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Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS): Unravelling the spectrum from controversy to nationalism

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Abstract

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is a formidable and multifaceted organization deeply entrenched in India's cultural and political landscape. Established in 1925, the RSS operates through a well-structured hierarchy, from local grassroots units (Shakhas) to regional and national bodies, facilitating community engagement and nurturing leadership. The present study analyzed the structure and function of social services, ideology, political influence, and controversies surrounding the RSS. The organization's core activities encompass character development, ideological education, and diverse social services, all underpinned by its commitment to the Hindutva ideology. This cultural and national interpretation of Hinduism serves as the foundation of the RSS's vision, aspiring to unify India around its rich cultural heritage. The RSS exerts substantial political influence, primarily through its affiliation with the Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P.) and promoting Hindutva. This influence shapes India's political landscape, from policy decisions to electoral strategies and public discourse. The organization's expansive network of local units empowers it to mobilize political support, particularly within India's Hindu majority. However, the RSS has not been immune to controversy, facing allegations of 'Hindu terrorism' and involvement in contentious events such as the Babri Masjid demolition and the Gujarat riots. These controversies have sparked heated debates, legal disputes, and varying scholarly perspectives. Nevertheless, the RSS's positive contributions overshadow these controversies, allowing the organization to flourish and become a prominent advocate for Hindu culture and values on a grand scale.

Keywords: Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Hindu terrorism, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Riots; Saffron terrorism

Introduction

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is a right-wing Hindu nationalist organization in India. The organization was founded in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar in Nagpur, India. It is one of the largest volunteer-based organizations in the world, often described as promoting and preserving Hindu culture, values, and traditions. The organization claims its aim.

To promote the idea of a Hindu nation and seek to protect and preserve the culture and religious identity of Hindus. Box 1 describes the mission of the RSS as mentioned by its founder.

Box 1 Mission of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

“The Hindu culture is the life-breath of Hindusthan. It is therefore clear that if Hindusthan is to be protected, we should first nourish the Hindu culture. If the Hindu culture perishes in Hindusthan itself, and if the Hindu society ceases to exist, it will hardly be appropriate to refer to the mere geographical entity that remains as Hindusthan. Mere geographical lumps do not make a nation. The entire society should be in such a vigilant and organized condition that no one would dare to cast an evil eye on any of our points of honour.

Strength, it should be remembered, comes only through organization. It is therefore the duty of every Hindu to do his best to consolidate the Hindu society. The Sangh is just carrying out this supreme task. The present fate of the country cannot be changed unless lakhs of young men dedicate their entire lifetime for that cause. To mould the minds of our youth towards that end is the supreme aim of the Sangh”

Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar
Founder RSS

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It plays a significant role in the political and social landscape in India. RSS is affiliated with organizations like the Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P.), Vishva Hindu Parishad (V.H.P.), and the Bajrang Dal. The people often believe that RSS is the government maker and the ruling party of India at present, i.e., B.J.P. is its right hand. This suggests that B.J.P.'s decisions are influenced by RSS (Sarkar 2022) ^[18].

Due to its political influence, the organization has been in controversies created by opposite parties for promoting Hindu nationalism and involvement in communal tensions and violence in India. Critics argue that it promotes a divisive agenda and is responsible for religious polarization. Some scholars/activists have used 'Hindu terrorism' or 'Saffron terrorism' to describe acts of violence affiliated with Hindu nationalist or extremist organizations such as RSS. These terms are highly controversial and have been a matter of debate, criticism, and legal disputes in India. Nonetheless, these terms are being used by opposite parties of B.J.P. as well as by the authors/activities native or having origin from Pakistan (Marshall 2004; Akram *et al.*, 2021; Alam *et al.*, 2022) ^[12, 1, 2]. The present study analyzes the structure and function of social services, ideology, political influence, and controversies surrounding the RSS.

Structure of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

Shakha (Local Unit): The basic unit of the RSS is called a 'shakha'. A shakha is typically a local gathering or assembly of RSS members where they come together for various activities, including physical exercises, prayers, discussions, and ideological education. Shakhas are at the grassroots level of the organization.

Mandal (Local Area): Several shakhas in a particular area are grouped to form a 'mandal' or local area organization. A mandal is responsible for coordinating and overseeing the activities of the shakhas within its jurisdiction.

Zilla (District): A 'zilla' or district organization consists of multiple mandals within a district. This level of organization provides guidance, support, and coordination for all the mandals operating within the district.

Prant (Regional): The 'prant' or regional-level organization oversees multiple regional districts. The prant is crucial in coordinating the region's activities, training, and communication.

