

One Hundred Years of Nationalism: A Historical Study of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its Socio-Political Influence in India

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Abstract: This paper explores the evolution and socio-political influence of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) over the past century. Founded in 27 September, 1925, the RSS has grown from a marginal cultural movement to a powerful ideological and organizational force in Indian politics. Through a historical lens, this study examines the RSS's ideological foundation in Hindutva, its organizational growth, relationship with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and its pervasive influence across education, culture, and civil society. The paper also critically evaluates the RSS's role in shaping India's national identity, its contested legacy, and its implications for democracy and secularism.

Keywords: Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Indian nationalism, Hindutva, socio-political influence, Hindu nationalism, right-wing politics, Sangh Parivar, Indian politics, cultural nationalism.

1. Introduction

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in 1925 by Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar in Nagpur, emerged as a response to the perceived threats to Hindu identity during British colonial rule and rising communal tensions in pre-independence India. Hedgewar, a former Congress member, envisioned an organization that could instill discipline, unity, and cultural pride among Hindus through physical training and ideological grooming (Andersen & Damle, 1987). Unlike political movements of the time, the RSS adopted a non-political, cadre-based approach, focusing on long-term social transformation rather than immediate political power.

At the heart of the RSS ideology lies *Hindutva*, a concept popularized by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in the 1920s, which emphasizes cultural nationalism and defines Indian identity primarily in terms of Hindu heritage and values (Savarkar, 1923/2003). The RSS interpreted Hindutva not as a mere religious doctrine, but as a civilizational identity rooted in the unity of Indian culture, language, and tradition. Over the next century, this ideological foundation became the basis for a vast network of affiliated organizations collectively known as the *Sangh Parivar*, including political parties, student unions, labor movements, and religious groups (Jaffrelot, 1996).

Today, the RSS is one of the largest voluntary organizations in the world, claiming millions of members and a presence in nearly every district of India. Its ideological and organizational influence has become particularly significant in the context of Indian politics, especially after the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which shares deep-rooted links with the RSS (Basu, 2015). The expansion of the RSS's reach into sectors such as education, media, civil society, and

governance raises critical questions about the evolving nature of Indian nationalism and the role of ideological organizations in a pluralistic democracy.

This study seeks to explore the century-long journey of the RSS, focusing on its historical evolution, ideological framework, socio-political strategies, and contemporary relevance. By analyzing both its contributions and controversies, the paper aims to offer a balanced understanding of how the RSS has shaped—and been shaped by—India's national discourse.

2. Historical Origins and Ideological Foundations

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was founded in 1925 by Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar in Nagpur during a period of rising nationalist fervor, communal consciousness, and socio-political unrest in colonial India. Hedgewar, a physician and former member of the Indian National Congress, grew disillusioned with what he perceived as the Congress's failure to adequately address the cultural and religious identity of Hindus in the anti-colonial struggle (Andersen & Damle, 1987). Inspired by nationalist and revivalist ideas circulating in the early 20th century, he conceptualized an organization that would focus on unifying Hindus through discipline, character-building, and a sense of national pride rooted in Hindu civilization.

The ideological foundation of the RSS is largely based on the doctrine of *Hindutva*, first articulated by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in his seminal work *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1923). Savarkar proposed that Indian national identity should be defined by shared ancestry (*pitribhumi*) and sacred geography (*punyabhumi*), both of which he argued were embodied in Hindu culture. According to Savarkar, being Hindu was less a matter of religious faith and more a cultural and civilizational belonging (Savarkar, 1923/2003). The RSS adopted and popularized this notion of cultural nationalism, promoting the idea that India is inherently a Hindu *rashtra* (nation), and that national unity could only be achieved through the consolidation of Hindu identity.

Early influences on RSS ideology also came from European nationalism, particularly models of ethno-cultural cohesion seen in Germany and Italy during the interwar period (Jaffrelot, 1996). The organizational model of the RSS—a disciplined, centralized cadre of male volunteers (*swayamsevaks*) engaging in daily physical training and ideological discussions—was inspired by these fascist models of nation-building, though the RSS insists it has remained distinct in its approach and non-violent in its methods (Graham, 1990).

