




RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hindutva in the shadow of the Mahatma: M. S. Golwalkar, M. K. Gandhi, and the RSS in post-colonial India

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Abstract

While many commentators have noted the Bharatiya Janata Party's more recent attempts at appropriating Gandhian imagery and symbolism, few have diverted their attention towards earlier attempts by Hindu Nationalists to do so. M. S. Golwalkar is the most prominent example of Hindu Nationalists who attempted to incorporate Gandhi into the pantheon of Hindutva (Hindu-ness). This article argues that Golwalkar reproduced Gandhian ideas as part of Hindu Nationalist thought, alongside carefully and consciously portraying himself as an ascetic politician, much like Gandhi, in the post-colonial leg of his career. He crafted a mode of Hindutva politics whereby his image as an extraordinarily able-bodied *yogi* became an archetype that was touted as a model for every *swayamsevak* to follow. Furthermore, the ideological shifts that are visible in Golwalkar's later publications created greater room in Hindutva thought to incorporate Gandhi's ideas and legacy into the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) ideological fold. Doing so allowed Golwalkar to tackle the challenges the RSS faced after Gandhi's assassination. This article locates Golwalkar and the RSS in the shadow of the Mahatma to not only broaden the understanding of Gandhi's legacy in post-colonial India but also to prompt a reappraisal of the nature of Hindutva itself. By exploring the Sangh's deep appropriation of Gandhi's ideas and legacy, one can begin to understand the malleable and flexible nature of the otherwise narrow majoritarian Hindu Nationalist project.

Keywords: Hindutva; Hindu Nationalism; M. S. Golwalkar; M. K. Gandhi; asceticism

Introduction

In 1972, a year before Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar's demise, Khushwant Singh, the famous author and journalist, interviewed him for *The Illustrated Weekly of India*.¹

¹Khushwant Singh, 'What happened when Khushwant Singh met RSS leader MS Golwalkar', *scroll.in*, published online on 13 August 2016, available at <https://scroll.in/article/813891/what-happened-when-khushwant-singh-met-rss-leader-ms-golwalkar>, [accessed 13 March 2024].

Singh premised his interview by confessing that Golwalkar was one of the few people he disliked without ever having met him. The role of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (hereafter the RSS or Sangh) in Gandhi's assassination, various communal riots, and their constant opposition to secularism made him wary of the organization and its second *sarsanghchalak* (Supreme Leader). However, as a journalist, Singh noted that he was thrilled to meet Golwalkar. The rest of his article was an account of how he was rather impressed by the 'calming' presence of a friendly and patient Golwalkar.² To his surprise, Golwalkar lived without guards in a humble house that smelled of incense sticks and flowers. Golwalkar had arranged a small room for the interview and invited along a few of his close friends, all dressed in spotless white kurtas. Singh described Golwalkar as a frail man in his sixties, with an 'unerasable smile' and 'sparkling eyes' and added that 'he looked like Indian Ho Chi Minh'.³ It was probably Golwalkar's elderly demeanour that prompted Singh to touch his feet out of respect as soon as he saw him. Golwalkar held his hands out to stop him from bending and invited him to start the interview. During the interview, Singh asked Golwalkar about the role of religion in an increasingly agnostic world. Golwalkar replied that Hinduism did not need to worry about such changes as it was not a religion or a dogma but a way of life. Soon after this question, Singh ended the interview and concluded his article by stating that he was impressed by Golwalkar, who seemed nothing like a fanatic religious leader of a violent organization but one who was welcoming and open to different points of view.

Less than a year after the interview, on Golwalkar's death, the *Times of India* called him 'the crusader for a strong India',⁴ and his fellow advocate of the politics of Hindutva, L. K. Advani, called him the Vivekananda of the twentieth century.⁵ Vinoba Bhave, the spiritual successor of M. K. Gandhi, remembered Golwalkar as a profoundly religious personality.⁶ A Congress leader remembered him as a '*karma yogi*, a self-realised soul', while others called him a *tapasvi* or an ascetic.⁷ Like Singh, not many saw Golwalkar as a hardliner who had subscribed to right-wing Hindu majoritarian political ideology. At the end of his life, Golwalkar was remembered as a spiritual man and revered as a *guru*. However, this image was carefully curated in the latter half of Golwalkar's career. Even though he remained politically aloof from the major political parties in the colonial period, the British perceived him as a political figure. A British police report on the RSS noted Golwalkar as 'a wary, astute and ... capable leader'.⁸ It was his acumen as a political organizer and leader of a paramilitaristic organization that intrigued colonial authorities in the 1940s, which is in stark contrast to his reputation among allies and rivals alike in the 1970s.

This article argues that Golwalkar consciously embraced an ascetic-nationalist framework from the early 1950s on. He crafted his image as a spiritually inclined political figure who came across more as a *baba* or saint rather than as an 'astute' leader

²*ibid.*

³*ibid.*

⁴'Golwalkar—The crusader for a strong India', *The Times of India*, 6 June 1973, p. 10.

⁵'Golwalkar's death tragic, beyond words: JS chief', *The Times of India*, 7 June 1973, p. 9.

⁶'Golwalkar respected other faiths—Vinoba Bhave', *The Times of India*, 8 June 1973, p. 6.

⁷C. P. Bhishikar, *Shri Guruji: Pioneer of a new era* (Bangalore: Sahitya Sindhu Prakashan, 1999) p. 192.

⁸'Report for the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh', Home Political, National Archives of India (hereafter NAI), File no. F-28-3 (1943), f. 16.

of the Sangh Parivar (the family of organizations affiliated to the RSS). By consciously casting himself, and by extension the RSS, as a repository of saintly virtue who lay outside the 'morally compromised' field of electoral and parliamentary politics, Golwalkar was able to tackle the challenges that the Nehruvian state presented to the organization in the middle of the twentieth century. This ascetic Hindu Nationalism took the shape of both ideological and tactical shifts in Golwalkar's career. He consciously constructed his image as a *baba* or ascetic through the RSS's propaganda texts and periodicals and styled himself as a yogic figure rather than a militaristic or party-political leader. Ideologically, Golwalkar moved away from older metaphors and symbols of Hindutva's epistemological roots in the nineteenth-century colonial discourses of race and civilization; his post-colonial works increasingly defined Indian and Hindu identities through spiritual and religious metaphors. This ideological shift was not a dramatic revision of his core beliefs—Golwalkar merely chose new metaphors and emphasized a different aspect of his vision of Hindu Nationalism to make his ideas more agreeable to changing sensibilities in the mid-twentieth century. In order to accomplish this subtle shift in emphasis, he created room in Hindutva's ideological framework to incorporate other ideologues who celebrated the Indian nation and its people for their spiritual credentials. While Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghosh, B. G. Tilak, and other such conservative ideologues were easier for the Sangh to co-opt, it is Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's addition to this list of figures that warrants some elucidation.

Through his anti-colonial mass movements, Gandhi provided a profoundly influential framework for political representation and popular leaders in post-colonial India. By setting the moral dimension of religion as a prerequisite for secular politics, Gandhi cemented the framework of the non-electoral ascetic political leader into the broader language of Indian politics.⁹ One can argue that Gandhi was only one on a longer list of figures who had deployed this ascetic-nationalistic political framework, but the success of his mass movements in the first half of the twentieth century cemented him as the most prominent example of such an ascetic-political figure.¹⁰ Gandhi's blend of asceticism and (anti-colonial) nationalism influenced many political actors in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. One might easily think of Vinoba Bhave, Jayaprakash Narayan, or, more recently, Anna Hazare as examples of such figures.¹¹ However, Hindu Nationalists, who often appear diametrically opposed to Gandhi,

⁹For a discussion on Gandhi's views on politics and religion, see Ajay Skaria, 'No politics without religion', in *Political Hinduism: The religious imaginations in public spheres*, (ed.) Vinay Lal (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 173–210; Karuna Mantena, 'Another realism: The politics of Gandhian nonviolence', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 106, no. 2, 2012, pp. 455–470; Nishikant Kolge, 'Gandhi: The mixture was the essence', *Journal of Dharma Studies*, vol. 3, 2020, pp. 207–214; Eijiro Hazama, 'The making of a globalized Hindu: The unknown genealogy of Gandhi's concept of *brahmacarya*', *Global Intellectual History*, vol. 6, no. 5, 2021, pp. 712–731.

¹⁰The intersection of asceticism and nationalism can be seen in various political actors other than Gandhi. For instance, see William R. Pinch, *Warrior ascetics and Indian empires* (New Delhi: Foundation, 2006); Chandrima Chakraborty, *Masculinity, asceticism, Hinduism: Past and present imaginings of India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2011).

¹¹For a discussion on Vinoba Bhave and Jay Prakash Narayan, see Devdutt, 'Gandhi's technique of social change and Jayaprakash Narayan', *Gandhi Marg*, vol. 2, no. 7, 1980, pp. 361–373; Devdutt, 'Vinoba and the Gandhian tradition', *Gandhi Marg*, vol. 5, no. 8, 1983, pp. 600–615; Thomas Weber, 'The lesson from the disciples: Is there a contradiction in Gandhi's philosophy of action?', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1,

also attempted to appropriate his ideas and legacy into their politics throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. The origins of Hindutva's opposition to Gandhi can be attributed to both Hindu Nationalists and their critics. On the one hand, Hindu Nationalists have consciously celebrated Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse.¹² On the other hand, most critics of Hindu Nationalists paint them as the quintessential un-Gandhian force, both for celebrating Godse as well as criticizing Gandhi's approach towards religion and Hinduism.¹³ However, despite the Sangh Parivar's (the family of organizations affiliated with the RSS) repeated criticism of Gandhi, its members have not shied away from appropriating and installing him into their pantheon of Hindu Nationalist ideologues.

While many commentators have noted the more recent attempts of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at co-opting Gandhian imagery and symbolism, few have diverted attention towards earlier attempts by Hindu Nationalists to do so.¹⁴ M. S. Golwalkar is the most prominent example of Hindu Nationalists who attempted to appropriate Gandhi. This article shall, therefore, not only show how Golwalkar reproduced Gandhian ideas as part of Hindu Nationalist thought but also how he carefully and consciously portrayed himself as a spiritual-ascetic politician, much like Gandhi, in the post-colonial leg of his career. Bringing such ascetic nationalism into the Sangh's ambit gave the organization the ammunition—both ideological and tactical—to slide back into mainstream politics. But beyond that, it created room in the Sangh's Hindu Nationalist repertoire for later figures to strategically adopt the ascetic-nationalist archetype whenever the need presented itself. Most recently, Narendra Modi has

1994, pp. 195–214; Narayan Hazary and Sanghamitra Buddhapriya (eds), *Immortal Sarvodaya* (New Delhi: A. P. H. Publishing Corporation, 2007); Taylor C. Sherman, 'A Gandhian answer to the threat of communism? Sarvodaya and postcolonial nationalism in India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2016, pp. 249–270. For a discussion on Anna Hazare's evocation of Gandhian politics, see Anand Teltumbde, 'Fasts, hunger, and hunger strikes', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 46, no. 26, 2011, pp. 10–11; Vinay Sitapati, 'What Anna Hazare's movement and India's new middle class say about each other', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 46, no. 30, 2011, pp. 39–44; Arvind Rajagopal, 'Visibility as a trap in the Anna Hazare campaign', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 46, no. 47, 2011, pp. 19–21; Sumanta Bannerjee, 'Anna Hazare, civil society and the state', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 46, no. 36, 2011, pp. 12–14; Mitu Sengupta, 'Anna Hazare and the idea of Gandhi', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 71, no. 3, 2012, pp. 593–601.

