialist site of memory into nationalist discourse establishes a space to create patriotic resonance. Other than building a sense of community, these can also mark the site of collective trauma. The use of victimhood narratives has been particularly marked in populist contexts, as a way of invoking history to make self-victimising claims. By arguing that the object was wronged, targeted and injured by a wide array of actors, one seeks to regain social or political power (Malinova, 2021).

The political exploitation of historical injustice has been researched in populist movements in Central and Eastern Europe. However, according to Meijen and Vermeersch (2023, pp. 933-934), the precise discursive and narrative interactions between memory politics and victimhood, especially the logics used to bring the past into the frame of the present to then exploit it by bringing groups together, have not been extensively researched. They have researched the construction of the underdog position, by populist movements in Hungary and Poland, and how they have performed victimhood (Meijen & Vermeersch, 2023, p. 941). Thus, they have argued that victimhood is not only used by populists, but also performed, thus allowing it to be stretched and maintain the illusion of representing the underdog. It has been argued that this performance is not concerned with the actual victims or even real historical trauma, rather that it is a simplified retelling of it. If culpable agents are found, policies and ideologies can be legitimised to neglect the real underdogs and continue to claim their own ‘inferiority’ and ‘suppression’ (Meijen & Vermeersch, 2023, p. 947).

Group identification has often been studied as a way to reduce self-uncertainty, derived from membership in a social group or category. Thus societal changes that present the opportunity to a shared victimhood of those threatened by creating outgroup oppressors are contemporary methods of using victimhood narratives to foster nationalist sentiments (Rovamo & Sakki, 2023, p. 495). Arousing shared grievances allows the differ-

entiation of a virtuous people from the egregious others, typically leftist urban elite, immigrants or other minorities. Combining historical victimhood with metaphorical borders, body politics to construct national uniqueness and homogeneity is a common facet studied (Rovamo & Sakki, 2023, p. 495).

Within the context of India, Sundar (2024), examines the trend of the dominant Hindu majority perceiving victimhood by the minority, and the systematic hurdles that are placed upon the minority under the facet of ‘reparations’ or ‘justice’. However, the specific narratives discussed are related more directly to reparations than victimhood. As discussed in the problem formulation, it has been studied that psychologically, Hindu communities in India possess negative emotions towards Muslims in particular, due to a collective sentiment of victimhood and fraternalistic relative deprivation (Tripathi et al., 2019, p. 32). Hindutva particularly seeks to maintain religious and cultural norms against colonial onslaught by requiring absolute faith in one’s own virtuous culture and the inferiority of the ‘other’. Thus, Indian political nationalism has always been tied to matters of cultural preservation. Through such a presentation, it has been argued that the narrative process of Hindutva succeeded in a manipulation of common sense to equate the Indian nation to Hinduism (Sarkar, 2020, p. 219). This paper shall attempt to understand how these negative emotions have been mobilised towards a populist victimhood narrative that demands a specific vision of nationalism where Hinduism forms the basis for Indian identity and nationalism.

Power and victimisation are often embedded within normative frameworks that have been dismantled by feminist and postcolonial scholars, identifying victimisation in dominant power structures in the international order. Similarly, there has been a movement within academia to mitigate the framing of subaltern identities through their past of oppression to maintain the agency of their voices (Jacoby, 2015, p. 516). This paper conceptualises the ‘victim’ as an idea that takes on the characteristics of its underlying political context, and thus while it represents real people and experiences, it can be moulded to represent



ethical and political goals, as in the case of the Hindu nationalist movement in India (Jacoby, 2015, p. 517). Postcolonial Nationalism, as proposed by Zhang (2023), has been discussed as a form of political activity by right-wing actors, in this case the Hindutva movement in India, to legitimize their authoritarian, conservative and ethnonationalist projects. This conceptualisation forms the basis to the paper, exploring the production, consumption and mobilisation of narratives that base national identity on victimhood or subalternity (Zhang, 2023, p.2). Indian political nationalism has always been tied to matters of cultural preservation.

Religious Nationalism itself, the issue at the core of this paper, has been widely researched anthropologically, particularly in the Global South where the ideological claims tied with religion have been widely explored (van der Veer, 2013, p. 662). This originates from the linkage of indigenous identity with religion, as in the case of Hinduism in India and Buddhism in Sri Lanka, often leading to communalism and segregation (van der Veer, 2013, p. 662). This argument particularly requires revisiting when considering the growth of Hindu nationalist movements that have diverged into the sect that views Hinduism as a tolerant civilisation at the base of a secular state, and those that view it as a national religion (van der Veer, 2013, p. 665).