From its inception, the RSS emphasized *sanskritization*, discipline, and *sewa* (social service) as central components of Hindu regeneration. It envisioned itself not as a political party but as a cultural force aimed at creating a Hindu society that would eventually give rise to a Hindu nation-state. This distinction allowed the RSS to maintain a long-term vision, focusing on grassroots mobilization, character-building, and ideological indoctrination rather than immediate political action (Andersen & Damle, 1987).

Despite its claims of being a cultural rather than political organization, the ideological positions of the RSS have had a profound impact on Indian political thought. By defining nationalism in religious and cultural terms, the RSS diverged from the secular and inclusive nationalism advocated by the Indian National Congress. This ideological divergence continues to be one of the most polarizing features of Indian political discourse.

3. Growth and Expansion (1925–2025)

Since its founding in 1925, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has transformed from a small group of volunteers in Nagpur into a vast nationwide organization with millions of active members and a deep penetration into India's socio-political fabric. The first few decades of the RSS were marked by slow but steady organizational growth. By the 1940s, the organization had spread to several provinces, focusing on the development of *shakhas*—local daily gatherings of volunteers for physical and ideological training (Andersen & Damle, 1987). The *shakha* model became the cornerstone of the RSS's grassroots strategy, facilitating a disciplined cadre system and uniform ideological dissemination.

The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 by Nathuram Godse, a former RSS member, led to the temporary ban of the organization by the Indian government. This moment was a significant setback, forcing the RSS to reorganize itself, clarify its non-political identity, and rebuild public trust (Jaffrelot, 1996). After its reinstatement in 1949, the RSS avoided direct political engagement but gradually expanded its influence through the formation of affiliated organizations, collectively called the *Sangh Parivar* (family of the Sangh). These included the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) for students, Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) for labor, and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) for religious and cultural outreach.

A pivotal moment in the RSS's political expansion came in 1951 with the formation of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) under the leadership of Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, seen as the RSS's political wing. This party later evolved into the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1980, which has become the most significant vehicle for the RSS's political vision (Graham, 1990). The BJP's electoral successes in the 1990s, particularly under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani, marked the beginning of the RSS's mainstream political ascendancy.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, in which the RSS and its affiliates played a prominent role, was a turning point that solidified the Hindu nationalist movement's mass mobilization capacity while also igniting national and international controversy (Basu, 2015). Despite—or perhaps because of—these polarizing moments, the RSS continued to grow rapidly, especially in northern and western India.

The 21st century saw unprecedented expansion in the scope and scale of the RSS. With the BJP's electoral victory in 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a former *pracharak* (full-time RSS worker), the ideological proximity between the state and the Sangh reached a new height. This period was marked by increased visibility of the RSS in policymaking, education reforms, civil society, and even foreign policy discourse (Chatterji, Hansen, & Jaffrelot, 2019). As of 2025, the RSS reportedly runs over 60,000 daily *shakhas* and operates thousands of schools, NGOs, think tanks, and service initiatives across the country (Sahni, 2023).

While supporters view the RSS as a nationalist and philanthropic force promoting cultural pride and discipline, critics argue that its ethnocentric and majoritarian ideology threatens India's secular and pluralistic ethos. Nevertheless, its ability to maintain organizational discipline, foster grassroots connectivity, and adapt to changing social contexts has made the RSS one of the most influential socio-political organizations in modern Indian history.

4. Socio-Political Influence and Cultural Interventions

Over the past century, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has exerted a profound and multifaceted influence on Indian society and politics. While the organization formally claims to be a cultural and apolitical entity, its ideological worldview and grassroots mobilization strategies have deeply shaped the political narrative, social values, and cultural consciousness of large segments of the Indian populace (Andersen & Damle, 1987). Through its vast network of affiliated bodies—collectively known as the *Sangh Parivar*—the RSS has engaged in systematic nation-building efforts that extend beyond traditional politics into realms such as education, media, religion, and civil society.

One of the most significant socio-political contributions of the RSS has been the institutionalization of *Hindutva* as a mass ideology. By promoting a singular, culturally-defined concept of Indian identity rooted in Hindu civilizational values, the RSS has redefined nationalism in religious and cultural terms. This ideological influence is particularly visible in the educational initiatives undertaken by the RSS and its affiliate, Vidya Bharati, which operates thousands of schools that incorporate nationalist narratives into curricula (Basu, 2015). These schools aim to instill a sense of cultural pride and moral discipline aligned with Hindu values, often challenging the secular and pluralistic foundations of India's post-independence educational framework (Nussbaum, 2007).

