Small acts, Big Society: sewa and Hindu (nationalist) identity in Britain

John Zavos
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This paper examines developing Hindu identity in a British context. It focuses on a recent initiative known as Sewa Day, an annual day dedicated to the provision of *sewa*, or service, as small-scale social action in local communities. Hindu nationalist organizations such as the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh have been central to promoting and taking part in Sewa Day. The paper asks what purpose is served by the drive to promote social action in this way, arguing that it represents a significant attempt to project Hindus as model citizens, contributors to what the UK government has termed the 'Big Society'. The paper explores the implications of this project in terms of its ability to re-situate the politics of Hindu nationalism in relation to dominant registers of civic virtue.

Keywords: diaspora; Hindu nationalism; Big Society; social action; citizenship

Introduction: religion and diasporic identity

Over recent years, Hindu identity has become increasingly prominent in British social and political discourse, as part of a more general turn to religion in the articulation of ethnic identity. Not just Hindus but Sikhs and in particular Muslims have been increasingly perceived as key ethnic groups, superseding a previous focus on national or quasi-racial (as in 'Asian') identity, a development noted by several academic commentators on religion in Britain (Allen 2005; Knott 2009; McLoughlin 2005; Zavos 2009).

A variety of reasons are offered for this turn. Partly, it is about the dynamics of ethnic identification as migrant communities become more settled and new generations emerge (Ballard 1992; Werbner 2002). At the same time, both local and national state policies related to the management of ethnic plurality have been influential. In local situations, religion sometimes operates as a mediating discourse for state institutions groping for ways to accommodate communities of difference with the perceived potential to develop a more radical political positioning (Baumann 1998). In national arenas, religious identities have become increasingly significant partly because of policy shifts from multiculturalism towards community cohesion, and partly because of projections of religious militancy as an excessive, subversive presence in contemporary politics and culture (Khan 2011). This striking double presence is sometimes represented as a difference between 'faith' and 'religion', where positions of faith are seen as a form of bridging capital, bringing people together by expressing common values in the context of community cohesion, while religious identities are seen as divisive, encouraging segregation and potentially fostering forms of extremism (Zavos 2009, 892).

The ambivalent trajectory of religion as ethnic identity in Britain reflects some classic diasporic themes. As James Clifford (1994, 308) says, diaspora identity invokes 'forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national

time/space in order to live inside with a difference'. Enactments of diasporic identity are then frequently played out in fields of tension – 'inside' but differently so – and this helps to situate the sometimes fraught position of diaspora religion. Clifford's tensions, however, are produced by their play on the border between the nation's 'inside' and 'outside', invoking a sense of homogeneity on both sides of this unilateral divide, even while noting the diasporic challenge. Such binary framing can obscure the complex, interconnected dynamics of globalized social relations that inform diasporic identifications, whether religiously configured or not. For example, although a good argument has been made for the idea of diaspora Hindu-ness (Vertovec 2000), the ways in which this identity has developed is unpredictable, subject to localized, national *and* transnational pressures that form multiple and sometimes conflicting contexts to developing identities. In Britain, then, Hindu identity develops as much through dialogue with other diasporic identities as it does with the 'national time/space', while these dynamic relationships are themselves refracted both by globalized discourses about religion as moral value, and by the persistent residues of nationally configured racial marking. These complex discursive webs subvert the easy bifurcation between inside and outside, and indeed between 'faith' and 'religion', suggesting that we need more detailed explorations of the ways that religious identities are produced in situations of ethnic plurality in order to understand the role of religion in developing formations of diaspora.

The present paper attempts to contribute to this understanding by focusing on organizations and their impact on these processes. The role of organizations in the formation of minority religious community identities has of course long been acknowledged (Knott 1986; McLoughlin 2005; Nye 2001). Analysing this role remains critical, however, because the dominant ideology associated with the concept of religion continues to invoke an image of uniformity 'within' particular religious communities, in a way that seems to obscure the relations of power informing bids for leadership and representation (Zavos 2009, 893–894). As religious identities gain salience in contemporary political arenas, these dynamics need careful consideration in order to understand more fully how particular agencies shape the contours of religious communities that make up our 'multifaith society'.