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

#### *Case Design and Case Selection*

Considering Hindu nationalism or Hindutva as the topic at hand, the research paper focuses on the case study of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). This case has been chosen in particular, as motivated in the introduction, because this organisation is the ideological parent to the current right-wing Hindu nationalist party of India, the Bharatiya Janata Party. As the research study focuses particularly on Hindutva as a political ideology, the RSS presents a representative case, as it exemplifies and concentrates the phenomena of the political ideology

which is present socially and culturally in politics, academia and everyday life (Andersen & Damle, 1987). The organisation being the historical root of this ideology as it is called and propagated today, makes it the ideal case study to examine how it has been shaped and moulded by victimhood towards the mobilisation of its followers. The case study shall be critically analysed intensively using the aforementioned Discourse Historical Approach through the theoretical lens of post-structuralism.

The transferability of the results is based upon similarity. The pattern of events and the postcolonial context is important to the understanding of Hindutva, and must be factored into any other case that is observed using the results. The pattern of postcolonialism as a stable feature of the world, must be applicable to other contexts where the analysis is applied. The previous research on this topic draws from multiple fields and case studies, however, the underlying commonality is in the frames and discourses that shape victimhood as a facet to use in argumentation (Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2009). Hindutva, as the second phenomenon being studied, has little impact outside the context of South Asia and South Asian diaspora, and thus cannot be extensively generalised towards other manifestations of religious nationalism, beyond basic arguments on the 'other'. Thus, while the case can be generalised towards a study of victimhood, its contextual basis in Hindutva makes the specific arguments more difficult to apply to cases beyond this case. There is, however, an intrinsic interest in the perpetuation of the applications of general victimhood theory and research towards a specific case of national relevance (Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2009).

#### *Sampling*

Purposive sampling of documents has been implemented in this paper, with the researcher strategically finding articles written by the key group of interest, the RSS, through their official archives (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). The goal of this method of sampling is to choose sources most likely to give a direct answer to the research ques-



tion. Done primarily through a scan of the official website of the organisation: RSS.org. The official website has been chosen as it is a representation of the views of the organisation, as any data published there has been reviewed by the public relations team. Articles, speech transcripts, books and statements by higher-ranking members of the organisation within the last 3 years have been scanned, and the selection procedure was based on the relevance of the title towards nationalism. This time-frame has been chosen in order to counterbalance the relatively old vision statement that makes the first source. Titles and content that have been judged to contain central themes of nationalism and national identity through a scan by the author have been chosen for texts. Key words that have been scanned for within the speeches were “invader”, “colonialism”, “destruction”, “oppression”, “reawakening”, “nationalism”, “national identity”, “patriotism”, “threat”, “revival” and synonyms of these words. These were based on the insights from the previous research and theoretical lens, as likely to portray victimhood frames towards nationalism. It has been acknowledged that not all the sources will cover victimhood equally, or in depth, and thus a wider net has been cast with regards to the length and quantity of data. Considering purposive sampling was used, a sample size of five documents, collectively resulting in over 40 pages of data were deemed adequate for the analysis (Bryman, 2012).

### *Data Collection*

Two primary sets of sources have been selected for the analysis. The first is the vision and mission statement as available on the official website of the RSS. The value of this source is that it contains lengthy, highly descriptive content that highlights the RSS’s perception of itself and its goal regarding Hindutva. The inherent persuasive nature as the first introduction to the group means that the organisation’s arguments can be discerned clearly. The second set of sources are a compilation of five speeches, two by Mohan

Bhagwat, the current chief of the group, and two by Dattatreya Hosable, the current general secretary. The value of using this source is that it contains statements by higher ranked officials of the organisation, thus based upon a valid assumption that the views presented represent that of the organisation and not an individual. Their claims hold value as they can be used to generalise the leadership’s construction of nationalism. The RSS being an organisation cannot be used as a source itself, and thus as the source of the study, the views and statements of its leadership are the best way to obtain information on the organisation.

### **Analytical Framework**

#### *Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity*

With the understanding that texts are linked to other texts, the individual pieces of data shall not be analysed separately, but rather with their connections to each other in the past and present. This has been established through their explicit references to similar topics, events or actors, allusions of a similar argument or in this case, the red thread of nationalist discourses. The link that shall be explored within the texts in particular, is the manipulation of victimhood and how it features and manifests across the texts. With the consideration of interdiscursivity, victimhood frames can appear across discourses, while victimhood itself can be discourse (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017, p. 90).

As an approach, the Discourse-Historical Approach is three-dimensional by 1) identifying the *specific contents or topics* of a specific discourse, 2) investigating the *discursive strategies* and lastly 3) examining the *linguistic means and realisations* (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017, p. 93). In order to do this, the research has been oriented towards five questions as prescribed by Reisigl and Wodak (2017, p. 94) to conduct a Discourse-Historical Approach.

1) How are persons, objects, phenomena/events, processes and actions named and referred to linguistically?



