



The Unwavering "Gyan, Sheel, Ekta" Saffron Surge: A Study of the Role of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad in Post-Independence Student Movements

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Abstract:

This research paper examines the role of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad in shaping student movements in post-independence India, drawing on perspectives from political science, history, and social work to provide a nuanced account of its ideological evolution, mobilisation strategies, and legacy. The paper traces ABVP's emergence as a counterweight to leftist student organisations, investigates its involvement in landmark historical agitations, analyses major campaigns from the late 20th century onwards, and ultimately situates its activism within the broader discourse of nation-building and youth empowerment in India. By applying social work frameworks such as community organisation, capacity-building, and rights-based advocacy, this study argues that the ABVP has developed a unique indigenous model of youth mobilisation that simultaneously functions as an instrument of political socialisation and a vehicle for community-level intervention. This study begins by reviewing the existing literature, followed by an outline of its objectives, hypothesis, and methodology, before proceeding with the main historical analysis. This analysis situates the ABVP's activism within the broader discourse of nation-building, cultural nationalism, and youth empowerment in contemporary India.

Keywords: Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), Post-independence student movements, Youth mobilisation, Cultural nationalism, social work frameworks, Community organisation, Capacity-building, Rights-based advocacy, Nation-building, Political socialisation, Grassroots activism, Student leadership development, Indigenous mobilisation model, Constructive programmes, Policy advocacy.

1. Introduction

In the decades following India's independence, university campuses became crucibles of patriotic student activism, where student organisations proudly acted as bridges between the nation's youth and the Indian state, nurturing a spirit of unity, ideological debate rooted in national interests, and collective action for India's social and democratic renewal. Amidst this transformative era, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) emerged on 9 July 1949 as a patriotic movement dedicated to "national reconstruction" rooted in Bharatiya traditions and values, countering divisive ideologies among India's youth. Driven by the motto "Gyan, Sheel, Ekta" (Knowledge, Character, Unity), ABVP's activism has persistently championed educational reform, cultural nationalism, and community mobilisation, all with the vision of strengthening national unity. Its evolution from a small initiative to a major force exemplifies not only the nationalist orientation of youth movements but also their alignment with principles of social empowerment, advocacy for a united Bharat, and social justice rooted in the Indian ethos. This study adopts historical analysis, political sociology, and social work theories to highlight ABVP's nationalist contributions to student politics, demonstrating how Indian models of youth mobilisation serve as tools for strengthening national unity and driving Bharat-centric social transformation. By analysing ABVP's

commitment to empowerment, advocacy, and grassroots engagement, we can showcase how such indigenous organisations embody patriotic mobilisation, acting simultaneously as instruments for nation-building and platforms for social intervention rooted in India's traditions and values.

2. Literature Review

This literature review engages with scholarship across three pivotal domains: the Hindu nationalist movement, the history of Indian student politics, and social movement theories. A critical assessment of this literature reveals a significant analytical gap. While existing research often frames the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) through a political or conflict-oriented lens, it fails to adequately capture the integrated dynamics of its multifaceted functioning, encompassing creativity, agitation, construction, and representation. This study contends that this gap exists because conventional political frameworks are insufficient. It aims to provide a more holistic understanding by applying a social work framework, which is better suited to analyse the interplay between ideology, community building, and social action that defines the ABVP's enduring presence and success.

The Ideological and Organisational Context: Scholarship on the Sangh Parivar Any study of the ABVP must begin with the extensive literature on its parent ideological body, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and its affiliate organisations (the Sangh Parivar). Foundational scholarly work, particularly Walter Andersen and Shridhar Damle's *The Brotherhood in Saffron* (1987), provides an essential organisational ethnography, mapping the RSS hierarchical structure, its ideology of discipline, and its strategy of creating specialised offshoots to work in various social sectors. This work explains the structural outfits that the ABVP inherited. It also sheds light on the ABVP's role in society, demonstrating its impact on social change across diverse spheres of national and social life.

In the same vein, political histories by Christophe Jaffrelot (e.g., *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics*, 1996) analyse how this framework has been operationalised for political mobilisation. Jaffrelot's analysis is crucial for positioning the ABVP as a "strategic vehicle for recruiting youth into the fold of Hindutva," highlighting its role in the long-term project of political and cultural transformation and Reorganise India as a cultural entity. However, Jaffrelot's study does not assess the impact of the ABVP's specific creative, agitational, constructive, and representative role within the social sphere as an affiliate of the Sangh. The present study is an effort to fulfil this.