In the political sphere, the RSS has maintained a symbiotic relationship with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), providing the ideological backbone and grassroots cadre for electoral mobilization. While the RSS itself does not contest elections, its trained volunteers often work behind the scenes during election campaigns, shaping political discourse and ensuring ideological consistency (Jaffrelot, 2007). The ascendancy of the BJP, particularly since 2014 under Narendra Modi—a former RSS *pracharak*—has resulted in greater institutional access for RSS-affiliated individuals, facilitating the translation of its ideological vision into public policy. This includes reforms in education, efforts to implement a Uniform Civil Code, and laws related to cow protection and religious conversion.

Beyond politics, the RSS has been active in social service and disaster relief, which has helped bolster its public image as a patriotic and altruistic organization. The *Seva Bharati* wing, for instance, has provided relief during natural disasters and conducted health and literacy programs in underserved areas (Sahni, 2023). These activities have often served dual purposes: genuine community service and strategic outreach to marginalized communities, including Dalits and tribal populations, traditionally outside the upper-caste Hindu fold. Critics argue that such outreach, while beneficial on the surface, often involves ideological indoctrination and aims to integrate diverse communities into a homogenized Hindu identity (Chatterji et al., 2019).

Culturally, the RSS has played a key role in reviving festivals, promoting the use of Sanskrit, and supporting indigenous art forms as expressions of national pride. Through organizations like the Sanskar Bharati, it has cultivated a cultural nationalism that seeks to counter perceived Westernization and secular modernity. The RSS also runs think tanks and publishing houses that produce literature, historical reinterpretations, and ideological material aimed at shaping public opinion (Graham, 1990).

Despite its wide influence, the RSS remains controversial. Critics allege that its emphasis on Hindu unity often translates into the marginalization of religious minorities, especially Muslims and Christians. Its involvement in campaigns such as *ghar wapsi* (religious reconversion) and opposition to interfaith marriages (e.g., through the term *love jihad*) have raised concerns about rising intolerance and communal polarization in India (Jaffrelot & Tillin, 2017).

In summary, the RSS's socio-political influence extends far beyond its organizational boundaries. Through a combination of ideological dissemination, political partnership, educational control, and cultural revivalism, the RSS has entrenched itself as a powerful force shaping the contours of Indian identity and democracy.

4.1 Cultural and Educational Influence

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), since its inception in 1925, has placed significant emphasis on cultural and educational engagement as a means to shape societal values and national identity. Central to its mission has been the promotion of what it defines as *Bharatiya Sanskriti*—a composite Hindu cultural heritage that it views as the foundation of Indian nationhood. This cultural narrative is disseminated not only through its daily *shakhas* (branches) but also through a vast network of affiliated institutions, collectively referred to as the Sangh Parivar.

One of the most impactful arms of this cultural project is the educational outreach conducted through organizations like *Vidya Bharati*, which operates thousands of schools across the country. These schools often incorporate nationalist themes into their curriculum, placing strong emphasis on Indian traditions, moral values, and historical interpretations aligned with the RSS worldview. Critics argue that this constitutes a form of ideological indoctrination, particularly in the way history, religion, and national identity are presented. Proponents, on the other hand, assert that it represents a necessary correction to a colonial or secularist bias in mainstream education.

The RSS's cultural interventions are also visible through its support for initiatives that revive traditional arts, promote Sanskrit and Hindi over English, and celebrate Hindu festivals with

nationalistic overtones. Through affiliated organizations like *Samskrita Bharati* and *Bharatiya Shikshan Mandal*, the RSS has advanced a cultural renaissance agenda aimed at fostering pride in indigenous knowledge systems and customs. These efforts are often positioned as counterweights to what the Sangh views as cultural deracination brought about by Westernization and colonial education models.

Over the decades, the RSS's cultural influence has permeated into broader civil society, impacting literature, cinema, textbooks, and even public policy discussions around heritage and identity. As the ideological influence of the Sangh has grown, especially through its alignment with political power via the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), its cultural vision has increasingly shaped national discourses on what it means to be Indian.

