



Rashtriya swayam sevak sangh: Popular myths and locked minds

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Abstract

The present article is a modest attempt in summarizing and analyzing various myths propagated time to time by researchers, academicians and political groups in India against Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). In India, several misconception and fake allegations have been labeled against RSS. Some blame it to be a fascist organization and others as communal or anti-minority group of people. The present article contends that RSS is a cultural and nationalist organization which aim is focused for the advancement of India and Indians in every sphere of life. The article also debunk those who criticize RSS because of their ideological bias with a focus on various social and humanitarian activities done by RSS.

Keywords: rashtriya swayamsevak sangh, bhartiya janata party, relief and rehabilitation, emancipation of lower castes, social service, nationalism.

Introduction

RSS was founded in 1925 by Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, who was a doctor in the central Indian city of Nagpur. Hedgewar, as a medical student in Kolkata, had been a part of the revolutionary activities of the Anushilan Samiti and Jugantar striving to free India from British rule^[1]. He had been charged with sedition in 1921 by the British Administration and was imprisoned for one year^[2].

Hedgewar was educated by his elder brother. After matriculating, he decided to go to Kolkata to study medicine. He was sent to Kolkata by Dr. B. S. Moonje in 1910 to pursue his medical studies. There he lived with Shyam Sundar Chakravarty and learned the techniques of fighting from the secret revolutionary organisations like the Anushilan Samiti and Jugantar in Bengal. He is said to have joined Anushilan Samiti and had contacts with revolutionaries like Ram Prasad Bismil^[3].

He has also involved in such type of revolutionary activities. He came to believe that although the revolutionaries had immense determination, in a country of continental proportions it was impossible to instigate an armed insurrection. After completing his graduation, he returned to Nagpur, disillusioned with the armed movement.

In his memoirs, the third chief of RSS, Balasahab Deoras describes an incident when Hedgewar protected him with some other individuals from joining the path of revolutionaries (Hindustan Republican Association, hereafter HRA)^[4]. Later he left the revolutionary organization in the year 1925 and formed the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.

Since Hedgewar was primarily associated with the Hindustan Republican Association, he adopted its constitution and implemented it in his newly established organization 'RSS'. The RSS first met in 1925 just after two months of Kakori train robbery and on the occasion of Vijaya Dashami festival in a small ground of Nagpur with only 5 to 6 persons. After the formation of the RSS, Hedgewar kept the organization away from having any direct affiliation to any of the political organizations but he

concentrated the entire energy of RSS in fighting against the British rule^[5]. But Hedgewar and his team of RSS members took part in various movements led by the Indian National Congress against the British rule. Hedgewar was arrested during Jungle (Forest) Satyagraha agitation of 1931 and served a second term in prison^[6].

Organization of RSS

RSS does not have any formal membership. According to its official website, any Hindu male can become member by joining and regularly attending the nearest 'Shakha', which is the regarded as the basic unit of RSS^[7]. The members of RSS are known as Swayamsevaks and the RSS claims that it never maintain its membership records but various researchers have estimated that the organization has between 5 to 6 million members in 2004 but the membership started seeing its decline after BJP lost 2004 general elections^[8]. The membership of RSS doubled in past ten years period and saw a massive rise after 2014.^[9]

Sarsanghchalaks

The *Sarsanghchhalak* is the head of the RSS. The individuals who have held the post of sarsanghchhalak of RSS are:

- Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (founder), also known as *Doctorji* (1925–1930 & 1931–1940)
- Dr. Laxman Vaman Paranjpe (1930–1931) (when Dr. Hedgewar was in jail during Forest Satyagraha)
- Shri Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, also known as *Guruji* (1940–1973)
- Shri. Madhukar Dattatraya Deoras, also known as *Balasaheb* (1973–1993)
- Prof. Rajendra Singh, also known as Rajju Bhaiya (1993–2000)
- Kuppahalli Sitaramayya Sudarshan (2000–2009)
- Dr. Mohan Madhukar Bhagwat (21 March 2009 – till date)

The position of Sarsanghchhalak is decided through nomination by the predecessor and since 2009 the

Sarsanghachalak of RSS is Dr. Mohan Madhukar Bhagwat, popularly known as Shree Mohan Bhagwat.