Hindu nationalism in Britain

With this framing discussion in mind, the paper will explore the role played by specifically Hindu nationalist organizations in shaping British Hindu identity in relation to local, national and transnational discursive spaces. Hindu nationalism is a broadly right-wing collection of ideological positions (also known as 'Hindutva'), often associated with antagonism towards Christian and especially Muslim communities. It has a major political, social and cultural presence in India, through the formidable network of organizations known as the Sangh Parivar – a network that has also extended its reach deep into the diaspora (Jaffrelot and Therwath 2007). Despite this organizational notoriety and global reach, however, the level of influence of Hindu nationalism in Britain is a matter of debate. There is no denying that key organizations associated with the Sangh Parivar are present and manisfestly active at the local level in different British cities (see Jaffrelot and Therwath 2007; Mukta 2000). Recent evidence nevertheless suggests that these organizations have not sustained a prominent profile in national arenas, with the main representative bodies apparently developing without Sangh influence (Zavos 2010).

Despite this lack of an organizational presence in national arenas, however, ideas and values associated with Hindu nationalism *are* apparent. As in some other diasporic environments (see e.g. Chaudhuri 2012; Reddy 2011), the public representation of Hinduism in Britain is frequently laced with inflections of Hindu nationalism, even as links to reactionary politics are disavowed. How are these affinities produced and sustained? Partly they persist because of the pressures exerted on Hindu-ness in the context of increasingly public religious pluralism, where the representation of distinctive 'world religions' is invoked by multiple state and other agencies. At the same time, it seems likely that such affinities are in some way informed by the vigorous work of Sangh organizations in more localized environments. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad, for example, is active in different cities, generating systems of cultural representation that emphasize strong visions of the homeland and specific antagonisms towards other communities (Zavos 2010). Through multi-local connections, this activity has an impact in 'diasporic public spaces' (Werbner 2002) that seems inform the development of Hindu diasporic consciousness, despite the apparent disjuncture with broader national arenas.

A possible weakness of this analysis is the sense of separateness that it invokes. Diasporic public space appears to exist parallel to the sphere of national discourse about multiculturalism and the multifaith society, involving a separate discursive register, and even, as suggested here, a separate set of active organizational agents. If this is so, how exactly does 'leakage' like that suggested here occur between different spaces?[1] In order to answer this, we need to focus on the conceptual borders, and the questions that they pose. As with the inside/outside binary of diasporic positioning noted earlier, we need to be cautious of frames that appear just too clear-cut to represent the blurred realities of social life. As well as exploring the work of organizations in different public spaces, then, we need to explore the webs of interconnection that problematize the very idea of such defined spaces. It is through this kind of dynamic that we may be able to understand both the ways in which ideological affinities emerge, and the role played by organizations in enabling this to happen.

One potential site for the enactment of these webs of interconnection is provided by the informal politics of everyday social action – that is, action directed at the provision of services and mobilization of communities around issues of social regeneration in local arenas. As we shall see, such action is frequently laced with discourses that have resonance in a range of public spaces. As well as becoming a site of increasing political contestation over the past decade or so, social action is also an arena that has been opened up to religious organizations over a longer period. Since the late 1980s, the UK state has recognized the potential of religious groups as institutions capable of delivering necessary services in sometimes troubled inner-city areas where the state itself has progressively retracted (Dinham 2009; Taylor 2002).[2] In more recent years, this recognition has developed into a conviction that religious organizations working at grass-roots level have an enhanced capacity, through such work, to generate values and sensibilities associated with developing notions of citizenship and community cohesion (see Furbey and Macey 2005).

Sewa Day as everyday social action

In order to explore social action as a 'site of interconnection' through which Hindu nationalist organizations have an impact on the development of Hindu identity in Britain, this paper examines a specific social action initiative known as Sewa Day. Sewa Day first

took place in October 2010 and has since been enacted annually. The 2010 Annual Report describes it as a social action day that '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' (National Sewa Day 2010, 5). The day follows the template of Mitzvah Day, an annual event associated with the Jewish Community Centre for London since 2005, which itself took inspiration from a similar initiative launched in the late 1990s by Temple Israel of Hollywood, Los Angeles (see Mitzvah Day 2013).[3] In 2010, National Sewa Day consisted of 130 projects, with over fifty organizations and 5,000 individuals taking part across the country, 'all committed to making Britain a better place' (National Sewa Day 2010, 5). By 2012 this had expanded to 237 projects involving 46,600 people (Sewa Day 2012, 5). The numbers are difficult to verify, but my experience of Sewa Day over the last three years has been of a range of people, genuinely committed to contributing to their social environment, and grateful for the chance provided by Sewa Day to express this commitment.

