

Naari Shakti: Story of Rashtra Sevika Samiti

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On a quiet clear bright morning, a group of women clad in crisp white sarees with pink borders moved in disciplined unison. This is the daily shakha (gathering) of Rashtra Sevika Samiti, an all-women organisation inspired by Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

In 2016, as part of Rashtra Sevika Samiti's 80th anniversary celebration, over 3,000 women volunteers (sevikas) gathered singing devotional songs and engaging in discussion on culture, civilisation and society, a powerful indication of female energy fueling the Hindutva movement.

Founded in 1936, Sevika Samiti stands as the world's largest Hindu women's organisation with presence in virtually every state of Bharat (India).¹ Its emergence and growth weave devotion towards motherland, "Bharat."

This power of women more popular as "Naari Shakti" has carved out its distinct and unique role in the all-inclusive Hindu society.

¹ Arun Anand, 'How RSS inspired a young widow to build an all-women's organisation across India' (ThePrint, 8 March 2021) <https://theprint.in/india/how-rss-inspired-a-young-widow-to-build-an-all-womens-organisation-across-india/617386/> accessed 15 September 2025.

Foundations of Rashtra Sevika Samiti



Lakshmibai Kelkar

Genesis of Samiti is rooted in an extraordinary relationship inspired by RSS founder Dr. K.B. Hedgewar and a determined young widow named Lakshmibai Kelkar: In mid-1930s, Kelkar, then a 27-year-old mother of two, had lost her husband and was searching for ways to channel her grief and nationalistic (cultural nationalism) fervour into social good.

Seeing transformation in her sons, honed in RSS through physical and mental discipline, Lakshmibai hit upon a decisive idea to create a similar institution for women with purpose and conviction as surest way to address this need.

She had already established a girl's school in Wardha, Maharashtra to educate young women at a time when female education was often neglected. In 1936, Kelkar sought to meet Dr. Hedgewar and urged him to create space for women in progressive unfoldment of cultural and civilization centric nationalist movement.

Recognising her zeal and intellectual capabilities, Hedgewar encouraged Kelkar to start an autonomous women's organisation, aligned with RSS, pledging his full support while insisting it remain independent.

On the auspicious day of Vijaydashami (Dussehra) 1936, Rashtra Sevika Samiti was formally founded at Wardha with Kelkar at its helm. This was groundbreaking: an Indian woman in 1930s leading a public organisation for nation-building was virtually unheard of. Kelkar, affectionately called *Mausi ji* ("Respected Aunt"), became first *Pramukh Sanchalika* (Chief) and thereafter remained in charge until her death in 1978.

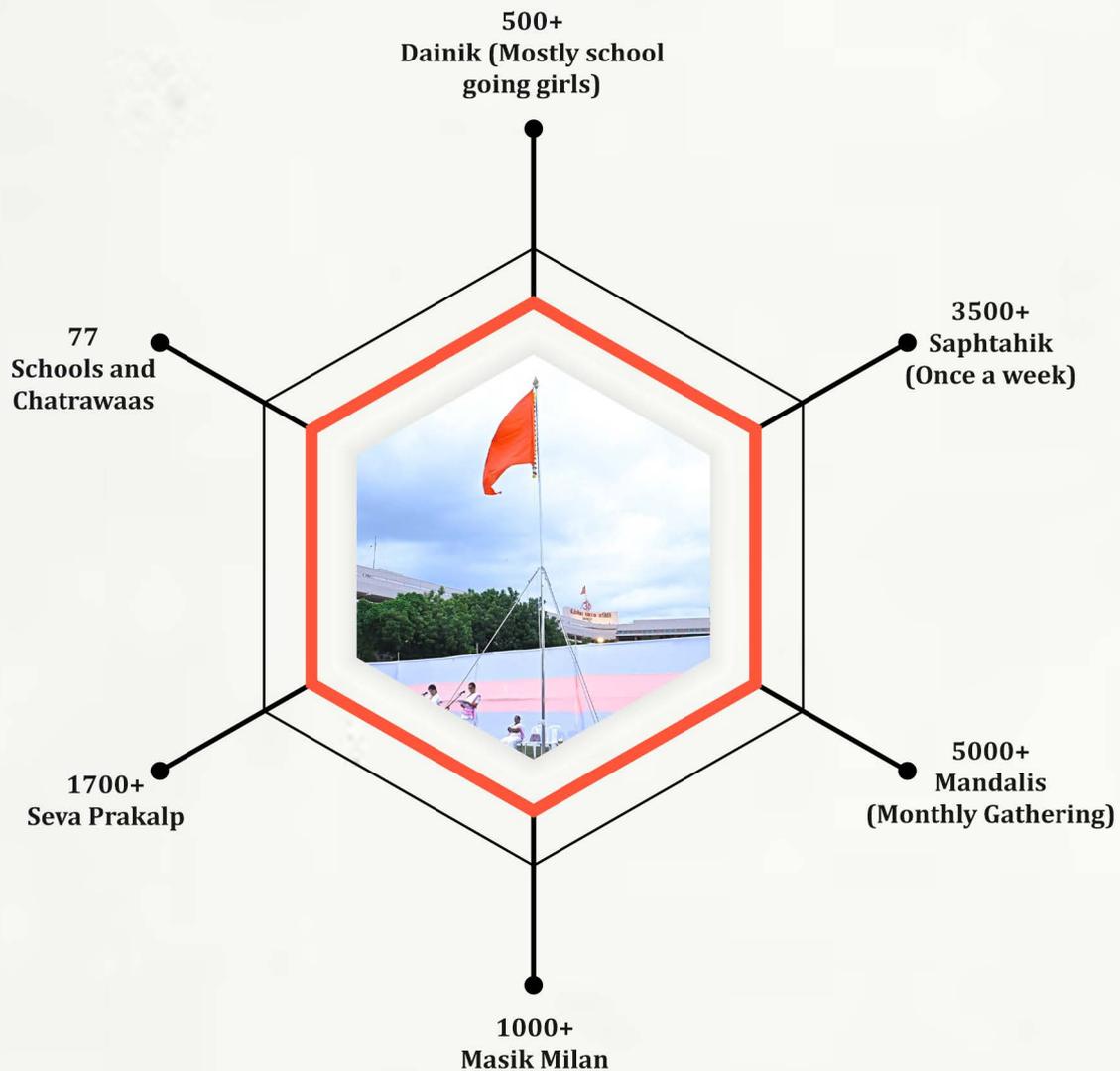
Sevika Samiti was never envisaged as an appendage to RSS but as its sister organization with equivalence in commitment and spirit.