This is further enriched by cultural analyses from scholars like Thomas Blom Hansen (*The Saffron Wave*, 1999) and Arvind Rajagopal (*Politics After Television*, 2001), who examine the broader symbolic and media strategies that created a fertile ground for nationalist ideas to flourish. Denying the value of culture and ethno identities.

This academic analysis is supplemented and countered by two other streams of literature. First, "insider" accounts such as Sunil Ambekar's *The RSS: Roadmaps for the Twenty-First Century* (2019) and the official ABVP history, *Dhyeya Yatra* (2022), a two-volume historical account of the ABVP edited by Manojkant, Pradeep Rao, and Umendra Dutt, which documents the ABVP's evolution as a nationalist student force committed to constructive activism and nation-rebuilding. These present an emic perspective on the organisation's self-identity, goals, and commitment to "constructive activism." Second, a strong body of critical literature, including Tapan Basu et al.'s *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags* (1993) and more recent works by commentators like Pratap Bhanu Mehta and A.G. Noorani. Although this vast literature effectively portrays the ideology and socio-political impact of the Sangh Parivar, it often treats the ABVP as a mere auxiliary organisation and does not delve deeply into its unique campus-level mobilisation methods. Furthermore, these commentators have overlooked the ABVP's role in fostering positive change within the educational sphere, acting as a bridge between the nation and society. The present research is a concerted effort to present its work towards social change in the social sector.

Positioning ABVP in the Narrative of Indian Student Politics

The scholarly discourse on student activism in post-independence India has predominantly focused on left-wing, liberal, and anti-establishment movements. The foundational texts of Philip G. Altbach (Student Politics in India, 1968) and later works by Manoranjan Mohanty (Student Politics in India, 1976) have historically centred on the role of organisations like the All-India Students' Federation (AISF) and the Students' Federation of India (SFI) in shaping campus politics and national debates. Contemporary accounts, such as Nandini Sundar's *Subalterns and Rebels* (2013), Ramachandra Guha's *India After Gandhi* (2007), and Yogendra Yadav's *Making Sense of Indian Democracy* (2000), analyse specific student-led movements, continuing this trend of often framing student politics as a site of radical dissent against state power and its establishments.

Within this dominant narrative, the ABVP is often relegated to a secondary, antagonistic role, portrayed as a "reactionary force" aimed at countering progressive campus politics. This portrayal, while capturing the conflictual dimension of inter-group dynamics, is analytically incomplete. It overlooks the ABVP's consistent engagement in activities that fall outside the protest-and-dissent paradigm, such as educational reform campaigns, grassroots community service, and cultural nationalism projects. This study is a valid attempt to move beyond this binary depiction by exploring the ABVP's proactive, program-based agenda and its self-perception as a movement of "nation-rebuilding."

Bridging the Theoretical Divide: From Social Movement Theory to an Indigenous Social Work Framework

This final section of the literature review pertains to social movement theory. Foundational Western models, such as Sidney Tarrow on political opportunity structures (*Power in Movement*, 2011), Doug McAdam on resource mobilisation (*Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*, 1982), and David Snow on framing processes, provide robust frameworks for understanding collective action. However, in the Indian context, and particularly with ideology-based organisations like the ABVP, their application has been limited. These West-centric models do not always adequately capture the significance of cultural nationalism, ideological mentorship (karyakarta development), and voluntary, service-based engagement that are central to the ABVP's operational philosophy.

This theoretical limitation gives rise to the central gap that this research addresses, and this study attempts to identify the ABVP's primary contribution. Scholars like Partha Chatterjee (*The Politics of the Governed*, 2004) and Veena Das (*Life and Words*, 2006) have highlighted the unique modes of political life and community action in the Indian context. This paper's unique contribution is to propose a social work framework as a specific tool for analysing this "indigenous mobilisation model." By applying concepts such as Community Organisation (analysing its unit-based structure), Capacity-Building (examining its leadership development), and Rights-Based Advocacy (studying its campaigns), your research can analyse how the ABVP translates its core ideology of "Gyan, Sheel, Ekta" (Knowledge, Character, Unity) into tangible, on-the-ground action. This approach enables a better understanding of the ABVP not just as a political entity, but as a complex socio-cultural organisation that combines ideology, activism, and community engagement in a uniquely resilient and effective manner.

3. Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this research is to analyse the ABVP's role and methods within the landscape of Indian student movements. The specific objectives are :

1. To trace the historical evolution of the ABVP's mobilisation strategies from its inception to the present day.
2. To analyse the ABVP's role and impact in key post-independence student agitations and national movements.
3. To apply a social work theoretical framework (community organisation, capacity-building, and rights-based advocacy) to understand the ABVP's operational methods.