¹²See Yasmeen Serhan, 'What the veneration of Gandhi's killer says about India', *The Atlantic*, published online on 2 June 2022, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/06/godse-cult-gandhi-assassin-india/661154/>, [accessed 13 March 2024].

¹³For instance, see Ashis Nandy, 'Final encounter: The politics of the assassination of Gandhi', in his *At the edge of psychology: Essays in politics and culture* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 70–98.

¹⁴Vivek Kumar, 'Whose cleanliness?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 49, no. 43/44, 2014, pp. 13–15; Ronojoy Sen, 'Narendra Modi's makeover and the politics of symbolism', *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2016, pp. 98–111; Ramchandra Guha, 'How Modi is trying to use Gandhi's name to whitewash his dark record', *scroll.in*, published online on 18 July 2021, available at <https://scroll.in/article/1000459/ramachandra-guha-how-modi-is-trying-to-use-gandhis-name-to-whitewash-his-dark-record>, [accessed 14 March 2024]; Narendra Modi, 'Why India and the world need Gandhi', *The New York Times*, published online on 2 October 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/02/opinion/modi-mahatma-gandhi.html>, [accessed 13 March 2024]; Amrita Basu, 'Ascetic masculinity and right-wing populism in Hindu Nationalist India', in *The perils of populism*, (eds) Sarah Tobias and Arlene Stein (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2022), pp. 72–108; Arpita Chakraborty, 'Tracing the rise of ascetic masculinity in India', in *Women, gender and religious nationalism*, (eds) Amrita Basu and Tanika Sarkar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 195–223.

engaged in both claiming Gandhi's legacy for the BJP and styling himself as a 'fakir' or ascetic, wielding the ascetic nodes within Hindutva politics that Golwalkar pioneered.¹⁵

This exercise to excavate Golwalkar's ascetic nationalism, therefore, not only broadens the understanding of Gandhi's legacy in post-colonial India but also prompts a reappraisal of the nature of Hindutva itself. By exploring how it attempted to appropriate one of its political enemies, one can begin to understand the malleable and flexible nature of the Hindu Nationalist fascist project.¹⁶ Recent studies that shine a light on Hindutva's appetite for co-option and its assimilative tendencies have focused mainly on local studies or micro-histories of the margins of South Asian society.¹⁷ This article attempts to portray Hindutva in a similar light as this scholarship, but it does so by focusing on the intellectual and tactical aspects of Golwalkar's career in the middle of the twentieth century.

Golwalkar's conscious appropriation of Gandhian thought and his posing as a spiritual leader has not gone unnoticed in the literature on Hindu Nationalism. Richard Fox has alleged that the Sangh 'hijacked' the symbols and metaphors of Gandhian thought during the late 1960s and early 1970s when the Nehruvian regime and other political forces had lost interest in claiming Gandhi's legacy for themselves.¹⁸ Additionally, the scholarship looking at Golwalkar has noted that the second *sarsanghchhalak* had a keen affinity with spiritualism that was not seen in the Sangh's leadership during the colonial period.¹⁹ This article expands on both these arguments by demonstrating that the Sangh's turn towards Gandhi and the spiritual turn in Golwalkar's personhood and leadership happened soon after Gandhi's assassination in 1948. Furthermore, Golwalkar's appropriation of Gandhi ran deeper than a mere 'hijacking' of metaphors and symbols. As the discussion below will show, Golwalkar's intellectual shifts between

¹⁵HT Correspondent, 'PM Modi meditates in cave after offering prayers at Kedarnath', *Hindustan Times*, published online on 14 May 2020, available at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pm-modi-in-uttarakhand-to-offer-prayers-at-kedarnath-shrine/story-M52WZnEawYecbsLPRD4ZZO.html>, [accessed 13 March 2024].

¹⁶For a discussion on the fascist nature of the Hindu Nationalist movement, see Sumit Sarkar, 'The fascism of the Sangh Parivar', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 28, no. 5, 1993, pp. 163–167; Achin Vanaik, 'Situating threat of Hindu nationalism: Problems with the fascist paradigm', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 29, no. 28, 1994, pp. 1729–1748; Barbara Harriss-White, *India working: Essays on society and economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 248–255; Benjamin Zachariah, 'At the fuzzy edge of fascism: Framing the *volk* in India', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2015, pp. 639–655.

¹⁷For instance, see Pralay Kanungo, 'Hindutva's entry into a "Hindu province": Early years of RSS in Orissa', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 38, no. 31, 2003, pp. 3293–3303; Daniela Berti et al. (eds), *Cultural entrenchment of Hindutva* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011); Malini Bhattacharjee, 'Tracing the emergence and consolidation of Hindutva in Assam', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 51, no. 16, 2016, pp. 80–87; Anand Teltumbde (ed.), *Hindutva and Dalits: Perspectives for understanding communal praxis* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2020); Arkotong Longkumer, *The greater India experiment: Hindutva and the north east* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021); Badri Narayan, *Republic of Hindutva: How the sangh is reshaping Indian democracy* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2021).

¹⁸Richard G. Fox, 'Hindu nationalism in the making, or the rise of the Hindian', in his *Nationalist ideologies and the production of national culture* (Washington DC: American Anthropological Association, 1990), pp. 69–70. Also see Richard G. Fox, 'Gandhian socialism and Hindu nationalism: Cultural domination in the world system', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1987, pp. 233–247.

¹⁹Thomas Blom Hansen, *The saffron wave: Democracy and Hindu nationalism in modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 81.

the colonial and post-colonial periods are indicative of the ways in which Gandhian thought gained importance in his ideas about the nature of Hindu Nationalism as well as its necessity in defining the newly born Republic. In other words, Golwalkar took Gandhi's ideas seriously, even though he approached Gandhi's ascetic nationalism from the opposite end of the scale—while religion and spirituality were important to Gandhi's anti-colonial nationalist politics as sources of morality and ethics, Golwalkar's Hindu Nationalist politics was concerned primarily with religious and cultural identity. Nevertheless, as this article will discuss, he saw no contradiction between Gandhi's and the RSS's vision of politics in post-colonial India and attempted to present Gandhi's ideas as part of the 'genealogy' of Hindutva ideas.²⁰ In this sense, this was an act of *deep appropriation* and not just a matter of simply posing as Gandhian under the compulsions of politics in post-colonial India.

Indeed, the flirtatiously proximal relationship that Gandhi's ideas had with conservative Hindu Nationalism made it easier for Golwalkar and the Sangh to appropriate them.²¹ More recent analyses of Gandhi's intellectual development have shown that it is crucial to see that his conceptualization of religion (and its role in public and political life) was highly individualized, which contrasts with the Hindu majoritarian impulse of deploying religion as a more communal (in the traditional sense of the term) identity.²² However, it is equally important to remember that, especially by the mid-twentieth century, few of Gandhi's readers would have grasped these philosophical nuances that are revealed upon closer readings of Gandhi's texts. Various academic analyses that attempt to excavate the complexity of Gandhi's thought have observed that his political and ideological programme was often co-opted as a token of legitimacy by contemporary and later socio-political actors.²³ In this context, where Gandhi's words, ideas, and personhood served as a vehicle for political mobilization, it is not hard to see why his 'religious politics'²⁴ would make Gandhi's grammar of politics a mechanism for the Sangh to justify its Hindu Nationalist designs. But beyond that, Gandhi's ascetic or saintly conception of religion (as an individual or personal affair) further became a blueprint for Golwalkar, who consciously projected himself as an ascetic figure and whose spiritual, *yogic* persona was in turn touted as a model for every *swayamsevak* (volunteer) in the RSS. As this article will show, though the truth

²⁰A similar point is made about 'appropriation' in Golwalkar's context in Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Terrifying vision: M. S. Golwalkar, the RSS and India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2007), p. xviii. Sharma alludes to the fact that over time apparent acts of appropriation can normalize certain ideas in the broader politics of Hindutva in the public sphere.

²¹For a discussion on the conservative, Hindu Nationalist tilt in Gandhi's politics and thought, see Tanika Sarkar, 'Gandhi and social relations', in *The Cambridge companion to Gandhi*, (eds) Judith M. Brown and Anthony J. Parel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 173–195.

²²For instance, see Eijiro Hazama, 'The paradox of Gandhian secularism: The metaphysical implication behind Gandhi's "individualization of religion"', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 51, no. 5, 2017, pp. 1394–1438.

²³For two examples of such tokenization of Gandhi for different ends, see Shahid Amin, 'Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur district, Eastern UP, 1921–2', in *Subaltern studies III: Writings on South Asian history and society*, (ed.) Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 1–61; Vinay Lal, 'Modi, Mahatma and mendacity', *UCLA Social Sciences*, MANAS, published online on 14 October 2007, available at <https://southasia.ucla.edu/history-politics/gandhi/modi-mahatama-mendacity/>, [accessed 13 March 2024].

²⁴Skaria, 'No politics without religion', p. 176.

about Golwalkar's physical state was quite different from his image as an extraordinarily able-bodied ascetic, the act of constructing such an image offers insight into the ways in which Golwalkar and the RSS attempted to adapt to meet newer challenges. Thus, by styling himself as a *baba*, Golwalkar sought to take his place in a long line of ascetic or saintly-politicians. Gandhi was indeed the most prominent figure in this line and cast the longest shadow on the twentieth-century political sphere; Golwalkar sought refuge in the shadow of the Mahatma at a time when the Sangh was facing a threat to its existence in the form of a state-sanctioned ban on the organization. This deep appropriation of Gandhi by Golwalkar and the RSS, whereby asceticism and nationalism were married together in order to carve out an ascetic mode of Hindutva politics, is a crucial part of Golwalkar's contribution to the project of building a *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu nation/Hindu ethno-state). Analysing how such deep appropriation took shape reveals the ways in which Hindutva thinks and functions: some of its most vital intellectual and tactical manoeuvres are based on horizontally and vertically appropriating a longer political lineage for itself than may be the case in reality.

The first section of this article explores M. S. Golwalkar's attempts to appear closer to the Mahatma in the immediate aftermath of Gandhi's assassination in 1948. The second section expands on his appropriation of Gandhian ideas by tracing the shifts in Golwalkar's ideas between his two major texts, *We or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939) and *Bunch of Thoughts* (1966), and to show how the appropriation went deeper than surface-level 'hijacking'. The final section then demonstrates how Golwalkar's spiritual turn played out in the larger politics of the RSS by examining how his saintly image was constructed through travel accounts and reports in the RSS's English-language mouthpiece, *Organiser*, in the last decade of his career. The turn towards Gandhi and asceticism thus became a tool to rationalize and justify Golwalkar's and the RSS's position outside the domain of electoral politics—a position that the RSS was forced to accept in order to free Golwalkar from prison and have its ban lifted after Gandhi's assassination. Golwalkar argued that non-participation in electoral democracy meant that the RSS could truly work towards nation-building without focusing on attaining monetary or social gains for the party or the individual leaders.²⁵ This position proved convenient for the Sangh to return to the political mainstream with J. P. Narayan's movement, which borrowed heavily from Gandhian politics in his stand against the Indira Gandhi government in the 1970s.²⁶ The exercises in appropriating Gandhi helped the RSS cement this extra-electoral position right from 1948, which went on to give the Sangh Parivar unprecedented strategic and ideological influence in electoral and parliamentary politics without being accountable to an electorate.

