



**EXPLAINER**

**RASHTRA SEVIKA  
SAMITI (RSS)**

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# Executive Summary

- Rashtra Sevika Samiti is the world's largest Hindu women's organisation to uphold Bharatiya culture and traditions.
- Rashtra Sevika Samiti works to uphold the Bharatiya culture and traditions in India and across 22 nations worldwide.
- Rashtra Sevika Samiti's motto is to build the individual and build the nation.
- An exemplary mother like Jijabai, a capable administrator like Ahilyabai Holkar and a brave, fearless leader like Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, are the role models of the Sevika's (volunteers).
- Rashtra Sevika Samiti recognises and celebrates the inherent qualities of women- Matrutva (Universal Motherhood), Kartrutva (Efficiency and Social Activism) and Netrutva (Leadership).
- Rashtra Sevika Samiti operates in 5215 active Shakhas (gatherings) and 875 centres conducting daily Shakhas.
- Rashtra Sevika Samiti believes in the idea of Kutumbh or family ("family'ism") and not select interpretations of feminism<sup>1</sup>.
- During its Shakhas, Rashtra Sevika Samiti emphasises women's leadership and social reform role in shaping the society.
- Rashtra Sevika Samiti also provides relief and aid in times of natural disasters and distress, providing shelter and livelihood to women (through their Chhatraavaas/hostels) in need of help.
- Rashtra Sevika Samiti, on lines similar to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), aspires for focussed and holistic development of women, who it believes to be the cornerstone of India's societal and family values.
- Rashtra Sevika Samiti is not merely limited to social and economic empowerment of women (as is propagated by select interpretations of feminism<sup>2</sup>) but has also assisted in women living meaningful lives, giving back to the Indian society, strengthening the social order, nation-building.
- The founding vision and mission of the Samiti broadens the concept of feminism. While feminism is limited to economic and social empowerment of women with a great focus on the *self*, the Samiti has endeavoured to move away from this limited mindset to grant the ultimate power to women: shaping the future of the tomorrow while focusing on complete development of the *self*.
- Rashtra Sevika Samiti is inseparable from Sewa (Service). Therefore, Sewa has a special meaning in the Samiti's work-schedule. The Samiti believes that national service, animals, birds, trees, mountains, rivers, seas, and all other elements of the creation need to be protected.

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<sup>1</sup> As there is no universally agreed definition for feminism. Select variations/branches of feminism promote radical interpretations of feminists and feminism. Such radical interpretations are being referred to in this context.  
Ref: Shibles, W. Radical feminism, humanism and women's studies. *Innov High Educ* 14, 35–47 (1989).

<sup>2</sup> n1, Shibles, W. Radical feminism, humanism and women's studies. *Innov High Educ* 14, 35–47 (1989).

# Historical Context

Rashtra Sevika Samiti (National Women Volunteers Committee) is the world's largest Hindu women's organisation upholding Bharatiya values and traditions. It was founded by Lakshmi bai Kelkar in 1936 at Wardha, MahaRashtra, to unite women and reinforce their pride, passion for the Rashtra and Hindutva sentiment by preaching values of Sanatan Dharma. The organisation believes that women are a manifestation of nature itself, the fundamental power of the universe. Whatever is visible in the whole world is mirrored in the influence of the same divine power, and so it is consciousness. Samiti considers supremacy as Maha Laxmi, Maha Saraswati, Maha Kali and the power that of Parabrahma. The Samiti is of the sound understanding that Bharatiya culture has coursed with the idea that every woman is a part of Shaktiyatva.

## **Samiti's objectives are established on three principles:**

- I. Matrutva (Universal Motherhood)
- II. Kartrutva (Efficiency and Social Activism)
- III. Netrutva (Leadership)

Samiti women participate in a wide range of socio-cultural activities and instil a sense of responsibility and social awareness among its volunteers. In addition, the organisation regularly runs multifarious educational and awareness programmes in India.

Rashtra Sevika Samiti trains the girls with the skilful art of uniting and keeping the family together. How to be victorious, how to maintain peace in families who are weak or broken. Samiti Shakhas currently operates in 5215 (five thousand two hundred fifteen centres), and 875 (eight hundred seventy-five centres) conduct daily Shakhas.

