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# Man-making, Nation-Building and National Reconstruction: the Engaged Hinduism of the RSS and the Vivekananda Kendra

Gwilym Beckerlegge<sup>1</sup> 

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## Abstract

The offering of *sevā* in its more recent sense of organized service to humanity has been central to engaged Hinduism. Despite the scale of the practice of *sevā* by Hindutva-inspired organizations, scholarly studies have tended to focus on the political rather than the cultural and religious dimensions of their activities. An examination of the nature and extent of these organizations' commitment to *sevā* reveals that, far from being monolithic in character, these organizations are characterized by different blends and balances of cultural, political, and religious aspirations and symbolism. This article explores examples of *sevā* activities drawn from two Hindutva-inspired organizations, the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the more recently formed Vivekananda Kendra, and aspects of the development of this practice within these groups. It considers what such groups might understand by engaged Hinduism, their goals, how they seek to realize these goals, and the relationship between their *sevā* activities and their wider cultural and political agendas, and some would say, in the terms of this volume, about the “benevolence” of their aims.

**Keywords** Engaged Hinduism · Swami Vivekananda · The RSS · The Vivekananda Kendra · *Sevā*

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✉ Gwilym Beckerlegge  
gwilym.beckerlegge@open.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Department of Religious Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK

## Introduction: The Centrality of *Sevā* to Engaged Hinduism

The introduction to this volume refers to engaged Hinduism being directed towards “benevolent world engagement” and to “service as a spiritual path”.<sup>1</sup> Central to this enterprise has been the offering of *sevā* in its more recent sense of organized service to humanity. Although this practice has come to be particularly associated with the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission (often popularly referred to as the Ramakrishna movement), the organization created by Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), it has also been undertaken by a range of contemporary Hindu movements, many in response to Vivekananda’s identification of renunciation and service as India’s national ideals. In fact, the Mission historically has provided opportunities for volunteers to assist in relief work without necessarily committing themselves to the movement beyond this. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889–1940), for example, participated in flood-relief organized by the Ramakrishna Mission in Kolkata over a decade before he founded the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh, the RSS or National Association of Volunteers (Beckerlegge, 2003: 31–65, 39).

Vivekananda’s impact from the outset, particularly at a symbolic level, was too wide-ranging to be contained within the movement he created and subsequently has never been confined to one organization or single, institutionalized line of transmission. This is one reason why it has been claimed that Vivekananda’s importance “far outweighs” his involvement with the movement he founded (King, 1999: 161). It has been said, moreover, that the Ramakrishna Mission “has served as a kind of template, with a number of other organisations styled along these lines emerging in the colonial and postcolonial period” (Zavos, 2012: 8). Consequently, in recent decades, much of the practice in India of *sevā* in Vivekananda’s name has taken place outside the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission in very varied organizational and ideological settings.<sup>2</sup> It is, therefore, perhaps hardly surprising that we encounter different and, at times, contested interpretations of Vivekananda’s teaching and conflicting judgements on the significance of the various strands of his legacy.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In a comparable study of Buddhist traditions, Jones (1989: 194) has observed that a “socially engaged [emphasis added] Buddhism needs no other rationale than that of being an amplification of traditional Buddhist morality, a social ethic brought forth by the needs and potentialities of present-day society.” Jones (1989: 216) includes within his model of socially engaged Buddhism social helping and welfare, and radical activism directed to fundamental institutional and social change, leading to “societal metamorphosis.”

<sup>2</sup> Following the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission Convention of 1980, the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Bhava Prachar Parishad (council of non-affiliated centers) was created to regulate external organizations active, including fund-raising, in Vivekananda’s name. This council comprises only those organizations willing to accept a measure of regulation by the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, but its existence and size are indicative of the scale of activity by a considerable range of Hindu voluntary organizations.

<sup>3</sup> Even within the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission there were early controversies centred on Vivekananda in that not all accepted his strategy for promoting Ramakrishna’s message, including his conviction that Ramakrishna had sanctioned a spiritual life characterized by the systematic offering of *sevā* (Gambhirananda, 1983: 30–34, 98, 181).

Vivekananda's role was not narrowly that of a Hindu religious thinker and leader because "for generations of nationalistic young men, he was possibly the greatest source of inspiration" (Sen, 2000: 80), "nationalistic" here referring to those involved in the struggle for independence. The Ramakrishna Math and Mission continues to celebrate Vivekananda's patriotism, as do other organizations that have adopted the practice of *sevā*, including Hindu nationalist organizations committed to the ideology of Hindutva. All these groups have given prominence selectively to those elements of his message they value.

To date, much of the attention paid by scholars to Hindutva-inspired groups has been focused on their politics, rather than on their cultural and religious dimensions. This emphasis arguably has had the effect, even if unintentionally, of fostering a misleading perception of organizations committed to the ideology of Hindutva as monolithic in character and interests.<sup>4</sup> An examination of the nature and extent of these organizations' commitment to *sevā* reveals different blends and balances of cultural, political and religious aspirations and symbolism.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I shall explore examples of *sevā* activities drawn from two Hindutva-inspired organizations, and aspects of the development of this practice within these groups. In the process, I shall consider what such groups might understand by engaged Hinduism, their goals and how they seek to realize these goals. This in turn raises questions about the relationship between their *sevā* activities and their wider cultural and political agendas, and some would say, in the terms of this volume, about the "benevolence" of their aims.<sup>6</sup> I shall focus initially on the RSS because of its role in coupling Hindutva ideology to the practice of *sevā*, and then consider the more recently formed Vivekananda Kendra.