Shakha

“*Shakha*” is Hindi for ‘branch’. Almost all the work related to organizational activities of the RSS is performed through the coordination of its various shakhas. The RSS shakhas generally are held in public places, like public parks or public grounds which continue till one hour. In 2004, more than 60,000 *shakhas* were run throughout India.^[10] However the number of Shakas has fallen by over 10,000 since the fall of the BJP led government in 2004.^[11] The number of Shakhas saw a massive rise again in the year 2014 when Shri Narendra Modi rise as a mass leader and Bhartiya Janta Party (hereafter BJP) won 2014 general elections with thumping majority. In 2019 general election in India, the BJP again won a clear majority and formed the government at centre for a second term. People started trusting the various activities of RSS and BJP. Both achieved a level of legitimacy among the masses. Therefore rise in the membership and Shakhas of RSS throughout India.^[12]

The shakhas organize various activities for its swayamsevaks to strengthen the physical and mental fitness through yoga, exercises and some games. The RSS shakhas also put emphasis on other activities which emphasize on basic human qualities like civic sense, social service, community living and service and patriotism^[13]. The RSS swayamsevaks are trained in providing first aid and in rescue and rehabilitation processes. The swayamsevaks are also involved in the developmental activities of the village or any under-developed or backward locality^[14].

Shakaha is regarded as the most important activity of the RSS. Ghatnayak or the group leader encourages the swayamsevaks to take active part in various activities and to attend the shakhas regularly. The next important position in shakhas is Shikshak (Instructor), the Shikshak regularly conducts all activities of the daily shakhas. Mukhyashikshak (the chief instructor) is responsible to regularly organizing and look after the various functions and activities of the shakha, held in their respective area or locality. The Secretary or the Shakha Karyavahak is given responsibility to provide guidance, instruction and help (if any) to the Mukhyashikshak in organizing and conducting the activities of shakhas smoothly and efficiently. This is the hierarchical positions of the shakhas which are found in every district, village or locality where the shakhas are being organized. The shakhas are known as the backbone of the RSS and it makes the swayamsevaks physically and mentally strong and healthy. The shakha also teaches about the national culture to inculcate moral values among swayamsevaks. It also instills organizational skills and the ability to work as a team among the swayamsevaks. The shakhas are open to all. Any individual from any caste, creed or social and economic status can come and join it. The persons who attend shakhas are expected to wear white shirt, khaki pants (earstwhile shorts) and a black cap.^[15]

The RSS welcomes mainly among the youth or teen age boys/male (12-25 years old, since they do not have any ‘family responsibility’ etc) in its shakhas. Although persons from any age group can join it, but RSS mainly focus on and train teen aged boys. Among them, the RSS choose regular and committed boys/teens to educate them. The education contains Pratham Varsh Shikshit (first year educated),

Dwitiya Varsh Shikshit (Second year educated) and Thritiya Varsh Shikshit (Third year educated). The Mukhyashikshak choose the youth for educating them and recommend their names to Shakha-Karyavaha and ‘Ghatanayaks’. Then accordingly the youth are given education^[16].

Information Technology Milan (I.T Milan)

For swayamsevaks who are software professionals or working in Information Technology related sectors can join the shakhas specially planned for these professionals, this shakha is known as IT Milan. Unlike the regular shakhas of RSS, IT Milan shakhas are held on weekly basis. Such IT Milan shakhas are organized in many cities, like Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Pune etc. In Bangalore alone there are more than three thousand IT professional who meet regularly in different IT Milan shakhas held in the city. This IT Milan shakhas run for sixty to ninety minutes on weekly basis, which includes prayer, yoga with surya namaskara asana, various games, song and oration. The prayer prayed in IT milan shakhas is provided to all in a typed printout form, the medium of communication is generally in English and when any new member joins the IT milan shakha, the regular members provided assistance in various yoga asanas, Pranayam and surya namaskar. These activities are planned to organize for the IT professionals to keep them calm and mentally strong so that they could bear the work pressure easily, for those who professionals who are suffering from chronic back pain due to long working hours and for the new members to protect them from developing any such disease. To relieve IT professionals from developing any kind of tension or stress, the members of IT Milan shakhas play various types of games to relieve from tensions and to develop any type of stress. IT milan shakhas also foster and nurture team spirit among its members and serves as a platform to discuss on various issues and matters of national and international importance^[17].