## **About Lakshmibai Kelkar- Aadya Pramukh Sanchalika (Founder)**



Image: Lakshmibai Kelkar

In 1905, Lakshmibai Kelkar was born in Nagpur's Mahal district. Kamal was her given name as a child (i.e. lotus). Bhaskar Rao Datey, a government employee, and Yashodabai, a housewife, were her parents. Young Kamal often accompanied the local temple priest and her Dai (nanny) on a righteous drive to save cows from slaughter. Here, Kamal learned the value of humility, the power of words, and the ability to withstand insults and animosity while fighting for a greater good due to these activities. During the plague outbreak, she helped her parents and Dai take care of the sick and poor, regardless of caste or creed. Her father was a compassionate man, he once volunteered to perform last rites of plague victims whom others had refused— and all of these experiences instilled in Kamal the principles of perseverance and patience. Kamal decided not to marry a person who demands dowry from her parents and values money more than her. Subsequently, she married well-known advocate Purushottam Rao on her terms of the famous Kelkar family of Wardha. Purushottam has two daughters from his first wife. So, as per the custom, her name

was changed to Lakshmi. Her devotion and goodwill captured everyone's heart in her husband's home as she cheerfully cared for the small daughters. Soon she was blessed with a son.

As freedom fighters from throughout the country flocked to Sevagram in Wardha, the location became a hive of political activity. Lakshmibai's patriotism was sparked, and she encouraged other women to join the fight for independence. For this noble cause, they even donated their jewellery. Unfortunately, her husband contracted Tuber Culosis, a dreaded and incurable disease in those days, and despite all of her efforts and prayers, he died at the young age of twenty-seven, leaving her a widow. Her eldest daughter died of illness as well. Nevertheless, she overcame her sadness by taking over the management of the house and bringing the finances under the order.

Laxmibai, often called Mausiji, laid the foundation of a girl's school, paving the way for women's literacy in Wardha. Meanwhile, her sons joined the RSS, where they were taught physical and mental discipline, the art of self defence etc. Observing the change and field, Lakshmibai decided that a similar institution for women was the solution to their problems. So she decided to meet Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, the head of the men's Sangha. Dr Hedgewar was impressed with her quiet strength and philosophy. So, with examples of great leaders like Swami Vivekanand, she convinced him about the need to empower women.

Mausiji's life story is an inspiring tale of a heroic lady who, with tremendous moral courage and mental strength, struggled against all difficulties and eventually triumphed. In a male-dominated culture, her foresight, boldness, and confidence led in the founding of a powerful organisation for women's rehabilitation, which reawakened patriotic impulses and dormant feminine strength in the hearts of traditional Indian women. She fought to uphold the Hindu ideology of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam,' which means 'the world is one family.' She devoted her life to the motherland's devotion and care. She insisted that women nurture their maternal instincts to serve society as a whole.

### **Venkatramaiah Shantha Kumari - Pramukh Sanchalika (Current Head)**

V. Shantha Kumari was born on February 5, 1952, is the current chief (Pramukh Sanchalika) of Rashtra Sevika Samiti. She took charge as chief in 2013. She was born in Bengaluru, Karnataka, in a family that valued philanthropy and devotion to the nation's cause. Her father was a member of the Quit India Movement in 1942, and her mother, a housewife, gave away all of her jewellery in response to the call of Mahatma Gandhi. In 1968, Shantha Kumari came in contact with Rashtra Sevika Samiti when she was only 16 years old. She had not only finished all of the requisite Rashtra Sevika Samiti training sessions by 1969, but she was also leading a daily Shakha at Wilson Garden in Bengaluru. Soon after, she was made the chief Instructor. Her dedication and competence propelled her to Nagar Karyavahak (Town Chief/In-charge) within five years.

Mannya 'Shanthakka' holds a master's degree in mathematics and a master's degree in education. She was a teacher at Bengaluru's Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan for many years. However, for the work of the Samiti, she voluntarily retired in 1995 and gave her full-time to the Rashtra Sevika Samiti's expansion and development.