Some of the activities undertaken under the auspices of Sewa Day have a religious dimension, such as volunteering at temples, but most do not. As one local organizer informed me, in order to have proper impact Sewa Day needed to get beyond the Hindu community, to reach out to a broader constituency.[4] 2011 projects included, for example, volunteers contributing to a local authority conservation project in Greater Manchester. In 2012 activities were classified under one of three headings: 'help relieve hardship/ poverty'; 'bring a little joy to others'; and 'help the environment' (Sewa Day 2013a). Examples of specific projects include painting and decorating an inner-city counselling service, much-needed assistance on a community farm project, and work with a local neighbourhood group to promote use of a communally owned apple orchard.[5] The people involved in offering service on these projects were, it appeared, both energetically committed to contributing, and frequently commented on their role in terms of 'giving something back' and 'reflecting on life'.[6]

The organizational framework of Sewa Day

Despite the avowedly secular thrust apparent here, the majority of organizations involved in Sewa Day are Hindu. There was a push in 2012 to involve schools and businesses,[7] but in terms of evidence from each of the three years in which Sewa Day has taken place, activities have been coordinated primarily by well-known Hindu organizations such as the Sathya Sai Service organization, BAPS Swaminarayan and ISKCON (some Jain and Sikh organizations have also been involved). No organizations have been as heavily represented as those associated with the Hindu nationalist Sangh Parivar. In particular, the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, the main Sangh organization in the UK focused on young people, has been heavily involved in arranging local activities, and many of the people involved in the projects that I witnessed in 2011 and 2012 were in some way associated with the Sangh.[8] This is not surprising, because Sewa Day developed as an initiative of Sewa UK, a working name of Sewa International, a charitable organization that has been implicated by some commentators in funding the activities of the Sangh Parivar in India (see AWAAZ-South Asia Watch 2004). Since March 2012, Sewa Day has been an independent registered charity in the UK, but before this it was a project of Sewa International (2011, 5–6), which itself was indicated as a service project of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh before becoming a registered charity in April 2010. In 2012, Sewa UK maintained its strong link to Sewa Day by providing substantial funding to support

the initiative.[9] Some of the main organizers of Sewa Day remain linked to the Sangh through membership of Sangh organizations.[10]

There is, then, a sense in which Sewa Day is embedded in the existing networks and initiatives of the transnational Hindu nationalist movement. Ideologically, it also resonates with the Sangh's fundamental commitment to social action as a route to the regeneration of Hindu society. As a key Sangh website explains, a guiding principle of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the 'parent' organisation of the Sangh network founded by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar in 1925, is that 'building a strong, organized society… is the very work of Dharma' (Sangh Parivar 2013). A succession of Sangh leaders have indicated that this 'work of Dharma' is as much the responsibility of Hindus outside India as of those within (see Jaffrelot and Therwath 2007, 280). Sangh organizations in the diaspora have sought to fulfil this dharmic duty primarily in two ways: first, by working towards preserving a sense of Hindu identity particularly among new generations of Hindus growing up in non-Indian cultures, through the provision of cultural, religious and language instruction; and, second, by contributing to the development of a 'strong, organized society' in India, through charitable donations to Sangh projects via portals such as Sewa International and the Kalyan Ashram Trust. The encouragement to regenerate society, in this sense, is both vicarious and classically diasporic, as it is focused on society as it is imagined in the homeland (Axel 2002). In this sense, Sewa Day represents something of a shift of direction, because it is geared towards a social action agenda not in Hindu India, but rather in Britain itself, and to a certain extent more broadly across the world.[11] The emphasis of Sewa Day is explicitly marked out as *not* fundraising. Rather, it is on galvanizing volunteers for community action in multiple local contexts. As the website states, 'we discourage all projects that involve fund-raising; as the purpose is to give your time'. This time is given as 'an act of kindness without expectation', 'performed selflessly and without ulterior motive' (Sewa Day 2013a).

In general terms, the thrust of this turn is strongly in line with the Sangh's self-image. The RSS, after all, is a volunteer organization (the name translates most commonly as 'national volunteer corps'); from its inception it has sought to project itself as dedicated to selfless service to society (see Beckerlegge 2004). It is nevertheless marked that Sewa Day focuses primarily on localized action within the UK, eschewing the fundraising dimension that has previously been a key element of such activities, as seen, for example, in the National Hindu Student Forum's Sewa Week, which has mixed local action with fundraising for a range of charities, but most consistently Sewa International.[12] With its focus on localized action, Sewa Day brings the discourse of *sewa* increasingly into dialogue with a prominent element of contemporary British politics, characterized most recently as the 'Big Society' agenda. In the following section I will explore this discourse and its interconnection with the idea of *sewa*.