## ***Sevā*, the RSS and the *Saṅgh Parivār***

The RSS has been a driving force behind the dissemination of Hindutva ideological ideals and aims since its foundation by Hedgewar in 1925.<sup>7</sup> Its implication in the assassination of M.K. Gandhi in 1948, although the RSS denied any involvement in

<sup>4</sup> In relation to the RSS and the Vivekananda Kendra, which are discussed in this article, Beckerlegge (2013: 703) distances the Kendra from the "violent militancy" of some Hindutva-inspired organizations, and Daniel Gold (2015: 172) similarly draws a distinction between the ethos of Vivekananda Kendra and "the most extreme of Hindu nationalism's ideological excesses."

<sup>5</sup> See also Sharma (2002: 23). Joseph Alter's work on the place of yoga and notions of exercise and physical well-being in these groups is an exception to this generalisation (see references to Alter's work in Beckerlegge (2014); see also Berti, Jaoul and Kanungo (2011), and Kanungo (2002), which, while emphasising the political ideology of the RSS, also explore the lifestyle of those who become its full-time workers; for examples of other studies of humanitarian activity by Hindutva-inspired organizations, see Pagani (2011) and Voix (2011)).

<sup>6</sup> Sharma (2007:xxi) observes that many have detected "dark and diabolical motives" in the way in which the RSS has claimed to devote itself solely to social and cultural goals, remaining "aloof from politics"; Article 4c of the Saṅgh's Constitution, quoted Sharma (2007: xx).

<sup>7</sup> The term "Hindutva" ("Hindu-ness" or "Hindu-dom"), often translated simply as "Hindu Nationalism," was popularized in an essay of that name by V.D. Savarkar (1923), which is now widely regarded as the seminal text of this ideological tradition and utilised by groups such as the RSS. I use the characterization "Hindutva-inspired" to signal both the diversity of the organizations often cloaked together under this label and that not all these organizations are formally linked to the RSS.

this, led to its brief proscription and a widespread collapse in public support. In the following decades, the RSS was widely reviled, and its members often regarded as comical in their uniform khaki shorts—hardly worthy of serious study.

The political turmoil of Indira Gandhi's Emergency (mid-1970s) renewed scholarly interest beyond India in Hindutva-inspired organizations after their role in opposing Indira Gandhi's government and campaigning for the Janata alliance (Sharma, 2002: 23; Beckerlegge, 2004a: 124-125). After the beginning of the RSS's popular rehabilitation during the period of the Emergency, and with the advent in the last quarter of the twentieth century of the so-called "angry Hindu", reacting against perceived concessions to Muslims and low-caste groups and lack of economic advancement, the *saṅgh parivār* ["family" of *saṅghs* or affiliates of the RSS] has steadily increased in influence. One of these, the *parivār*'s only formally constituted political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has provided to date two of India's recent Prime Ministers.<sup>8</sup> During this same period, however, the involvement of some of the *saṅgh parivār*'s affiliates in outbreaks of communal violence, not least that linked to the destruction of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in 1992, which led to considerable loss of life, has remained a focus of public concern and has impinged on the attitudes of scholars to the RSS.

Even immediately before and after Partition, when the RSS had increased its popular standing among Hindus because of its support for vulnerable Hindu communities and Hindus displaced by the imposition of Partition, its performance of service was perceived by its critics to be narrowly communal in nature.<sup>9</sup> Under Hedgewar's leadership, the RSS did not adopt the breadth of *sevā* activities, for example, educational activities, the care of orphans, and famine-relief, found in the Arya Samaj and the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, which by then had already been functioning for several decades. The kinds of activities undertaken by the RSS under Hedgewar were more akin to policing, marshalling crowds at festivals and political meetings and offering some aid and support to Hindu communities during outbreaks of communal violence (see Beckerlegge (2004a: 106-112)). It was during this time that the RSS adopted its distinctive uniform and the use of the *lāthi* [a long, heavy stick used as a weapon] was introduced, both of which were suggestive of a paramilitary role. There is little evidence to support claims made from within the RSS that its *sevā* activities stem from, except in a most general sense, the example of its founder, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, and that, "in its rudimentary form", Hedgewar had conceived of the specialized bodies with their own functions now found in the *saṅgh parivār* (for example, Thengadi, n.d.).

<sup>8</sup> The second of these Prime Ministers, Narendra Modi, like M.S. Golwalkar, the RSS's most prominent ideologue, is reported not just to have been strongly influenced by Vivekananda but also at one time to have wished to train for entry to the Ramakrishna Math (Marino, 2014: 25-28). Compare the advice he was given by members of the Math, noted later in this article, that his future lay elsewhere to that given earlier to M.S. Golwalkar, the second leader of the RSS.