²⁵Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, *Shri Guruji Sangrah*. Vol. 2 (New Delhi: Suruchi Prakashan, 2004), pp. 78–79.

²⁶Ghanshyam Shah, 'Ideology of Jayprakash Narayan', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 14, no. 9, 1979, pp. 511–514. For further discussion on the RSS and the Gandhian anti-Emergency movements of the 1970s, see Christophe Jaffrelot *The Hindu Nationalist movement and Indian politics: 1925 to the 1990s* (London: Hurst and Co., 1996), pp. 230–245; Arvind Rajagopal, 'The Emergency: A watershed in India's politics', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 54, no. 22, 2019, pp. 23–26; Christophe Jaffrelot and Pratinav Anil, *India's first dictatorship: The Emergency, 1975–77* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 243–245.

Gandhi, Godse, and Golwalkar

On the evening of 30 January 1948, Nathuram Godse brought a long-planned plot to its conclusion when he fired three shots at Gandhi, killing him on the spot. Godse was a member of the Hindu Nationalist party Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS. Although he later revised this fact in court, stating that he had left both organizations and the plot was a private design, various academic inquiries have revealed that Godse had retained membership of the RSS, that the plot to assassinate Gandhi had perhaps been designed by various actors, and Godse's role in it was not as central as had been deemed in the court.²⁷ However, in killing Gandhi, Godse created a storm that led to various developments in the newly independent Indian nation.

Immediately after his assassination (but also to some extent well before that), Gandhi became a source of legitimacy in the political sphere for both the Congress-led government as well as those who opposed it. On the one hand, the post-colonial state clearly had a contentious relationship with Gandhi-like political activism in the public domain, arguing that the need for civil disobedience had ended since the state was now in the hands of fellow countrymen who could be reasoned with through constitutional means.²⁸ On the other hand, the state did not shy away from claiming to represent Gandhi's legacy as a justification for its various developmental programmes.²⁹ Gandhi's personhood, as well as ideas, thus came to represent a unique set of symbols that became a source of legitimacy. Political leaders or even groups could resurrect a Gandhi of their own, be it through the invocation of his person (donning *khadi* or coarse cotton, presenting one's self as an ascetic or saintly politician, or even simply holding up his portrait during a protest march); by borrowing his ideas in order to criticize the government; or by justifying one's views on an issue by citing Gandhi's. All these methods of resurrection could be deployed regardless of whether or not one had any institutional links with Gandhi or his legacy, for example, through the various Gandhian organizations like the Sarva Seva Sangh or the All India Village Industries Association, based out of his ashram-towns.

One political group that had very little to do with Gandhi's institutional legacy is the Hindu Nationalists in the RSS. Both the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS were acutely critical of Gandhi's stance towards partition as well as the newly formed Pakistan, which was the immediate context behind Gandhi's assassination.³⁰ By his own admission, Godse assassinated Gandhi to avenge the perceived wrongdoings of partition.³¹

²⁷For details about the facts surrounding Godse and the assassination plot, see Dharendra K. Jha, *Gandhi's assassin: The making of Nathuram Godse and his idea of India* (London: Verso, 2023). Also see Jeevan Lal Kapur Commission, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Conspiracy to Murder Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs, 1970); and Tushar A. Gandhi, *'Let's kill Gandhi': A chronicle of his last days, the conspiracy, murder, investigation and trial* (New Delhi: Rupa and Co., 2007).

²⁸Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'In the name of politics: Democracy and the power of the multitude in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 40, no. 30, 2005, pp. 3293–3301.

²⁹Ornit Shani, 'Gandhi, citizenship and the resilience of Indian nationhood', *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 15, no. 6–7, 2011, pp. 659–678; Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking small: The United States and the lure of community development* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 66–100.

³⁰Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist movement*, pp. 81–87. Joya Chatterji, *The spoils of partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 261–275.

³¹For details on Godse's plot to assassinate Gandhi, see G. D. Khosla, *The murder of the Mahatma* (Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House, 1965); *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Conspiracy to Murder Mahatma Gandhi*.

Gandhi's assassination naturally prompted a swift response from the newly formed post-colonial state.³² Godse and his co-conspirators were tried and (most of them) found guilty, while the RSS was banned and many of its members arrested. Among those arrested was its *sarsanghchalak*, M. S. Golwalkar. He spent over a year in prison, communicating with Home Minister Vallabhbhai Patel in order to negotiate both a lifting of the ban on the RSS as well as the release of all its *swayamsevaks*.³³ Most commentators identify these negotiations as the moment when Golwalkar succumbed to the hegemony of the post-colonial regime, with the popular view being that he begrudgingly agreed to Patel's demands while still celebrating Gandhi's assassination privately or in RSS circles.³⁴ However, even before his arrest and subsequent negotiations, Golwalkar's reaction to the assassination was not that of open celebration or support for Godse.

Immediately after the news of Gandhi's assassination broke, Golwalkar expressed his disbelief and shock over Godse's actions. Quick to realize the damage that the assassination could do to the organization, Golwalkar defended the RSS's character while sending out a disciplining message to the cadre at the same time. Golwalkar, in his capacity as the *sarsanghchalak*, issued a nationwide communiqué ordering RSS *shakhas* (local branches or chapters) to halt all activities to mourn the sudden loss of Gandhi for the customary 13 days, as per Hindu rituals. He wrote condolence letters to Nehru, Patel, and Gandhi's eldest son, and issued a press note expressing his disbelief and sorrow.³⁵ He called Gandhi a unifying force of the newly partitioned nation.³⁶ In the press release, Golwalkar expressed his desire to carry Gandhi's legacy forward by rejuvenating national life with unity, love, and peace. He added that it was a time of collective testing for the nation, and it was more necessary than ever to secure a harmonious and stable future.³⁷ He offered the RSS's support for restoring peace amid the turmoil in the country. All of this was, of course, an opportunity for Golwalkar to fashion the RSS as a selfless and patriotic organization that upheld the same spirit of national harmony as Gandhi's teachings:

Being pragmatic (*yukta-bhaav*), cordial (*ruchir vaani*) and having a vision that is in the national interest (*rashtrahitaek drishti*), and bringing various tendencies

³²For a discussion of how the state responded to Gandhi's death and used it to establish its own hegemony in the political sphere, see Yasmin Khan, 'Performing peace: Gandhi's assassination as a critical moment in the consolidation of the Nehruvian state', in *From subjects to citizens: Society and the everyday state in India and Pakistan, 1947-1970*, (eds) Taylor C. Sherman, William Gould and Sarah Ansari (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 64-89.

³³For details regarding Golwalkar's negotiations, see Rakesh Ankit, 'How the ban on the RSS was lifted', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 47, no. 16, 2012, pp. 71-78

³⁴The popular view of the RSS paying lip-service to legal and democratic sensibilities while privately celebrating Godse and Gandhi's assassination comes from both initial reports of RSS members celebrating Gandhi's death as well as subsequent private celebrations of Godse that continue to this day. While this view is not entirely inaccurate, it does obfuscate some important developments around the time of Gandhi's assassination which this article looks at.

³⁵Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, 'Pratibandh Parv', in *Shri Guruji Sangrah. Vol. 10* (New Delhi: Suruchi Prakashan, 2004), pp. 5-7.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 8.

(*pravritiyon*) together, the responsibility falls on all of us to steer the nation's ship (*rashtra-nauka*) ahead safely. On behalf of an organization (*sangathan*) that believes in this message, while experiencing the nation's sorrow intensely [and] remembering that late great soul (*divangat punyaatma*), I pray to the Lord (*parampita parameshwar*) to give us inspiration and insight (*prerna aur buddhi*) to build a truly eternal integrity (*sacchi chiranjeevi ekatmata*) in this period of extreme difficulty (*bheeshan aapatti*).³⁸

Through such letters and press statements, Golwalkar not only paid customary tribute to Gandhi but also attempted to put a check on *swayamsevaks* by urging them to remain 'pragmatic' and 'cordial' by extending 'love and service' to detractors, both in the wake of the assassination and while on the receiving end of public opinion.³⁹ The need to discipline his cadres would have arisen from reports that various Hindu Mahasabha-ites and RSS *swayamsevaks* were seen celebrating in the streets upon hearing of Gandhi's death.⁴⁰ Gandhi's assassination also provided the Nehruvian state, which was in its infancy, with an opportunity to discipline and check 'communal' right-wing organizations like the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha, thereby making a compelling case for cementing secularism as a national doctrine.⁴¹ Sensing this animosity towards religious hardliners, Golwalkar distanced himself from Godse, Gandhi's assassin. Such post-facto distancing is part of a larger trend: the RSS has always been quick to distance itself publicly from violence, even when its workers have infamously attacked Dalits and religious minorities.⁴² Thus, Golwalkar understood the value of strategically appearing virtuous and upholding righteous behaviour in the public sphere, which he attempted to do through his public statements and letters at the time. Interestingly, though, he never mentioned Godse by name in any of these letters and only referred to him indirectly on two occasions.

³⁸Ibid., p. 6.

³⁹Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, 'Appendix III: Statement of Sri M. S. Golwalkar, Sarsanghchalak of the R.S.S. issued to the press before his arrest', in *Justice on trial: A collection of historic letters between Sri Guruji and the government, 1948-49* (Bangalore: Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 1969), p. 65.

⁴⁰Multiple sources in the government attest to the celebrations of the assassination by Hindu Nationalist outfits. For example, see Nehru, 'From a letter dated 5 February 1948', in *Letters for a nation: From Jawaharlal Nehru to his chief ministers, 1947-1963*, (ed.) Madhav Khosla (Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2014), p. 317. There was also news coverage of such acts, for example in 'Gandhi murder plot', *The Times of India*, 6 February 1948, p. 1.

⁴¹For a discussion on how the Nehruvian state consolidated itself in the wake of Gandhi's death, see Khan, 'Performing peace'; Mira Debs, 'Using cultural trauma: Gandhi's assassination, partition and secular nationalism in post-Independence India', *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2013, pp. 635-653; William Gould and Sarah Ansari, *Boundaries of belonging: Localities, citizenship and right in India and Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 26-36.

⁴²For a discussion on the RSS and the use of violence, see Jayanth Deshmukh, 'Terrorising Muslims: Communal violence and emergence of Hindutva in India', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2021, pp. 317-336; Dibyesh Anand, 'Anxious sexualities: Masculinity, nationalism and violence', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2007, pp. 257-269; Sudha Ramachandran, 'Hindutva violence in India: Trends and implications', *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2020, pp. 15-20; Tanika Sarkar, 'Semiotics of terror: Muslim children and women in Hindu Rashtra', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 37, no. 28, 2002, pp. 2872-2876; Sathianathan Clarke, 'Hindutva, religious and ethnocultural minorities, and Indian-Christian-theology', *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 95, no. 2, 2002, pp. 197-226.