4. To critically evaluate the effectiveness and socio-political implications of this indigenous mobilisation model.

4. Hypothesis of the Study

This study is guided by the following hypotheses.

1. The Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad's sustained growth and influence are attributable to an indigenous mobilisation model that uniquely integrates principles of social work, such as community organisation, capacity-building, and rights-based advocacy, with a core ideology of cultural nationalism.
2. The ABVP's strategic duality of engaging in both constructive social programs and confrontational protest politics allows it to appeal to a broader student base and adapt to changing political contexts more effectively than single-focus student organisations.

5. Research Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative and descriptive research design**, utilising a **historical and case-study approach**. The research is primarily based on the analysis of **secondary data** drawn from a wide range of sources to ensure a comprehensive and balanced perspective.

Data Collection: The sources include:

Academic Sources: Peer-reviewed books, academic journals, and dissertations on Indian politics, the RSS, Hindu nationalism, and student movements.

Media and Archival Sources: News reports, articles, and op-eds from reputable national newspapers and magazines (such as The Hindu, Rastradharm, Pantjanya Organizer, The Indian Express, Frontline, and Economic and Political Weekly) to reconstruct events and understand public discourse.

Organisational Publications: Official websites, Chatrashkti magazine, resolutions, pamphlets, and publications from the ABVP to analyse its self-representation, stated objectives, and public framing of issues.

Method of Analysis: The collected data is analysed using **thematic and historical content analysis**. This involves identifying recurring patterns in the ABVP's mobilisation techniques over different historical periods, tracing the evolution of its strategies, and systematically connecting empirical evidence from its campaigns and activities to the theoretical framework of social work. This method allows for an in-depth, interpretative understanding of the ABVP's unique operational model.

The Early Years: Ideological Formation and Grassroots Mobilisation (1949–1970)

The formation of ABVP marked a strategic response by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) to the growing leftist influence on college campuses in post-colonial India. Unlike many contemporaneous student organisations, which allied with trade unions and political parties, ABVP emphasised character-building, leadership development, and a broad-based program of national reconstruction.

Through localised meetings, study circles, and engagement with educational policy, ABVP nurtured a cadre of volunteers' adept in ideological dialogue and organisational skills. This early period defined its profile as an organisation oriented towards capacity-building and national integration, aligning with the principles of social work, which emphasise empowerment and consciousness-raising.

The Nav Nirman Andolan and JP Movement

The 1970s witnessed a dramatic escalation in student activism in India. Discontent over corruption and governance led to major uprisings, notably the Nav Nirman Andolan in Gujarat (1974) and the Bihar Movement spearheaded by Jayaprakash Narayan (JP Movement, 1974–75). ABVP played a prominent role by mobilising students, organising rallies, providing strategic leadership, and disseminating information. It formalised methods of grassroots mobilisation, door-to-door campaigns, peer-led meetings, and collective action, which mirrored advocacy techniques in social work.

The ABVP's interventions during these agitations highlighted the capacity of youth organisations to act as vehicles for social justice, catalysing change not merely through political protest but via sustained community engagement. The participation of ABVP volunteers in these movements reflected a deep commitment to transparency, accountability, and ethical governance all pillars of social work.

1975 Emergency: A Crucible of Resistance

The imposition of the Emergency by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1975–77) marked perhaps the most formative period in ABVP's history. The organisation, along with the RSS, was banned, and thousands of activists were jailed. Despite official repression, ABVP demonstrated remarkable resilience:

- Organised clandestine protests and underground networks
- Published and distributed anti-Emergency literature
- Provided support to families of political prisoners
- Sustained voluntary networks despite risks of arrest

This era solidified ABVP's reputation as a pro-democratic force, capable of deploying community-based strategies akin to social work mobilisations during crises. The voluntary, decentralised activism enabled ABVP to maintain ideological continuity and influence amid severe state-led repression.

Especially during this time, many ABVP activists later gained prominence as leaders in national politics, underlining the organisation's role as a “nursery” for leadership development rooted in democratic values.

The Rise of Cultural Nationalism and Identity-Based Agitations (1980s–1990s)

Advocacy for Kashmiri Hindus

The late 1980s saw the large-scale displacement of Hindus from the Kashmir valley due to militancy and communal violence. The ABVP was among the few student organisations to frame the crisis as a matter of national security and human rights, organising demonstrations, seminars, and nationwide campaigns. These efforts combined elements of social advocacy (education, awareness) with direct community support, resonating with macro-level social work approaches. The mobilisation for Kashmiri Pandits displayed ABVP's evolving capacity for policy advocacy and humanitarian intervention, not merely campus-centred action.