4.2 Political Engagement through BJP

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While the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) began as a cultural and ideological organization, its political engagement became formalized with the establishment of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh in 1951, the political forerunner of the present-day Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This marked a strategic shift in the RSS's approach—from solely focusing on cultural nationalism to actively participating in electoral politics through an affiliate organization. The Jana Sangh, and later the BJP (formed in 1980), became the political embodiment of the Sangh's ideological vision, particularly *Hindutva*, or Hindu nationalism (Jaffrelot, 1996).

The relationship between the RSS and BJP is both structural and ideological. While the RSS officially maintains that it is a non-political body, it exerts significant influence over the BJP's leadership, policies, and long-term strategic direction. Senior BJP leaders, including Narendra Modi, L.K. Advani, and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, have been swayamsevaks (RSS volunteers), and many continue to consult the Sangh's top leadership, especially the *sarsanghchalak* (supreme leader), on critical issues (Andersen & Damle, 2018). The RSS's role in cadre development, ideological grounding, and crisis management has made it a central player in BJP's political success.

This partnership has become more overt and influential since the BJP's rise to national power in 2014. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a former RSS pracharak (full-time worker), many of the Sangh's ideological goals have been foregrounded in national policy—ranging from the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu & Kashmir, to the construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, and the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). These developments are viewed by many scholars as manifestations of the RSS's long-standing ideological agenda being realized through state power (Basu, 2020; Jaffrelot, 2021).

However, this close alliance has also sparked controversy and concern. Critics argue that the RSS-BJP nexus blurs the lines between religion and state, challenges India's secular democratic fabric, and centralizes power in a manner that marginalizes minority voices (Chatterji et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the Sangh's ability to mobilize grassroots support, shape narratives, and maintain ideological coherence has made it an indispensable force in India's political landscape.

Through the BJP, the RSS has effectively transitioned from a cultural nationalist movement to a decisive political force, shaping the trajectory of Indian democracy in the 21st century.

4.3 Civil Society and Social Work

Beyond its political and cultural engagements, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has developed a robust presence in civil society through its extensive network of social service and welfare organizations. The Sangh has long positioned itself not only as a cultural guardian but also as a provider of humanitarian aid, particularly in times of crisis, thereby strengthening its grassroots legitimacy and societal reach.

The social work of the RSS is primarily conducted through *seva* (service) initiatives coordinated by its affiliate, *Seva Bharati*. Established in the 1980s, Seva Bharati runs thousands of programs

across India, including health camps, education centers, disaster relief operations, and rehabilitation projects for marginalized communities (Andersen & Damle, 2018). These efforts are especially visible in urban slums and tribal areas, where state services are often inadequate. The organization's work has helped cultivate an image of the Sangh as a patriotic and benevolent force, capable of addressing social inequities while promoting a nationalist ethos.

Critically, the RSS's civil society engagement is often characterized by a dual strategy: providing genuine aid while also introducing beneficiaries to Hindu nationalist ideology. Scholars argue that this form of welfare nationalism serves to expand the ideological base of the RSS, especially among Dalits, Adivasis, and other historically excluded groups (Basu, 2020; Jaffrelot, 2007). Educational outreach, vocational training, and health services are often accompanied by cultural programs that stress Hindu unity and identity, subtly reinforcing the RSS's vision of a cohesive, Hindu-centric nation.

The RSS has also played a significant role in disaster relief. From the 2001 Gujarat earthquake to the COVID-19 pandemic, its volunteers have been mobilized quickly and efficiently, earning public recognition even among critics of its ideology. These interventions often receive media attention and are leveraged to project the organization's capacity for national service, while simultaneously legitimizing its broader socio-political role (Chatterji et al., 2019).

Despite its extensive outreach, the RSS's social work remains a subject of debate. Detractors argue that its programs are not ideologically neutral and may foster social polarization under the guise of service. Nonetheless, the Sangh's civil society initiatives have undeniably contributed to its ability to sustain long-term influence in Indian society beyond electoral politics.

5. Criticisms and Controversies

Despite its extensive influence and long-standing presence, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has been the subject of considerable debate, criticism, and controversy. These issues stem from its ideological stance, historical actions, and social impact. This section explores key critiques under distinct thematic subheadings.