Golwalkar's first reference to Godse was when he wrote to Nehru about his grief after learning that the 'revered Mahatma' (*poojya mahatma ji*) had been killed 'by some senseless corrupt-hearted man' (*kisi avichaari bhrasht-hridaya vyakti ne*), lamenting his Indian nationality.⁴³ He did state though that even if the assassin had been from an enemy state (*shatru rashtra*), the assassination would have been equally untenable (*asamarthaneeya*).⁴⁴ In his second reference to Godse, which was made in his press note written in English, Golwalkar was more concerned with his Hindu identity. He stated that the assassination was 'a tragedy of unparalleled magnitude the more so because the evil genius [Godse] is his [Gandhi's] countryman and a Hindu.'⁴⁵ By invoking Godse's religious identity, Golwalkar wanted to show that as a Hindu himself, he now had to carry the burden of guilt that a fellow Hindu had killed the father of the nation. To absolve the RSS and himself of this guilt, he implied that the murder by a Hindu was an exceptional case of violence and not a characteristic of Hindus. Thus, for Golwalkar, Godse's action was an un-Hindu act; true Hindu-ness, which he thus claimed to represent, could not have inspired Godse. Golwalkar claimed he stood alongside Gandhi and the rest of the Hindu population; he was as one with the bereaved and wronged. Godse was an 'un-Hindu' violent perpetrator. Golwalkar further implied that, like Gandhi and himself, virtuous Hindus were non-violent. He was on the side of virtue and righteousness and, thus, undeserving of the public suspicion of his involvement in Gandhi's assassination. However, despite such attempts to establish common ground between Gandhi and the RSS, Golwalkar was soon arrested and the RSS outlawed.⁴⁶

The ban on the RSS lasted for roughly 15 months, with a constant back and forth of letters between the Home Ministry and Golwalkar. By the end of 1948, Golwalkar realized that the government would not lift the restrictions on the Sangh. So, in December 1948, on Golwalkar's instructions, members of the RSS launched a 'peaceful *satyagraha*'.⁴⁷ Golwalkar announced the decision to launch a series of peaceful protests against the government's unwillingness to lift the ban through a public letter addressed to all *swayamsevak*s on the ground, in hiding, and in prison; the letter later came to be referred to as '*Ran-nad*' (battle cry) or 'Clarion call' in the RSS's own historical accounts.⁴⁸ Although Golwalkar did not use the term *satyagraha* in his letter, the government and the press deployed the Gandhian term to refer to the Sangh's acts of civil disobedience; some *swayamsevak*s did take up the term for themselves

⁴³Golwalkar, 'Pratibandh Parv', p. 6.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 8.

⁴⁶Correspondent, 'Leaders of Hindu Mahasabha arrested', *Times of India*, 3 February 1948, p. 7; Robert Trumbull, 'India bars groups teaching violence', *New York Times*, 3 February 1948, p. 1.

⁴⁷'Satyagraha by R.S.S. workers all over India: Boys and girls among persons arrested by police', *Times of India*, 11 December 1948, p. 7.

⁴⁸Golwalkar, 'Swayamsevakon Ke Naam Patra', in *Shri Guruji Sangrah. Vol. 10*, pp. 46–49. An English version of the letter was also simultaneously issued and is replicated in M. S. Golwalkar, 'Appendix XII: Sri Guruji's clarion call to swayamsevak to restart the organisation in spite of the ban', in Golwalkar, *Justice on trial*, pp. 87–91. This article uses the English version to provide a translation of the Hindi for this letter, although the Hindi version is cited primarily.

in the ephemeral literature that circulated at the time.⁴⁹ Golwalkar's letter calling upon the *swyamsevaks* to rise up peacefully for truth and justice nonetheless gave the Sangh a somewhat Gandhi-like stance. The government's 'intolerance' (*asahishnuta*) and 'narrow-mindedness' (*sankeerna manovritti*) had forced the Sangh to protest against its dishonourable methods of oppression, alleged Golwalkar.⁵⁰ He claimed that the government had no evidence against the Sangh, and yet hundreds of *swyamsevaks* still suffered arbitrarily at the Congress's authoritarian hands; the government only wanted to strengthen the position of one party by stamping out another, he alleged.⁵¹ He added that God showered 'His blessings' where 'truth' (*satya*) and 'justice' (*nyaya*) lie, which Golwalkar claimed were on their side. He thus characterized the Sangh as a non-violent force that was fighting a battle for truth and justice against the self-preserving and tyrannical post-colonial state, reminiscent of the Gandhian calls for mass movements against unjust colonial rule in the recent past. After authoritatively differentiating right from wrong and virtue from sin, Golwalkar concluded that a series of nationwide peaceful protests was the only ethical way of opposing such an oppressive state, dubbing it a 'sacred duty to refuse to submit to arbitrary tyranny.'⁵² Golwalkar further blatantly equated the Congress with the British colonial state in declaring that tolerating the government's 'atrocious tyranny' was a 'humiliating ... insult to the honour of the citizens of free India and a blow to the prestige of' India's state.⁵³

During the *satyagraha*, RSS members restarted daily *shakhas* and the Sangh's other usual activities, defying state directives along the lines of civil disobedience.⁵⁴ This came in stark contrast to the Sangh's erstwhile unwillingness to participate in the Gandhian *satyagraha* movements during the colonial period.⁵⁵ One of the conditions for the lifting of the ban on the RSS was that the organization would refrain from participating in electoral politics.⁵⁶ Claiming to be an inheritor of the legacy of the Gandhian mass movements was one of the critical tools that allowed the RSS to style itself as a cultural organization. This notion gave the RSS an opportunity to remain politically active while never directly contesting a single election. Thus, within a few months of Gandhi's death, the RSS and Golwalkar made proactive attempts to espouse

⁴⁹For an instance of the Sangh's literature using 'satyagraha' contemporaneously to describe their protest, see 'Rashtriya Swyam Sevak Sangh activities: Satyagraha launched by Rashtriya Swyam Sevak Sangh', Home Political, NAI, File no. F 74/1 (1948), f. 64.

⁵⁰Golwalkar, 'Swayamsevakon Ke Naam Patra', p. 49.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid., p. 48.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Rashtriya Swyam Sevak Sangh activities: Satyagraha launched by Rashtriya Swyam Sevak Sangh', Home Political, NAI, File no. F 74/1 (1948).

⁵⁵Pawan Kulkarni, 'History shows how patriotic the RSS really is', *The Wire*, published online on 17 April 2017, available at <https://thewire.in/history/rss-hindutva-nationalism>, [accessed 13 March 2024]; Shamsul Islam, 'Fact check: The RSS had no role in India's freedom struggle', *Indian Cultural Forum*, published online on 22 March 2018 available at <https://indianculturalforum.in/2018/03/22/rss-freedom-struggle/>, [accessed 13 March 2024].

⁵⁶'Government lift ban on R. S. S. organisation: Leader's undertaking to abjure violence', *The Times of India*, 13 July 1949, p. 1. Also see Ankit, 'How the ban on the RSS was lifted', p. 78.

the Gandhian idiom of protest and penance in order to navigate the challenges it faced in the post-colonial political landscape.

Manoeuvring towards Gandhian ideas

Golwalkar's deep appropriation of Gandhi was not limited to opposing the state through *satyagraha*. He did not shy away from incorporating the intellectual nodes of Gandhi's ideas. As noted above, Fox has argued that Hindu Nationalists engaged in a dishonest 'ideological hijacking' of Gandhian ideas in the 1970s, whereby they adopted Gandhian metaphors and slogans without their 'radical' content.⁵⁷ Fox's concept of the 'hijack' has been taken up by various other scholars looking at Hindu Nationalism in this period to argue that Hindu Nationalists borrowed the Gandhian idiom without its 'radical ideals'.⁵⁸ However, such a view downplays the tendencies within Gandhian thought towards cultural nationalism as well as the RSS's appetite for co-option and appropriation.⁵⁹ Additionally, the 'hijack' framework fails to take into account the right-ward tilt within the Congress, exemplified by some of its Gandhian-conservatives like Purushottamdas Tandon.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Fox states that the 'hijack' only took place in the 1970s, by which time the Indira Gandhi-led Congress had moved firmly beyond the Gandhian programme and built its own image independent of his legacy. However, as the discussion so far has shown, the process of the Sangh's appropriation of Gandhi had started well before that in the domain of tactics and ideas.

Golwalkar's intellectual development from the 1950s onwards is an example of how he created more and more room to incorporate Gandhi's ideas into Hindu Nationalist thought. As many scholars have noted, in the period after the ban on the RSS was lifted, Golwalkar became interested in spiritual and cultural themes.⁶¹ This development was in contrast to Golwalkar's (and indeed Savarkar's) erstwhile emphasis on direct political action and racial notions of nationhood. This is clearly visible in the stark contrast in tone as well as references to other ideologues and scholars in his two published works: *We or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939) and *Bunch of Thoughts* (1966). Many critical commentaries on Hindu Nationalism and Golwalkar rely mostly on Golwalkar's 1939 book *We or Our Nationhood Defined* to analyse and understand the concept of the *Hindu Rashtra*.⁶²

⁵⁷Fox, 'Hindu nationalism in the making', pp. 69–70.

⁵⁸For example, see Hansen, *Saffron wave*, p. 85.

⁵⁹For a discussion on the cultural nationalism and anti-Islamism within Gandhian politics, see Sumit Sarkar, 'Nationalism and poverty: Discourses of development and culture in 20th century India', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2008, pp. 429–445; Amalendu Misra, *Identity and religion: Foundations of anti-Islamism in India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004), pp. 64–109.

⁶⁰For a discussion on Purushottam Das Tandon and other right-wing conservatives in Congress, see William Gould, 'Congress radicals and Hindu militancy: Sampurnanand and Purushottam Das Tandon in the politics of the United Provinces, 1930–1947', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2002, pp. 619–655.

⁶¹Walter K. Andersen and Sridhar Damle, *The brotherhood in saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu revivalism* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1987), pp. 43–45; Hansen, *Saffron wave*, pp. 80–92; Pralay Kanungo, *RSS's tryst with politics: From Hedgewar to Sudarshan* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2002), pp. 51–52.

⁶²For instance, see Shamsul Islam, *Know the RSS: Based on Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh documents* (New Delhi: Pharos Media, 2002), pp. 5–6, 38–39; Marzia Casolari, 'Hindutva's foreign tie-up in the 1930's: Archival evidence', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2000, pp. 218–228.