Swayamsevaks of RSS

RSS swayamsevak participated in various political and social movements including the struggle for independence against British rule^[18]. And the RSS, during pre-independence period became the foremost nationalist organization^[19]. By the 1990s, the group had established various schools, charity institutions and clubs to propagate and instill the nationalist ideas among Indians^[20].

The Swayamsevaks are also active in doing the relief and rehabilitation work during natural calamities or disaster^[21].

The swayamsevaks are also responsible for running more than one lakh social service activities in education, health care, development of rural areas, tribal emancipation, village self-sufficiency, Farming Programmes in rural India, the rehabilitation work and providing assistance to special needs children^[22]. It was banned by the British^[23] and then after independence three times by the Government of India—first in 1948 when Nathuram Godse, assassinated Mahatma Gandhi; then during emergency (1975-1978); and after the Demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992.^[24]

Although the link of Godse with RSS was never found. Godse was critical of RSS programs and Veer Savarkar. His association was as a member of Hindu Mahasbha is well known and later with Hindu Rashtra Sena^[25]. Simultaneously, there is no evidence of RSS participation in Babri Masjid Demolition^[26].

Generally youth from age group 12-18 years are selected for Pratham Varsh Shiksha, 20-25 years for Dwitiya Varsh Shiksha (after successfully completing Pratham Varsh Shiksha) and twenty to thirty years for Tritiya Varsh Shiksha (after successfully completing Pratham and Dwitiya Varsh Shiksha).

The persons who are Tritiya Varsh Shikshit are not supposed to marry and have to devote their lives for serving the nation and its people. To spread the ideology of 'Hindutva' among the masses. All office bearers of RSS are either Dwitiya Varsh Shikshit or Tritiya Varsh Shikshit.

Mission

The revival of Indian values, culture and civilization etc are the main missions of RSS. The mission of RSS is inclusive in nature and put emphasis on nationalism and nationalist ideology, thereby propagating the ideas which is based on universalism with the aim to promote peace and prosperity to all, here all means the entire mankind, the entire world. (Golwalkar: 1966) [32]. Thus universal brotherhood or vasudhaiva kutumbakam which means that the entire world is one family, is the accepted philosophy and mission of RSS. (Sheshadri: 1984) [33]. The central focus of RSS is on Indian renaissance and Indian nationalism, which will construct an egalitarian society and a strong India. And therefore, RSS always work for social reform and overall development of society, economic upliftment of the downtrodden and weaker sections, respect for women and the respect for Indian cultural diversity etc. (Sheshadri: 1984) [33]. The RSS believe in the notion of Unity in Diversity and want to unite all Indians as Indians and not as Hindu, Muslims, Gujrati, and Bengali etc. RSS believes that once India achieve unity in diversity in its true sense than only the aim to unite all Indians (irrespective of their different cultural, regional, religious and linguistic) would be achieved and India would become a strong and a powerful nation and can guide the other nations and nationalities. The world is becoming a multicultural society because of rise and growth of globalization and thus many nations find it unable to adjust with other cultures. RSS trusts that someday India will become Vishwa Guru and teach the world 'how to respect diversity' and how to live peacefully with other cultures.

The second Sarsanghchalak of the RSS, M S Golwalkar in his book also mentions that, "in order to be able to contribute our unique knowledge to mankind, in order to be able to live and strive for the unity and welfare of the world, we stand before the world as a self-confident, resurgent and mighty nation" [32].

