

SADHVI RITHAMBARA

IMPACT: Sadhvi Rithambara is a senior leader in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and is the founder of Param Shakti Peeth, a “charitable organization” in India, which also has two sister organizations in the US, Param Shakti Peeth Of America Foundation and Param Shakti Peeth Of America East Coast (PSPA). Rithambara is a leading figure in the Hindu nationalist movement and her anti-Muslim speeches played a central role in the demolition of the Babri Mosque in the 90s. Leaders of PSP in the US are also affiliated with far-right Hindu nationalist organizations.

- Sadhvi Rithambara is a longtime **member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founder of Durga Vahini, the women’s wing of the militant Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and the founder of Param Shakti Peeth.** Earlier, she was also part of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) and Rashtriya Sevika Samiti, the student and women wing of the RSS, respectively. **Rithambara gained prominence during the 1980s and early 1990s Hindu nationalist movement to demolish the historic Babri Mosque,** constructed by the Mughal emperor Babar in 1528, and replace it with a temple dedicated to Lord Ram.
- **Rithambara’s anti-Muslim speeches— sold and distributed as audio cassettes— played a central role in the demolition of the mosque** on December 6, 1992, when thousands of Hindu nationalists climbed atop the domes and razed the structure to the ground. According to the book “The Crisis of Secular-nationalism in India” by Aditya Nigam, in early 1991, **Rithambara’s hate speech cassettes had sold 1.5 million copies nationwide.**
- According to a paper published by professors Ratna Kapur and Brenda Cossman in Harvard International Law Journal, Rithambara “repeatedly lashes out against the Muslim community for allegedly keeping Hindus in a state of persecution. This general sentiment of Hindus as oppressed is then often followed by increasingly brutal rhetoric that calls on Hindus to fight back against these Muslim oppressors and often expressly calls for violent confrontation. The rhetoric of these leaders is thus not only increasingly distrustful of Muslims but also advocates violence against them.”
- The **Liberhan Commission, established by the Indian government to investigate the demolition of the Babri Mosque and which submitted its report in 2009, concluded that Rithambara’s speeches “were rabid and provocative and vitiated the communal atmosphere in the country.”** The commission determined that the attack on the mosque was the culmination of her efforts and those of numerous Hindu far-right leaders, including senior members of the ruling BJP. Regarding attacks on multiple journalists by the violent Hindu extremist crowd, the report stated that “the preplanning for the assault on the media and the disputed structure was carried out by and on the directions of” Rithambara and 12 other Hindu far-right leaders.
- In 2019, a bench of Indian Supreme Court judges described the destruction of the Babri mosque as a “serious violation of the rule of law.” However, in September 2020, an Indian court acquitted 32 accused individuals, including Rithambara.
- **Members of Rithambara’s Durga Vahini, who played a leading role on the day of the demolition of the Babri mosque, were also accused of playing a “significant role” in the 2002 Gujarat pogrom that claimed the lives of over 2000, predominantly Muslim men, women, and children.**
- According to The Tribune newspaper, citing a senior Gujarat police officer, Vahini members were “found providing healing touch (Hindu spiritual leaders claim its divine touch which brings physical, emotional, or spiritual healing) to the male activists, information back-up and if the ethnic cleansing theory is true, I have a feeling they played a significant role in intelligence network as well. While it will be very difficult to prove their direct involvement, women Sanghis had definitely scrutinized voters’ list or the traders’ license papers to screen the minorities with an innocuous intention.”