Hegemonic discourses of social action

Shortly after he took office in 2010, Prime Minister David Cameron gave a speech in Liverpool explaining an idea that he had been propagating in the run-up to the General Election in May of that year. This was the vision of an energized civil society, which Cameron had characterized as the Big Society. In a speech in July of that year, he explained that during the years of New Labour government (1997–2010), social relations had become increasingly fractured and this 'broken society' was in urgent need of repair.

Cameron (2010) stated: 'Over the past decade, many of our most pressing social problems got worse, not better. It's time for something different, something bold – something that doesn't just pour money down the throat of wasteful, top-down government schemes.' That something different was a vision of social action, a devolution of power that would enable local people to address issues within their communities: 'It's about people setting up great new schools. Businesses helping people getting trained for work. Charities working to rehabilitate offenders.' This would, he said, represent 'the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street' (Cameron 2010). Although much criticism of this idea has been focused on the idea that this is just a veil for the retraction of state services in a new era of austerity, there is also a good deal of scepticism about the apparent redistribution of power (North 2011; Ransome 2011). 'Redistribution', it seems, has been carefully channelled, the man and woman on the street carefully chosen to form what the Conservative Party has termed 'the little platoons of civil society' (Conservative Party 2010, 38). Big Society initiatives are marked by this 'little platoons' approach, as model groups of citizens are projected as leading the way by example, developing what the state sees as legitimate social enterprise initiatives and acts of civic virtue.

In some ways this approach actually extends that developed under New Labour after 2001, known as community cohesion. This approach also responded to an analysis of especially urban social life in Britain as fractured, leading to apparently dangerous patterns of segregation between communities – patterns that only further encouraged attitudes of separation and disaffection to develop, leading, as one key community cohesion architect suggests, to incidents of violence between and among urban communities, and the potential development among ethnic communities of 'a common bond of disaffection, both within nation states and across national borders, embracing a transnational identity, rather than with their fellow citizens' (Cantle 2005, 10). Ted Cantle, who led the government's review in the wake of a series of disturbances in British urban spaces in 2001, appears here to voice that sense of the suspect location of diaspora consciousness with which we began, articulating 'transnational identities' distinctively in contrast to the notion of citizen-fellowship. Community cohesion was to provide the policy framework for the government's attempts to counter such potential threats, encouraging and connecting the idea of community and promoting the notion of bridging social capital at a variety of levels, from the housing estate right up to the arena of national citizenship.

As Adam Dinham (2009, 92) has shown, the structural binaries of the community cohesion agenda were strongly echoed in the state's concern with 'religion' and 'faith' in the early 2000s, in terms of the dangers of radicalization on the one hand, and the potential to provide models of good citizenship on the other. The double-edged sense of religion/faith has been carried through into the Big Society discourse, as noted in the introduction to this paper. Religious identities are seen both as part of the reason for the fracturing of society, but also, when properly mediated, as excellent examples of the kind of 'little platoons' identified as key to regeneration. This was made clear in several ministerial statements and initiatives around the time of Prime Minister Cameron's speech noted above. At a meeting with 'faith leaders' hosted by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Minister for Decentralisation, Greg Clark, stated:

> Faith communities make a vital contribution to national life: guiding the moral outlook of many, inspiring great numbers of people to public service, providing support to those in need. A "community of communities", they often have the experience, volunteers and connections that can put them at the heart of their neighbourhood. (DCLG 2010)

Soon after, at a meeting with Anglican bishops, the then high-profile Conservative Party chair and minister without portfolio Sayeeda Warsi (2010) noted:

> in a stronger and bigger society the scope for people of faith to take their places as equals at the public table should become easier not just on so called "stake-holding" bodies but as the vanguard of an increasingly decentralised civic society.