## Rashtra Sevika Samiti - Leadership over the years

S.No.	Timeline	Leaders
1	October 1936 to November 1978	Laxmibai Kelkar
2	1978-1994	Sarawati Apte A.k.a Tai Apte
3	1994-2006	Usta-tai-Chati
4	2006-2012	Pramila-tai Medhe
5	2012 to present	Venkatramaiah Shantha Kumari

## Rashtra Sevika Samiti - Timeline

S.No.	Date	Details
1.	October 25, 1936	On the auspicious occasion of Vijaydashmi Laxmi Bai Kelkar (Mausiji), established the Rashtra Sevika Samiti at Wardha, MahaRashtra, India.
2.	1953	Rashtra Sevika Samiti started Sevika Prakashan
3.	April 2, 1965	Samiti started publishing an annual diary called Dindarshika on every Navvarsha Pratipada.
4.	November 1978	Death of the founder of Rashtra Sevika Samiti Laxmi Bai (Mausiji) Kelkar.
5.	1975 -77	Rashtra Sevika Samiti had taken part in the emergency.
6.	1978	After the death of Mausiji Kelkar, Saraswati Apte also known as Tai Apte Pramukh Sanchalika (head) of the organization. She headed the organisation from 1978 to 1994. She was second head of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti.
7.	February 1990	In the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi movement, 20,000 women karsevikas (volunteer) were arrested out of 50,000 karasevikas who were involved in the Karaseva.
8.	May 1994	Rashtra Sevika Samiti had participated in All India Hindu Mahila Sammelan which was organised under the banner of Hindu Chetana.
9.	1994	Usha Tai Apte nominated as the third head of the organisation. She headed the organisation from 1994 to 2006.
10.	2006	After Usha Tai Apte, Pramila Tai Medhe was heading the organisation as fourth head. She headed the organisation from 2006 to 2012. Pramila Tai Medhe currently advisor of the organisation.
11.	2012	After Pramila Tai Medhe, Venkatramaiah Shantha Kumari is leading the organisation and she is current head of the organisation.

12.	2014	The focus of the samiti was on married women. It gave them a place to talk about their experiences and come up with solutions.
13.	2015	Young women were the focus of the organization's activities. A total of 291 meets were held, with a total of 88,343 participants.
14.	2016	During the Samiti's 80th year celebrations, its training camp was attended by 3,000 sevikas (volunteers).
15.	February 4, 2020	On the occasion of the 25th-anniversary commemoration of Saraswati Tai Apte, Rashtra Sevika Samiti had organised Shakti Sannmelan at wardha, MahaRashtra.



# Ideology and Identity

The ideology and the ethos of the Samiti are rooted in the vibrant Hindu culture to spearhead a society that has a strong cultural, social, educational, developmental, political, and nationalist foothold. The Rashtra Sevika Samiti, on lines similar to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), aspire for focussed and holistic development of women, who it believes to be the cornerstone of India's societal and family values.

The Samiti is an institution with no parallel, focusing on national reconstruction, building on ideals of Bharat nirman, and asserting Bharat's identity to strengthen the position of women and girls in the Indian society after centuries of subjugation by external forces. The Samiti, through its tireless efforts and work for empowerment of women has successfully reignited the concept of nari shakti and shaktitva (that is, every woman derives her essence and power from Parabrahma<sup>3</sup>).

At the core of glaring dysfunction of the Indian society, like the failing Indian family system in modern times, is the lack of ideals. In this backdrop, the Samiti has stepped in to guide the women of the country, specially the youth. The work carried out by the Samiti has touched every corner of Indian existence. It is not merely limited to social and economic empowerment of women (as is propagated by Western feminism) but has also assisted in women living meaningful lives, giving back to the Indian society, strengthening the social order, nation-building, providing relief and aid in times of natural disasters and distress, providing shelter and livelihood to women (through their chhatraavaas/hostels) to women

in need of help. The Samiti has given shelter and a new life to those deprived of a quality life in naxalite-hit areas of India<sup>4</sup>. In this manner, the Samiti has set a gold-standard for women in the Indian society.

Lakshmibai Kelkar, the founder of the Samiti envisioned all-round development of Indian women. Her vision, which is deeply embedded in the Samiti's ideology, is a seven-fold mission statement as depicted in Fig.01.

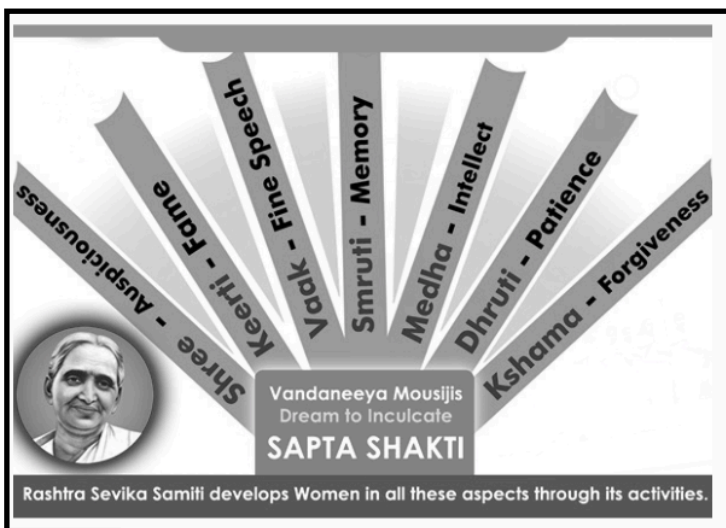


Fig. 01. The vision of the Samiti as held by its founder, Lakshmibai Kelkar (Mousiji). Source: Samiti website.