5.1 Allegations of Religious Majoritarianism

One of the most persistent criticisms of the RSS is its promotion of a Hindu majoritarian vision of Indian nationalism. The ideology of *Hindutva*, as articulated by early RSS thinkers such as M. S. Golwalkar and V. D. Savarkar, defines India as primarily a Hindu nation, implicitly placing religious minorities—particularly Muslims and Christians—outside the national mainstream (Savarkar, 1923/2003; Golwalkar, 1939/2000). Critics argue that this ideological framework challenges the secular and pluralistic foundation of the Indian Constitution (Nussbaum, 2007).

Organizations affiliated with the RSS have been accused of creating communal tensions through campaigns like *ghar wapsi* (reconversion of Muslims and Christians to Hinduism) and opposition to interfaith marriages under labels like *love jihad* (Jaffrelot & Tillin, 2017). These activities have been widely condemned as efforts to polarize communities and impose cultural homogeneity.

5.2 Role in the Babri Masjid Demolition and Communal Riots

The demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 is among the most significant events in India's post-independence history involving the RSS and its affiliates. The mobilization campaign led by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—both linked to the RSS—culminated in the destruction of the 16th-century mosque, claiming it was built on the birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram (Basu et al., 1993). This act triggered nationwide communal riots and deepened Hindu-Muslim animosity.

Investigative reports and commissions, including the Liberhan Commission, have pointed to the RSS's ideological influence and organizational support in mobilizing kar sevaks (volunteers) for the demolition (Engineer, 1995). This incident severely damaged the RSS's image among secular and minority groups and remains a deeply polarizing issue.

5.3 Accusations of Undermining Academic Freedom and Intellectual Diversity

The RSS has faced criticism for allegedly attempting to influence academic and cultural institutions in India. Critics assert that RSS-affiliated individuals have been appointed to key positions in universities, research councils, and historical bodies, resulting in the promotion of ideologically aligned curricula and suppression of dissenting viewpoints (Chatterji et al., 2019).

There are also concerns regarding the rewriting of history textbooks to reflect a Hindu-centric narrative, often downplaying or omitting the contributions of Muslim rulers, critical caste-based histories, and secular nationalists (Nussbaum, 2007). These interventions are seen as attempts to indoctrinate students and control the cultural imagination of future generations.

5.4 Political Influence without Accountability

Although the RSS does not directly contest elections, it has been accused of wielding significant political power through its relationship with the BJP. This dual structure—wherein the RSS influences policy through ideological direction but remains outside democratic accountability—has raised concerns about transparency and institutional integrity (Jaffrelot, 2007).

This indirect control allows the RSS to shape key decisions while avoiding legal or electoral scrutiny. Several policy positions taken by the BJP government, such as the abrogation of Article 370 (which granted special status to Jammu and Kashmir) and the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), have been interpreted as aligning closely with RSS ideology (Chopra, 2020).

5.5 Internal Dissent and Regional Criticism

Even within the broader Hindu community, not all voices align with the RSS. Various regional, caste-based, and linguistic groups have criticized the organization's perceived upper-caste and North Indian bias. Dalit leaders, for example, have accused the RSS of tokenism and of seeking to co-opt marginalized communities without addressing structural caste inequalities (Omvedt, 1994).

Moreover, in southern and northeastern India, where regional identities and religious pluralism are stronger, the RSS has faced resistance in its attempts to expand. Local critics argue that the RSS's emphasis on cultural homogeneity undermines regional traditions and minority rights (Menon, 2022).

6. Contemporary Relevance and the Future of the RSS

As the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) enters its second century, its role in India's contemporary political, cultural, and societal landscape remains a subject of critical analysis and speculation. This section explores its current status and evaluates the potential directions the organization might take in shaping India's future.

6.1 Political Consolidation through the Sangh Parivar

The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to national prominence, especially since 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi—a long-time RSS affiliate—has significantly elevated the RSS's political influence. Through its extended network known as the *Sangh Parivar*, the RSS continues to shape public discourse, influence policy, and mobilize mass support on issues such as national security, cultural nationalism, and economic self-reliance (*Atmanirbhar Bharat*) (Jaffrelot, 2021).

The electoral dominance of the BJP has allowed the RSS greater space to indirectly guide policy on issues like the abrogation of Article 370, the construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, and the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), all of which align with its long-term ideological goals (Chatterji et al., 2019).

6.2 Evolving Strategies and Modern Outreach

To remain relevant among younger generations and urban populations, the RSS has adopted modern tools and strategies. It has increased its digital presence through mobile apps, websites, and social media campaigns, appealing to a broader demographic, including the youth and diaspora communities (Pande, 2017).

