

Social media as an allusion: Hindu activism and digital media



Image: Flickr, Esther Vargas

*How has digital media impacted Hindu activism in the UK? Here **John Zavos** explores its role in Sewa Day – an annual day dedicated to social action among Hindu communities and others in Britain. He finds that, influenced by emerging digitally networked social movements, the presence of social media in Sewa Day operates partly as a kind of trope, invoking the idea of a grassroots social movement bringing people together through social media and internet based connections. Much more significant in the actual processes of mobilisation are already existing ‘friends networks’ associated with a range of Hindu nationalist organisations embedded in localities across the country.*

Sewa Day and Hindu nationalist activism

Sewa is a term used in several South Asian languages to denote the idea of service. Sewa Day is then a day of service, which first took place in October 2010 and has since become an annual event. The **2010 Annual Report** describes Sewa Day as a day of action which ‘recognised the need for local communities to take the responsibility for overcoming the challenges of disadvantage and deprivation by harnessing resources and talents that exist within them’.

In 2010 the day consisted of 130 projects, with over 5000 individuals taking part across the country, ‘**all committed to making Britain a better place**’. By 2014, the website (sewaday.org) claims, 100,000 people took part, not just in the UK but in countries around the world

Sewa Day projects are a patchwork of local activities, with the **2010 annual report listing**, for example, ‘feeding the hungry and the homeless’, ‘entertaining the elderly’ and ‘caring for the environment’ as generic objectives. By 2012, the range of activities had expanded to include, for example, renovating an inner city counselling centre, working on a community farm, and taking part in a community apple day; in 2014 there was a particular emphasis on collecting **food** for

foodbanks, framed by a recognition that 'food poverty in the UK is at a shocking level and is set to get worse'.

These activities are strongly framed by a discourse of social transformation. For example, in 2012 the Sewa Day t-shirt (all volunteers on the day wear a specially designed t-shirt) invoked Martin Luther King, Gandhi and Nelson Mandela in the context of its ubiquitous tagline, 'be the change.' This tagline is taken from a statement (somewhat dubiously) attributed to Gandhi, 'you must be the change you want to see in the world,' which has a high profile on the [Sewa Day website](#).

No particular religious affiliation is apparent on the Sewa Day website beyond a reference to Sewa being 'embedded in Indian traditions', but it is nevertheless very much a Hindu initiative. The majority of organisations and individuals involved are Hindu, although others are encouraged to take part (in particular Sikhs and Jains).

A closer look at Sewa Day indicates that it is strongly associated not just with Hinduism, but more specifically with the Hindu nationalist Sangh Parivar network. In particular, it has had formal links with [Sewa UK](#), also known as Sewa International, a Hindu nationalist charitable organisation which has been implicated by some commentators in funding the activities of the Sangh Parivar in India through charitable donations raised in the UK (see AWAAZ-South Asia Watch 2004). Before it became a registered charity in March 2012, Sewa Day was a project of Sewa International, which itself was a service project of the [Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh \(HSS\)](#) before becoming an independent registered charity in April 2010. The HSS is one of two central Hindu nationalist organisations in the UK, the other being the [Vishwa Hindu Parishad](#).

Hindu nationalist organisations, multiculturalism and the state

Whilst multiculturalist discourse has been a major spur to the emergence of Hindu activism in the diaspora, the shaping of this discourse in the UK has meant that such activism has developed in a rather different way to other key diaspora contexts such as [the US](#). Of particular significance is the role of religion. In the UK, 'faith' has in recent years developed a [high profile in multiculturalist discourse](#), with the state keen to capitalise on the perceived common attributes of 'world religions' as it seeks to refashion multiculturalism in the context of [social cohesion](#), a counter-narrative to the threat of ethnic segregation in Britain's urban areas.

In this context, Hindu activism at the national level has been less explicitly influenced by Hindu nationalist organisations than is found, for example, in the US. Rather, representative or 'umbrella' Hindu groups have been active agents in institutional politics at this level. The Hindu Forum of Britain (HFB), in particular, has emerged as a prominent Hindu voice in such arenas, responding to the government's insistence that recognised 'faith organisations' should be representative of '[as wide as possible a range of traditions and organisations within the community](#)'.

This does not mean that Hindu nationalist organisations are not present in the UK; there is certainly a developed network of organisations, most notably the [Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh](#), the [Vishwa Hindu Parishad \(VHP\)](#) and the [National Hindu Students Forum](#). These organisations, however, tend to work on a more [localized level](#). This is significant, as it creates a disjuncture between these organisations and institutional politics which opens up possibilities for engagement with networked social action.

Digital media and social action

According to Manuel Castells, the late modern era is distinctive because of the [emergence of the 'network society'](#). In this context, democratised forms of networking in the 'free public spaces' of digital media encourage a reconfiguration of global relations of power, such that power 'is no longer concentrated in institutions (the state), organisations (capitalist firms), or symbolic controllers (corporate media, churches)'. Instead it is 'diffused in global networks of wealth, power,



information and images, which circulate and transmute in a system of variable geometry and dematerialised geography’.