<sup>3</sup> Rashtra Sevika Samiti - Home. (2022). Retrieved 7 March 2022, from <https://sevikasamiti.org/>

<sup>4</sup> Excerpts from telephonic conversations with the Samiti members.

## Empowering the feminine

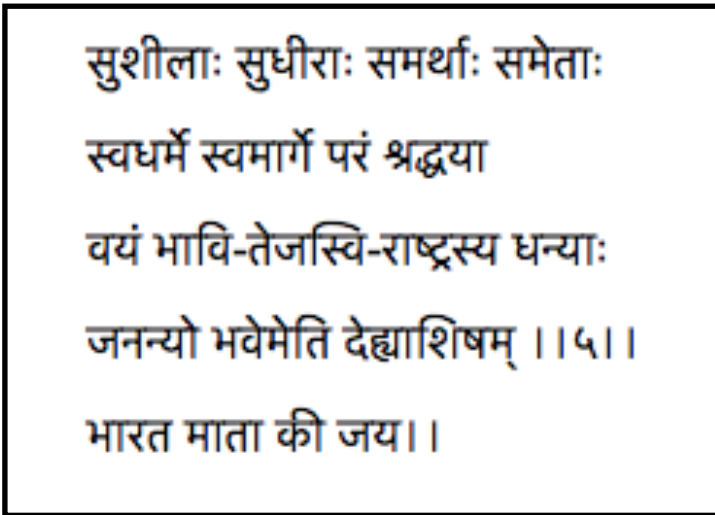


Fig. 02. A snippet from the Samiti prayer. Source: <https://sevikasamiti.org/resources/RSS/Publications/Prarthana%20Meaning.pdf>

At the core of *Hindutva*, all women are conceptualised as *matrushakti* or having divine mother power. The women of the Samiti base their ideals and their work on this underlying principle and it celebrates the active participation of women in all spheres of life. This is reflected in the ideals of womanhood that have been highlighted by the Samiti leaders, like *Kshatriyas* queens who fought with valour for their states, goddesses, like the *ashtabhujā devi* who embodies eternal qualities like physical strength, intellect, and prosperity and other qualities that signify the infinite possibilities and endeavours which women can

undertake. Fig. 02. is a snippet from the *prarthana* (prayer) of the Samiti, which highlights the basic tenets of womanhood.

The Samiti attempts to put women at the centre of their worldview to affirm the essence of the feminine. Both, the present and the past of the Samiti has eulogised women from history from all walks of life - scholars, queens and warriors from epics, women saints and ascetics, dutiful wives, and valorous mothers. The primary aim of relying on history is to inspire women and young girls of the present. The Samiti has also concerted efforts to fine tune the image of mothers and their role in shaping the Indian society. Women are considered as invested with great potential for spinning change. For instance, the Samiti has venerated Shivaji Maharaja's mother, Jijabai, with *enlightened motherhood*. The Samiti views women as the catalyst of cultural evolution and transmitters of Hindu values from one generation of other, hence, putting the responsibility of modelling the Indian society on them. After all, women are at the heart of the family and the greater family is the nation. The founding vision and mission of the Samiti thus broadens the Western concept of feminism. While feminism is limited to economic and social empowerment of women with a great focus on the *self*, the Samiti has endeavoured to move away from this limited mindset to grant the ultimate power to women: shaping the future of the tomorrow while focusing on complete development of the *self*.

# Activities and Associations

While most observers view the Samiti as the women's wing of the RSS, it is time that the independence and interdependence of the Samiti is brought to light.