<sup>9</sup> Displaced Sikhs from Panjab were embraced under the heading of "Hindus." The understanding of "Hinduism" as a category including all religions of Indian origin, of course, is not unique to Hindutva thinking as it also figures in India's Constitution.

It fell to Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (1906–1973), who had become the second *sarsaṅghcālak* [Supreme Leader] of the RSS in 1940, to begin the long campaign after Gandhi's assassination to rehabilitate the RSS in the eyes of India's population, not least Hindus. From the nineteen-fifties, the nature of *sevā* activity in the RSS and its affiliates changed quite strikingly under Golwalkar's leadership.

Golwalkar was made from a different mould than Hedgewar, his mentor. Hedgewar was an activist. Committed to character building to bring about national regeneration, he instituted the RSS's distinctive *śākhā* [branch]-based organization, the style of the daily meetings conducted by *śākhās* in which sport and ideological discussion as methods of character building play a major part, and ensured the centrality of the saffron flag to *śākhā* ritual. Hedgewar's thoughts circulate today in the form of popular collections, rather than in a sustained body of work able to provide a basis upon which the RSS could elaborate its ideology more systematically. His notion of "service" was that of serving the nation through the RSS (see, for example *Pathey, 2004*). Golwalkar undoubtedly fleshed out the ideological position now associated with the RSS. It was Golwalkar's imbibing of ideas drawn, probably indirectly, from the German tradition of Romantic nationalism, and his dissemination of these ideas in *We or Our Nation Defined*, published in 1938 (see Golwalkar 1945), that has led to sustained criticism of him as a racist ideologue.<sup>10</sup>

Golwalkar was universally known in the RSS as "Guruji", and the use of this title and iconographic representations of him deliberately conjure up the image of a Hindu spiritual teacher rather than a social mobilizer of Hedgewar's ilk (on iconography, see Beckerlegge, 2004b). This is suggestive of the distinctive figure Golwalkar cut within the RSS. Golwalkar dedicated more of his energies than his predecessor and successors to developing what might be regarded as the "religious" dimensions of the Hindu tradition. One example of this was Golwalkar's role in creating the Vishva Hindu Parishad in 1964 to bring together and unify Hindu movements. A form of communal prayer is recited at meetings of *śākhās*, and Hedgewar spoke of the RSS doing God's work in defending religion and nation (see, for example, *Pathey, 2004*). In a personal memoir, however, a former member of the RSS has noted that its volunteers [*svayamsevāks*] have showed little interest in "religious orthodoxy or strict adherence to scriptures" and observing "the traditional rituals of Hinduism" (Sirsikar, 1988: 200).

Jyotirmaya Sharma (2003: 7) has argued that, like Deendayal Upadhyaya (1916–1968), another key ideologue within the RSS who was Golwalkar's contemporary, Golwalkar's work is best perceived as a "foray into intelligent pamphleteering", largely aimed at those within the organization. Sharma (2003: 7) concludes that Golwalkar and Deendayal Upadhyaya "recast and paraphrase the central ideas of the quartet of Dayananda, Vivekananda, Aurobindo and Savarkar. Very little of any consequence was added to the central tenets of Hindutva beyond Savarkar". Golwalkar, however, was responsible for greatly enhancing the practical day-to-day involvement of the RSS and its affiliates in service-based

<sup>10</sup> For a fuller statement of this controversial aspect of Golwalkar's thinking, see Beckerlegge (2004a: 117–120), and for fuller discussion see, for example, Bhatt and Mukta (2000), Sharma (2007).

initiatives, a different and wider form of engagement, and here Golwalkar drew heavily on Vivekananda.<sup>11</sup>

Golwalkar's relationship with the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission was far closer than Hedgewar's passing involvement as a volunteer relief worker. In 1936, Golwalkar left his home and the RSS and travelled to Bengal to seek initiation from Swami Akhandananda, one of Vivekananda's brother disciples and beyond question the most supportive of Vivekananda's institutionalization of organized *sevā* in the nascent Ramakrishna movement (see Beckerlegge, 2000a and Beckerlegge, 2003 on Akhandananda's influence on Golwalkar). Akhandananda's sudden death in 1937, not long after Golwalkar is said to have received personal initiation, triggered Golwalkar's return to Nagpur and to his former life within the RSS, abandoning what seems to have been his intention of seeking admittance to the Ramakrishna Math. It has been claimed Akhandananda foretold that Golwalkar's destiny lay with Hedgewar (Kohli, 1993: 3). Yet, although Golwalkar had sought out Akhandananda, Golwalkar did not immediately take up a life of service personally or attempt to promote it within the RSS. This did not take place until more than a decade later when Golwalkar, by then *sarsaṅghcālak*, began to rebuild the RSS in the 1950s, having also participated in relief work for victims of Partition. It is quite possible that Golwalkar had been drawn primarily to Akhandananda's asceticism rather than his social engagement.