Table 1: Data Collection

Source Name	Nature
Vision Statement and Mission (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015).	Summarises the perceptions, aims and the mission of the RSS regarding nationhood and Indian identity.
Speech by Dattareya Hosabale (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2022)	Transcript of a speech by the general secretary of the RSS, given under the context of the 75th year of Indian independence. Valuable particularly in portraying the RSS's perceptions of the events surrounding Indian identity and independence.
Speech by Mohan Bhagwat (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2023)	This speech was given on the key Hindu religious holiday, Vijayadashami, and has been chosen as it touches heavily upon the controversy surrounding the building of the Ram temple in Ayhodhya.
Speech by Mohan Bhagwat (Bhagwat, 2024)	A speech given under the context of the inauguration of a controversial temple worshipping the deity Ram in Ayodhya.
Speech by Dattareya Hosabale (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2025)	This speech, given at the 100th year anniversary of the RSS, provides insight into the organisation's views on "Indianness".

2) What characteristics, qualities, and features are attributed to social actors, objects, phenomena/events and processes?

3) What arguments are employed in the discourse in question?

4) From what perspective are these nominations, attributions and arguments expressed?

5) Are the respective utterances articulated overtly, are they intensified or mitigated?

In order to specifically answer the research question, the operationalisation of narratives of victimhood has been drawn from the Theory and Previous Research section, by centering the Discourse-Historical Approach on the topic at hand. The five questions within the approach are positioned with the idea of how the past is recalled in a way that victimises the 'Hindu' or India as described by the RSS, to mobilise a target or gestate Hindu nationalism, through its usage of victimhood language and through a critical examination of the discursive strategies. This includes, but is not limited to, devices of membership categorisation, tropes such as metaphors, and stereotypical or evaluative attributions. Comparisons of and evocation of a memory of grievance or current suffering through fallacies, diminutives, tag questions, subjunctives, hesitations, vague expressions and hyperboles shall be analysed expressly (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017, p. 96).

Within the analysis, the questions fulfil individual purposes that shall lead towards an answer

to the research question. The analysis shall be structured in the order of Question 1, followed by Question 2, Question 5 and Question 3 respectively. A choice has been made to not include Question 4 from Reisigl and Wodak's original approach: *From what perspective are these nominations, attributions and arguments expressed?* (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017, p. 96) within the analysis. This decision was made as the perspective of the speaker — the RSS — has been extensively discussed already within the problem formulation, but also shall be integral to the answer to Question 2, where the position of the RSS with regards to nationalism shall be addressed. The purpose of question one is to look at the discursive construction of the social actors that are later attributed with victimhood. This shall be done by analysing what general characteristics are given to particularly India and Hinduism/Hindu society, as based on assumptions from the previous research, they are the object of religious nationalism. The questions have thus been modified and re-ordered towards the following result:

1) How are Hindu society and India named and referred to linguistically?

2) What characteristics, qualities, and features of victimhood are attributed to the aforementioned entities?

3) Is victimhood articulated overtly, is it intensified or mitigated?

4) What arguments are employed in the vic-



timhood discourse?

Question 1 shall be used to explore the general construction of Hindu society and India, as the key objects of religious nationalism. Through question 2 particular attributes of victimhood shall be explored through the discursive characterisation of social actors, objects, phenomena, event processes and actions. More concretely, this question shall be used to identify the actors and means that the RSS uses to grant victimhood to India and the Hindu society, including events and the types of victimhood that are attributed with the aforementioned actors. Question 3 shall then be used to ascertain the mode's methods of argumentation that make this victimhood persuasive and compelling towards the RSS's target audiences. This shall be done by identifying the modifications (intensifying or mitigating) in illocutionary force and thus the epistemic or deontic status of utterances. Furthermore, diminutives or augmentatives, (modal) particles, tag questions, subjunctive, hesitations, vague expressions, hyperboles, litotes, indirect speech acts (e.g. question instead of assertion), verbs of saying, feeling and thinking shall be looked out for. Question 4 shall be used to round up the discussion, as it provides the route to show how exactly victimhood, once constructed and argued for, are transposed towards the legitimisation of Hindutva and religious nationalism. This question is thus very important in establishing the link between victimhood and Hindutva.

## Analysis

### **Question 1: Linguistic Construction of Key Actors**

The two key actors that are portrayed to be victims in the discourse of the RSS are Bharat/India and the Hindu society. As such, this section discusses the general construction of these actors, and the traits that later allow them to be given the characteristics of victimhood.