The idea of an active, grass-roots vanguard exemplifying civic virtue is one that resonates deeply with Hindu nationalist ideas about how to effect social change, so it is perhaps no surprise to see that Sewa Day is frequently associated with the Big Society project. The 2010 Annual Report, for example, features a personal message from David Cameron in which he explicitly endorses Sewa Day in Big Society terms, stating: 'When I talk about building a Big Society – where neighbours and communities come together to make life better – some people say it will never happen. …National Sewa Day shows how cynical that is' (National Sewa Day 2010, 4). More recently, Sewa Day has been a part of the government-sponsored Year of Service initiative, launched by Communities Secretary Eric Pickles in January 2012,[13] in which faith groups are perceived as 'exemplifying the principle of selfless service to others' (DCLG 2012, 12), a function explicitly framed by concerns about extremism in a Department for Communities and Local Government strategy paper entitled 'Creating the Conditions for Integration' published at this time (DCLG 2012).

While this discursive frame locates Sewa Day firmly within the context of the state's concerns to embrace 'faith' while simultaneously working to defuse the subversive power of 'religion', it is important to consider alternative framings that both overlap and provide a different dimension to understandings of this social action initiative. This is particularly so as many of those involved in Sewa Day regard the idea of the Big Society as little more than a convenient way of packaging the initiative in order to gain a higher profile in a range of public environments.[14] Far more resonant for many of those who took part was the discourse of *sewa* itself. *Sewa* is a kind of generic term used to indicate devotional service or giving. The Sewa Day website describes it as sacrificing 'your time and resources for the benefit of others without wanting anything in return', a concept 'embedded in Indian traditions' (Sewa Day 2013a). Traditionally associated with different forms of *bhakti* devotionalism, *sewa* as a concept was fashioned more particularly as an obligation to participate in forms of social action and service to humanity by the influential Bengali ascetic and Hindu moderniser Swami Vivekananda in the late nineteenth century (Beckerlegge 2006). Vivekananda's notion of *sewa* as social action articulates it as a selfless act – indeed, its selflessness is an indicator of its legitimacy as a form of devotion (see also Warrier 2005, 59). The idea of *sewa* has become a central feature of virtually all modern Hindu (and indeed Sikh) organizations as they have developed during the twentieth century (see e.g. McKean 1996 on the Divine Life Society), and it has developed a particular resonance among the many such organizations with a transnational reach.

One significant reason for this, I would suggest, is that *sewa* operates as a critical diasporic currency for South Asian migrants. In an analysis of what she calls 'modes of Sikh diasporic action', Ann Murphy (2004) notes that Sikh engagements in *sewa* activities are marked to a certain extent by political commitments to separatism in a fabulated Punjabi homeland, but at the same time argues that *sewa* operates beyond as well as in relation to such direct connections:

> [It] does contribute to the marking of Sikh space, but such a home is not drawn simply – the position of a "twice-migrant" African Sikh community in relation to a "homeland" complicates interventions with multiple "homes", and the Sikh space defined is not limited to Punjab. (Murphy 2004, 365)

Murphy's observations suggest a kind of expanded, layered idea of home related to the flexible currency of *sewa*, facilitating the production of community identities beyond the linear connection between migrants and the originary 'home'. Extending this argument, I suggest that *sewa* facilitates the construction of local and global citizenship identities, as it is frequently recognized as positive social action, an act of civic virtue as well as religious devotion, in ways that enhance the 'model minority' status of Hindu and Sikh communities. This is evident as much in a local Sai Baba centre in Indianapolis (Baumann 2012, 145) as it is in major BAPS Swaminarayan centres both in the UK and beyond (Kim 2012; Zavos 2013), and in the pronouncements of David Cameron as highlighted in the Sewa Day Annual Report. *Sewa* embeds, or even naturalizes, civic virtue and exemplary citizenship in South Asian diasporic identities; as one report on a popular British Asian community website commented on the launching of Sewa Day: 'Asians are better at "Big Society"' because "Sewa" is hardwired into the genetic code of Asians' (Patel 2010).

Hindu and Sikh religious and associated organizations seeking to engage migrant communities almost invariably present *sewa* as a key part of their profile. To extend the 'currency' metaphor, they act as '*sewa* traders', mediating their religious profile and organizational structure through a multilayered engagement in different welfare and social action activities. In this context, the positioning of Sangh organizations at the centre of the Sewa Day initiative is interesting, as it provides an arena of exchange with other '*sewa* traders' that links them not just to the idea of the fabulated homeland (as is the case, for example, with the work and profile of Sewa International), but to both locally and globally projected notions of community. This local-global scaling is visibly apparent on the Sewa Day website. Although the initiative was launched in 2010 as National Sewa Day, it had by 2011 dropped the 'National' and became known simply as Sewa Day. The change reflected an aspiration to project the initiative as taking place around the world. Although in practice Sewa Day projects are still relatively uncommon beyond the UK, there is a very strong representation of global social action. The front page of the website provides a series of flags that act as apparent links to country-specific sites, as well as a drop-down menu listing a range of thirty-five countries around the world where there is at least the aspiration to run projects.[15]