Golwalkar's *We*, published in the late colonial period, was a controversial text in which he praised Hitler and Mussolini and argued that Nazism had served the German nation well on its path towards growth (thus implying that India ought to follow in the footsteps of Nazi Germany).⁶³ Furthermore, Golwalkar elaborated on the Savarkarite notions of race and nationhood, emphasizing the link between blood and soil as determinants of racial/civilizational identity (as opposed to genetics or physiology).⁶⁴ In order to do this, Golwalkar referred to European political theorists like John Burgess, Ludwig Gumplowicz, and Raymond G. Gettell, whose works were based on Social Darwinism and race theory in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁶⁵ One can easily surmise the extent to which Golwalkar's *We* relied on race theory, Orientalism, and pseudo-geography in order to theorize an exclusionary, Hindu-centric conception of nationhood for those living in South Asia.⁶⁶ In other words, *We* belonged right alongside the pre-war race theory texts about nationhood. In contrast, Golwalkar's second book attempted to move away from the tone of his first book.

Published in 1966, Golwalkar's *Bunch of Thoughts* was an anthology of his speeches and articles written as the *sarsanghchalak* of the RSS, covering a time span of about 25 years between 1940 and 1965. It presented a growingly muted version of the Hindu Nationalist imagination of the Indian self and nationhood that skips out the eugenicist and racial references, replacing them with more religious and mythological references that were based on a different kind of internalized Orientalist discourse.⁶⁷ This is not to say that he no longer saw Muslims, Christians, and communists as 'internal threats' to the nation.⁶⁸ Nor did he abandon the project of an *Akhand Bharat* (undivided India) and *Hindu Rashtra*. However, perhaps owing to the growing critique to which race-based analyses were subjected in the mid-twentieth century, he no longer relied solely on Savarkarite race theory in order to justify or legitimize these goals of nation-making. Interestingly, the introduction to a *Bunch of Thoughts*, which was penned by the anti-communist libertarian M. A. Venkata Rao, but closely supervised by Golwalkar, expended the two opening pages on highlighting the importance of Gandhian thought for the processes of de-colonizing and nation-building.⁶⁹ Gandhi's name was listed

⁶³Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, *We or our nationhood defined* (Nagpur: Bharat Publications, 1939), pp. 34–36.

⁶⁴For a discussion on Savarkar's views on race, see Luna Sabastian, 'History, international radicalism and the revolutionary in the political thought of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar: ca. 1906–1923', PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2015.

⁶⁵Golwalkar, *We*, pp. 17–18.

⁶⁶The influence of European civilizational discourses on Golwalkar and Hindu Nationalists in general has been noted by various commentators. For example, see Romila Thapar, 'Syndicated Hinduism', in *Hinduism reconsidered*, (eds) Günther-Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke (New Delhi: Manohar, 1989), pp. 54–81; Thomas Blom Hansen, 'Globalisation and nationalist imaginations: Hindutva's promise of equality through difference', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 31, no. 10, 1996, pp. 603–616; Sharma, *Terrifying vision*, pp. xxii–xl.

⁶⁷For a discussion on the relationship between Golwalkar's spiritual ideas and the internalization of orientalist discourses, see Hansen, *Saffron wave*, pp. 81–82.

⁶⁸Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, *Bunch of thoughts* (Bangalore: Vikrama Prakashan, 1966), pp. 166–194.

⁶⁹Golwalkar's relationship with Rao during the drafting of the introduction was highlighted in the Publisher's note to the third edition of *Bunch of thoughts*, published in the 1990s. In it innumerable instances of passages about Golwalkar's views on Gandhi were interspersed in the text, most probably

among the 'galaxy' of 'typical names' of the men he deemed responsible for 'reawakening' India's national culture, including Vivekananda, Dayanand Saraswati, Aurobindo, Tilak, Hedgewar, and Savarkar.⁷⁰ By positioning Golwalkar and the RSS as the true inheritors of the 'genuine purity and power' of Gandhian thought, Rao argued for a cultural and moral turn in the post-colonial political sphere.⁷¹ In this view, the Nehruvian Congress did not understand the real nature of India's society and culture, and the secularist-socialistic model of development was ignorant of the 'foundational ideas of the past' that were deeply entrenched in Indian society.⁷² While Gandhi was able to recognize and build a movement in light of these foundational ideas, Rao argued, Nehru's modernist outlook was 'infinitely more abstract and superficial, more mechanical and charged with unsolved problems of class conflict', rendering the Nehruvian Congress unworthy of its Gandhian ancestry.⁷³ Rao thus hailed Gandhi's ideas as the bedrock of Hindu Nationalist nation-building led by the RSS, placing Golwalkar's anthology as being born out of the Gandhian tradition of thinking outside the hegemony of 'western values' in favour of 'spiritual nationalism'.⁷⁴ Golwalkar himself continued to assert this stance as well as the claim that under him the RSS was the true inheritor of Gandhi's legacy.⁷⁵

Throughout *Bunch of Thoughts*, as well as elsewhere, Golwalkar continued to present his ideas as being more Gandhian than both Gandhian ideologues and Gandhi himself. A typical strategy was to establish the importance of a particular point of view by stating how Gandhi or other Gandhians also thought along those lines. But Golwalkar was always quick to point out that the solutions sought by Gandhians were either inadequate or not radical enough. For example, Golwalkar argued that while Gandhi's use of the term 'Harijan' (children of God) for Dalits was an honest and well-intentioned attempt to reform the problems in the caste system, it would only sow the seeds of a 'separatist consciousness' among Hindus in the long run by forcing them to think of themselves as a privileged group, rather than one among a group of equals within the Hindu fold.⁷⁶ This was despite the fact that Golwalkar himself never stopped referring to Dalits as Harijans.⁷⁷

Similarly, in highlighting how communism was a threat to the Indian people, Golwalkar referenced the case of the anti-communist rhetoric in Vinoba Bhave's land-donation (*Bhoodan*) movement:

... the masses will have a suspicious feeling that all such movements, which come up in the name of their uplift are only half-hearted and deceptive. They may very well say, 'Now that the Communists are making headway, you want to

by the publishers. However, many of these passages were taken from articles or speeches that Golwalkar had produced after the first edition of *Bunch of thoughts* was published. These were recently compiled in the collected volume of Golwalkar's writings and speeches.

⁷⁰M. A. Venkata Rao, 'Introduction', in Golwalkar, *Bunch of thoughts*, p. xxi.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid., pp. xxii–xxiv.

⁷³Ibid., p. xxiii.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. xxxiv.

⁷⁵'Guruji on Mahatma Gandhi', *Organiser*, vol. 47, no. 9, 1995, p. 7.

⁷⁶Golwalkar, *Bunch of thoughts*, p. 110.

⁷⁷For instance, see 'Shri Guruji on the caste system', *Organiser*, vol. 22, no. 28, 1969, p. 3.

come forward with all these reforms and promises! We would rather prefer the blunt Communists. They are at least honest and bold. They mean what they say and we can believe them.' Thus, contrary to expectations, [the *Bhoodan*] movement may pave the way for Communists. In fact, to work merely with a view to counteracting Communism is always dangerous. It is only the inculcation of a right and positive faith that can make the masses rise above the base appeal of Communism.⁷⁸

In Golwalkar's eyes, while Bhave's suspicion of communism may have been correct, his methods to counter the communist 'threat' through 'reactionary' *Bhoodan* was not enough to dissuade the masses. The 'positive faith' that Golwalkar claimed he advocated could only be brought about by 'evol[ing] our own way of life based on the eternal truths discovered by our ancient seers...', something that the RSS claimed to be doing.⁷⁹ Such a position afforded Golwalkar a distant affinity to Gandhians and Gandhi, whereby he could portray both distance and closeness with the latter in order to appeal to post-colonial sensibilities as well as offer a critique, so to speak, from within.

As mentioned above, this shift in Golwalkar's tone could have been based on the changing attitudes towards race theory and Orientalism in the post-Second World War period. Along with the wider criticism of the passages that celebrated German and Italian fascism, this critique would have been what forced him to publicly denounce his authorship of *We* in 1963. Golwalkar claimed at a press conference that *We* was an abridged translation of the Marathi book *Rashtra Mimansa*, originally authored by Ganesh Damodar Savarkar (alias Babarao Savarkar, V. D. Savarkar's elder brother) and was not his own original work.⁸⁰ This continued to be the RSS's official stance on the book as well.⁸¹ However, even a surface-level investigation of these claims reveals that Golwalkar did write *We*. While he acknowledged G. D. Savarkar's influence on him in the preface to *We*, Golwalkar clearly identified himself as the sole and original author of the text. Even though he explicitly mentioned Savarkar's *Rashtra Mimansa* as being a source of inspiration for his ideas in *We*, he went on to state that he considered Savarkar's text so vital that it should be translated into English for a wider audience.⁸² In light of such proof of Golwalkar's authorship, one must, therefore, look at his denunciation of *We* in terms of curating a more palatable image of himself in the post-colonial context. The overt attempts to lay claim to Gandhian ideas in the opening paragraphs of *Bunch of Thoughts* help to define the contours of this more palatable image. Golwalkar's attempts to fashion himself as a Gandhi-like figure only intensified after *Bunch of Thoughts* was published. Thus, the act of denouncing *We* was, in essence, an act of embracing Gandhi.

⁷⁸Golwalkar, *Bunch of thoughts*, p. 190.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, p. 194

⁸⁰Dhananjay Keer, *Veer Savarkar* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1966), p. 527. Also see Des Raj Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (New Delhi: Radha Krishna Prakashan, 1979), pp. 80–81, who believes Golwalkar's claims to be true, albeit for different reasons.

⁸¹Akshaya Mukul, 'RSS officially disowns Golwalkar's book', *Times of India*, 6 March 2006, p. 15.

⁸²Golwalkar, *We*, p. 4. One can probably also gather from this that Golwalkar might have borrowed (or even plagiarized) some of his ideas from *Rashtra Mimansa*, but it seems clear that the text of *We* was not a translation of *Rashtra Mimansa*, since he highlighted the need for a translation by someone in the future.

On 2 October 1969, Gandhi's centennial birth anniversary and three years after the publication of *Bunch of Thoughts*, Golwalkar addressed a gathering of the *swayamsevaks* in Sangli, Maharashtra. His speech highlighted his relationship with Gandhi and his engagement with Gandhi's political and philosophical contributions.⁸³ Delivered in Marathi, the speech was later translated into Hindi and English and published in the *Panchjanya* and *Organiser*, respectively the Hindi and English mouthpieces of the RSS. This address was an excellent example of Golwalkar's attempts to assimilate Gandhi into the pantheon of Hindu Nationalist ideologues. Golwalkar began his address by reminding the audience that the Sangh was the only organization that invoked Gandhi's name every morning in their daily *shakha*.⁸⁴ The veracity of this claim is hard to verify—did *swayamsevaks* really invoke Gandhi, or was this just rhetoric?—but the claim itself points to a willingness to stand closer to Gandhi. In the Sangh's parlance, the tradition of praying to great past personalities akin to 'gods' in their stature was called *prataha-smaran* (morning remembrance). *Bharat bhakti stotra* (sources of devotion to India) was a compilation of great men picked from India's history that fitted the Sangh's *Hindu Rashtra* narrative. This list included Rana Pratap, Prithviraj Chauhan, Tilak, and Savarkar, among other 'Hindu' icons.⁸⁵ The RSS added Gandhi to this list sometime in 1963.⁸⁶

Later, in his 1969 speech, Golwalkar claimed that he found no contradiction between Gandhi's principles and the Sangh's aspirations.⁸⁷ For him, both followed the true path of Hinduism and, thus, there were no significant differences that overshadowed the Sangh's allegiance to *Bharatvarsha* (the Indian nation). Golwalkar avowed Gandhi's greatness by referring to his multiple contributions to Indian society and the world. For Golwalkar, Gandhi fought the British in India and was a champion of free nations worldwide.⁸⁸ But, more importantly, stated Golwalkar, at the same time, Gandhi also stressed the need for social reforms and decoupling of Indians from Western influence and, thus, hailed an indigenous vision for India.⁸⁹ This was a vital point in Golwalkar's reading of Gandhi since it reinforced the Sangh's criticism of the Nehruvian state as being highly influenced by 'Western' ideals of state-led developmental planning. Golwalkar thus used Gandhi's disdain for modern industrial society as one of the bases for mounting an attack on Nehruvian developmentalism.⁹⁰

Golwalkar also highlighted Gandhi's disciplinary and ascetic qualities in providing a template for *swayamsevaks*. Praising Gandhi, he said,

⁸³ Golwalkar, *Shri Guruji Sangrah. Vol. 1* (New Delhi: Suruchi Prakashan, 2004), pp. 208–216.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Smriti Kak Ramachandran, 'RSS and Gandhi: Finding common ground', *Hindustan Times*, published online on 1 October 2020, available at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/rss-and-gandhi-finding-common-ground/story-fk1LCqATxApDw0df4hfODP.html>, [accessed 13 March 2024].