In the years following the lifting of the ban on the RSS in 1949, Golwalkar sent *pracāraks* [regional organizers] to work under Vinoba Bhave, often regarded as Gandhi's spiritual successor, who worked with the poor and landless. Social activism, rather than the RSS's former para-military role, was brought to the fore, and in 1954, Golwalkar provided a rationale for this new direction through his formulation of the tenets of "Positive Hinduism" in an address to *pracāraks*. In *Bunch of Thoughts*, a volume pulled together in 1966 from Golwalkar's talks over the previous 25 years, there are frequent references to Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, and Golwalkar (1966: 26) attributes directly to Ramakrishna, rather than to Vivekananda, the notion of *daridra nārāyaṇa* ["destitute God"].

In his advocacy of "Positive Hinduism", which initially appears to be very reminiscent of Vivekananda, Golwalkar affirmed that "a person worships God through service to society" (Andersen & Damle, 1987: 111). A highly significant shift in emphasis in Golwalkar's re-working of Vivekananda's theory of service, however, becomes apparent in Golwalkar's declaration "Our People is our God" (Golwalkar, 1966: 25), arguing that the ideal of serving "man" (humanity) had been so broad as to lead to inaction (cf., Golwalkar, 1966: 386f.). Thus, in Golwalkar's system, Vivekananda's "living God", for Vivekananda the individual in need, becomes the divine within "Our People" or the nation; "This supreme vision of Godhead in society is the very core of our concept of 'nation' and has permeated our thinking and

<sup>11</sup> For examples of service performed by the RSS with some testimony from workers (see Sharda 2018: 206-2012) and Chitkara 2004: 192-195). Both authors have been associated with the RSS. For profiles of workers in Northeast India (see Longkumer (2021: 30-46).



given rise to various unique concepts of our cultural heritage” (Golwalkar, 1966: 25).<sup>12</sup> This recalibration of Vivekananda’s message, and the growing, influential and effective role played by *pracāraks* as mobilizers within the expanding *saṅgh parivār* under Golwalkar’s leadership, undoubtedly lie behind the dramatic increase in the *parivār*’s involvement in *sevā* since the 1950s and the impact of this in India today.

In 1989, the RSS committed itself to increasing its provision of *sevā* to mark the centenary of Hedgewar’s birth. It was then that the RSS established the Seva Vibhag [Service Division]. The first report based on the databank set up in 1994 to record *sevā* activity, *Sevā Dishā* [the “direction” or “thrust” of *sevā* activities], was published in 1995 and was described in a later edition of the report as “a report of all sewa activities by the Sangha pariwar” (Anon, 2009: cover page). Subsequently, similar reports were produced approximately every 5 years over the following decade or so. *Sevā* activities are typically classified under education, health, rural development, social rejuvenation, economic self-reliance and disaster relief and rehabilitation. Even a cursory examination of these reports reveals the extent of *sevā* activity generated by this “family” of organizations.

The *Sevā Dishā* report published in 1997 claimed that 22,866 recorded *sevākaryas* [*sevā* activities] had reached 7% of India’s population (Anon, 1997: “Section Two - Sevakarya Data” and “A Fact Sheet of Sevakarya”).<sup>13</sup> The same report noted that the target of creating 5000 units of service to mark the centenary of Hedgewar’s birth had been passed easily within 3 years because of the existing capacity of the large, nationwide network of RSS *sākhās* (Anon, 1997: “Section Two - Seva Vibhag - Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh”). A further factor that contributed to the speed with which the target was exceeded is the size of some of the RSS’s affiliates and the way in which they effectively both target and draw on specific sectors of Hindu society for their support; for example the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad works with students and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh with labour. By 2009, the number of recorded *sevākaryas* had risen to 157,776 from 43,386 in 2004. In 2015, it was reported that Mohan Rao Bhagat, the *sarsaṅghcālak* of the RSS, had called for a doubling of the speed at which the number of *sevākaryas* increased (Anon, 2015). In 2017, the number of projects reported within the RSS, with some omissions but including both its own welfare wing Seva Bharati [Service of India] and its affiliates, was 170,700 (Sharda, 2018: 205).

Christophe Jaffrelot (2005: 212) has noted in his examination and assessment of Seva Bharati that its creation in 1979 signalled the more systematic implementation of what he refers to as the RSS’s “social welfare strategy”. It is as a result of such initiatives that the RSS has been described in a sympathetic study as “the world’s largest voluntary Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)” (Chitkara, 2004: 167). The sheer scale of the *sevā* activities carried out by the RSS alone would seem to suggest that Hindutva-inspired organizations

<sup>12</sup> For a fuller explanation of Golwalkar’s theory see Beckerlegge (2003: 49-55; 2004a: 116-121).

<sup>13</sup> The 2009 *Sevā Dishā* (Anon., 2009: 11) records the operation of 15063 *sevākarya*, rather than 22866, for 1997, a smaller but still considerable number.



merit attention in this volume, even though they arguably represent a contentious example of engaged Hinduism.<sup>14</sup>

### The Vivekananda Kendra: a “Spiritual Oriented Service Mission”

The Vivekananda Kendra characterizes itself as a “spiritual oriented service mission”. In explaining its mission, the Vivekananda Kendra implicitly and unequivocally identifies itself with the message of Vivekananda in its declaration that it “is centered around the noble thought [that] service to man is worship of God—and is guided by the national ideals RENUNCIATION and SERVICE.”<sup>15</sup>