Sewa is presented as a catalyst to global civic virtue. The website states:

> On Sewa Day, thousands of good-hearted people across the world come together to perform Sewa and experience the joy of giving in its truest sense. By participating in this collective endeavour, we hope that the seeds of Sewa are watered so that acts of kindness and public service are performed more often. (Sewa Day 2013a)

Albeit on a global scale in this context, this catalytic role echoes the Cameron administration's emphasis on exemplary civic action by model 'little platoons'. In this sense the discourse of *sewa* is imbricated with the Big Society in a UK context, providing a layered discursive framework which mediates the Sangh's self-image as a vanguard that inspires social regeneration, rendering it as one exemplary feature of a model ethnic minority presence in multicultural Britain. As an Early Day Motion tabled in the House of Commons in 2010 and reproduced in the Annual Report states, Sewa Day 'pays tribute to Britain's Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Jain communities for leading by the power of their example in a practical way to benefit their fellow citizens' (National Sewa Day 2010, 6). Hindu nationalism, then, is concealed – folded into this wider discursive framework – as much as it is revealed through engagement in this social action initiative.

The revelation and concealment of diaspora Hindutva

A similar dynamic of revelation and concealment in the everyday performance of social action is noted by Tim Jenkins (1999, 7) in his exploration of the organization and enactment of an annual Whit Walk procession in Kingswood, a working-class suburb of east Bristol:

> If the event appears ordinary and everyday, the motivations and desires of the participants are by the same token obscure to the observer… the continuity of the event over time, the degree of organization and work it demands each year, and the numbers of people mobilized as marchers or spectators are all indicators of an extraordinary social energy at work. This combination of obviousness and opacity points then to a problem of perception… It is a form of social life which is constructed in part in order to reveal itself and, at the same time, to conceal itself; it creates an interplay of display and secrecy.

For Jenkins, this interplay of display and secrecy is configured by the complex politics of the locality, and the dominance of particular social agents and discursive registers. These dynamics, he argues, are critical factors in the mediation of community identity, as represented by the regulated social energies informing the annual Whit Walk.

These observations about everyday social dynamics are interesting in the present context, as they provide us with a model for thinking about the dynamics that inform the relationship between Hindu nationalism, Hindu community identity and discourses of social action in the organization and enactment of Sewa Day. We have noted the way in which the presence of Hindu nationalist ideology is obscured within the dominant discursive framework provided by the Big Society and diasporic *sewa*. A further interesting concealment concerns religion. Although most of the organizations involved are religious, this generative identity is very rarely referred to in the public representation of Sewa Day. The website is a case in point. There is very little that is overtly Hindu here. *Sewa* is represented as a 'universal concept' embedded in Indian traditions, and indeed the chairman of the initiative, Arup Ganguly (2012a), states in a blog entry commenting on Sewa Day's involvement in A Year of Service (in itself a faith-based initiative): 'I still maintain we are not a faith initiative. Sewa Day is simply a vehicle for doing good.'

The most explicit references to religion are related to cross-community action, and are most frequently expressed by outside commentators on the initiative. For example, David Cameron's testimonial states that Sewa Day 'says great things about the Sikh community and the Hindu community, and about this country' (National Sewa Day 2010, 4), and the aforementioned Commons Early Day motion describes the day as 'a cross-community,

multi-faith initiative' led by 'Britain's Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Jain communities' (National Sewa Day 2010, 6). An exception can be found in the extensive public relations and marketing section of the 2010 Annual Report, where one of the four objectives of Sewa Day is listed at 'Influence for the better public perception of Hindus within and beyond the wider communities' (National Sewa Day 2010, 16). Here, interestingly, the outsider representation of an inclusive, multifaith approach is superseded by a specific insider focus on the public image of Hindus.