The hierarchical structure of the Samiti is similar to that of the Sangh, with a *Pramukh Sanchalika* (head of the organisation) being appointed to the position for life, and a band of women volunteers known as *pracharikas* who work to spread the values and ethos of the Samiti. They are also responsible for the expansion of the Samiti network. The Samiti also organises *shakhas* and training camps are organised to mark important days, festivals, and programmes. The Samiti, through cultural events and programmes also glorifies and venerates its heroines and ideals<sup>5</sup>. Fig. 03 shows the Samiti's celebrations of



major Hindu festival *Raksha Bandhan* and *Ugadi*.

Fig.03 Raksha Bandhan and Ugadi celebrations as marked by the Samiti as per the Hindu panchangam. (Source: <https://sevikasamiti.org/>)

## Shakha

Shakha is a weekly gathering of Samiti volunteers that lasts about an hour, during which volunteers practise yoga, play games, talk and ponder on national concerns, and participate in activities such as singing songs and performing theatre. The Samiti

<sup>5</sup> Sisterhood in Saffron. (2022). Retrieved 7 March 2022, from [https://www.iias.asia/sites/default/files/2020-11/IIAS\\_NL36\\_15.pdf](https://www.iias.asia/sites/default/files/2020-11/IIAS_NL36_15.pdf)

नमामो वयं मातृभूः पुण्यभूस्त्वाम्  
त्वया वर्धिताः संस्कृतास्त्वत्सुताः  
अये वत्सले मण्डले हिन्दुभूमे  
स्वयं जीवितान्यर्पयामस्त्वयि ॥१॥

नमो विश्वशक्त्यै नमस्ते नमस्ते  
त्वया निर्मितं हिंदुराष्ट्रं महत्  
प्रसादात्तवैवात्र सज्जाः समेत्य  
समालंबितुं दिव्यमार्गं वयम् ॥२॥

समुन्नामितं येन राष्ट्रं न एतत्  
पुरो यस्य नम्रं समग्रं जगत्  
तदादर्शयुक्तं पवित्रं सतीत्वम्  
प्रियाभ्यः सुताभ्यः प्रयच्छाम्ब ते ॥३॥

समुत्पादयास्मासु शक्तिं सुदिव्याम्  
दुराचार-दुर्वृत्ति-विध्वंसिनीम्  
पिता-पुत्र-भ्रातृश्च भर्तारमेवम्  
सुमार्गं प्रति प्रेरयन्तीमिह ॥४॥

सुशीलाः सुधीराः समर्थाः समेताः  
स्वधर्मे स्वमार्गे परं श्रद्धया  
वयं भावि-तेजस्वि-राष्ट्रस्य धन्याः  
जनन्यो भवेमेति देह्याशिषम् ॥५॥  
भारत माता की जय।।

Figure 6

emphasises women's leadership roles in society and their role as social reformers.<sup>6</sup>

The members of the Shakha are taught three core values:

- Matrutva** (universal motherhood)
- Kartrutva** (social activism)
- Netrutva** (social leadership)

The members of the Shakha are imbued with these values which not only encourage them to lead a disciplined life but also assists them in inculcating these values in their children and family.

**The Shakha comprises of the following activities:**

•**Prarthana** - A prayer that is devoted to Mother Goddess and aligns with the hopes and wishes of every Indian woman. It gives mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical strength to women. The prayer, though written in Samskrita, has also been translated into English to further understanding among the masses. The entire prayer has been shown in Fig.6 on the left.

•**Dainik Shlokas** - The members of the Shakha are encouraged to learn and recite Shlokas (hymns) which have been derived from Samskrita and Hindi poetry. Two popular ones that are recited quite often are, “*Manasa Satatam Smaranyam*” and “*Janani Janma Bhumi Svaraga*”



Fig 04: Samiti volunteers singing dainik shlokas.

<sup>6</sup> Rashtra Sevika Samiti - Shakha. (2022). Retrieved 7 March 2022, from <https://sevikasamiti.org/Shakha>

se Mahaan Hai". Fig. 04 shows Samiti members singing dainik shlokas.

- **Geet** - The members of the Shakha are also encouraged to sing along patriotic songs with their peers to develop values of oneness and bonding. They sing songs in Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Gujarati, and Samskrita.
- **Achar Paddhati** - This is a formal procedure that is followed by the Samiti at the beginning and end of each Shakha session. It is imperative for organisations of this stature and membership to have a set



Fig. 05. Shakha members playing a sport that develops team spirit. Source: Rashtra Sevika Samiti - Khel. (2022). Retrieved 7 March 2022, from <https://sevikasamiti.org/Khel>



Fig. 07. A baithak in progress in Nagpur. Source: <https://sevikasamiti.org/Boudhik>

of formal standards on how the members will be organised during the Shakha and how each member will be able to pay respect to the *dhwaja* (the flag).