#### *Bharat, i.e., India*

One of the key observations is the consistent referral to the nation of India as 'Bharat'. This

has been noted as an ongoing discourse surrounding the perceived colonial legacies of naming and referral. The name 'India' is connected to the colonial era of British rule, and a direct result of it, thus making Bharat, out of multiple other names that this region has been referred to as, the primary and 'correct' designation (Gaubha, 2020). Bharat is referred to as a cultural empire, a nation that has existed for millennia, and as one that excelled collectively as a nation within the fields of science, commerce, arts, technology, agriculture and multiple other spheres. This process of situating "Bharat" as a 'nation', before the concept of a nation was even constructed, carries with it a primordial understanding that allows following arguments of nationalism and collective suffering to seem logical or natural. This primordial approach to nationhood and particularly the nationhood of India allows the 'integrity', 'honour' and 'history' of the entity to be something that can collectively be harmed or damaged (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2025). The country of Bharat is framed as one that has existed for millennia, glorified by its progress in various fields; science, technology, commerce, arts, agriculture, and philosophy, whose cultural empire expanded all the way to Southeast Asia for over four centuries (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2025). This brings with it the connotation of a brilliant past that can be harmed. However, it has been argued that all these achievements were mitigated by a lack of social cohesion, and dissension, which led to its subjugation under foreign powers for centuries (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2025, p. 1).

The nation here is portrayed as a victim of foreign invaders with far-reaching consequences thus amplifying the areas that have been subjected to victimhood, by illustrating the destruction of temples, and religious spaces, with the result of a demoralised "Bharatiya society", left open to rule over (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015). India is further referred to as the "Motherland" (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 5), "Bharatmata" (Mother Bharat) (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2025, p. 9), "Mathrabhoomi" (Earth of the Mother in Sanskrit) (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2025, p. 9), in reference to "her" subjugation to colonial



rule. The imagery of the maternal figure being threatened, with the idea of the ‘masculine’ in the RSS protecting the ‘feminine’ in the nation is thus evident here.

The specific discourse on the conflict surrounding Ayodhya is an exaggerated example of this historical anthropomorphisation, where the RSS claims a loss of national character and morale and weakness in Hindu society and pessimism and insecurity regarding the entire culture and its knowledge (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 11). The British colonists have been framed as those with an aim of Bharat’s political, imperial and religious enslavement (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2025, p. 13). The building of the Ram temple at Ayodhya in 2022 is emotionally celebrated and legitimised by the organisation as a winning battle against the invading ‘them’. What is silenced in this celebration is the violence that several “servers” of the organisation conducted at the site, prior to the long-standing court case. In 1992, an organised mob of over 75,000 identifying with Hindu nationalism stormed a mosque that stood in the site, the aftermath of which led to interreligious rioting leaving over one thousand people (a majority Muslim) dead across several Indian cities (Mehta, 2015). Indiscriminate acts of violence against Muslim minorities by the police and other authority figures have been covered up to celebrate the event and gain divine justification, as reclaiming holy land (Bhagwat, 2024, p. 2). This is further intensified by referring to values that the deity Ram represents, and tying them intrinsically to both the site and the perceived “victory” over it, (Bhagwat, 2024, p. 2) furthering the argumentative storyline of an us who have won after centuries of suffering perpetuated by *them* (Bhagwat, 2024, p. 2).

### *Hindu Society*

Hinduism is throughout the vision statement referred to as the basis of Indian national identity, and the pillar of national consciousness, carrying the nation of Bharat, as discussed earlier, to its “pinnacle of glory” (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 1). Hinduism through its age-old spiritual values forms the groundwork of Indian national identity in this case (Rashtriya

Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 16). The ideal Hindu society or Hindu Nation is allegorised as a functional body with organs functioning in harmony, and the society itself to be ‘god incarnate’, thus drawing upon divine justification as its legitimation strategy (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 11). Thus what is evident are varying strategies of legitimation beginning even from the description of the movement. The anthropomorphisation of entities such as the “Hindu Psyche”, which has been accredited with a “pristine form”, especially when the latter is an abstract construction by the former (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 4) is key linguistically. “Hindu society” has been described to contain attributes of “self-confidence” and “denigration”. Similarly, the regions of Kashmir, Assam and Nagaland have been given the ability to be “headaches” (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 19), “thorn(s) in the flesh”, “oppressive” and “vulnerable” (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015). The three have been specifically highlighted as they present the “threat” of a growing Muslim population, and secession. This is purposive as it allows any further discourses to attribute actions and collective characteristics to these abstract entities, including victimhood.

Thus, this primary question has allowed us to discuss the two key subjects of victimhood under the lens of the RSS, namely India and Hindu society. It has been shown that the two entities are presented not only as inherent, and natural in their existence, but also draw their brilliance and glory from historical values, tied with primordial ideas of nationhood and spiritual arguments for a religious state.

### **Question 2: Characteristics of victimhood**

Considering the argument that victimhood has been applied primarily to India’ and Hindu society (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2023, p. 2), the source of this victimhood has been identified to be threefold, with the first being the perceived elite, as represented by the government, academia and the media; the second as the Religious offender, particularly articulated as the Muslim and Christian communities in the country, and lastly the historical colonial invader,



represented by Islamic rulers and the British colonial rule.