Kshetra (Zonal): Multiple prants are grouped to form a 'kshetra' or zonal organization. The kshetra level manages larger areas, usually consisting of several regions.

Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha (ABPS): The highest decision-making body of the RSS is the Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha. This body consists of representatives from all over the country and convenes annually. It discusses policies, makes decisions, and sets the agenda for the organization.

Sarsangh chalak: The Sarsangh chalak is the top leader of the RSS. At present, this responsibility is being held by Mohan Bhagwat. The Sarsangh chalak is responsible for

setting the broader vision and direction of the organization and plays a significant role in decision-making.

Pracharaks: Pracharaks are full-time RSS workers who dedicate themselves to the organization. They are responsible for propagating the ideology of the RSS, organizing shakhas, and conducting various activities.

Social services conducted by Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

RSS conducts various social services as part of its core activities and through affiliated organizations within the Sangh Parivar. Some of the leading social services conducted by the RSS include:

Character development: One of the primary functions of the RSS is character development (Tiwari and Kumar, 2022) ^[20]. Through daily shakhas (local gatherings), members participate in physical exercises, moral and ethical discussions, and cultural activities to foster discipline, leadership skills, and a sense of responsibility.

Ideological education: The RSS provides ideological education, particularly emphasizing Hindutva, a cultural and nationalist interpretation of Hinduism (Waghmore, 2023) ^[21]. Members are taught about the organization's core principles and its cultural and national identity vision.

Cultural preservation: The RSS strongly prioritizes Hindu culture, values, and traditions (Doss 2023) ^[7]. It conducts activities, events, and educational programs to promote and protect Hindu heritage.

Social services: The RSS engages in various social service activities through affiliated organizations like Sewa Bharati. These may include disaster relief, healthcare initiatives, educational programs, and vocational training to uplift underprivileged and marginalized communities (<https://rashtriyasewabharati.org/en/>).

Youth engagement: The RSS aims to engage and mold the minds of youth towards its vision (Patel 2010) ^[16]. Youth camps, personality development programs, and cultural activities are organized to instill values and commitment to society.

Nationalism and patriotism: The RSS promotes a sense of nationalism and patriotism among its members (Anderson and Damle 2019) ^[5]. It conducts events to commemorate national days and historic milestones in Indian history.

Organizational and leadership development: The RSS plays a role in developing leadership skills (Patel 2010) ^[16]. Members are encouraged to assume responsibilities within the organization and the broader community.

Promotion of Indian languages: The RSS encourages the use and promotion of Indian languages and has undertaken initiatives to protect and develop regional languages and scripts (Anderson and Damle 2019) ^[5].

Environmental conservation: Some affiliated organizations within the Sangh Parivar are involved in

environmental conservation and protecting India's natural resources (Sharda 2018) ^[19].

Relief and rehabilitation: During natural disasters and calamities, the RSS and its affiliated groups are often at the forefront of relief and rehabilitation efforts, assisting affected communities (Bhattacharjee 2016) ^[6].

Ideology of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

The ideology of the RSS is deeply rooted in Hindutva, a cultural and nationalist interpretation of Hinduism. At the core of its belief system is the vision of India as a Hindu *Rashtra*, or a Hindu nation (Anderson and Damle 2019) ^[5]. This ideology underscores the RSS's commitment to preserving and promoting Hindu culture, values, and traditions. The organization views Hinduism as the foundational culture of India and seeks to safeguard and strengthen it as an integral part of the nation's identity (Sharda 2018) ^[19].

In addition to cultural preservation, the RSS strongly emphasizes the concept of nationalism (Iwanek 2023) ^[9]. It envisions India as a sacred land with a rich and ancient cultural heritage, and its members are encouraged to cultivate a profound sense of patriotism and national pride. This nationalist perspective is closely tied to the belief that the Indian people constitute a single, unified cultural entity, with Hinduism at its core. The organization sees the preservation of Hindu cultural identity as a means to ensure the well-being and unity of the nation.

Integral Humanism, a philosophy developed by Deendayal Upadhyaya, a prominent thinker within the RSS, plays a significant role in the organization's ideology (Upadhyaya 2021). Integral Humanism emphasizes an individual's development within the larger framework of society and the nation, reflecting the RSS's commitment to character-building and cultivating moral values among its members.

Political influence of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

RSS exerts substantial political influence in India, primarily through its close association with the Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P.) and its ideological orientation (Pal 2023) ^[15]. This political impact is evident in several key aspects. The RSS's strong affiliation with the B.J.P., one of India's prominent political parties, is a primary avenue through which it influences the country's political landscape. The RSS has played an instrumental role in shaping the B.J.P.'s leadership, ideological direction, and electoral strategies (Kulkarni 2017) ^[11].

