

THE BJP AND THE RSS – THE EVOLUTION OF A POLITICAL POWER IN RELATION TO A SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

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Abstract: Religious forces appear to use welfare services to achieve their goals. Globally, views about the political goals of religious groups vary widely: at one extreme, the view that religion is inseparable from politics leads to advocacy (and some practical examples) of theocracy; at the other it is believed that states should have a secular foundation and religion should be a purely private affair. Attempts by religious forces to gain or influence political power lead to conflicts with states and governments that are based on secular principles, especially if the strategy they adopt is to establish political parties. The involvement of religious organizations, especially those with political aspirations, in providing welfare services gives rise to particular concern and suspicion. However, there is little understanding of their motives and practices or analysis of how their provision of welfare services affects their relationships with the state. This study is one of a series that aims to understand how religious forces use welfare services to achieve their goals and how they operate vis-à-vis the state in South Asia, namely in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. In order to understand the mechanisms that religious forces adopt, the comparative study first looked at the question of why religious groups seek political power and why they set up political parties to achieve this aim. It then went on to examine the relationships between the religious group and its associated political party, as well as the nature and role of the welfare activities the party supports.

Key Words: Political Power, Social Organization, Bharatiya Janata Party, Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh

An overview of BJP's origin and evolution, and more importantly, the history of its relationship with RSS, an organization described as probably the most controversial organization in contemporary India" (Kanungo, 2002), is critical to understanding the former's contested reputation as a 'religious' political party, prior to unravelling its relationships with any welfare organizations it supports. Besides, it is also important to unpack *Hindutva* as defined by RSS and BJP and to assess its religious content.

As the following section will describe, RSS itself emerged as a response to the socio-political conditions prevailing in late 19th and early 20th century pre-independence India. This section seeks firstly to establish the 'Hindu' orientation of RSS and its contested ideology, and secondly to examine RSS's role in the establishment of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the dynamics of the relationship between the two.

Emergence of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) as a 'social service' organization

The 'communalization' (Basu et al, 1993) of politics under the British in India in the early 1900s is stated to have been one of the primary reasons for the emergence of RSS, ostensibly as a social organization with the sole objective of freeing 'Hindustan' and saving the 'Hindu' culture. In reality, a combination of factors, which included rifts in relationships between Hindus and Muslims and between upper caste Brahmins and non-Brahmins, as well as fears of the influence of Western culture, provided a fertile ground for the foundation of RSS.

Certain events in the early years of the 1920s not only brought to the forefront the religious differences between Muslims and Hindus in India, but also introduced communal tensions into the realm of Indian politics. Tensions between the two communities intensified in the following years (1923-1926), with each trying to protect its religious interests and identity in various ways. Political historians often describe this period and the formation of RSS as the culmination of 'Hindu revivalism', wherein social and political movements and *sanghatans* (organized groups) like the Arya Samaj²² and the Hindu Mahasabha²³ emerged and played critical roles. The Hindu Mahasabha spearheaded the *sanghatan* movement and brought together different Hindu groups, including some leaders of the Congress, on a common platform, promoting the cause of a strong Hindu community to equal the strength of the Muslims.²⁴ The Hindu nationalist leaders "...cashed in on a new Hindu feeling of vulnerability and...exploited it by launching the RSS" (Jaffrelot, 2005a). It was amidst this communal upheaval that RSS was formed in 1925 in Nagpur, the intellectual capital of the Central Provinces, by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, a Maharashtrian Brahmin.

Hedgewar devoted himself to politics - in principle with the Congress - but with a Hindu perspective. However, he saw the collapse of the 'Non-Cooperation Movement' and riots in the subsequent years as a result of Muslims in India proving to be "...Muslims first and Indians only secondarily..." (from an official publication of RSS, quoted by Basu et al, 1993), apparently underscoring Muslims' allegiance to their community rather than the nation. Hence, Hedgewar came to believe that only Hindus could free the country and save its Hindu culture; he was also convinced that Muslims were 'anti-national' and the enemy of Hindus and that the two communities could never come together as a fraternity on a common national cause. He also believed

that, although Hindus were more able than Muslims and the British in terms of manpower and resources, what they lacked as a community was a sense of "...national consciousness and cohesion", when what was needed was "national solidarity" against both the British and the Muslims. Hindus hence, in his view, needed to be organized into a dedicated and disciplined structure to counter the devious moves of Muslims and ensure a Hindu *Rashtra* or nation with a Hindu culture. The RSS was an outcome of this perceived need.

Some socio-political observers are sceptical about Hedgewar's concerns about Muslims' supposed treacherous attitude. They believe that for Hedgewar, the key issue was the conflict of interests between Brahmins and non-Brahmins and suggest that the formation of RSS was actually an "...an upper caste reaction to efforts at self-assertion by down trodden groups within the Hindu fold" (Basu et al, 1993), particularly as the mid-19th century also saw an upsurge of anti-Brahmin and *dalit* movements in Maharashtra under Ambedkar. Bidwai (2004) observes that the RSS largely appealed to the Maratha Brahmins and notes that its membership was initially predominantly confined to Brahmins from Western and Central India.