### *The Elite*

Firstly, the nation's integrity is attributed with erosion at the hands of the elite (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2023, p. 1). The *us*, formed by the RSS and Hindu society, are characterised as victims of divisive strategies by the *elite* under the apparent farce of secularism, secession and thought patterns that are dissonant with nativity (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2023). Academia and scholarship are shown as perpetuating a lack of national consciousness, and using their dominant position to suppress the RSS and Hindu nationalist actors. The Sangh perceives itself, as a representative of Hindu society, to be a victim of judgement and harsh misunderstanding; constantly referring to undefined "people expressing doubts about the continued survival and growth (of the RSS)" (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2023, p. 1), and "baseless canards", "unjust incarceration", "opponents" and "virulent critics" (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2023, p. 1). Within Bhagwat's 2025 speech, the "English-speaking academic elites" are vilified as those who would never understand Hindutva or the idea of a Hindu Nation due to their preconceived notions (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2025, p. 1), and societal divisions and "destructive forces" are accredited to the "Cultural Marxists" and "woke" elites accused of carrying lofty ideals, with discriminatory and deceitful interests (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2023, p. 2).

These *elite* have been characterised as the victimisers of the Bharatiya society, by controlling media and academia into creating a vicious cycle of fear, confusion and hatred. Their modus operandi has been described as taking control over the academia and media, turning these institutions against anything religious, which according to the RSS results in a vicious cycle of fear, hate and confusion. Further vague opponents in the *elite* are created and accused of forging alliances with undesirable foreign forces, in an attempt for political power. The *elite* is thus portrayed to be creating conflicts through social differences, victimising the *us* (the RSS) to have

become "amnesiac" (Without fervour or blood) (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2023, p. 2).

### *The Religious Other*

While there exists the creation of the *elite* that oppresses the *us* constantly, a more direct other is constructed in minority religions. Victimhood is attributed to Bharat as a result of attempted religious destabilisation, in reference to the possibility of the province of Assam gaining a Muslim-majority demographic. This has been blamed upon undefined foreign countries and agencies, thus creating a vague threat with "serious" consequences (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 7). Secondly, Christian missions have been accused of armed revolt to "carve out" independent Christian provinces, another activity that the RSS places blame for upon the aforementioned undefined "foreign countries and agencies" (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 8).

With regards to Kashmir, the Hindu population has been framed to be targeted by militants who do not face consequences due to their "privileged minority tag". Furthermore, the state of Jammu and Kashmir has been characterised as oppressive due to its "Muslim majority", and described as a 'headache for the country' ever since independence, both signifying hostility coming from within, thus presenting the other within *us*. The Pakistan-administered region of Kashmir is described as "Pakistan-occupied Kashmir", and characterised as a threat to Indian national sovereignty (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2022, p. 1). The "appeasement of Muslims", argues the RSS, is the "bane of our government's Kashmir policy" (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 8), describing Kashmir as a spoilt child ridden with subversives that weaken the nationality of Bharat and its identity. The threat is expanded to Bharat's sovereignty as the government of 1947 (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 8) is accused of the appeasement of the Kashmiri resistance, who are characterised to be "militants". Indian governments of the past are accused of pandering to the Muslim minority, and in doing so ignoring the wishes of the Hindu society. This has been referred to as "selfish" and "discriminatory": thus clearly appealing to a fear



of deprivation from the Hindu society, in a call to work against it (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2022, p. 2).

Even within the Hindu society, tribal Hindu minorities' systematic alienation by the rest of the country is viewed as a threat to unity and social injustice. This is perceived to be a result of the alienation leaving open the communities to Christian missionaries' conversion. (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2022, p. 9). Broadly, the us have been implied to be Hindu society, or the Hindu Nation, that is continually victimised by them, who form the religious majorities that pose a threat of conversion and domination. The implication that their subsequent domination would lead to the minority status of Hindus is particularly ironic, as it would subject the latter to the same treatment that the RSS wishes to subject other religious minorities to.

### *The Coloniser/ Invader*

The aim of attacks from "Islam" is argued to carry the ambition to completely destroy and alienate society. The nation here is portrayed as a victim of foreign invaders who destroyed temples and religious spaces with the result of a demoralised Bharatiya society, leaving it open to rule over (Bhagwat, 2024, p. 1). Two genres of historical invaders have been identified here: the first being the Islamic rule that victimised Hindus for over 800 years, and the second being the British colonial rule. The latter has been credited with not only the oppression of the Hindu society, but also an attempt to subvert the Hindu mind itself, towards the erosion of national identity (Bhagwat, 2024, p. 1). One of the primary discourses within this argument is that of the destruction of a temple dedicated to the deity Ram in the city Ayodhya. The speech regarding the Ayodhya temple is made under the context of the Supreme Court ruling that allowed for the building of a Hindu temple at the site, which was inaugurated in 2022. Islamic empires and the British empire are most commonly in the vision statement referred to as "aliens" (Bhagwat, 2024, p. 1). The usage of this particular term dehumanises those who are characterised as invaders, making it extremely easy for audiences to har-

bour detestation beyond just the presentation of historical "facts" and appeals for a degradation of nationhood (Bhagwat, 2024, p. 1).