The RSS's influence extends beyond party politics. At its core is the ideology of Hindutva, a concept that promotes Hindu culture, values, and identity as central to India's cultural and national landscape (Waghmore 2023) ^[21]. The RSS's propagation of Hindutva has significantly impacted the political discourse in India, setting the stage for debates, policy decisions, and electoral campaigns. This ideology has been employed to mobilize political support, especially within the Hindu majority (Jaffreot and Therwath 2012) ^[10]. Furthermore, the RSS's extensive grassroots network is crucial to political mobilization. Its *shakhas*, local units where members engage in various activities, create a platform for direct engagement with communities and voters. The organization's presence at the local level allows it to connect with voters, shape public opinion, and

influence the political climate, particularly during elections and political campaigns (Narayan 2021) ^[13].

Beyond politics, the RSS's cultural and social activities contribute to its political influence. By promoting Hindu culture and values, the organization influences the behavior and attitudes of individuals. This, in turn, can impact voting patterns and political decisions. Additionally, the RSS engages in advocacy and lobbying on issues that align with its ideological stance, shaping public policy and influencing the political agenda. Overall, the RSS's political influence in India remains a significant and contentious aspect of the country's political landscape (Andersen and Damle 2018) ^[4].

Controversies surrounding the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

RSS has been at the center of several controversies, and specific terminologies have been associated with it. Some of the major controversies associated with the RSS are as follows:

Hindu terrorism and Saffron terrorism

The terms Hindu terrorism and Saffron terrorism have been used to describe acts of violence associated with extremist Hindu nationalist groups, including some links to the RSS by the political parties opposite to B.J.P. (Marshall 2004; Akram *et al.*, 2021; Alam *et al.*, 2022) ^[12, 1, 2]. The term gained prominence in 2000s and have been subject to debate and controversy in India. It is essential to mention that using these terms is highly contentious and has led to legal disputes and criticism (Norris 2020) ^[14].

Babri Masjid demolition

The demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 was a highly controversial event and often associated with RSS (Rai *et al.*, 2020) ^[17]. Several individuals and organizations demolished the Babri Masjid, which led to communal tensions and violence in 1992. Investigations, legal cases, and inquiries, including the Liberhan Commission, have examined the role of various groups and individuals in the Babri Masjid demolition (Ananth 2010) ^[3].

Gujarat riots

The 2002 Gujarat riots were marked by communal violence, with many critics accusing the state government, led by the B.J.P. (closely affiliated with the RSS), of not doing enough to prevent the violence (Andersen and Damle 2018).

Ghar Wapsi Campaign

The Ghar Wapsi (homecoming) campaign in 2014, supported by some Hindu nationalist organizations close to the RSS, aimed to convert non-Hindus to Hinduism (Gandeha 2019) ^[8]. This initiative raised concerns about religious conversions and religious freedom in India. It is essential to mention that the public perception and scholarly analysis of these controversies vary, highlighting the RSS in public debate, media and international perspectives. However, the positive impact of the RSS surpasses these controversies, and the organization continues to expand its role as a leading advocate for Hindu culture and values.

Conclusion

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is a powerful organization in India, known for its dedication to promoting Hindu culture and values. Founded in 1925, it operates

through a structured hierarchy, from local units (shakhas) to regional and national bodies, facilitating grassroots engagement and leadership development. The RSS conducts character development, ideological education, and a range of social services, emphasizing the importance of Hindutva ideology. This cultural and national interpretation of Hinduism is at the core of the RSS's vision, which envisions a unified India rooted in its cultural heritage. The RSS holds significant political influence, primarily through its affiliation with the Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P.) and the propagation of Hindutva. This influence has shaped India's political landscape, affecting policy decisions, electoral strategies, and public discourse. The organization's extensive grassroots network enables it to mobilize political support, especially within the Hindu majority. The RSS has faced controversies, with accusations of 'Hindu terrorism' and its alleged involvement in contentious events like the Babri Masjid demolition and the Gujarat riots. These controversies have sparked debate, legal disputes, and differing scholarly

interpretations. Nonetheless, the positive contributions of the RSS overshadow these controversies, and the organization continues to grow, becoming one of the most prominent proponents of Hindu culture and values.

Declaration of generative A.I. in scientific writing

While preparing this work, the author used ChatGPT-3.5 for language editing. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the publication's content.

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