Members of the Kendra speak of their organization having “two mothers”, the RSS and the Ramakrishna Mission. The RSS refers in a general sense to “being in tune” with “the noblest values constituting the cultural and spiritual legacy of the land [Bharat] and collectively called ‘Dharma’” (for example Sangh, n.d.). Some of its members refer to practising a *sādhanā* [“means of attaining an end”; spiritual practice]. Above all, the RSS defines itself in terms of its mission of national reconstruction and organization, and the *sādhanā* that its volunteers follow is the training offered at the *śākhā* - Hedgewar’s method for moulding its members. Vivekananda Kendra’s collective sense of indebtedness to the inspiration of Vivekananda is explicitly acknowledged in its title, and this is exemplified in the prominence the Kendra gives to the notion of “spirituality”, its understanding of this, and the nature of its *sādhanā*. But the Kendra, like the RSS, also actively promotes a Hindutva-influenced ideology, as presented by the Kendra’s former (1995–2020) President P. Parameswaran, (1998, 2000).

The Kendra is not formally part of the *saṅgh parivār*, being an independent organization. It does not, for example, follow the *śākhā* model of organization nor has it reported its *sevā* activity via *Sevā Dishā*. Although founded by a RSS *pracāarak*, the Kendra does not have a shared leadership with the RSS nor rely on the transfer of RSS *pracāarak*s to maintain its centers and projects. It does work closely with the RSS, but also with the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, in areas of common interest. Pralay Kanungo (2013 and Unpublished) has encapsulated the nature of the Kendra and its somewhat fuzzy relationship with the RSS in references to the Kendra as a “fraternal Hindutva organisation”, “Hindutva-sponsored” and a “special RSS affiliate”, which holds to its own version of this ideology and means of pursuing its ends.

Like the RSS, the Kendra has a cadre of full-time life-workers [*jīvanvratīs*] who adopt an ascetic way of life but, unlike the RSS, the Kendra admits women to its cadre, and some of these have held senior national and regional posts (including

<sup>14</sup> By way of comparison, in 2022 the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, the Hindu movement perhaps most popularly associated with organized *sevā*, had 198 centers in India (in addition to its HQ and 45 centers in other countries).

<sup>15</sup> For an overview of the Kendra and its work, see the Vivekananda Kendra’s website, available <https://vrmvk.org>, Beckerlegge (2013), and Kanungo (2012).

those of President and Vice President). Unlike the RSS, the Kendra does not require the wearing of a uniform, and, although forming into ranks and teamwork are features of its events, it does not have the appearance of being a para-military organization. Unlike its second “mother”, the Ramakrishna movement, the Kendra explicitly rejects a guru-disciple model of leadership and proclaims itself to be an “extraordinary movement” created by ordinary people. Thus, Vivekananda is revered and honoured within the Kendra but not installed as the movement’s guru.<sup>16</sup> Underlying the Kendra’s *sevā* activity are its convictions that lay-people, men and women, are better able to relate to the concerns and needs of the mass of the people than exclusively male *saṃnyāsis* [renunciants], and that, through leading a life of renunciation and service, its workers are able to internalize the wearing of the *saṃnyāsi*’s *gerua*, or ochre, cloth (see Beckerlegge, 2010).

The “maternal” descent of the Vivekananda Kendra takes us back through its founder, Eknath Ranade (1914–1982), to Golwalkar. Although there is no evidence to suggest that Ranade (a member of the RSS since his student days) had been as powerfully drawn to the Ramakrishna movement as Golwalkar, Ranade had a profound respect for Vivekananda, the great patriot. A former General Secretary of the RSS, Ranade was given the task by Golwalkar of orchestrating a national celebration of the centenary in 1963 of Vivekananda’s birth. In taking this on, Ranade liaised closely with the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. Ranade (2006) edited a collection of Vivekananda’s recorded teachings to mark the actual year of the centenary. This deepened Ranade’s appreciation of Vivekananda and produced a book that has remained at the heart of Kendra’s training and outreach programs. (The Kendra does not rely in this respect on RSS ideologues, such as Golwalkar.)

The most dramatic outcome of the campaign led by Ranade was the creation of the Vivekananda Rock Memorial at Kanniyakumari, held to be where Vivekananda had a vision in late 1892 of a new India reborn through *sevā* (see Beckerlegge, 2022). The then President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission consecrated the Rock Memorial in 1970. It is said that, in the process of attempting to fund-raise to establish the Memorial, Ranade came to realize the full extent of the public mistrust of the RSS and its motives, and there is evidence from as early as 1965 of his having considered the formation of a new organization separate from the RSS. Swami Ranganathananda of the Ramakrishna Math was influential in advising Ranade to create a lay movement. The Vivekananda Kendra was founded in 1972 on the back of the momentum generated by the RSS’s Rock Memorial campaign. The Kendra continues to manage the Memorial and benefits from the charges paid by visitors. By 2016–2017, the annual number of those visiting the memorial had exceeded 2,000,000.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Thus, the Vivekananda Rock Memorial at Kanniyakumari is a *memorial* and not a *mandir* [temple], although there is a separate meditation room. Vivekananda and Ranade are commemorated at Vivekanandapuram, rather than being the focal points of cultic activity.