⁸⁷ Golwalkar, *Shri Guruji Sangrah. Vol. 1*, p. 214.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 209–210.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

⁹⁰ Criticizing Nehruvian developmentalism from a Gandhian perspective was common practice for various other ideologues during Golwalkar's leadership as well. This is best exemplified by Deendayal Upadhyaya, the principal economic thinker in the Hindu Nationalist movement during the 1960s. Particularly, see Deendayal Upadhyaya, *Integral humanism* (Noida: Jagriti Prakashan, 1992).

Mahatma Gandhiji was born as an ordinary individual, but because of his dedication, he reached the pinnacle of manhood. His life should be an ideal example and we all should change ourselves accordingly ... Babu Genu was not educated, but his sacrifice is an example of Gandhi's great influence. [Gandhi] turned dust to gold. He inspired ordinary people to do extraordinary things.⁹¹

Using the example of Babu Genu, an Indian millworker who was killed by a colonial officer for raising Gandhian slogans, Golwalkar stressed a crucial part of Gandhi's legacy. He reminded his audience of Gandhi's influence among hundreds of Indians who upheld him as Mahatma and respected his ideas. In doing so, he attempted to remind the *swayamsevak*s of the influence that Gandhi had in Indian peoples' minds, thus implying that the *swayamsevak*s should also be cognizant of that when they engaged with people outside the Sangh.

However, Gandhi's grip on Indian minds, in Golwalkar's reading, was also the result of something that the Sangh stood for. According to Golwalkar, everything that was 'great' about Gandhi—his ability to bring people together for a greater cause and his stamina to fight against injustice, all of which a *swayamsevak* should also nurture in their own selves—was because he was a Hindu. He quoted Gandhi's famous statement—'I am a staunch *Sanatani* Hindu'—to establish the centrality of Hinduism to being a Gandhian.⁹² The quote continued, 'I am a staunch Hindu, and so I can love not only the whole of humanity but the whole of creation.'⁹³ Golwalkar further said that Gandhi's religious understanding of Hinduism shaped the central tenets of Gandhian philosophy: *satya* (truth) and *ahimsa* (non-violence).⁹⁴

Later in his speech, Golwalkar went on to use another quote by Gandhi on his views on Hinduism:

Gandhi wrote in an article on Future of Hinduism that Hinduism is a relentless pursuit of truth, and it today has become moribund, inactive, irresponsive to growth [...] it is because we are fatigued, and as soon as the fatigue is over, Hinduism will burst upon the world with brilliance perhaps unknown before. The responsibility of translating this prophesy of Mahatma into reality has now fallen on our shoulders.⁹⁵

Golwalkar thus concluded that the RSS and Gandhi wanted the same thing: the establishment of a system whereby Hindus and Hindu principles and practices would find primacy (*shreshthatva*) over all other groups of people and ideas in society.⁹⁶

Thus, the address unfolded in three parts. The first part established Gandhi's 'greatness'—*Gandhi was a great man, and everyone (especially swayamsevak)s ought to follow his path*. The second part explained why he was 'great'—*Gandhi was great because he was*

⁹¹Golwalkar, *Shri Guruji Sangrah*. Vol. 1, pp. 208–209.

⁹²Ibid., p. 210.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Let us follow the Mahatma and revive Hindu dharma: Shri Guruji's speech on Gandhi Jayanti', *Organiser*, vol. 23, no. 8, 1969, p. 2.

⁹⁶Golwalkar, *Shri Guruji Sangrah*. Vol. 1, p. 215.

a Hindu. And the third part responded to the first part—the only way one could genuinely follow Gandhi was through a revival of the Hindu dharma. He further implied that if Indians forgot Gandhi's relationship with Hinduism, they would forget everything worth remembering about him. In other words, he implied that there could be no Gandhi without Hinduism. Golwalkar thus established Gandhi within the pantheon of other 'Hindu' thinkers and ideologues of Hindu Nationalism and argued that it was the Sangh's duty to fulfil Gandhi's 'dreams' by reinstating Hinduism to its ancient glories.

Thus, for Golwalkar, Gandhi worked as a means to an end—he was important because he highlighted the importance and greatness of Hinduism and its role in political life. Golwalkar, therefore, attempted to scrub away the differences between Gandhian principles and the Sangh's goals—both strived for the same end, and so other differences that may have existed were rendered trivial matters of differing approaches rather than different goals.

The Gandhian assimilation into the Hindu Nationalist project was not only crucial for the political legitimacy of the RSS but was also for Golwalkar's personal journey as a public figure. Alongside incorporating Gandhi into the politics of *Hindu Rashtra*, it was only fitting for Golwalkar to transform himself in the image of Gandhi, to become more like the 'pinnacle of manhood' that he described Gandhi as.⁹⁷ It had to be Gandhi and not any other religious Hindu saint because Gandhi was primarily a political figure. As discussed above, for Golwalkar, there was no distinction between his political and religious ideas. And so, yet again, he met Gandhi on Hindu religious grounds to legitimize his own politics. The best example of this was when Golwalkar sought to justify his defence of the caste system by citing Gandhi. In the midst of sharpening assaults on the caste system by various anti-caste movements and organizations in the late 1960s, the RSS attempted to highlight the similarities between Gandhi and Golwalkar regarding their views on caste in the modern world.⁹⁸ Gandhi's ambivalent and apologetic ideas on caste worked as a perfect template for the Hindu Nationalists to justify upholding caste prejudices.⁹⁹ An article published in March 1969 in *Organiser* directly stated that Golwalkar 'and Gandhiji agree[d] on Varna' almost entirely.¹⁰⁰ This article was part of the Sangh's response to the backlash that Golwalkar had received after the publication of his interview in the Marathi magazine *Nawakal*, in which he celebrated caste as a divine system of cooperation that was fundamental to both Hindu religion and the Indian nation.¹⁰¹ As noted above, Golwalkar stuck to using Gandhi's terminology—Harijan—to refer to Dalits in the *Nawakal* interview.¹⁰² He even

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 208.

⁹⁸'Guruji and Gandhiji agree on varna', *Organiser*, vol. 23, no. 29, 1970, p. 2.

⁹⁹On Gandhi's ideas of caste, see Sarkar, 'Gandhi and social relations', pp. 178–184; Skaria, 'No politics without religion', p. 189.

¹⁰⁰'Guruji and Gandhiji', *Organiser*, p. 2.

¹⁰¹Sampradayikta Virodhi Committee, *Golwalkar and caste-system: Expose of an obscurantist outlook* (New Delhi: Sampradayikta Virodhi Committee, 1970), pp. 4–5; for an account of the public backlash, see *ibid.*, pp. 12–36. Golwalkar's apology was reflected in Deendayal Upadhyaya's contemporaneous views on the caste system, too. For instance, see Deendayal Upadhyaya, *Rashtra Jeevan ki Disha* (Lucknow: Lokhit Prakashan, 1979), pp. 107–110.

¹⁰²Sampradayikta Virodhi Committee, *Golwalkar and caste-system*, p. 7.

cited Gandhi in response to a question about the basis of one's caste identity being determined by one's actions.¹⁰³

It is needless to state that Gandhi's views on caste were not static and shifted throughout his career.¹⁰⁴ But his unwillingness to call for a complete 'annihilation' of the caste system, along with his inconsistency on the matter of caste in general, left enough room for later figures like Golwalkar to deploy Gandhi selectively in their own apologia. The complexity or ambivalence of Gandhi's own ideas was therefore not important for Golwalkar—what mattered to him was the fact that, unlike Ambedkar or other more radical critics of caste, Gandhi did not see the need to demolish the institution *in toto* to flatten the hierarchy it produced. But, while Golwalkar attempted to mirror Gandhi on matters such as caste, he also established himself as a virtuous, ascetic figure, much akin to Gandhi.

Constructing Golwalkar *baba*

As has been noted by various commentators, Gandhi's influence and popularity, as well as his successes in mobilizing South Asian masses, especially the peasantry, were closely linked with his unique style of spiritual activism that constructed Gandhi as a *baba* through rumours and folk tales.¹⁰⁵ In other words, Gandhi was seen as a spiritual (super)man who was capable of solving material political and economic problems through the powers granted to him by supernatural saintly virtue. Gandhi's use of ritual practices for non-violent political mobilization, like fasting, listening to Hindu devotional music (*bhajans*), organizing life around the *ashram*, and holding prayer meetings regularly, have all been widely commented upon.¹⁰⁶ Even though he had not engaged deeply with Hindu theology, Gandhi referred incessantly to the *Bhagwad Gita* and Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* (Ramayana) as sources of philosophical, moral, and political inspiration throughout his public life.¹⁰⁷ His moral and ethical politics of truth (*satya*) and non-violence (*ahimsa*) thus further built his image as an ascetic-political

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁰⁴On Gandhi's inconsistency on caste, see Nishikant Kolge, *Gandhi against caste* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁰⁵Amin, 'Gandhi as Mahatma'. Also see Kapil Kumar, 'Peasants' perception of Gandhi and his programme: Oudh, 1920–22', *Social Scientist*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1983, pp. 16–30; Hassan Imam, 'Mahatma Gandhi in popular imagination: A study of literature of the national movement', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 74, 2013, pp. 571–580; and Nitin Varma, *Coolies of capitalism: Assam tea and the making of coolie labour* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), pp. 205–224. Also see Anthony J. Parel, 'Gandhi in independent India', in *The Cambridge companion to Gandhi*, (eds) Brown and Parel, pp. 227–229; Veena R. Howard, *Gandhi's ascetic activism: Renunciation and social action* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013); Judith Brown, 'Gandhi: A man for our times?', *Journal for the Study of Religion*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2018, pp. 96–111.