Hedgewar's decision to extend support to a separate women's organisation reflected a progressive belief in women's participation unusual in the colonial era. It also demonstrated his and Hindu society's confidence in women power.

For Kelkar, the mission was clear: woman is the inspiring force for family and nation. As long as this force is not awakened, society cannot progress, she famously asserted.² This founding credo set the tone for Samiti's philosophy; that empowering woman as patriotic, cultured leaders was essential to Bharat's (India's) rejuvenation.



² Maitri, 'Lakshmibai Kelkar: inspirational nationalist rooted in Bharatiya culture and Dharma who founded Rashtra Sevika Samiti' (HinduPost, 16 July 2024) <https://hindupost.in/history/lakshmibai-founder-of-rashtra-sevika-samiti/> accessed 14 September 2025.



Over ensuing decades, Rashtra Sevika Samiti evolved steadily from its humble origins to a formation with nationwide presence. The Sevika Samiti today boasts hundreds of thousands of members across India making it one of the largest all-women's organisations in the world.

It has grassroots presence through local branches or shakhas in over 5000 locations where women gather regularly for conversations, activities and community service. Much like RSS, Sevika Samiti's basic unit is the daily or weekly shakha meeting held in local parks, open courtyards or temple grounds where sevikas practice yoga, sing patriotic songs and discuss social issues.

The organisation's structure is much like that of RSS: full-time women workers known as pracharikas dedicate their lives to the cause. There are also part-time sevikas who serve for limited periods, ensuring continuous infusion of selfless volunteers into the movement.³

Sevika Samiti has developed its own symbols and routines, fostering a distinct identity even as it shares RSS core ideology. It prescribes a uniform for volunteers attending annual camps to impart physical, intellectual and spiritual training to women volunteers. Since the first such camp in 1939, participation has swelled; for example, over 10,000 women attend camps each year, and special camps draw thousands (during the 80th year celebrations in 2016, a camp saw three thousand sevikas). This rigorous training regime reflects Samiti's belief that disciplined, confident women are vital nation-builders.

³ Neha Dahiya & Prachi Mishra, 'Explainer: Rashtra Sevika Samiti (RSS)' (Centre for Integrated and Holistic Studies, 2022)

Saraswati Tai Apte
1978-1994



Usha Tai Chate
1994-2006



Pramila Tai Medhe
2006-2012



V. Shantha Kumari
2012-Present

After Kelkar; a succession of dedicated women led the Sevika Samiti, these included visionaries like Saraswati Apte, Usha Chate, Pramila Medhe and since 2012 V. Shanta Kumari (Shanthakka) as the current Pramukh Sanchalika. Under Shanthakka's leadership,

the Sevika Samiti launched a youth wing (Taruni Vibhag) to cater to interested young women and girls, ensuring the movement rejuvenates itself with each generation.