<sup>17</sup> For further discussion of the numbers of visitors to the Memorial and their projected growth, see Beckerlegge (2022).

The Vivekananda Kendra reported on its website in 2022 that it was currently maintaining almost 850 branch and project centers throughout India (see Spiritually Oriented Service Mission, <https://www.vrmvk.org/vivekananda-kendra-spiritually-oriented-service-mission>, <https://vrmk.org>). The distribution of the Kendra's centers reveals heavy concentrations of the organization's efforts in Maharashtra, the Kanniyakumari district of Tamil Nadu, and India's North-East border region. These locations are indicative at least in part of Kendra's strategic priorities. Maharashtra has long been the heartland of support for the RSS. Kanniyakumari, in addition to being the reported location of Vivekananda's vision of a transformed India, is a district where there is a high proportion of Indian Christians and where the RSS previously had not had a strong presence. Ranade's efforts in establishing the Rock Memorial enabled him to gain contacts and influence in the region.

The Kendra's attempts to bolster the Hindu identity of the North-East border regions reflects concern about the security of the border and the threat to Hindu identity by the inroads made by Christian missions in that remote area. For example, some of the ephemera produced by the Kendra's Arun Jyoti service project in Arunachal Pradesh incorporate the slogan, with variations, "Strengthen Arunachal, Save India, Protect Dharma". The Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture, Guwahati, has been active in promoting and disseminating its research into local communities and their culture, understood as Hindu *vanavāsī* [forest and, by extension, mountain-dwelling] communities rather than as "tribal" and/or, "animistic" *ādivāsīs* [original inhabitants]. The decision to concentrate the Kendra's efforts in the North-East border region, in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, was made by Eknath Ranade (see Kanungo, 2011). It remains a key feature of its *sevā* strategy, and, the Kendra claims, symbolizes its national scope—from remote and neglected regions of the North-East to Kanniyakumari at the southernmost tip of mainland India (on the North-East see also Longkumer, 2021).

The Kendra's purpose is to "rebuild the nation" guided by Vivekananda's identification of India's national ideals of renunciation and service. Unlike the RSS, which requires *svayamsevāks* to attend daily, short meetings of their local *sākhā*, the Kendra's centers more typically have a monthly schedule of meetings. The Kendra's *kāryapaddhati* [system of working] is structured around certain core activities; the provision of *yoga varga* [yoga courses], which are routinely offered by all the Kendra's centres, *samskāra varga* [character education and training] and *svādhyāya varga* [working/thinking together for the nation]. The provision of *śivirs* [training events, literally "camps"] and seminars at its various centers, which have attracted thousands of participants, are central to the Kendra's style of working.

The Kendra's current centers include educational establishments and hospitals; a cultural institute (the Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture referred to above); Vivekanandapuram, its HQ at Kanniyakumari with its own project centers devoted to sustainable development, and the Vivekananda International Foundation in New Delhi.

In addition to its cadre of full-time life-workers, its website refers to the support and involvement of “Thousands of Local Karyakarata [sic] [workers] as well as lakhs [units of 100,000] of patrons, well-wishers and our publication subscribels [sic]”.<sup>18</sup>

The scale and impact of the Kendra’s work, emanating from its schools and hospitals, its Institute of Culture, and from its extensive HQ and the various projects housed there are indicative of its vigorous outreach programme. For example, it maintains nursery schools that have given it a presence in villages, enabling it to train women-workers to run these nurseries, to use as platforms for contributing to children’s education and health (for example, through feeding) while disseminating its message. Its HQ at Vivekanandapuram capitalizes on the iconic location of Kanniyakumari, now an increasingly popular tourist resort (see Beckerlegge, 2022), through its standing exhibitions that celebrate Vivekananda, Kendra’s founder Eknath Ranade, Kendra’s history and work, and Hindu culture.<sup>19</sup> The most elaborate of these exhibitions is the visually striking Sri Ramayana Darshanam and Bharatmata complex located at Vivekanandapuram, which was inaugurated in 2017. Even before that, however, steadily increasing numbers of Kendra sympathizers and tourists have visited the range of exhibitions on offer both at Vivekanandapuram and in the center of Kanniyakumari (see VRMVK, 2017). These tens of thousands of annual visitors, coupled with the millions who have visited the Vivekananda Rock Memorial every year, provide a rough indicator of the extent of Kendra’s popular outreach, which runs in parallel with its sustained, far deeper engagement with those who attend its training camps and its schools, and avail themselves of its medical services.

Not uniquely among Hindutva-inspired organizations but distinctively in the extent of importance and effort attached to this, Kendra’s teaching and promotion of yoga is a crucial aspect of its offering of *sevā*.<sup>20</sup> This emphasis was instituted by Ranade when he founded the Kendra. Like Vivekananda before it, the Kendra targets the educated and through teaching yoga attempts to appeal to those immersed in pressurized lifestyles. Yoga trains Kendra’s workers, and elementary instruction in techniques of postural yoga is embedded in the Kendra’s interface with the wider public, which it hopes will be drawn to its message of the “yoga way of life” (see Beckerlegge, 2014). Ranade declared “Thus equipped and trained, the team of workers will devote their entire life to serve our people in particular and humanity in general...”.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> For accounts of the Kendra and its workers based on observational research, see Beckerlegge (2010: 73–82; 2014) and Gold (2015: 171–187), which also includes discussion of an institution (the Vivekananda Needam) that has broken away from the Kendra.