¹⁰⁶For an overview of Gandhi's views on religion and spirituality in politics, see Bhikhu Parekh, *Gandhi's political philosophy: A critical examination* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), pp. 65–109, 142–170. Also see Ashis Nandy, 'Final encounter: The politics of the assassination of Gandhi', in his *At the edge of psychology: Essays in politics and culture* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 70–98.

¹⁰⁷M. K. Gandhi, *Hindu dharma*, (ed.) Bharatan Kumarappa (Ahmedabad: Navjeevan Publishing House, 1950), p. 8. For a discussion on Gandhi and the Gita, see Shruti Kapila and Faisal Devji (eds), *Political thought in action: The Bhagawad Gita and modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 66–126.

figure. As a contemporary of his noted, Gandhi was a 'politician with a halo' around his head.¹⁰⁸

Golwalkar's attempts to stand in the Mahatma's shadow culminated in him trying to adopt a persona similar to Gandhi's. Through carefully strategized propaganda, Golwalkar constructed rumours and tales about himself that portrayed him as an ascetic politician, much like Gandhi. This process of establishing himself as a *baba* started soon after the ban on the RSS, but it gained momentum in the twilight years of his life. It is critical to note that Golwalkar's affinity towards ascetic politics was rooted in his inclination towards the Ramakrishna Ashram and the longer tradition of ascetic figures in India's nationalist politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Abruptly abandoning his legal practice and his career in the RSS in 1936, Golwalkar spent a year at the Ramakrishna Mission's Saragacchi Ashram under Swami Akhandananda.¹⁰⁹ After Akhandananda passed away in 1937, Golwalkar returned to the Sangh almost as abruptly as he had left it. Jyotirmaya Sharma has argued that his stint at Saragacchi gave Golwalkar an opportunity to lay claim to the legacy of Vivekananda and appropriate the concept of *seva* (service) into the RSS's fold.¹¹⁰ But the asceticism that became so important later in his life was certainly rooted in Golwalkar's time at Saragacchi as well. His personal commitments to spirituality may or may not have been sincere, but Golwalkar's asceticism only sprouted forth in public life somewhat later in his career as an accompaniment to his and the RSS's Hindu Nationalist politics.

Chandrima Chakraborty has argued that asceticism as an archetype of masculinity has been a critical aspect of various visions of nationalism in India since the late nineteenth century.¹¹¹ She shows how Golwalkar and the RSS contributed to this tradition of 'ascetic nationalist masculinity' by creating the archetype of an 'Angry Hindu' man in order to foster a violent group of men (*swayamsevaks*) who would work towards building a *Hindu Rashtra*.¹¹² Along these lines, Sikata Banerjee offers a slightly more nuanced argument in stating that the RSS, in fact, created two archetypal images of ideal Hindu masculinity¹¹³—that of a Hindu soldier and a warrior monk. The Hindu soldier was best typified in actual Indian soldiers: Hindu Nationalist literature often idealized the role of the *jawan* (young soldier) of the Indian military as vital to the project of the *Hindu Rashtra*—his brute physical strength to fight enemy nations was considered irreplaceable. However, the warrior monk was equally important in Hindutva politics—embodied in the RSS *pracharaks* who showed great self-control and discipline in carrying out the message of the Sangh by leaving their ancestral homes and remaining celibate. Together, both of these masculine archetypes were the foundation of Hindutva politics and served as ideals for young recruits to emulate.

¹⁰⁸Lester Hutchinson, 'Gandhi: Politician with a halo', *Current History*, vol. 41, no. 4, 1935, pp. 413–418.

¹⁰⁹For an account of Golwalkar's memories of his time at Saragacchi, see Bhisikar, *Shri Guruji*, pp. 19–29. Also see Gwilym Beckerlegge, 'Iconographic representations of renunciation and activism in the Ramakrishna Math and mission and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2004, pp. 47–66.

¹¹⁰Sharma, *Terrifying vision*, pp. xvi–xvii.

¹¹¹Chakraborty, *Masculinity, asceticism, Hinduism*, pp. 4–6.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 168–213.

¹¹³Sikata Banerjee, *Masculinity, Hinduism, and nationalism in India* (Ithaca: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 76.

However, in Golwalkar's case, one finds an attempt to bridge the gap between these two archetypes. Golwalkar attempted to emerge as an amalgamation of the two: he was gifted both physically and spiritually and thus embodied Hindu Nationalist masculinity. The RSS, under the close watch of Golwalkar himself, produced a meticulously planned image of Golwalkar as the *Param Poojaneeya Shri Guruji* (most revered teacher, a variation of the more commonly used saintly title His Holiness) that surpassed the division between the two archetypal Hindu Nationalist men. The image of Golwalkar as a *baba* or saintly figure who was an astute political mind appealed to something beyond the confines of the Sangh's lore. It was an attempt to occupy the space created by Gandhi and his legacy in the post-colonial public sphere.

The process of construction was evident in multiple *Organiser* articles and Golwalkar's biography, which talked of his greatness against the backdrop of the mundanities of everyday life, highlighted through accounts of his extraordinary spiritual prowess and his revered reception by common folk throughout his travels. This image made his very existence the site of inordinate spiritual construction. Accounts of Golwalkar's unusual eating habits to his ability to withstand extreme weather conditions glorified him to the highest degree of divinity.¹¹⁴ Even the years he battled lung cancer were showcased as an example of his courage in the face of a life-threatening disease.¹¹⁵ The fact of the matter was that his health was quite poor for most of his stint as *sarsanghchalak*. Hemendra Nath Pandit, writing in 1950 as a disgruntled former *pracharak*, reported that

Physically, Golwalkar is lean and fragile... he has now to be under strict and continuous care of a physician who remains by his side for twenty-four hours day and night ... Golwalkar suffers from an acute insomnia and can scarcely get any sleep at night without the aid of sedative drugs.¹¹⁶

Similar facts were also reported by Des Raj Goyal, another former *swayamsevak*, who wrote an exposé of the Sangh in 1979.¹¹⁷ While both men may have been exaggerating the finer details, it would be hard to argue that their claims are entirely made up. Furthermore, both accounts mentioned that discussing Golwalkar's ill health was considered taboo in RSS circles. It is, therefore, easy to imagine that in order to mask the fact that the man in charge of an organization that aims to militarize and train Hindu bodies was critically ill, there was a conscious attempt by the RSS to construct an image of Golwalkar that stressed his physical fitness. Furthermore, in order to explain his rather apparent frailty, his physical strength was linked to his spiritual abilities. He thus fashioned himself as a mystic or sage who appeared frail yet was capable of super-human feats. The best platform for him to do so was through periodic articles in the RSS's mouthpiece, *Organiser*.

¹¹⁴For example, see 'Shri Guruji in Dehradun', *Organiser*, vol. 25, no. 29, 1972, p.6.

¹¹⁵Bhaurao Deoras, 'Our Guruji', *Organiser*, vol. 25, no. 30, 1972, p. 4; also see P. B. Desai, 'Guruji was my patient', *Organiser*, vol. 26, no. 51, 1973, p. 10.

¹¹⁶Hemendra Nath Pandit, *The end of a dream: An inside view of the R.S.S. to-day* (Calcutta: Rabindra Nath Hore, 1950), pp. 9–10.

¹¹⁷Goyal, *Sangh*, pp. 108–109.

All RSS publications about Golwalkar refer to him as either *Shri Guruji* or *Param Poojineya Shri Guruji*, showing great respect for their *sarsanghchalak*. In fact, the phrase *Shri Guruji* was made of three Hindi honorifics—*Shri*, a prefix equivalent of the English Mister; *Guru*, a term of reverence for teachers; and *ji*, a suffix commonly used to stress the respectable stature of the person. Virtually none of these writings ever used his name, doubtlessly a trope to evoke admiration, reverence, and awe for the subject in both the author and the reader. Only when referring to his childhood did they refer to him by his first name. Madhav, the child, was portrayed as a prodigy with his ‘razor-sharp-intellect, insatiable hunger for knowledge, extraordinary memory, willingness to alleviate the sufferings of others, extreme forbearance, absence of ego, purity of mind’.¹¹⁸ The adult Golwalkar certainly upheld these qualities but was also portrayed as an exceptionally fit and extraordinarily able-bodied man.

On this question of physiology and spiritualism in politics, Joseph Alter has shown that Gandhi’s political philosophy and his somatic concerns with celibacy and dietetics often overlapped, one flowing into the other.¹¹⁹ For instance, non-violence was as much a question of communal or anti-colonial politics for Gandhi as it was about the embodiment of spiritual and ethical morals in one’s physiological practices. Gandhi’s *realpolitik* was intertwined with the now infamous constant experiments with his own body and a deep concern for public health. Among his many beliefs about health, Gandhi maintained that ‘morals are linked with health, a perfectly moral person can alone achieve perfect health’.¹²⁰ Similarly, celibacy or *brahmacharya* and self-control were two of the most important virtues that allowed men to achieve perfect health. For instance, he insisted on a particular type of controlled, vegetarian diet, as restraining one’s palate was important in restraining one’s desires, sexual or otherwise.¹²¹ Golwalkar, too, consciously attempted to embody this ideal by styling himself as a man with a perfect yogic body born out of his morally and ethically righteous lifestyle, as well as extraordinary spiritual abilities.

C. P. Bhisikar, in Golwalkar’s biography, *Shri Guruji: Pioneer of a New Era*, presented an interesting account of Golwalkar’s physical stamina and his ‘yogic’ body. He noted that Golwalkar’s diet was so frugal and calorie-deficient that it even shocked a doctor who once visited him.¹²² Bhisikar mentioned that the doctor remarked with utter disbelief to Golwalkar, ‘I cannot believe you are a living man!’¹²³ The anecdote also added that an expert Ayurvedic doctor once remarked that, ‘Shri Guruji’s physique is in such a yogic state that it needs just a little amount of food.’¹²⁴ To add to the mystique, Golwalkar insisted that he only ate the bare minimum necessary for survival.¹²⁵ The story was the perfect propaganda parable: Golwalkar was an ascetic who had control

¹¹⁸Bhisikar, *Shri Guruji*, p. 15.

¹¹⁹Joseph Alter, *Gandhi’s body: Sex, diet, and the politics of nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), p. 7.

¹²⁰M. K. Gandhi, *The collected works of Mahatma Gandhi. Vol XII* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1998), p. 50

¹²¹Alter, *Gandhi’s body*, p. 20. Also see Nico Slate, *Gandhi’s search for the perfect diet: Eating with the world in mind* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019).

¹²²Bhisikar, *Shri Guruji*, p. 18.

¹²³*Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*

¹²⁵*Ibid.*

over his senses and did not succumb to gluttony, and his great physical fitness was the outcome of his spiritual abilities.¹²⁶ This was all meant to suggest that Golwalkar defied the boundaries of ‘Western’ medical science and surprised ‘Westernized’ doctors who could never fully grasp the realm of spirituality, prayer, and *tapasya* (spiritual penance).

