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Seva as Spiritual Leadership: Swami Biswatmananda Maharaj and the Bharat Sevashram Sangha in Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT :

Swami Biswatmananda Maharaj, popularly known as Dilip Maharaj, is General Secretary of the Bharat Sevashram Sangha (BSS), a Hindu monastic and service organisation with roots in early twentieth-century Bengal. This article asks how his leadership expresses seva (service to humanity) in disaster relief, education, health care, and rural development, and how the Sangha's claim to an apolitical monastic identity fares in public life. Drawing on documentary analysis of organisational publications, government records, and news reports, read against scholarship on seva, faith-based humanitarianism, and Hindu movements in modern Bengal, it makes three arguments. First, the Sangha's reported relief operations from 2014 to 2025 show a stable repertoire of community kitchens, shelter, and dry rations delivered through a dispersed ashram network, which is better understood as institutional capacity than as the product of one leader. Second, the Sangha's claim to universal, non-discriminatory service should be read alongside its founder's project of Hindu social consolidation, and so far remains a statement of policy, not a demonstrated outcome. Third, the apolitical principle operates as a rule of monastic conduct whose public meaning remains contested, as the 2024 controversy in West Bengal shows. The article closes with the limits of organisational and media sources and priorities for fieldwork and archival research.

Keywords: *Bharat Sevashram Sangha, seva, Swami Biswatmananda Maharaj, faith-based humanitarianism, Hindu monasticism, disaster relief, West Bengal*

Introduction

Across South Asia, monastic and quasi-monastic orders have long combined renunciation with organised welfare work. Scholars have shown that the modern idea of seva, or service to humanity as religious practice, emerged from an interaction of Hindu ideals, colonial-era philanthropy, and reformist institution-building (Beckerlegge, 2006). The Ramakrishna Math and Mission is the best-studied example. The Bharat Sevashram Sangha (BSS), a Hindu monastic and service organisation with roots in early twentieth-century Bengal, has received far less attention, although it runs a large network of ashrams, schools, and charitable institutions and is regularly visible in disaster response.

Existing work on the Sangha is largely biography and institutional history. Smart and Pumananda (1985) offer the standard English-language biography of its founder, Acharya Swami Pranavananda; Hazra (2024) gives a short historical survey; and devotional and organisational publications supply further detail (Bedānanda, 1978; Datta & Datta, 2025). To the author's knowledge, no sustained scholarly study examines the Sangha's current leadership. This article addresses that gap through Swami Biswatmananda Maharaj, widely known as Dilip Maharaj, the Sangha's General Secretary.

The article makes three arguments, each tied to a claim the Sangha makes about itself: that service is a form of spiritual practice, that its service is universal, and that its monks stand outside party politics. First, the documentary record shows the first claim as institutional practice, a durable capacity for emergency relief, though it cannot show what that work means to those who perform it. Second, it leaves the claim of universality untested, and that claim has to be read against the founder's project of Hindu social consolidation. Third, it shows non-partisanship to be a rule of monastic conduct whose public meaning is contested, not a settled fact. A corollary concerns leadership. Because the relief repertoire predates Swami Biswatmananda's tenure and the sources say little about his personal role, his leadership is best analysed as stewardship and public representation of an inherited institution, not as individual initiative. The analysis moves from method and sources through conceptual and historical background to the Sangha's humanitarian, educational, and health work, then to the apolitical principle and public recognition, and ends with limitations and future research.

Method and Sources

This study uses documentary analysis of four kinds of material: (a) organisational and devotional publications, which give insiders' accounts of the Sangha's history and ideals; (b) government and institutional documents, including the Prime Minister's Office record of the 2017 centenary address and humanitarian reports on the disasters discussed; (c) contemporary news reports; and (d) scholarship on seva, faith-based humanitarianism, and Hindu movements in modern Bengal. Interviews and archival work in Sangha repositories were not part of this study.

Each category has limits. Organisational sources are promotional by design and seldom report shortcomings or independent evaluations. News reports vary in depth and often rely on organisational statements. Figures for personnel, beneficiaries, and expenditure are self-reported unless otherwise stated.

The article therefore attributes claims to their sources, separates reported activity from assessed impact, and treats evaluative language in devotional literature as evidence of how the Sangha understands itself, not as independent verification.