The demolition of the temple is argued to have been conducted with the sole purpose of demoralising Bharatiya society to rule over it once it has been weakened. Within discourses on Ayodhya, the building of the temple is contextualised through a four-century long struggle by the Hindus against the "Muslim invaders" with temporal logic to gain legitimacy (Bhagwat, 2024, p. 2). The speech regarding the Ayodhya temple is made under the context of the Supreme Court ruling that allowed for the building of a Hindu temple at the site, which was inaugurated in 2022.

Secondly, the West is blamed for Indian victimhood specifically through an economic perspective portraying the victimhood of the country under British colonial rule. Two different arguments have been observed to be made in tandem, the first being that colonisation destroyed the economic potential of India, and secondly that Western dominant models of economic governance are flawed at their base and the only valid one is that based on Hindu dharmic principles (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 17). The West is blamed for the downhill economy of the country, referring to the plunder of capital during the colonial era, as well as the pervasive dominant economic models of the GATT, IMF and the World Bank (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 17). Trade Union movements, guided by socialist and Marxist thinkers have been characterised as "alien", and a threat to national interests (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 13). Further, sources that wreak havoc on the cohesion of Indian society, including terrorism, exploitation, individualism, and totalitarianism are blamed on imitations of the West (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2023, p. 2).

In an assessment of the above information, it can be argued that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh attributes victimhood to Hindu society, Bharat as a country and the organisation RSS itself. This is achieved through the consistent delineation of the other as opposed to oneself, as the *elite*, the West, the Invader and Religious Other are accused and perceived of to be victimising



the aforementioned actors. For the victimisation of Bharat specifically, historical victimhood has been projected into a meta-historical narrative that derives on temporal logic to prove current self-victimisation, by supposing a golden age that has been stolen from the country (Al-Ghazzi, 2021). It can thus be argued that identity narratives that borrow from historicised fiction have been used to treat the India and Hindu society, the objects, as a character in a plot, pitting the us against *them* to manufacture social cohesion and group identification (Berezin, 2021, p. 239).

### **Question 3: Articulation of Victimhood**

Victimhood has been attributed by the RSS to India and Hindu society have been articulated overtly through highly emotional argumentation throughout the speeches and the vision statement, in an appeal towards its audience, those whose victimhood it wishes to convey. Through this, it has been observed that the RSS wishes to convince particularly the Hindu society, which it equates with India, of their own victimhood. This victimhood is intensified through the creation of an exclusive us through the usage of language, with the appeal of group identification articulated through their shared victimhood. Finally, the anthropomorphisation of India to contain features such as hurt, portrayed by her personification as “Mother India”, adds to the argumentative tools that support the narrative victimhood portrayed.

#### *Emotional Argumentation*

Pathos has been implemented consistently to intensify the apparent victimhood of the Hindu society. The *elite* is mobilised against the latter, through temporal arguments depicting an era when it was considered intellectual superiority to “heap contempt” upon Hindu society, and “ruses” were used to denigrate them (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 11). Governments of post-independence India are similarly accused of creating a system where Muslim minorities were appeased towards the end of Hindus gaining “second-order” citizen status, thus explicitly

and deliberately lowering the majority into victimhood minority. The RSS continues with this strategy as a means to recover from the “self-oblivion” that the elite government has placed the Hindu society into. The tone of this argument has been identified to be emotionally charged, with a theme of conspiracy, implying that critics of the organisation and Hindutva within academia were running ruses (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 7).

The term “externally induced impoverishment” has been used to dramatically describe the current economic plight of the country. The indigenous models of science and technology have been portrayed as the victim of a deliberate crushing by the West. Furthermore, a “culturally induced poverty” has been deemed to impact the psyche of the people with repeated utterances of “you are poor”, “you are primitive” and “you are backward” (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 18). The emotional impact to an Indian reader growing up in a postcolonial context is cemented through such quotes being explicitly mentioned in the statement, having great ability to persuade a Hindu listener or reader of their own apparent victimhood. Through such a framing utilising pathos extensively, internal causes of economic issues are mitigated and erased.