In another bid to establish Golwalkar’s spiritual prowess, *Organiser* published an article titled ‘The Intuition of a Yogi’.¹²⁷ The piece discussed Golwalkar’s unique ability to predict the future based entirely on his ‘intuition’. The article quoted Golwalkar’s narration of an incident where he could ‘feel’ the impending demise of two young men in his first meeting with them. On another occasion, Golwalkar claimed to have predicted his uncle’s death, even after the doctors had declared he was fine.¹²⁸ If the article is to be believed, both of his ‘predictions’ came true, and all three died soon after he claimed to have intuited their passing. Golwalkar claimed that only an advanced *yogi*—which he was—could see beyond the boundaries of time and space. The sphere of the spiritual journey was beyond the realm of reason, as reason would soon become a ‘hindrance’ in the spiritual realization of a being, he explained. However, Golwalkar confessed that he had never actively pursued the development of these abilities (through meditation or penance) because the organizational responsibilities of the RSS were his primary goal. Thus, the *Organiser* article argued that Golwalkar was a spiritual guru and a mystic who possessed incredible powers—but his greatness lay in letting go of these ‘individual’ abilities in order to pursue the collective goal of organizing the Hindus of the world. The article implied that Golwalkar prioritized the Sangh’s this-worldly, ‘self-less’ organizational work over his other-worldly personal gains as a saint and individual journey towards enlightenment.

The attempts to establish Golwalkar as a saintly figure can also be seen in accounts of his travels across India. Golwalkar’s travelogues were published as stories of a saint visiting his disciples, guiding and blessing them with his presence and wise words. Senior *swyamsevaks*, who generally wrote these articles, presented every conversation of his as a sermon that had the ability to transform the listeners’ lives. Through these travelogues, the authors attempted to place Golwalkar within the religious and cultural tradition of travelling saints in India, who journeyed throughout the country delivering sermons. In looking at the details of some of these accounts, one can begin to see the conscious attempts to present Golwalkar as a saint-politician.

As part of the spiritual propaganda, especially during the later years of his life, Professor Dharamvir, a senior RSS worker and Golwalkar’s companion, maintained a travel diary of Golwalkar’s itinerary and his countless addresses. *Organiser* and *Panchajanya* later published these accounts. In one such piece, published after Golwalkar visited Himachal Pradesh in 1968, titled *A Week with Shri Guruji in Holy Himalayas*, Dharamvir portrayed Golwalkar as a renowned Hindu saint welcomed by all the residents and essential members of civil society.¹²⁹ People visited Golwalkar from surrounding regions to listen to his words of wisdom. Others came to seek his guidance in matters of familial or local political distress. Dharamvir painted an image of

¹²⁶Pandit, *End of a dream*, p. 10.

¹²⁷Dharamvir, ‘The intuition of a yogi’, *Organiser*, vol. 23, no. 10, 1969, p. 23.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*

¹²⁹Dharamvir, ‘A week with Shri Guruji in the holy Himalayas’, *Organiser*, vol. 21, no. 39, 1968, p. 5.

Golwalkar as a patient, calming, and all-knowing saint as he talked to numerous people, delivering his sermon interspersed with dialogues with distressed folk. Wherever Golwalkar went, Dharamvir claimed, a group of *swayamsevaks* also waited for him and would often be so overwhelmed by their revered *sarsanghchalak's* arrival that 'they did not believe their eyes when they saw Guruji before them'.¹³⁰ Even the residents of remote villages met him with great affection as he offered prayers at their small, local shrines and temples. Golwalkar visited the temple of Jwalamukhi Bhagwati, the local deity, in a small town in the Kangra valley and performed the evening prayer as the priest of the temple.¹³¹ He addressed his *swayamsevaks* and the local attendees in the background of such holy events. While visiting these small temples, he would discuss the financial condition of temples around India with the priests. He lamented the underfunding of temples under the Congress government and advised the local councils to appeal to the courts for more resources. As a saintly figure who was politically engaged, Golwalkar thus bounced back and forth between religion/spirituality and politics with ease, while commenting on matters of both local and national concern for his audience.

In almost all of his public speeches and interviews, Golwalkar warned the listeners against the perils of imitating the West, a practice that he saw as an effect of the modernist policies of the Nehruvian state. His attack against the modernist socio-economic values of the Western world would often slip into a socio-cultural sermon on family, parenting, and even fashion, themes where his views converged with Gandhi's. This discourse was particularly reminiscent of Gandhi's anti-colonial politics of ethical consumerism, which called for giving up 'Western' suit and trousers in favour of the indigenous *khadi dhoti* (loincloth) and *kurta* (shirt).¹³² Golwalkar prompted a similar ethical lifestyle, especially in one of his sermons on the 'drainpipe' trousers fashion of the late 1960s. He believed that only 'sinners' in the United States wore such trousers.¹³³ He thus implied that Indians who wore drainpipe trousers were ignorantly adopting new fashion trends which were, in fact, practised only by American 'sinners'.

Golwalkar's conversations thus hovered around everyday ethics and the ambiguous category of 'Indian' morality—a virtue that he believed was only thought of in the Hindu *dharma* and not in any of the 'Western' thought systems that the Congress governments followed. For him, the extension of everyday morality to overarching political issues was seamless and inevitable. The moral dimension of everyday cultural politics was yet another site where RSS publications justified Golwalkar's views by referring to Gandhi's views on the matter. For instance, Golwalkar countered the government's narrative of family planning by declaring that the state was out to stop Hindus from reproducing with the help of 'Western' birth control pills and other 'dangerous' methods.¹³⁴ In another interview, he stated that the government was playing with the bodies of Hindu women by forcing them to use foreign pills that affected their

¹³⁰Ibid.

¹³¹Ibid.

¹³²For a detailed discussion on Gandhi's views on *khadi* and ethical consumerism, see Lisa N. Trivedi, *Clothing Gandhi's nation: Homespun and modern India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

¹³³Dharamvir, 'A week with Shri Guruji', p. 5.

¹³⁴'The terrible trouble with birth control pills', *Organiser*, vol. 21, no. 51, 1967, p. 11. For an overview of the public debate around family planning in the post-colonial period, see Rosanna Ledbetter, 'Thirty years

health and happiness.¹³⁵ Through multiple interviews and *Organiser* articles, he demonized Western medicine as an unnecessary and dangerous foreign force encroaching upon the sovereignty of Hindu men and women's 'pure' bodies. A 1968 *Organiser* article referenced Gandhi's acute criticism of modern medicine to support Golwalkar's views on birth control pills, suggesting that the only correct way of population control was abstinence, as Gandhi had once argued.¹³⁶ Golwalkar thus placed this Hindu Nationalist bio-politics as an issue of everyday individual morality (abstinence versus birth control pills), which were part of a broader critique of the Congress government being overly 'Westernized' in its modernist-socialistic rhetoric.

These narratives of maintaining cultural purity in the face of 'Western' cultural assaults presented Golwalkar as a man who embodied the values of an archaic Indian mystic—asceticism and spiritual prowess—yet one who was in sync with the worldly developments of his day. Various commentators have identified a similar this-worldly saintliness as the element that gave Gandhi his unprecedented appeal among the Indian masses.¹³⁷ Naturally, then, Golwalkar attempted to forge his self-image along similar lines.

Conclusion

The extent to which the ascetic mode of Hindutva resulted in Golwalkar's political success is a matter of perspective. On one level, he was obviously not as politically successful as his successor, Madhukar Dattatraya Deoras, in bringing the RSS to the forefront of political and public life; the RSS arguably only became politically relevant after the JP Movement in the mid-1970s when Deoras was its *sarsanghchalak*. But on another level, Golwalkar's success lay in his ability to steer the RSS through a period of state repression and to expand the membership and outreach of the Sangh in post-colonial India from about 50 *shakhas* and 1 lakh members in 1940 to an estimated 10,000 *shakhas* and about a million members by the time he died in 1973.¹³⁸ On the organizational front, Golwalkar relied on diversifying the RSS by expanding its activities through subsidiary organizations like the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, etc. By adopting this method of indirect expansion, he was able to stick to the rhetoric that the RSS was a cultural organization, while involving its members in political activities at all levels. Similarly, curating his own image in the framework of the ascetic nationalist saint-politician allowed him to actively propagate his political views while being perceived as a non-electoral figure. By attempting to stand in line with the likes of Gandhi, he was able to demonstrate that

of family planning in India', *Asian Survey*, vol. 24, 1984, pp. 736–758. For a late twentieth-century perspective on birth control measures, sexuality, and Hindu Nationalism, see William Mazzarella, *Shovelling smoke: Advertising and globalisation in contemporary India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 59–146.

¹³⁵'Hindus must wake up', *Organiser*, vol. 20, no. 8, 1967, p. 7.

¹³⁶'Gandhiji's solution of population problem', *Organiser*, vol. 21 no. 13, 1968, p. 11.

¹³⁷Akeel Bilgrami, 'Gandhi's religion and its relation to his politics', in *The Cambridge companion to Gandhi*, (eds) Brown and Parel, pp. 93–116; Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *Postmodern Gandhi and other essays: Gandhi in the world and at home* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 230–252.

¹³⁸Goyal, *Sangh*, p. 84. These numbers are broad estimates, as Goyal himself confesses, which is largely due to the fact that the RSS has never disclosed any official records or numbers.

the RSS would keep its promise of not participating in electoral activity and confine itself to the socio-cultural sphere, a condition imposed in the terms of the lifting of the ban on the RSS in 1949.

Furthermore, Golwalkar's ideological attempts to assimilate Gandhian politics into the Hindu Nationalist pantheon in the 1950s and 1960s created room for Deoras to forge links with Gandhians during the 1970s and 1980s. These ideological attempts were, of course, not limited to Golwalkar. Deendayal Upadhyaya, Nanaji Deshmukh, Dattopant B. Thengadi, and other ideologues within the Sangh also actively engaged in justifying their ideas about village development, *swadeshi*, caste, and the broader political economy on the basis of Gandhian views on the same during Golwalkar's tenure. In some ways then, the Sangh found a rough blueprint for its own stance on various issues from within Gandhian politics.

But more importantly, by looking at how and why Golwalkar styled himself the way he did, one can attempt to look for answers to other broader questions. Golwalkar's trajectory was part of the post-colonial history of Gandhian politics. Gandhi's legacy lay not only in direct successors like Vinoba and JP and distant imitators like Anna Hazare, it also rested with the fate of the Sangh and Golwalkar's political career. In highlighting this aspect of Golwalkar's leadership, one can also begin to understand how the RSS has actively adopted symbols, ideas, and messages from across the political spectrum throughout its nearly century-old history. The Sangh did not reduce Gandhian symbols and ideas to simple slogans or imagery in order to 'hijack' their popularity at the surface level on their return to mainstream politics in the 1970s. As the discussion above shows, these ideas and symbols were taken seriously and formed a core set of practices and beliefs within the Hindu Nationalist movement since the 1950s. Among other factors, it was the deep appropriation of Gandhi and Gandhian ideas that played a critical role in the Sangh's return to mainstream politics in the mid-to-late 1970s. The trajectory of the Hindu Nationalist movement would have been very different had it not been for the institutional and ideological support it garnered from Gandhians like J. P. Narayan in the period before the Emergency. Thus, even though the Sangh can be seen as primarily an ideological formation that has a narrow world view, it would be unwise to ignore its ability to co-opt and appropriate seemingly opposing forces in its putsch for the *Hindu Rashtra*.

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