Conceptual and Historical Background

Seva and Organised Humanitarianism

Beckerlegge (2006) asks whether social service is rooted in Hindu traditions or arose from India's encounter with the West, and shows that organised seva in the Ramakrishna movement had varied, overlapping influences. He later argues that seva is a "boundary issue" in the study of Hindu movements: accounts of its origins and meaning differ between insiders and outsiders and among outsiders, following contested historiographical positions (Beckerlegge, 2011). His study of how organisations of the sangh parivar draw on Vivekananda's philosophy of service shows that service can be an arena where religious, social, and political claims overlap (Beckerlegge, 2003). Ethnographic work on charity in New Delhi likewise shows that giving and service are shaped by religious idioms and by the demands of modern humanitarian organisation (Bornstein, 2012). Together these studies imply that a claim of seva cannot be taken at face value as either purely religious or purely humanitarian.

A separate literature addresses faith-based organisations in development and humanitarian work. Berger (2003) and Clarke (2006) map the diversity of such organisations, which differ in how far religious identity shapes their programmes, staffing, and beneficiaries. Ager and Ager (2011) argue that functional secularism frames contemporary humanitarian discourse, which makes it hard for the sector to engage with faith. Humanitarian standards, meanwhile, commit agencies to impartiality, meaning assistance based on need alone (Sphere Association, 2018). These works supply two separable criteria. The Sangha's claim of universal, non-discriminatory service can be assessed against the principle of impartiality, and its religious identity can be analysed as a feature of the organisation, not a departure from humanitarian norms. The separation matters: an openly religious organisation can still be impartial, and a declaration of universality is not itself evidence of impartiality.

The Sangha and Its Founder

Organisational accounts date the founding of the Sangha to 1917. They describe Pranavananda, born in 1896 in the village of Bajitpur in what is now Bangladesh, as taking formal monastic vows in 1924 at the Allahabad Kumbh Mela and dying in 1941 (Bharat Sevashram Sangha, n.d.). Because the 1917 founding precedes his formal sannyasa, the date may mark the start of a movement rather than the constitution of a monastic order. The Sangha's motto, *Atmano mokshartham jagaddhitaya cha* ("for one's own liberation and for the welfare of the world"), expresses the dual aim that organisational accounts attribute to its monks.

Smart and Purnananda (1985) present Pranavananda as an ascetic who combined strict personal discipline with high ideals of social service and a commitment to Hindu solidarity, and devote a chapter to Hindu unity and the "dharma state." Hazra (2024) lists among the Sangha's early functions the founding of Hindu Milan Mandirs, centres for Hindu unity, and a protective corps, the Hindu Rakshi Dal. These initiatives place the Sangha in the milieu of Hindu social organisation in Bengal in the 1920s to 1940s, a period of heightened communal mobilisation that historians have examined at length (Chatterji, 1994). The inheritance matters for what follows: service and Hindu consolidation were joined in the founding project, so the Sangha's present claims of universality have to be read against that history, not apart from it.

Disaster response belongs to the founding narrative as well: the Sangha's own account presents relief work as a feature of the organisation since the 1920s (Bharat Sevashram Sangha, n.d.). The founder's teachings are preserved in texts such as the *Sangha-gita* (Pranavananda, 1977) and in devotional biography, whose claims, including those about the founder's miraculous powers (Datta & Datta, 2025), are treated here as expressions of the Sangha's self-understanding.

Swami Biswatmananda Maharaj

Swami Biswatmananda Maharaj is General Secretary of the Sangha and in that capacity welcomed the Prime Minister to its centenary celebrations in 2017 (Prime Minister's Office, 2017). Publicly accessible sources give little biographical detail on his early life, monastic training, or the date of his appointment. In organisational and media coverage he appears mainly in three roles: overseeing relief operations, inaugurating educational and health institutions, and speaking publicly on the Sangha's non-partisan identity. What follows is therefore an analysis of institutional leadership as publicly reported, not a biography.

Leadership and Institutional Character

The Sangha's own accounts say that its monks undergo spiritual and organisational training meant to cultivate humility, moral integrity, and dedication to social welfare, and that sannyasa entails giving up personal ambition for service. The institutional repertoire spans disaster relief, education, health care, vocational training, and welfare work among tribal communities (ANI, 2017). The model is one in which a monastic core directs a dispersed network of ashrams, schools, and charitable institutions. Under such a model the General Secretary's role is plausibly one of direction and public representation, while operational capacity sits in the network.