In recent years these ideas have been used to produce an analysis of new cultures of activism, in which networking through forms of social media becomes central to sustained social and political movements, such as the multiple manifestations of the **Occupy phenomenon**, **los indignados** in Spain, and the **UK Uncut** network.

The significance of this ‘**digitally networked activism**’ is not just in its pragmatic efficacy, but also in its reconceptualising of social worlds and political solutions. In this analysis, diffuse, decentred networking in the unmediated realm of the Internet operates as a different kind of social morphology, through which invigorated values of mutual respect, personal freedom, cooperative intent and social responsibility are propagated between individuals in ways which are no longer possible in established political realms dominated by states, transnational capital and institutionalised forms of networking.

As public spaces, social media environments can evoke a sense of grass roots communitarianism and autonomous action appropriate to the intent and moral shaping of many social action initiatives. There is, then, a sense in which the new public spaces opened up by media technologies are spaces with an implicit potential to frame vigorous, ‘bottom up’ social action accompanied by a strong sense of moral legitimacy, in a way that seems to exist in contrast to formalised political spaces at the national level, as occupied by the likes of the Hindu Forum of Britain.

Sewa Day and the sensation of digitally networked activism

As an initiative designed to let people ‘be the change’, Sewa Day is suited well to the idea of bringing people together through social media and Internet-based connectivities. Indeed the **Sewa Day website** is notable for its promotion of a range of social media technologies, encouraging interested individuals to interact via Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

In addition, despite its links to Hindu nationalism, Sewa Day remains a skeletal organisation with an emphasis on self-generating grass-roots activism. People are encouraged to come together through the hub of the Sewa Day website, linking up with others inspired to ‘be the change’. It is certainly also the case that a wide variety of organisations are involved in Sewa Day, from other Hindu organisations such as the **Sri Sathya Sai Service Organization**, to non-Hindu religious organisations such as the **Namdhari Sikh Sangat**, and non-religious organisations such as specific branches of **Dolland & Aitcheson opticians**.

Nevertheless, it is also very much the case that no organisations have been as heavily represented as those associated with the Sangh Parivar. In particular, the HSS has been a key force involved in arranging local activities. My experience of participating in Sewa Day is that an impressive array of projects, from helping at a Day Shelter to environmental projects, were co-ordinated by HSS workers, and involved many young people who regularly participated in *shakhas*, the local HSS sessions that are held regularly week by week across the country.

In conjunction with this, a significant feature of participation in Sewa Day is the influence of what might be termed ‘friends networks.’ Many participants are involved because they know others who are *swayamsevaks* (HSS volunteers), or had once themselves been a *swayamsevak* but are no longer directly involved. This word of mouth approach to social action is in itself nothing new or necessarily distinctive to Sewa Day, but it does serve to demonstrate the operation of an enduring element of Sangh practice. Right from its very inception, the ‘parent organisation’ of the Sangh Parivar, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, has used this kind of approach in its development. The friends network approach has been implemented throughout the life of the Sangh, ensuring on the one hand that it has sustained a quiet yet steady growth, whilst on the other that it has retained a particular (though broadening) social profile associated with the caste and class **base** of

its key members. This kind of approach transfers effectively to the diaspora, as lines of communication remain strong in diaspora public spaces, established initially through patterns of chain migration and concentrated settlement in British urban areas, and sustained through common experiences, aspirations and ways of being.

The evidence suggests that it is this form of networking, around the multicentred hub of HSS *shakhas*, that is central to the annual success of Sewa Day. Social media networks are certainly present, but their usage is relatively scant (in early 2015, for example, the [Sewa Day twitter feed](#) had just 1219 followers, at a time when the movement claimed to involve 100,000 volunteers globally). A similar disjunction is apparent in interactions on its [Facebook page](#), even though both these platforms are promoted prominently, as indicated earlier.

This does not mean that social media is unimportant. Facebook, Twitter and the like act both as important signifiers, as engines of affective value. They provide a framework of meaning which locates the Sewa Day initiative within the arena of self-perpetuating grassroots mobilisation, and they generate the sensation of energised social action. Although it may not be particularly effective as a form of connective action with regards to Sewa Day, then, the presence of social media in the initiative provides it with an aura of connectivity which is critical to its representation as a key form of Hindu activism in the UK.

For organisations and ideologies such as those at the heart of this initiative, this affective framing is a critical element in the projection of political action in contemporary public arenas which are both transnational and multidimensional.

This is an abridged and amended version of J. Zavos (2015), [Digital Media and Networks of Hindu Activism in the UK, Culture and Religion 16 \(1\): 17-34](#)



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