Golwalkar in his *Bunch of Thoughts* affirms the RSS mission of integration as: "RSS has been making determined efforts to inculcate in our people the burning devotion for Bharat and its national ethos; kindle in them the spirit of dedication and sterling qualities and character; rouse social consciousness, mutual good-will, love and cooperation among them all; to make them realize that casts, creeds and languages are secondary and that service to the nation is the supreme end and to mold their behavior accordingly; instill in them a sense of true humility and discipline and train their bodies to be strong and robust so as to shoulder any social responsibility; and thus to create all-round Anushasana in all walks of life and build together all our people into a unified harmonious national whole, extending from Himalayas to Kanyakumari" [27].

Golwalkar also contends that the intention of RSS is not to take part in elections and will restrict itself only for social welfare and will work among the people. He further says that RSS discourage any kind of hatred or opposition to any particular religion, culture, caste, creed or political party or political organization. RSS respect every identity and political ideas, therefore it is inclusive in nature [28].

RSS can back and support any political party which in any manner subscribes or supports its views on India and its people. RSS has never been into electoral politics but it supports those political parties which has similar ideology or support its views on India as a nation. RSS validates and supports the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), but whenever it has found that there is difference of opinions on certain matters or issues of national interests, it refused to support BJP [29].

Social Service and Reform

The RSS always has supported the upliftment of Dalits and other backward communities of India and want to give them the due respect as human being. It also supported the entry of lower caste communities in temples and encouraged their training to be the temple high priests, high priests position are for upper castes (Brahmins) only and the priest position with right to enter in temple was denied to lower caste groups, RSS extend its support to win both rights for the lower caste groups [30].

Mohan Das Gandhi once visited RSS camp of Wardha with Mahadev Desai and Miraben in 1934. Mr. Gandhi was amazed to see the discipline of swayamsevaks and complete absence of untouchability. All the Swayamsevaks were staying and eating together without bothering about each other's castes [31].

Another prominent figure of freedom struggle and Massiah of lower caste movement in India, Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar visited the RSS camp in Pune (1939) and he also observed that all the swayamsevaks were staying in camp with equality and brotherhood, he found that there was no caste or castiesm in RSS camp. [32] Dr. Ambedkar also addressed the swayamsevaks in the camp and said that it is first time in his entire life that he is seeing complete absence of castiesm and absolute equality among all swayamsevaks irrespective of their castes. Dr. Amedkar inquired about the presence of untouchables in the camp to Dr. Hedgevar, he answered that in our camps there are no "touchables" or "untouchables" all of us are Hindus only [33]. Anderson and Damle in their book also summarize that the members of all castes have been welcomed in RSS without any discrimination and all are treated as equals [34].

It must also be mentioned here that RSS has always been pro-active in providing the education to the rural and socially-economically backward people of rural area, slum areas, tribal areas and poor locality of cities in India [35].

Relief and Rehabilitation Work of RSS

RSS has a long and constant tradition in providing relief and rehabilitation to the affected people. The RSS played an active role in providing relief after the Orissa (now Odisha) Cyclone 1971 and Andhra Pradesh Cyclone of 1977 [36].

The RSS also helped in the relief work during the 2001 earthquake in Gujarat. The RSS also helped in rebuilding many villages of affected areas in Gujarat [37].

Tentatively more than thirty five thousand RSS members were engaged in various relief works in affected areas of

Gujarat state^[38] And was active in 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy (Buch: 2012). Not only India, when Nepal faced the earthquake in 2015, RSS raised funds to help Nepal.^[39] ‘Sewa Bharti’, the RSS affiliated organization organized relief works and camps after 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake. The volunteers of Sewa Bharti was active in providing building shelters for homeless people and in providing food, clothes and medical care.^[40] Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh was also praised for the relief work done during 2004 Sumatra-Andaman earthquake and the subsequent Tsunami^[41].

In Jammu and Kashmir Sewa Bharti adopted fifty seven children (out of the adopted children thirty eight were Muslim and nineteen Hindu) who were from militancy affected areas. It also provide them education upto Higher Secondary level^[42].

RSS also provided basic necessities to the people of Surat in Gujarat who were adversely affected by the flood in the area also RSS swayamsevaks actively worked in flood affected area of North Karnataka and in various districts of Andhra Pradesh^[43]. In Utrakhand flood crisis, the RSS swayamsevaks again played a prominent role in flood relief work and activities^[44].