Reports of Swami Biswatmananda's leadership emphasise personal supervision of relief operations and visits to affected areas. These reports come from organisational and sympathetic media sources, and the sources reviewed do not document how his day-to-day role differs from that of the Sangha's wider monastic leadership. Other claimed interactions with senior national leaders are omitted because no source was identified.

Humanitarian Service

Disaster relief is the most extensively reported dimension of the Sangha's work and the one for which independent corroboration is most available. Table 1 lists the five operations discussed below in chronological order.

Table 1

Disaster Responses Attributed to the Bharat Sevashram Sangha, 2014–2025

Event	Date	Reported Sangha response	Source
Jammu and Kashmir floods	Sep 2014	Cooked food and dry rations distributed in remote villages of Udhampur	Business Standard (2014)
Nepal earthquake	Apr 2015	Relief team of monks and volunteers; food, milk, tarpaulins, and blankets; joint work with the Ramakrishna Math in Gorkha	Siasat (2015); Zee News (2015)
Cyclone Amphan	May 2020	Community kitchens and shelter in ashrams and schools, including Gangasagar and Namkhana	Source to be added
West Bengal floods	2024	Cooked food distributed by boat in Ghatal, Panskura, and Gaighata	Source to be added
Severe Cyclonic Storm Montha	Oct 2025	Relief teams from the Hyderabad Ashram with food, water, and medicines	Source to be added

Note. Descriptions follow the cited sources and record reported activity, not independently verified outcomes.

Jammu and Kashmir Floods (2014)

After the floods of September 2014, Sangha teams reportedly reached remote villages in Udhampur, where damaged roads and communication lines hampered access, and distributed cooked food and dry rations to people sheltering in isolated areas (Business Standard, 2014).

Nepal Earthquake (2015)

The magnitude 7.8 earthquake of 25 April 2015, centred on Barpak in Gorkha district, killed nearly 9,000 people (National Planning Commission, 2015). News reports describe a Sangha relief team of monks and volunteers distributing food, milk, tarpaulins, and blankets, with teams travelling deep into Nepal and, in the worst-affected Gorkha district, working alongside the Ramakrishna Math. The initial team was reported as 10 monks and 20 volunteers, and the combined team with the Ramakrishna Math as 12 monks and 50 volunteers (Siasat, 2015; Zee News, 2015). The operation is notable as cross-border relief and as cooperation between two monastic organisations.

Cyclone Amphan (2020)

Amphan made landfall on 20 May 2020 and was among the strongest cyclones to strike the region in over a decade; at least 86 people died in West Bengal, mostly from electrocution or the collapse of homes, and COVID-19 distancing rules limited the use of cyclone shelters at full capacity (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [IFRC], n.d.). The Sangha is reported to have run community kitchens through its ashrams and schools and to have sheltered people at sites including Gangasagar and Namkhana, with more than 30,000 people fed in the immediate aftermath. The operation shows the Sangha's existing buildings serving as emergency shelters, a point taken up below.

West Bengal Floods (2024)

In 2024, Sangha monks and volunteers are reported to have cooked and distributed food by boat to marooned families in Ghatal, Panskura, and Gaighata, areas that were hard to reach because of flooding.

Cyclone Montha (2025)

Severe Cyclonic Storm Montha crossed the Andhra Pradesh coast near Narasapur on the night of 28–29 October 2025 (The Wire, 2025). The Sangha's Hyderabad Ashram is reported to have dispatched teams with food, water, and medicines and to have helped with evacuation and temporary shelter.

Patterns and Assessment

Three features recur across the five cases. First, relief runs through the Sangha's existing ashrams, schools, and kitchens, not temporary field establishments, which gives the organisation rapid-response capacity wherever it has a local presence. Second, relief concentrates on cooked food, dry rations, and shelter, the most immediate needs, with fewer reports of longer-term rehabilitation. Third, in every case the sources are largely organisational or journalistic. The first two features support the argument that the Sangha's relief is a standing institutional repertoire; the third limits how far that conclusion can be pressed.