- **Pragya Singh Thakur, a disciple of Rithambara and a prominent Vahini leader who is now a BJP Member of Parliament**, is a person accused in the 2008 bomb blast in Maharashtra's Malegaon city, which resulted in the deaths of 10 people. **Thakur has a history of making violent anti-Muslim statements, such as telling an audience at an event in 2022 to "keep weapons in your homes if nothing else, at least keep your knives sharp."**
- Nisha Pahuja, a Canadian filmmaker who produced the documentary "The World Before Her" on the operations of Durga Vahini, told Indian news outlet Firstpost that the "brainwashing and the blood curdling chants they are taught that shocked and depressed" her, with Vahini members expressing "no qualms about killing Gandhi or people of other religions who attack Hinduism." Durga Vahini also regularly organizes arms training camps.
- **Historian Tanika Sarkar has described Rithambara's speeches as "the single most powerful instrument for whipping up anti-Muslim violence," while *Unveiling Desire* book, edited by Devaleena Das and Colette Morrow, has also mentioned that her speeches played a "role in fomenting violence against Muslims."** In 1991, Delhi police filed a complaint against Rithambara for delivering a speech that incited animosity towards Muslims. Subsequently, her audio cassettes were banned by the Delhi police.
- In **1995, Rithambara was arrested in Udayanagar, Madhya Pradesh, for delivering a dangerous speech where she openly threatened mass violence against the members of the Christian community.** "If a single choti or janeu (Janeu is a sacred thread worn by Hindu men, while Choti is a small ponytail worn by mostly upper caste Brahmins and priests) is cut, Christians will be wiped out from the face of India," she told the crowd. The speech was delivered in the same town where a catholic nun, Sister Rani Maria, was brutally stabbed to death on a bus allegedly by a local member of BJP-Vishwa Hindu Parishad.
- In 1996, British newspaper The Sunday Times noted that Rithambara's speeches condoned violence against Muslims. "Playing on Hindu reverence for sacred cows, she shocked her simple rural audiences with tales of Muslims slaughtering the animals merely to please the palates of Arab sheiks," report author John Zubrzycki wrote.
- In 2002, protestors in New York confronted Rithambara at an event for her role in "communal bloodshed." Later, the event host, The Ganesh Temple Society, told a reporter that they were "misled and manipulated" by Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA) to organize the event.
- In **2006, Rithambara, while speaking at the Shabari Kumbh Mela event, demonized Christians and called for arming Hindus to save the Hindu religion.** "They [Christians] call us harvest. They intend to pluck us out. And foreigners want to do this to us," she told over 60,000 people in the crowd. The event was organized by the RSS leader Swami Aseemanand, who was arrested in 2010 for masterminding bomb blasts targeting multiple mosques and the Samjhauta express train (he was later acquitted of all charges), for killing over 70 people.
- In April 2022, while speaking at an event in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, Rithambara called for inducting two children from every Hindu family into RSS and VHP.
- In September 2022, a church in Ridgewood, New Jersey, initially scheduled as the venue for PSPA's fundraising event for Rithambara, withdrew permission after rights activists informed the church leadership about the speaker's background.
- During the same month, Rithambara's supporters in the UK were compelled to cancel her events due to heightened pressure from the British civil society concerning her violent past and far-right affiliation. Additionally, she faced denial of transit permission through London airport while returning from the US to India.
- In **June 2023, Indian news channel, ETV Bharat, reported Rithambara of peddling an anti-Muslim conspiracy theory of "love jihad."** According to Time Magazine, "love jihad" is a "baseless conspiracy theory" that claims

Muslim men are trapping Hindu women in love to convert them to Islam. The term has been used by Hindu nationalists in India to police, incite, and commit violence against Muslim men in interfaith relationships.

- **Rithambara's PSP operates two registered organizations in the US: Param Shakti Peeth Of America Foundation and Param Shakti Peeth Of America East Coast.** Between 2004 and 2022, PSPA raised over \$12.6 million for its parent organization, PSP, in India. PSPA and PSPA East Coast function solely as fundraising groups to finance various projects run by PSP in India.
- On its website, PSPA states its mission as “to catalyze socio-economic change and accelerate the poverty-alleviation mission in India through a multitude of social programs for the bottom-of-the-pyramid population, with highest focus to the underprivileged children.”
- **PSP's core team in India is led by Hindu nationalists**, including Jai Bhagwan Aggarwal, a leader of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In the US, PSP operations are led by five Indian Americans associated with different Hindu far-right groups, including the Overseas Friends of the BJP (OFBJP), the registered foreign agent of the BJP in the US.
- Avadhesh Agarwal, the permanent director of PSPA, is a trustee of far-right group Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America's (VHPA) World Hindu Council INC and a former executive of OFBJP. Agarwal is also one of the top donors of the Frisco, TX-based Global Hindu Heritage Foundation (GHHF), an organization that publishes discriminatory, and intolerant content about Islam and Christianity. Agarwal has contributed \$122,000 since 2013. Other core team members include Shekar Reddy, a member of VHPA-led Ekal Vidyalaya group and a trustee of GHHF; Braham Aggarwal, the former director of the RSS offshoot Hindu Swayamsewak Sangh's (HSS) South East America; Ramjibhai Patel, an OFBJP leader; and Balram Advani, an advisor to Ekal Vidyalaya's New York chapter.
- PSPA's board of advisors includes Ramesh Bhutada, the joint president of HSS and the chairman of Sewa International; Subhash Gupta, HSS's Houston chapter president, Chairman-Advisor of Ekal Vidyalaya, and a former VHPA Governing Council member; and Rakshpal Sood, the senior advisor of the OFBJP. Its board of directors includes Shiv Aggarwal, the Atlanta, GA chapter president of Ekal Vidyalaya who has served as VHPA Governing Council Member and its former Atlanta chapter President; Chandru Bhambhara, the HSS leader; Suresh Khanna, the president of Ekal Vidyalaya Hudson, NY; and HSS leader Anil Parekh, who is also a member of Indian American Republicans of California.

This factsheet was produced in collaboration with Raqib Hameed Naik, US-based Kashmiri journalist who covers human rights, religious minorities, and Hindu nationalism.