<sup>19</sup> Kendra’s recent Annual Reports and website <https://vrmvk.org> have generally presented data under the headings of *prants* (provinces), rather than providing a national or overall summary. Consequently, for the purposes of this study, reference has been restricted to the work of Vivekanandapuram, Kendra’s HQ, not because it is typical but because the breadth of its activities conveys something of the ethos of the Kendra.

<sup>20</sup> For example, the Kendra does not blend its instruction in yoga with games, physical training, or health training, as is commonly done in other Hindutva-inspired organizations.

<sup>21</sup> Taken from a word-processed version of “Yoga ...The Core of Vivekananda Kendra - A Pamphlet”, identified as having been released by Ranade in 1975, which has been provided for my use by Kendra’s General Secretary. It is given in Works Cited as Ranade (1975).

To understand the Kendra's activist ethos, it is important to appreciate that its training in techniques of yoga (postures, breathing and cleansing techniques) and its introduction to meditation are intended to forge individuals who will commit themselves to adopting the practice of *karma yoga* [the discipline of action or works], following the example of Vivekananda.<sup>22</sup> Unlike the RSS prayer, which is addressed to the Motherland and refers to working for the Hindu nation and “stern heroism” in its service, in their daily recitation of the Kendra Prayer, life-workers address Paramātman and declare themselves to “have deep faith in the chosen path of Karmayoga”, praying that they may achieve their goal through their “Renunciation, Service and Self-knowledge” (Anon, 1991: 8; c.f., Chitkara, 2004: 105).

Ranade (2004: 113) declared “That service is best and the noblest, which is performed with the attitude of total surrender to God.” Although *sevā* is given the status of a *sādhanā* in the Kendra, the development of the individual is seen to be instrumental to preparing the individual to serve the nation and humanity and not an end itself (see Ranade, 1975). For “the core” of the Kendra's activities are “man-making”, “nation-building” and “national reconstruction” (Ranade, 2004: 115). Linking yoga to *sevā* enables the Kendra to translate the commonly held association between yoga and the inner unification of the individual into one between yoga and the unification of community and ultimately the nation through the service of the trained and dedicated individual.

One of the many large posters erected on the Vivekanandapuram site draws on Vivekananda's lecture “Common Bases of Hinduism”, given at Lahore in late 1897. It reads “National union in India must be a gathering up of its scattered spiritual forces. A nation in India must be a union of those whose hearts beat to the same spiritual tune”.<sup>23</sup> Peter van der Veer (2001: 73-74) has pointed out that it was Vivekananda who placed yoga at the heart of his construction of Hindu “spirituality” and that this has underpinned the conviction that one can be a renunciant and still be active in political and social causes, suggesting that “Hindu nationalism could hardly exist without such a notion”. This is evident in Kendra's linkage of *sevā*, yoga, renunciation and spirituality. Having rejected the guru-model of leadership, the Kendra claims to be non-sectarian and even universalistic through its adoption of an understanding of “spirituality”, which has some of its roots in Vivekananda's teaching, and of *omkāra*, the symbol representing the Sanskrit syllable *om* (*aum*) that is believed to contain mystically the whole universe, as a form of Īśvara (Lord God). Thus, Kanungo (2012: 138) judges that the Kendra “constructs an ecumenical Hinduism and simultaneously cultivates Hindu nationalism.”

<sup>22</sup> The Kendra does not draw systematically on Vivekananda's fourfold model of yoga or his extended exposition of this.

<sup>23</sup> For Hansen (1999: 70), Vivekananda's preoccupation with “spirit” as the basis for a national community is a “mediated version of Herderian axioms”, which echoes observations, noted above, made about the impact of German Romantic nationalism on Golwalkar.

## Conclusion

In exploring forms of *sevā* adopted by two Hindutva-inspired organizations as important, contemporary examples of engaged Hinduism, this study has challenged what was referred to at the beginning of this article as a tendency to view such movements as monolithic. It has also illustrated ways in which the impetus Vivekananda gave to engaged Hinduism, through his promotion of an influential model of organized *sevā*, has resulted in significant differences in the understandings and practices of *sevā* even in organizations that have acknowledged his influence. The different “readings” of Vivekananda’s life and significance promoted by such groups should not be treated simplistically as alternatives. There are many overlaps, although of varying degrees, between these interpretations of Vivekananda’s message and that promoted within and by the movement that Vivekananda founded, the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. For example, although Golwalkar was far more intimately connected to the Ramakrishna movement than Hedgewar, many of the concerns voiced by Hedgewar, including the need to organize Hindus and the nation, the perceived threat posed by Christian and Muslim missions even to the survival of Hindus as a majority in India, and the need to promote education and physical strength, were also voiced by Vivekananda (see Beckerlegge, 2006). Whatever else they were, both were men of their time, late colonial India.