The Sangha states that aid is given irrespective of religion, caste, language, or social status. This accords with the principle of impartiality (Sphere Association, 2018), but the sources reviewed contain no independent evaluation of who received assistance, so the claim remains a statement of policy, not a demonstrated outcome. Declared universality is also not the same as impartial allocation. Because the Sangha's capacity is greatest wherever it has an ashram, its reach may follow the map of its institutions more closely than the map of need. Beneficiary interviews, comparison with state and other non-governmental relief, or audited reports would allow stronger conclusions.

Education, Health, and Rural Development

Education

The Sangha's educational philosophy is set out in its 1967 memorial volume for the founder, which presents education as a means of cultural and spiritual regeneration (Bharat Sevashram Sangha, 1967). In 2015 the Sangha identified a 5,000-square-foot site in the Sagar Islands for a skill-development centre meant to train about 2,700 people in fish breeding, farming, organic manure production, and handicrafts (AITC Official, 2015). The Sagar Islands, in the Sundarbans delta, face poverty and exposure to cyclones and flooding, so the project can be read as linking livelihoods with resilience.

Two new schools are reported for 2026: Pranavananda Vidyamandir in South 24 Parganas (March), planned to grow from primary education to a high school and eventually a vocational centre, and Swami Pranavananda Vidya Mandir at Panjgrain, Nagrota, in Jammu (April), opened in the presence of the Lieutenant Governor of Jammu and Kashmir. Both openings are reported without independent sources in the material reviewed. The Sangha also describes a wider network of schools, student hostels, scholarship programmes, and tribal education projects; this article could not locate independent documentation of its size.

Health

The Bharat Sevashram Sangha Hospital announced in 2023 a second construction phase that would add 300 beds (The Kolkata Mail, 2023), and it is reported to have received the Ananda Swasthya Ratna 2025 award. The Sangha also describes charitable dispensaries, medical camps, eye-care camps, and rural programmes such as mobile clinics and immunisation drives, but the sources reviewed give no data on their scale or reach.

Rural and Tribal Development

The Sangha describes livelihood projects, agricultural training, infrastructure work, and schools and clinics in tribal areas as part of its rural mission. Of these, only the Sagar Islands centre is documented in the sources reviewed; every other programme rests on the Sangha's own descriptions. Across education, health, and rural work, the documentation is thinnest where the Sangha's claims are broadest, which is why this article treats disaster relief as its main evidentiary case. Annual reports and field visits are the priority for future research.

The Apolitical Principle and Public Recognition

Monastic Neutrality as an Institutional Rule

The Sangha describes itself as a strictly apolitical socio-religious organisation whose monks, brahmacharis, and residents may not engage in party politics or affiliate with any party. In March 2026, press reports said the Sangha reaffirmed this stance and took disciplinary action against members who had departed from it (The Statesman, 2026; UNI India, 2026). Disciplinary action, as reported, implies that the rule is meant to bind conduct and that breaches were treated as real. The Sangha's reasons for the rule are that it keeps aid universal, protects the spiritual integrity of monastic life, and allows cooperation with governments of any party. The rule has an evident practical logic for an organisation that depends on public goodwill.

The 2024 Controversy

The rule was tested in May 2024. During the general election campaign, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee alleged that some monks of the Ramakrishna Mission and the Sangha were acting on the instructions of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Prime Minister Narendra Modi criticised the remark, and Banerjee later said she had referred to one or two individuals and was not against the institutions, which she praised for their philanthropic work (National Herald, 2024). Swami Biswatmananda said the Sangha was not involved in personal views and, as a philanthropic institution, was "not against anyone" (ThePrint, 2024). He was also reported to be unaware of the matter raised by a legal notice that a Murshidabad monk had sent to the Chief Minister (National Herald, 2024).

The episode shows two features of the apolitical principle. As an internal rule it governs the conduct of individual monks, which is consistent with the leadership's response of distancing the institution from individuals' views instead of contesting the allegation. As a public claim, however, it is received in a polarised environment in which political actors on both sides invoke the Sangha's standing. The scholarship explains why such claims resist

settlement: seva is a boundary issue, and organisations that present themselves as purely religious or humanitarian still sit within wider fields of Hindu social and political organisation (Beckerlegge, 2003, 2011; Jaffrelot, 1996). The Sangha's non-partisanship, understood as a rule against party affiliation, is therefore compatible with a historically rooted Hindu-unity agenda (Hazra, 2024; Smart & Purnananda, 1985). The two should not be conflated, and neither settles the other. This article does not assess whether any individual monk breached the rule.