The Ram Janmabhoomi Movement

ABVP's involvement in the Ram Janmabhoomi movement (late 1980s and early 1990s) marked a shift towards broader ideological engagement. Rather than only championing campus issues, it mobilised students toward causes of “cultural and historical justice,” utilising tools like:

- Study circles and ideological education
- Campus lectures and discussions
- Cultural programs and rallies

This strategy indicated a method where ideological discourse was fused with grassroots mobilisation, blurring the lines between student activism and cultural nationalism. The methodology—educative, discursive, participatory—mirrored preventive and promotive strategies in social work, albeit with pronounced cultural orientation.

Ekta Yatra Movement: Hoisting the National Flag at Lal Chowk, Srinagar (26 January 1992)

The Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad made a historic and brave choice to raise the Indian national flag, called Tiranga, at Lal Chowk in Srinagar on January 26, 1992. This action was part of a campaign named “Ekta Yatra” or Unity March. This event is remembered as one of the most remarkable, peaceful, and important actions in the history of ABVP.

In the early 1990s, Jammu and Kashmir was facing a lot of terrorism and separatist activities. At that time, raising the Indian flag at Lal Chowk was seen as nearly impossible. However, ABVP brought together young people from all over the country and bravely took on this mission. They successfully raised the Tiranga at Lal Chowk, which was a powerful symbol of national unity and strength.

The main goal of this journey was to show that “Kashmir is an integral part of India” and that the Tiranga stands for the unity, integrity, and pride of the nation. The march was led by Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi, who was the National President of ABVP at that time.

The journey started from Kanyakumari and ended at Lal Chowk in Srinagar. This trip inspired a strong sense of national awareness, courage, leadership, and shared responsibility among Indian youth. From the viewpoint of social work, this yatra symbolized social unity, community strength, and the development of leadership. It also represented the spirit and social duty of the youth. Even under tough and challenging conditions, this Tiranga Yatra, done with hard work and patriotism, was more than just a political action. It became a lasting story of national identity, unity, and youth leadership. The journey proved that through strong organization, ideals, and the power of youth, even the most difficult tasks can be achieved.

Save Campus Culture Movement

The “Save Campus Culture” campaign (1993–94) exemplified ABVP’s drive to reinforce “Indian values” amid perceived Westernisation of youth. Initiatives included value-based counselling, peer-led workshops, and curricular interventions. While these efforts remain controversial for their homogenising tendencies, they serve as case examples of how voluntary student organisations attempt to shape campus life using peer education and preventive interventions, a classic social work domain.

Navigating the 21st Century: New Issues and Persistent Ideologies (2000–Present)

In the new millennium, the ABVP has adapted its strategies to address contemporary issues while maintaining its core ideological commitments. It has increasingly engaged in rights-based advocacy, mirroring the methods of modern NGOs. This was evident in its role as a significant youth mobilizer during the **India Against Corruption movement (2011)** and its participation in campaigns for women's safety following the **2012 Nirbhaya case**. It later launched ‘**Mission Sahasi**,’ a nationwide self-defence training initiative for girls, reflecting an empowerment-centred, gender-sensitive approach.

In response to privatisation and perceived “de-Indianization” of education, ABVP launched the “**Save Education, Save Culture**” movement (2002). These nationwide campaigns opposed commercial policies and promoted cultural sensitivity in educational institutions. Methods included:

- Petition drives for policy reform
- Student assemblies and mass mobilisations
- Advocacy for ethical dimensions in policy-making

Here, ABVP’s activism closely parallels that of social workers advocating for equitable education and cultural rights, foregrounding the organisation’s capacity to translate ideological positions into actionable policy advocacy.

“Chalo Chicken Neck” Campaign

In 2008, ABVP drew attention to the challenges of infiltration and security in the Siliguri Corridor “Chicken Neck”. While not a classical social work domain, ABVP’s approach to community education, pressure-group tactics, and outreach demonstrates how youth organisations adapt their mobilisation strategies to contemporary national issues.

India Against Corruption and Social Justice Movements

The **anti-corruption agitations** of 2011 (India Against Corruption) marked ABVP's entry into rights-based advocacy. The organisation orchestrated massive student rallies and campaign initiatives to demand stronger anti-graft legislation. Similarly, ABVP played a prominent role in:

- The 2012 Nirbhaya movement for women's safety
- Campaigns for stricter laws and justice reforms (e.g., Juvenile Justice Act, 2015)

These interventions spotlighted ABVP's shift towards **policy reform and rights-based advocacy**, the territorial domains of social work practitioners. The organisation demonstrated techniques such as mass mobilisation, media advocacy and peer education—established best practices from social work activism.