Eknath Ranade was challenged about how he reconciled membership of the RSS with Vivekananda’s philosophy. He replied, “It is Vivekananda’s Philosophy that made me an R.S.S. worker...in fact R.S.S. is nothing but the extension of Swamiji’s work” (Anon, 2000: xiii; c.f., Rao, 2012: 10). At two national training camps run by the Vivekananda Kendra, which I attended as an observer in 2010 and 2012, I talked extensively with the participants, the majority of whom had no prior links to the Kendra. I was told repeatedly that there was no substantial difference between the RSS, the Kendra and the Ramakrishna movement. All were engaged in the same mission—serving the nation, serving humanity. Several participants declared that they were variously involved in both the RSS and the Kendra, or the Ramakrishna Mission and the RSS, or the Ramakrishna Mission and the Kendra.

Returning to this volume’s characterization of engaged Hinduism in terms of “benevolent world engagement” and “service as a spiritual path”, the identification of “benevolence” as a feature of engaged Hinduism raises the question of whether we test this in relation to intentions or outcomes. In fact, the matter is more complicated because it has been argued that world engagement or social activism based on the wrong principles could at best be unhelpful to its recipient, if not actually damaging, regardless of the good intentions of the performer. Admirers of Vivekananda maintain that only *sevā* performed as a *sādhana*, based on his principles of offering selfless service to humanity as divine, will have lasting, wholesome results for recipient and performer. Critics of Vivekananda, including some who have taken a positive view of other elements of his career, have argued that the idealistic basis of his philosophy prevented the necessary, radical transformation of the socio-economic conditions of those very people whom he sought to help. His defence of many aspects of traditional Hindu belief and practice, they have argued, strengthened, if

anything, the oppressive forces that needed to be dismantled (for example, Beckerlegge, 2000b: 46–48; c.f., Anon, n.d.).

The RSS and its affiliates and the Vivekananda Kendra would clearly maintain the “benevolence” of their form of engagement in terms of the interests of the nation and the Hindu community. It is their conflation of national and Hindu identity, on the basis of their understanding of Hindutva as India’s national tradition, distinct from the religion of “Hinduism” (for example, see Parameswaran, 2000: 4), that has contributed to the concerns voiced by these organizations’ critics and those Indians who feel excluded and threatened by this characterization of Indian nationhood. The RSS and the Vivekananda Kendra would doubtless also stress the beneficial effects of their respective *sādhana*s upon those who adopt these disciplines, with the latter speaking more of the spiritual impact of the work on the performer, although not as an end in itself. In terms of external perceptions, as well as the suspicion and mistrust provoked by some Hindutva-inspired organizations, their *sevā* activities have received both national and international recognition, as has been the case with the Kendra’s research into sustainable development. I recall having been told on several occasions by Indians who were raised or live in Arunachal Pradesh, but unconnected to the Kendra, that the Kendra’s schools and hospitals in that region are widely valued and respected.

Judgements passed on the activities promoted by organizations labelled as “Hindutva” will greatly depend on what one imports into this term and what degree of difference and diversity one admits is concealed within this category. There are Hindus whose sympathy for this ideological tradition is driven by concerns over the future of a “Hindu India” and concerns about threats to India’s national “integrity” posed by separatism, global capitalism (see, for example Parameswaran, 2000: 11–13), and the inroads of Christian and Islamic missions (“religions that originated abroad”, with their “Jealous God”, intolerance and violence) (Parameswaran, 2000: 7–8). For other Hindus, political support for the BJP has largely resulted from disillusionment with the formerly dominant Congress Party and revulsion at governmental corruption or it has been pragmatically rather than ideologically driven as the best hope of securing improvement in their own localities or immediate situation. In addition, there are beyond question many Hindus who do feel a measure of majoritarian entitlement and many who are socially conservative, as I have found in my own research into the Vivekananda Kendra.

Klaus Klostermaier (2006: 3), having acknowledged activist scholarly criticisms of Hindutva and that aspects of Hindutva activity are open to criticism, has stated that supporters of Hindutva-inspired ideology and organizations “articulate what a majority of Hindus believe in”. He argues that, as have Hindus in the past, “they take elements of Hindu tradition and reshape them in the light of their own time so as to provide answers to the needs of their contemporaries” (page 10; cf. fn. 1 below). Is it then the case that the motives and the effects of the actions of those who fall within what might more appropriately be regarded as a spectrum of Hindutva-influenced ideological positions and groups need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, if we are adequately to understand contemporary expressions of their understandings of what constitutes engaged Hinduism? Certainly, given their importance and level of activity in contemporary India, these organizations and their followers



warrant serious study, not exclusively in terms of their impact upon regional and national party politics, and in such a way as to capture, in Ninian Smart's (1973: 56) phrase, their "fine grain", which is revealed in their various practices and understandings of service.

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## Declarations

**Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals** This article is based on book-based research and did not involve human participants.

**Informed Consent** N/A.

**Ethical Approval** N/A.

**Consent to Participate** N/A.

**Consent to Publish** N/A.

**Conflict of Interest** I am not aware of any conflicts of interest. I am the sole author.

**Disclaimer** Please note that I am now retired and hold an emeritus post partly in recognition of my research. The research reflected in this article was all carried out in accordance with my university's code of research ethics at the time.

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