State Recognition

The Sangha's standing is also visible in its relations with state leaders. On 7 May 2017, Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the centenary celebrations, held in Shillong, by video link, and Swami Biswatmananda welcomed him on the Sangha's behalf. The Prime Minister recalled having worked with the Sangha in Gujarat, praised its work in the North-East and during disasters, said the Sangha had helped dispel the notion that service and spirituality are separate, and urged it to take up cleanliness work in the North-East (Prime Minister's Office, 2017). He also said that Pranavananda had spoken of social justice a century earlier. That is the Prime Minister's characterisation, not an independent historical finding; the founder's social thought is better read alongside the scholarship cited above.

Teaching on Unity, Youth, and Interfaith Relations

Organisational accounts attribute to Swami Biswatmananda teachings that parallel the Sangha's institutional commitments: that selfless service is itself worship, that spiritual discipline and social service are complementary, and that India's diversity is a strength requiring cooperation among communities. The Sangha reports youth camps, leadership programmes, character-building workshops, community service opportunities, and participation in interfaith dialogue. The sources reviewed provide no programme documents, participant data, or records of dialogue, so these claims are noted, not evaluated. One tension merits future study: the language of universal human unity sits alongside the Sangha's historical association with Hindu unity activism, discussed above.

Discussion

Three conclusions follow, one for each claim the Sangha makes about itself. First, on service as spiritual practice, the record shows a standing institutional repertoire of kitchens, shelters, and rapid dispatch from a dispersed ashram network. The sources credit Swami Biswatmananda with personal supervision, but the repertoire predates his tenure, and the reported operations of 2014 to 2025 are continuous with the organisation's earlier practice (Bharat Sevashram Sangha, n.d.). His leadership is therefore best read as stewardship of inherited capacity and as public representation of the Sangha, not as the origin of its work. The record cannot show what the work means to those who perform it.

Second, on universality, comparison with the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, a well-studied Hindu service organisation, suggests that the questions Beckerlegge (2006) raises there apply to the BSS as well: the sources of seva, the interplay of indigenous and colonial influences, and the pressures that social need places on a monastic body. The BSS differs in that its founder's explicit Hindu-unity programme gives its history a distinct character. This is why universality cannot be read off the Sangha's declarations. Open religious identity is compatible with impartial relief, but whether the Sangha's relief is impartial can be shown only by evidence about who was served, and none of the sources reviewed supplies it.

Third, on non-partisanship, relief, education, and health work generate public goods and so public legitimacy. This helps explain both the recognition the Sangha receives from political leaders and the scrutiny of whether its monks stay outside party politics. Legitimacy of this kind makes political attention more likely, so a rule against party affiliation is better understood as a continuing institutional task than as a fixed attribute. The 2024 episode and the 2026 disciplinary action are both consistent with this reading, though the sources do not allow more than that.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study relies on documentary sources, most of them organisational or journalistic. Several reported figures lack independent verification, and no fieldwork was undertaken. These limits bear most heavily on the universality claim, which only beneficiary-level evidence can test. Future research could (a) use the Sangha's archives and annual reports to document programmes and finances; (b) interview monks, volunteers, and beneficiaries to assess how services are experienced and whether access is impartial in practice; (c) compare BSS and Ramakrishna Mission relief in disasters where both were active, such as the Nepal earthquake; and (d) examine how the Sangha's Hindu-unity heritage is understood by its members today.

Conclusion

Swami Biswatmananda Maharaj leads a monastic organisation whose public identity rests on the claim that service to humanity is a form of spiritual practice. The documentary record supports three conclusions and sets limits on each. The Sangha maintains a durable, geographically dispersed capacity for emergency relief and a growing portfolio of educational and health institutions. Its universal service is so far a declared policy, not a demonstrated outcome. Its non-partisanship is a monastic rule whose public meaning is contested and continually negotiated. The record does not yet allow firm conclusions about impact, equity of access, or the day-to-day role of any individual leader. Read against the scholarship on seva and faith-based humanitarianism, the Sangha shows how religious service organisations hold spiritual, humanitarian, and communal commitments together, and why claims about each need to be evidenced, not assumed.

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