India faced a complete lockdown in the year 2020 due to spread of Covid 19 pandemic. At that time of lockdown, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh provided various kinds of assistance which includes, distribution of masks, soap, hand wash, sanitizers, food and drinking water to the people across India^[45]. Impressed after seeing the welfare services of Sewa Bharti during lock down period, a Muslim woman from Jammu and Kashmir contributed Rs. Five lakh to it, which was her saving to do Haj^[46].

Criticisms and Accusations

Many Indian Marxists writers have claimed that the RSS activities and ideology is fascist in nature primarily because it oppose the heterogeneous cultural values of India and Indian diversity, these authors further goes on to say that RSS want to establish the cultural hegemony of Hindus over other groups and tries to mobilize them by recognizing them as homogeneous community of India^[47].

Christopher Jaffrelot, who has served the position of Director of the Center for Studies and Research (CERI) and currently a non-resident fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace says in his 2007 work that although the RSS has a paramilitary style of working and because it emphasize more on discipline among the swayamsevaks, the RSS is recognized by many scholars as an Indian version of fascism. He criticize this approach and argues that the nature and characteristic of the ideology of RSS has always been to down-play the role of the state and there is no effort by RSS to develop any theory of state and the race (Fascism or Nazism) which was central element in European nationalism, but the focus of RSS has always been on cultural unity and not racial dominance, therefore RSS should not be termed as fascist organization. Although he blames that RSS believes in mobilization based on religious grounds and has a communal, anti-minority tone^[48].

The Response of Criticism

Linking of RSS with fascism of Europe by some Indian and western critics has been systematically criticized by many scholars. For example, Jyotirmaya Sharma in his work contends that there is an attempt by western writers to

defame Indian idea of patriotism and national unity”, and such type of “simplistic transference” wrongly put Indian culture, nationalism and knowledge system at wrong place^[49]. Belgian scholar Dr Koenraad Elst, affirms that such accusations and analysis have written mainly by the Marxist researchers and academicians from India and abroad, thus these writers are less driven by facts but by their ideological zeal and commitments. He also criticizes the RSS with some other nationalist organizations for being silent on such analysis and accusations^[50].

What Patnaik writes about RSS is purely based on ideological bias and lack complete facts. RSS is the only organization which respects all cultures and diversity of India. RSS want to completely eradicate the differences, bias and regional superiority or any kind of hatred which is found among the people from various states of India. Also, RSS does not discriminate people on caste, religious, linguistic and cultural lines. RSS welcomes all religious, caste and cultural groups in its fold without any discrimination. To be more precise, RSS is very inclusive in nature. The accusations that RSS is a fascist organization has been criticized by many scholars. For example, Koenraad Elst claims that the ideology of RSS cannot be linked with the notion of fascism as an ideology. (Elst: 2001)^[51]. another scholar named Vincent Kundukulam also presents the similar views and calls RSS as the only organization which believe in social service of mankind^[52]. Scholars like Chetan Bhatt and Parita Mukta reject the these theories which link RSS and its ideology with fascism, and claim that RSS is a cultural organization and not the racial organization and RSS works among the people for their welfare. Although they define RSS as the organization which is based on revolutionary conservatism or ethnic absolutism^[53]. Nobel Laureate V.S. Naipaul completely rejects these allegations on RSS and see the rise of RSS as a welcome and broader civilizational resurgence in India^[54]. These allegations on RSS generally come from the far left, who are against the idea of nationalism and wrongly find similarity between Indian nationalism and European nationalism. They must understand that there is a huge difference between the two. Indian nationalism respect diversity, accommodate all cultures, religions or other groups without any sense of bias and hatred. On the other hand European nationalism was entirely based on the idea of hating and eliminating other cultural, religious and/or ethnic groups. Unlike European nationalism, Indian nationalism propounded by RSS is much inclusive in nature. The critiques of RSS needs to first understand the Indian notion of inclusiveness, Indian nationalism and the very idea of India, India as a nation cannot be compare with any European or Western nation and any idea/any ideology cannot be compared with these nations. India has a unique identity and we as Indians must understand this uniqueness.

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