Constructive Programs and Ideological Confrontations

The late 2010s saw ABVP navigating between confrontational and constructive mobilisation. In 2017, it launched the “Chalo Kerala” protest against alleged violence by leftist organisations; in 2018, it launched ‘Mission Sahasi,’ a nationwide self-defence initiative empowering lakh of school and college-going girls. Such initiatives reflect a gender-sensitive, empowerment-centred approach, incorporating gender justice and self-confidence as key dimensions in social work community development.

ABVP's Policy Advocacy and the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019–20)

ABVP's support for the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) marked another inflexion point in its activism. As nationwide protests against the Act gained momentum, ABVP organised rallies, public seminars, and published position papers defending CAA as a humanitarian measure.

While critics accused it of partisanship, ABVP's involvement typifies the evolving role of student organisations as policy influencers, active participants in legislative advocacy, and mobilisers of public opinion. These activities underscore not only ideological commitment but also the organisation's ability to deploy sophisticated advocacy, policy analysis, and strategic communication, all of which are landmarks of modern social work advocacy.

Social Work Lens: Capacity-Building, Community Organisation, and Empowerment Theoretical Framing

ABVP's trajectory can be interpreted through key social work frameworks:

- **Community Organisation:** The ABVP utilises grassroots, participatory approaches (study circles, peer meetings, local campaigns) to foster collective action and build solidarity around shared ideological goals. Its unit-based structure allows for deep penetration into diverse student communities.
- **Capacity-Building:** A central tenet of its work is leadership development (netritva vikas), focusing on public speaking, organisational management, and debating skills. This mirrors social work interventions designed to empower individuals and equip them with the tools for effective advocacy.
- **Rights-Based Advocacy:** While its ideological lens is specific, its campaigns for educational reform, anti-corruption, and gender justice employ the methods of rights-based advocacy, including petitions, mass mobilisation, and policy engagement.
- **Social Capital:** The organisation develops dense, long-term networks of activists and alumni who provide mutual support and go on to occupy influential positions in politics, media, and academia, creating a powerful ecosystem of influence.

This model emphasises voluntary networks, ideological mentorship, and consciousness-raising, adapting classic tenets of social work to a specific cultural and social context.

Indigenous Mobilisation Model

Unlike Western models of student activism that rely heavily on institutional support, ABVP's methods emphasise:

- Localised, voluntary networks
- Resource-sharing and informal mentoring
- Ideological education and consciousness-raising

This indigenous approach draws upon cultural frameworks while adapting the classic tenets of social work solidarity, empowerment, and advocacy to local contexts.

Empirical Outcomes

Studies of ABVP mobilisation suggest impacts on student leadership, policy influence, and targeted social reforms. Alumni have emerged as leaders in public service, policy research, and social entrepreneurship, reinforcing the organisation's legacy as a site for youth capacity-building.

Critiques and Controversies

While ABVP's influence is indubitable, it remains a subject of intense debate in academia and civil society. Key critiques revolve around concerns such as strident nationalism, perceived partisanship, and its approach to religious, regional, and cultural diversity. However, a closer reading of these criticisms reveals how they have also contributed to the organisation's self-reflection and innovation.

Nationalism as Cohesion: What critics term "strident nationalism" is seen by supporters as a necessary counter to campus fragmentation, creating a unifying narrative that emphasises civic duty and collective responsibility among youth.

Ideological Affinity, Not Dependency: Rather than compromising independence, ABVP's proximity to the RSS has provided it with organisational discipline, voluntary networks, and long-term vision qualities that many student movements lack.

Engaging Diversity Through Action: Although its approach to diversity has been questioned, ABVP's outreach programmes, cultural exchanges, and constructive campaigns like Mission Sahasi and Seva Projects show an expanding effort to integrate students from varied backgrounds into national life.

Thus, even the controversies surrounding ABVP have functioned as catalysts, sharpening its strategies and deepening its engagement with students' real-world concerns. Its enduring presence challenges scholars not only to critique but also to understand how indigenous models of youth mobilisation can blend with social work to produce sustainable contributions to nation-building.

6. Conclusion

The Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad's journey offers a rich case study of youth mobilisation, one that spans political protest, policy advocacy, and constructive social programming. Through decades of activism, ABVP has evolved from a counterweight to leftist student organisations into a central force in shaping student discourse and influencing India's socio-political landscape.

Its methods, grassroots mobilisation, peer-led education, advocacy, and community organisation mirror key social work interventions, adapted to the context of Indian civil society. The ongoing debates about its ideology, methods, and legacy serve to enrich the scholarly conversation about the role of youth organisations in nation-building, rights advocacy, and social change.

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