Ideology: Matrutva, Kartrutva, Netrutva

Ideological framework of Sevika Samiti centers on a vision of women as foundation of the Hindu society and the nation. While aligned with broader Hindutva movement of RSS, the Sevika Samiti has crafted a distinct practice that places feminine qualities and leadership at forefront of nation-building.

It explicitly propounds three key ideals; Matrutva (*universal motherhood*), Kartrutva (*skill and societal duty*) and Netrutva (*leadership*) which are seen as intrinsic virtues of womanhood to be cultivated. To inspire its members, Samiti holds historic icons as role models. These range from wise queen Ahilyabai Holkar, famed for her able governance to the fearless Rani Lakshmbai of Jhansi for bravery and above all to Jijabai, mother of Maratha King Shivaji, whom the Samiti venerates as epitome of enlightened motherhood.

It was Jijabai's teachings and strength of character that instilled in Shivaji the resolve to establish a Hindavi Swarajya (*self-rule of the Bharatiya people*), reflection of a mother's role in shaping the destiny of a nation. By celebrating maternal figures like Jijabai and invoking protective ferocity of Goddess Ashta bhuja Devi, Sevika Samiti defines motherhood not as passive domestic duty but an active force for social change and national regeneration.⁴

Sevika Samiti's worldview blends traditional gender roles with a national mission, asserting that every woman's duty is inherently linked to nation-building. This maternalist vision of empowerment; emphasizing duty, community and cultural pride over individualistic aims sets Sevika Samiti apart from Western feminist paradigms.

In Sevika Samiti's eyes, true elevation means strengthening society as a whole: by being ideal daughters, wives and mothers, women simultaneously become leaders and guardians of nation's future.

A recent organisational briefing described the approach succinctly with the motto "*build the individual and build the nation*," reflecting the belief that personal character development and national progress go hand in hand.



Rani Lakshmbai

Jijabai

Ahilyabai Holkar

Activities and Social Interventions

Sevika Samiti complements its ideological core with extensive social service (*seva*), making it a notable presence in charity and disaster relief. The organisation today runs hundreds of welfare projects for underprivileged, irrespective of caste or creed including schools, libraries, orphanages, medical camps, self-help groups and vocational training centres.

Rashtra Sevika Samiti runs about 1,700 Seva Prakaalps (service projects) all over India. These projects include a wide range of social, cultural, and developmental activities. Deep Puja (lamp worship) ceremonies, training for priests, and bhajan (devotional song) classes are all part of the religious projects. Samiti runs hostels (17) and schools (60) in the field of education, giving children and young women a safe place to live and learn. The health sector's efforts include clinics, yoga and fitness classes, and medical camps to improve overall health. Samiti runs industrial temples, skill development centres (64), and vocational training programmes to help women become financially independent and find jobs. Lastly, the organization teaches values and culture through Sanskar classes (moral and cultural lessons) and sports complexes, which help participants grow physically, mentally, and morally.

Samiti's then-chief, Shanta Kumari even helped arrange marriages of widows in the region, stepping in to restore hope and stability in their lives after tragedy.⁵

Such efforts show that "service" in this women's movement is far from symbolic; it is a tangible expression of their ethos of motherly care extended to the nation. *Day-to-day, local shakhas also emphasise social awareness, discussions on issues like women's health, literacy and social challenges are woven into meetings alongside patriotic songs, prayers and inspiring stories, all aimed at moulding women who are self-reliant yet firmly rooted in Bharatiya cultural values, seeing the nation as an extension of their family.*⁶

Very existence and success of Rashtra Sevika Samiti challenge the notion that RSS is an all-male domain. Behind the ostensibly male-dominated imagery of RSS, there have always been women volunteers. From bold step taken by Laxmibai Kelkar in 1936 to quiet heroics of sevikas in villages today, Samiti's journey is one of breaking barriers and redefining femininity on its own terms.

For most part unsung, these women have built a legacy of service and leadership that belies stereotype of a patriarchal RSS.

As India progresses into 21st century, Sevika Samiti illustrates how tradition and power of women (Naari shakti) can intertwine: it also shows how RSS inspired one of the country's most enduring and largest women's organisation.

In the words of Kelkar's cherished maxim, when this "inspiring force" of women is truly awakened, there is very little that society cannot achieve.



⁵ Jaideep Shenoy, 'Rashtra Sevika Samiti to open hostel for women in Dehradun' (The Times of India, 17 October 2013).

⁶ Rashtra Sevika Samiti, 'Official website' <https://www.rashtrasevikasamiti.org> accessed 25 September 2025.

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<https://hindupost.in/history/lakshmibai-founder-of-rashtra-sevika-samiti/> accessed 14 September 2025.
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