•**Khel** - Sports have been an integral part of peer-building and for forging lasting friendships within the Shakha. Sports and games that accentuate mental faculties, physical strength and stamina, team spirit, and group dynamism are promoted. These include games like chess, kabaddi, horse riding, Kho-Kho etc. Fig. 05 shows Shakha members engaged in *khel*.

- **Boudhik** - The purpose of these activities is to stimulate intellectual capacity building among the Shakha members, to gain knowledge about Hindu culture, and to develop a sense of pride and honour about India's glorious past. All of this is achieved through talks, debates, and intellectual discourses. Fig. 07. shows members of the Shakha engaging in a *baithak* (meeting)
- **Yogasana** - Members of all ages are encouraged to learn yoga and inculcate a habit of daily practice. Yoga is seen as a holistic way of maintaining overall health and development of the human body. It serves the mind, body, and the spirit in total.

## Sevika Samiti prominent Seva Projects

Human qualities like “Jiva Seva” are highly valued in Indian culture.

“Service” denotes consideration for other people's needs.

Rashtra Sevika Samiti is intrinsically linked to Sewa. Therefore, Sewa has special significance in the samiti work-plan. Sevika Samiti believes the national service, animals, birds, trees, mountains, rivers, the sea, and all the other components of the work's creation are all meant to be protected. Enlighten the spirit of the nation, way of life and



culture.

## Samskruti Seva Trust

It is a women’s self-help group in Hubballi, Karnataka. Women from low-income families were enrolled for this project. They are trained in a variety of income-generating activities such as Mahila Udyog Kendra, Stitching & Training Center, Samskara Kendras & Children's Camps, Personality Development Camps, Matru Mandali, Small Scale Designer Products Manufacturing & Marketing, and so on. Products made by women were marketed by Holige Kendra. Money earned after selling the products was directly given to the women. This supported women in learning money-making skills, thereby increasing their self-esteem.



### **Devi Ahilyabai Smarak Samiti**

Devi Ahilyabai Smarak Samiti (DASS) operates specialised rehabilitation and education programs for women who have been victims of atrocities committed by various groups in MahaRashtra. These physically mistreated, bereaved, and homeless women are taken to DASS, where they are assisted by DASS volunteers. They were given shelter, food, clothes, and education. Many girls return to their homes after finishing vocational training or basic matriculation for a period of 4-5 years and establish an institution modelled after DASS.



## Bala Gokulam

Bala Gokulam is a forum where kids discover and express their divinity. Children aged five and above can participate in Bala Gokulam. The kids are divided into two groups based on their ages. Adults and teenagers have their own activities within the centre as well. No one has turned away from the Bala Gokulam centre because of their age or other factors. Activities like Yoga, Bhajans, Shlokas, Arts and Crafts were performed in the centre. This will allow children to learn and appreciate their cultural roots and Hindu values.



- Rashtra Sevika Samiti has around 45 Health Initiatives across Bharat
- Rashtra Sevika Samiti has around 480 education projects across Bharat for Orphans and Girls with financially weak backgrounds.
- Rashtra Sevika Samiti has more than 480 women self-help groups to empower women and make them self-reliant.

## Humanitarian Assistance: COVID19

During the extraordinary circumstances like the COVID19 global pandemic, the Rashtra Sevika Samiti played a significant role in Humanitarian Efforts. Some examples are listed below:

- Rashtra Sevika Samiti distributed 4,26,237 Masks, Gloves and PPE Kits.
- Rashtra Sevika Samiti distributed 1,09,696 Grocery Kits.
- Rashtra Sevika Samiti provided 11600 packets of Sanitary Napkin
- Rashtra Sevika Samiti distributed food to 4,23,794 people.
- Rashtra Sevika Samiti runs Welfare programs at 38 places.
- Rashtra Sevika Samiti distributes ayurvedic medicines to 11,550 people.



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# Concluding Observations

Rashtra Sevika Samiti has committed full-time workers and active daily Shakhas worldwide. The structure of the Shakhas is very similar to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), but their activities are very different. Since its inception, Samiti developed unique methods to connect with women. The Samiti focuses on the role of Hindu women in society as active social reform leaders, facilitators and teachers who influence all walks of life of women with an aspiration for human elevation, which is holistic and inclusive