Additionally, the RSS has diversified its engagement through affiliates in education (e.g., Vidya Bharati), labor (e.g., Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh), and tribal welfare (e.g., Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram), expanding its footprint beyond traditional urban strongholds into rural and marginalized areas (Andersen & Damle, 2018).

6.3 Shifts in Ideological Tone and Inclusivity Efforts

In recent years, the RSS leadership has made concerted efforts to soften its image and reach out to communities historically skeptical of its motives. Leaders like Mohan Bhagwat have made statements supporting social harmony, caste inclusion, and dialogue with minority groups (Bhagwat, 2018). Initiatives such as honoring Dalit saints or participating in interfaith events represent attempts to broaden the organization's appeal (Jha, 2020).

However, critics argue that these moves are more tactical than ideological, meant to consolidate power rather than address structural issues within the Sangh's worldview (Menon, 2022).

6.4 Challenges in a Pluralistic Democracy

While the RSS continues to gain ground, it faces significant challenges in reconciling its vision of Hindu cultural hegemony with India's constitutional commitment to secularism, diversity, and pluralism. The rising tide of sectarian violence, caste tensions, and ideological polarization risks alienating large sections of the population, both domestically and internationally (Nussbaum, 2007).

The RSS's future influence will largely depend on how it negotiates this tension—whether it adapts to a more inclusive and democratic framework or persists in pursuing a homogenized cultural identity.

6.5 Prospects for Global Expansion and Diaspora Influence

The RSS has also been expanding internationally through organizations such as the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS), which operates in countries like the U.S., U.K., and Australia. These entities focus on cultural promotion, youth engagement, and ideological outreach among the Hindu diaspora (Jaffrelot & Tillin, 2017).

Through these networks, the RSS is increasingly influencing discussions on Hindu identity, Indian nationalism, and global perceptions of Indian politics, suggesting that its impact may extend beyond national borders in the future.

7. Conclusion

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in 1925, has evolved from a cultural organization with a narrowly defined Hindu nationalist ideology into a major force influencing India's political, social, and cultural fabric. Over the past hundred years, the RSS has grown into one of the largest volunteer organizations in the world, with a network of affiliated bodies (Sangh Parivar) permeating nearly every sector of Indian society.

The ideological roots of the RSS, drawn from thinkers like V.D. Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar, rest on the concept of *Hindutva*—a cultural nationalism that defines India as a Hindu *Rashtra*. Initially focused on character building and discipline through shakhas, the RSS maintained a non-political stance while influencing movements indirectly through its offshoots (Andersen & Damle, 2018; Jaffrelot, 2021).

7.1 Socio-Political Expansion and Influence

Throughout its existence, especially after India's independence, the RSS increasingly positioned itself in the socio-political sphere. Its role in founding the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and later the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was pivotal in creating a direct link between its ideology and Indian politics. The ascendancy of the BJP at the national level has further institutionalized the influence of the RSS, enabling its ideology to influence policy-making and national narratives (Chatterji et al., 2019).

The organization's network has also expanded into areas such as education, labor rights, tribal welfare, and disaster relief, often advancing its ideological agenda under the guise of social service (Pande, 2017). While critics argue that this influence undermines India's pluralistic values, supporters claim it fosters national unity and cultural pride.

7.2 Contemporary Relevance and Global Outreach

In the 21st century, the RSS has adapted to new challenges by modernizing its communication tools, expanding globally through diaspora outreach, and attempting to appear more inclusive in its messaging (Bhagwat, 2018; Jha, 2020). These efforts suggest a strategic evolution rather than a transformation of its ideological foundations.

However, the organization's future role will depend on its ability to reconcile its Hindu nationalist ideology with the democratic, secular, and pluralistic values enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The growing polarization in Indian society and international scrutiny also pose challenges to its expansion.

7.3 Final Thoughts

As India moves forward, the RSS's centennial legacy will continue to provoke debate. Whether it is viewed as a patriotic institution working for national unity or as a force promoting cultural majoritarianism, the RSS undeniably remains one of the most influential and controversial institutions in modern Indian history. Continued scholarly engagement is essential to assess its evolving role in shaping India's democratic and cultural trajectory.

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