Open-ended questions are particularly evident in the speech from 2023 (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2023, p. 3), in an attempt to insinuate that undefined sources were ‘ravaging’ the society into divisions using the example of the situation in the province of Manipur, where tensions between two ethno-religious groups resulted in horrific violence against Kuki women (Christian majority) by Meitei mobs (Hindu majority). Within this discourse, the society of Manipur is portrayed to be harmonious and society prior to this event. Open-ended questions along the lines of “who has a vested interest in besmirching an organisation like the RSS (...) into this unfortunate incident?” (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2023, p. 3), “Which foreign powers may be interested in taking advantage of such unrest and instability...?” (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2023, p. 3). These questions form an intense accusation of foreign alliances in destabilising Indian unity, having the impact of pushing blame



away from those that the RSS views as its own (the Hindu society) towards a foreign undefined ill-wisher through its own portrayal of victimhood (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2023, p. 3).

### *Creation of an Exclusive 'Us'*

Secondly, the creation of “us” as an oppressed group implicitly promotes uniqueness and gives epistemic authority to the group, moving it from what is perceived to be a top-down hierarchical society into one of balanced equal participation. Within their framing overall, it is evident the creation of an exclusive ‘us’ who require enlightenment over the critical ‘them’ that perceive Hindutva to be inferior. This is done by only attributing heightened positives with the RSS and Hindutva in the entire discourse: with vocabulary such as “unique”, “dynamic” and “Powerhouse” (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 3).

More explicitly, this exclusive group identification is visible in the quote: “Sangh’s alone has been the voice of genuine patriotic concern amidst the cacophonous, politically inspired shibboleths of undefined secularism etc.” (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 3). The vision statement (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 6) states that “the sweep and amplitude of one great mind (in reference to the founder of the RSS), can be fully grasped only by minds with a like vision and imagination”. There is a contradiction found within this formulation, where the opinions of academics and the *elite* are denounced but at the same time, the growth of the RSS and its relevance is argued through the apparent approval it is receiving from current intelligentsia (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 8). Thus, it appears as though the validation of critics, and the “world” as a whole, is extremely important to the Sangh, but at the same time anyone that criticises its ideology is denounced to possess immoral values (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 8). Contradictions are further observed in the vision statement in the portrayal of the RSS as a political organisation. While denouncing perceived detractors who portray the organisation as paramilitaristic with political ideological motives, they con-

tinue to argue that the political sphere is one it wishes to enhance, through a military-like disciplinary training expected of its cadres (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 9). The Hindu and the Hindutva, as victims of a “state-sponsored denigration”, are decreed as existential threats to the polity of Bharat, using a tone of affront to emote for a nationalist ideology that protects the Hindus (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 6).

Having established both the victim and the victimiser, through the analysis of the first two questions, this section has demonstrated the narrative and discursive tools of persuasion used by the RSS specifically to articulate said victimhood. The first focus on emotional argumentation regarding pathos demonstrated how the elite has been mobilised through deliberate phrasing that seeks to incite indignation and anger, the emotions key to sustaining victimhood amongst the perceived victims. It has been further demonstrated that this invocation of emotion is geared towards the creation of an exclusive us, who face the opposition of the world as a whole. Finally, anthropomorphising India into a mother figure makes it possible to invoke the same emotions towards ‘her’ as towards Hindu society as a whole.

### **Question 4: Arguments Using Victimhood Towards Hindutva**

The first argument derived from this portrayal of victimhood is that the existence of such an oppressive elite is viewed as a *raison d’être* for the RSS and nationalism that places Hindu nationalist identity at the forefront of Indian society. The evocation of the *elite* vs *us* has been implemented through a pretension of using logos based argumentation, however what is evident is a lack of clear facts or identification, other than the *elite* and intelligentsia that continue to attack and demean the RSS and Hindu society (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 6). This formulation of an *elite* is manipulated towards the presentation of the organisation as the saviours of their own mission.

This perceived undermining of Hindu society is used towards an argument to promote a change



in the “psyche” of Hindus, to prevent conversions and bring previous converts back into the “fold”. The agency of those who have converted to other faiths has been erased as the organisation develops a mechanism for re-conversion. Furthermore, Hindu identity is extended to the diaspora, as the aims of the organisation extend towards the preservation of Hindu values and ideals in this arena, as a link to the home country. This effectively erases diaspora from other backgrounds in their equation, prioritising the Hindu society as the only valid nationals (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 14). A Hindu nationalist ethos is equated to nation-building and used to justify a reach towards all social institutions, encompassing family, marriage, religion, and education (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 14). The specific wording that has been used is the supposition of a “Hindu Century”: as a cure to the ills that plague all of the world and Indian society.

The RSS mobilises the destruction caused by colonisation to construct a national identity to base nationalism on, mobilizing the grievance that most postcolonial subjects have towards the coloniser towards an exclusive national identification system, based on primordial assumptions of who belongs to the continent. A second causal link that has been used is of social cohesion leading to national integrity, though the means of this social cohesion, and who shall be excluded in such a process have not been mentioned explicitly throughout the sources (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 16).