A further area where the dynamics of display and secrecy are apparent is in relation to the role of Sangh organizations themselves. As previously mentioned, since April 2012 Sewa Day has been registered as an independent charitable organization. Before this it was officially a project of Sewa International/UK. During the period of formal connection, the website carried a short reference to Sewa UK, citing it specifically as 'a secular, non-political UK-registered charity' (this statement, carried on the 'About us' page, is no longer included on the site). This minimal level of presence is also reflected in the 2010 Annual Report, where Sewa UK is referred to as the 'main co-ordinating body' for Sewa Day (National Sewa Day 2010, 5); there is no mention in the 2012 report. Sangh organizations are much more present in references to and descriptions of actual social action, although this presence is very much embedded as part of a patchwork of broader Hindu and some non-Hindu organizations. This was apparent in the list of activities in the 2010 report (National Sewa Day 2010, 9–11). In the lead-up to the event in 2011 and 2012, it was also apparent in the 'Project pages' of the website, which carry a list of commitments to take part in Sewa Day activities (Sewa Day 2013d). In this list, a range of Sangh organizations have been very much present,[16] with the database template giving the opportunity for these organizations to promote their general ethos and background. For example, the website in January 2013 referred back to the planned *sewa* activities of the Edinburgh branch of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh in 2012, and included a general statement on the shape and aims of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, which was reproduced on each Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh project page. This statement includes a commitment to 'organize the Hindu community in order to preserve, practice and promote Hindu ideals and values' and to maintain 'Hindu cultural identity in harmony with the larger community' (Sewa Day 2013c).

In the lead-up to the 2012 event, the Sangh again had a key presence in exemplifying social action as part of a broader, looser network. The site included three case studies as a way of providing inspiration for those looking for ways to contribute on the day. One of these examples, entitled 'Cleaning up the streets of Wembley', features a project run jointly by the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh and the Sevika Samiti the girls' and women's equivalent of the HSS (Sewa Day 2013b). Notably, the associated image includes the legitimation of the local Member of Parliament (MP) Barry Gardiner. The case study develops in a manner strongly reminiscent of Sangh literature, which frequently provides narratives explaining the power of exemplary Swayamsevaks to inspire change. It begins with an indication of both socially and morally suspect behaviour among young people, who were not only littering but also drinking in the public arena of a local park in Wembley. The narrative explains how the volunteers began the day with a 'sense of apprehension', and their work initially drew only 'curious and bemused looks' from others, but through working together selflessly the volunteers were able to inspire both a sense of unity and a change in people's attitudes. 'We worked', the narrator explains, 'with a number of local teenagers and residents. One of them remarked that "Teenagers

always seem to be in the news for all the wrong reasons – and no-one hears about all the good things that we do'" (Sewa Day 2013b). Here, then, the work of the Sangh appears, through exemplification, to have changed attitudes about teenagers and their position in society. The narrative goes on to explain how the day ended appropriately with refreshments at the spectacular new show temple of north west London, Shree Sanatan Hindu Mandir on Ealing Road, which seems to reiterate the position of Hindus as marking the civic landscape of this area of London – environmentally, socially, morally – with an exemplary presence.

Conclusion

Finally, then, what do these points about revelation and concealment tell us about the politics of Hindu identity in the UK? As we have seen, Sewa Day may be located squarely in relation to a contemporary dominant discourse on social regeneration, which we have identified as the Big Society discourse. In invoking *sewa*, it also resonates clearly with a diasporic discourse in which *sewa* is recognized as a legitimate and ubiquitous way of demonstrating devotion, valid cultural association with the homeland, and social responsibility in a whole range of arenas. The interaction of these two discourses is instrumental in projecting the idea of some Asian communities as respectable, model minorities with much to offer British society – communities, as it were, with civic virtue in their genes. These ideas, then, provide some critical frameworks for the imagining of the Hindu community in contemporary Britain as a model minority whose prominent, spectacular (and, of course, self-funded) building projects contribute to the development of Britain's multicultural landscape.

But the noted absences or 'concealments' enable us to develop some perspective on the social energies that also inform this imagining. For example, the devotional, religious inflection of *sewa*, as we have seen, emerges intermittently and ambiguously – sometimes crossing the boundary into the secular, sometimes represented as multifaith, sometimes as Hindu. Such ambiguities do in fact resonate strongly with Hindu nationalism. This is an ideology that has always oscillated between encompassing other Indian religious identities in one moment, staking a claim to a kind of 'genuine' Indian secularism in another, while at other times projecting a strident and exclusive notion of Hindu-ness.

We can also see echoes of Hindu nationalism in the general framing of the day as social action – in particular, the pervasive image of an inspirational vanguard, 'being the change', is strongly reminiscent of Sangh ideology. At the same time, the presence of Sangh organizations is ambiguous. The initial coordinating role of Sewa International was only minimally revealed, while the grass-roots activism of local Sangh organizations is apparent as an embedded feature of the broader landscape of (mostly) Hindu organizations, which are themselves frequently subsumed by the energetic enthusiasm of diverse individuals.

As with the Whit Walk and local community identity in Kingswood, this interplay of revelation and concealment is an interesting indication of dynamics that help to shape Hindu community identity in the UK. Hindu nationalist organisations have played a leading role in Sewa Day, an increasingly prominent social action initiative in many urban areas across the country and beyond. The dynamics that inform the enactment and representation of this initiative demonstrate that attitudes and inflections associated with these organisations have become enmeshed in a web of interconnected discursive frames, correlating with registers of civic virtue in local, national and also transnational public spaces. Exploring such processes may help us to understand ways in which organisations

of the Sangh Parivar are sustaining and developing their position as influential agents in the production of UK Hindu identity, even while maintaining a low profile in more formal political arenas.

Notes

1. For further discussion of this point, see Zavos (2012).
2. Jenny Taylor (2002) has explored the UK state government's interest in religion in this context from the late 1980s onwards. She explores ways in which the Thatcher government sought to involve the Anglican Church in urban regeneration initiatives like the Action for Cities programme. In 1992, the Inner Cities Religious Council (ICRC) was 'part of a conscious effort by the Government to improve relations with the Church. We hope that it will… give the Church and other religions a positive role to play in policy making' (ICRC chair and government minister Robert Key, quoted in Taylor 2002, 96). The idea of religion as a means of reaching out to minority communities was signalled at this time by Douglas Hollis, a Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) official who was instrumental in setting up the ICRC: 'in order to have dialogue with these ethnic communities, by far the best instrument for communicating with them… and enabling them to represent their needs to government, was through their faith linkages' (quoted in Taylor 2002, 92).
3. The connection to Mitzvah Day was reinforced by the inclusion of its founder, Laura Marks, on the Sewa Day advisory board.
4. Interview with local organizer, 25 September 2011. All interviewees quoted in this paper shall remain anonymous.
5. All projects I visited during the 2012 event.
6. Views expressed to me independently by several participants in both the 2011 and 2012 events.
7. The 2012 Annual Report states that Lloyds Banking group has adopted Sewa Day as part of its corporate volunteering strategy (Sewa Day 2012, 4).
8. Mostly as members of affiliated organizations, although sometimes through more informal connections.
9. The Sewa UK (2012) website claims to have donated £10,000 to Sewa Day in 2012. Reported total donations to Sewa Day during that year were £37,015 (Sewa Day 2012).
10. Information provided by a member of the core team in an interview on 10 January 2012; These connections are also evident in formal administrative roles. For example, one individual is registered as a trustee of both Sewa Day and the Kalyan Ashram Trust, a UK-based organization linked to the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh and actively supporting the work of the Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, a Sangh organization that works in tribal welfare.
11. Since 2011, the initiative has had some presence in other countries. See note 15.
12. As the National Hindu Students Forum (NHSF 2013) website states:

    Over the years we have worked with and built up a good relationship with several charities. However, through first hand experience we had chosen one particular charity that stands out to be our sponsored charity. Fourteen years on we are pleased to still be able to support them. That charity is Sewa International. A non-political non-governmental organization helping those regardless of class, creed or religion.

13. A Year of Service was designed to showcase the social service work of religious communities in Britain. It was initiated as part of the 2012 Jubilee celebrations by the DCLG (Winter 2013). Sewa Day withdrew from the initiative in May 2012 citing a lack of transparency in the allocation of funds related to the project (see Ganguly 2012b).
14. This point was made by several volunteers whom I spoke to at Sewa Day 2011, as well as by a member of the core team in a personal interview on 10 January 2012.
15. The 'flag' countries are the UK, the USA, South Africa, Indonesia and Australia. Clicking on one of these flags, or indeed one of the listed countries, leads to the main website. The key difference is in the 'project finder', where projects related to specific countries are listed. The vast majority of projects are UK-based.

16. Out of a total of 106 projects noted on the site on 23 September 2011, forty were clearly identifiable as being run by Sangh organizations (mostly Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, Sevika Samiti and National Hindu Students Forum).

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JOHN ZAVOS is Senior Lecturer in South Asian Studies in the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures, University of Manchester.

ADDRESS: School of Arts, Languages and Cultures, University of Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL, UK. Email: john.zavos@manchester.ac.uk