With regards to economic victimhood, the discourse is directed towards two arguments: the first being that colonisation destroyed the economic potential of India, and secondly that Western dominant models of economic governance are flawed at their base and the only valid one is that based on Hindu dharmic principles (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 18). The solution to the economic crisis, in India and globally, is argued to be attained through the cultural rejuvenation and re-assertion of Hindu values that separate it from the West, and views it as a necessity in the state of the world (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 18). Aforementioned “alien” trade union movements have been

eschewed for the *Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh*, a new labour movement that is based on Hindu tenets, characterised by a strong opposition to strikes (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 14).

All of the aforementioned argumentation has culminated towards the view that all the historical and current grievances that have placed Hindu society at such a victimised position, must be the reason to inculcate a “righteous militancy”. In doing so, the RSS advocates for an entirely changed political, social and economic culture in the country (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2015, p. 14), that would, with Hindu nationalism as the basis, restore the nation’s honor and dignity and portray the “weak in society”. It has been argued that the society must rid itself of their “colonial mindset” and take from the outside world only that which suits the country. Thus, it is evident, that only two options are presented, that ridding oneself of a colonial mindset can only be achieved by nationalist conservatism, and forsaking all foreign influence (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2023). The country can thus be framed as having risen from the centuries of crises towards a path of spiritual and material progress. The character in the story is thus saved and rises above its struggles. Foucauldian creations of the subject and object are evident through the evolution of discourse to constitute differences, thus linguistically constructing reality into one perceived by the RSS (Campbell & Bleiker, 2016). In this reality, not only is India, at the end of this story, powerful and avenged, they are also looked at by the crisis-ridden world to emerge with new ideas in the face of fanaticism, arrogance and hysteria from religious sectarianism (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2023).

## Conclusion

This paper has addressed the manipulation of victimhood towards religious nationalism, through the research question: *How is victimhood employed by the RSS to promote Hindutva ideology?*

It has overall been concluded that Bharat/India and Hindu society have been at-



tributed with victimhood by the RSS, as both are constructed generally within the frame of possessing a glorious past. Bharat particularly is given a primordial and natural nationhood, rather than one that evolves and is constructed. Following on from this, Hindu society and Hinduism are equated with the identity of the country, forming an exclusive group identification that rests upon religious identity. This establishes the religious nationalist ideology that the group purports that bases nationhood and national cohesion upon Hindu identity and belonging. To this pre-constructed and well-defined actor, various facets of victimhood are attributed thus creating a causal relationship, where the threat to these actors poses a threat to national identity and sovereignty itself. Both Bharat and Hindu society have been portrayed throughout the sources to be exposed to threat and suppression from various angles, from the top in the form of the elite, from within itself through religious minorities and from the outside through invaders. The “elite” represent various actors including the government, academia and the West broadly who are accused of systematically demeaning anything that relates to Hinduism and its values through oppressive media, unjust bans and general sentiment. The religious other has been found in particularly the Muslim and Christian minorities who pose the threat of conversion and gaining dominance, who seek to make Hindus second order citizens in ‘their own country’. Finally, the historical invaders are portrayed to have had far-reaching consequences on society, with the meta-historical narrative of a glorious past and era that has been snatched and desecrated.

This victimhood has been argued for emotionally using various persuasive tools, such as exclusive underdog positions to convince its target audience in Hindu communities in India of their own victimhood. Emotional argumentation to denounce the garbs of the perceived *elite* and *religious other* thrown at the Hindu society and

India is implemented in order to create a special and exclusive ingroup identification as the oppressed based on collective memory. Creating an us who have been exposed to debasement allows for the group to feel unique in its rise and double down on collective group identity. Another technique used to articulate victimhood is the attribution of human-like features to a country, exposing it to harm and thus furthering the impact of the emotional argument that has been mentioned previously.

Finally, it has been shown how the previously established victimhood has been mobilised towards a society that is built entirely upon Hindu ideals, and for the reawakening of Hindu society. Economically, a nationalist economic approach prioritising Hindu Indigenous systems not only domestically but globally are argued to cure the entire world of its ills. Hindu cultural revival and redemption is thus placed at the forefront of Hindu nationalist ideology with a focus on bringing back Hindus into the fold, and deepening their pride in their own community, by placing their religious identity at the center of their social life through militant or peaceful means. It is campaigned to rise beyond the circumstances that place Hindu society and India into victimhood towards a nation that the RSS deems ideal and socially cohesive.

The findings overall contribute to the broader study of memory politics and victimhood discourse towards nationalist ideologies. More particularly, explorations on religious nationalism in the Indian context can benefit from this study. Further research can focus more directly upon the political wing, in the discourses that the Bharatiya Janata Party uses, for a comparative case study, or a direct discourse analysis. Further, the usage of digital media by nationalist groups as an important tool in the 21st century, can be developed towards a tangential understanding of Hindutva.

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