In addition, the two architects of the concept of *Hindutva* and of RSS — V.D. Sarvarkar and Golwalkar - were Maratha Brahmins. Thus, a conflict of interest between Brahmins and non-Brahmins, as much as tensions between Hindus and Muslims, appears to have been the reason for the establishment of RSS and the propagation of Hindu nationalism as its ideology. The fact that even today RSS appears to be a bastion of upper caste Hindus supports this theory.

Confirming the 'Hindu' orientation of RSS

If RSS was any other social organization, it would merely be known as one of the largest and best organized non-governmental development organizations (*Sangh Parivar*) in the country today, working in areas as diversified as education, health, tribal welfare, empowerment of women, labour unions, disaster management and relief work, amongst others. However, the vision, ideology and constitution of the organisation, as well as its use of specific Hindu symbols of worship, give it a definitive 'Hindu' character and a unique Hindu profile.

'Hindu Rashtra' and 'Hindutva' as a vision

The *Hindutva* agenda of RSS was set when Hedgewar urged a Hindu *Rashtra* or Hindu nation, and his successor M.S. Golwalkar, while on one hand extolling the catholicity of Hinduism, on the other defined the Hindu nation as a place where:

...the non-Hindu people... must adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and revere Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but the glorification of the Hindu nation,...they must cease to be foreigners or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation...(From Golwalkar *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, quoted in Basu, T, et al, 1993).

Golwalkar (1906-73) strongly believed that religious minorities had to show respect to Hindu symbols because he regarded them as synonymous with the identity of the nation and not merely the religion. He argued that society in India is Hindu because Hindus had inhabited the area stretching from the Himalayas to the southern ocean for thousands of years; moreover, he asserted that it was the Hindu forefathers who had established standards and norms and fought against foreign invaders. Hence, he claimed, only a Hindu could claim to be a "child of this soil." Religious minorities were therefore counselled to pledge allegiance to the Hindu symbols of the nation and to restrict their own religious rituals and practices to the confines of private space.²⁵ Thus for Golwalkar, the 'nation' was constituted of geographical, racial, religious, cultural and linguistic elements.

Later, RSS leaders voiced similar views, believing that the "Hindu culture contains within it the essence of Indian identity" (Jaffrelot, 2005b). As Jaffrelot noted, RSS writers like Patenge (n.d.) observed that Hindus who converted to Islam and Christianity were not only forced to change their mode of worship, but also their style of dressing, names, culture, value system and lifestyles. Patenge believed that conversion led to a simultaneous change in nationality, "and that was the root cause of all their problems" (Patenge in a meeting of RSS officers on the subject of "Outlook of the Sangh towards the Non-Hindus"). Patenge added that the 'problem' of non-Hindus like Muslims and Christians is, therefore, not the problem of faith, alleging that it "transcends the barriers of faith and worship and tends to create social and political tensions in an anti-national perspective." He observed that it is difficult to bring non-Hindus into mainstream politics, thus the only answer is *Hindutva*, which will protect everyone's common interests.

Other RSS thinkers and supporters of the concept of *Hindutva* today believe that it is Hinduism that prevents India from being a theocratic state. They are convinced that Hinduism is a way of looking at the universe, with a value system that encompasses all aspects of life. They regard it as the only binding matter in India, without which society would get dispersed and lost like that of the ancient Greeks.²⁶ For K.N. Govindacharya, the one-time General Secretary of the BJP, the 'Hindu *Rashtra*' and 'Hinduness' are synonymous with 'Bharatiyata' or Indianness. He urges that exclusivist thinking must be shed and believes that the solution to communal tensions and co-existence in India is the 'Indianization' of all religions. Arguing that sectarianism is not in India's ethos and that an Indian type of 'Protestantism' will emerge in due course, in an interview given to the *Times of India*, January

30, 1999, he concludes that India is already a Hindu *Rashtra*:

If you accept that the nation and state are not co-terminus, then geo-culturally we are a Hindu nation. This is because a sense of belonging is embedded in the spirit of Hinduness, which, in turn, is the result of living together and sharing the same *sanskriti* [culture] for a millennium.

Govindacharya sees a future where 'Hinduness' will exist even if individuals' mode of worship differs and this is what he believes will motivate respect for all religions. To strengthen their collective argument, RSS supporters often refer to the 1995 judgement of the Supreme Court of India, which observed that "... *Hinduism* or *Hindutva* are not necessarily to be understood and construed narrowly, confined only to the strict Hindu religious practices unrelated to the culture and ethos of the people of India, depicting the way of life of the Indian people."

Thus the concept of Hindu *Rashtra* as propounded by Golwalkar and others after him²⁷ appears to accommodate the practice of other religions, at least theoretically, but with the rider of this being confined to private space and combined with allegiance to the Hindu nation. Golwalkar was attracted towards the idea of Hindu solidarity, as propounded by Ramakrishna Paramahansa (a Hindu religious leader of the 19th century), according to which every different sub-group would have its own rituals but would be reconciled within an overarching Hindu solidarity. However, the catch was that Hindu symbols and festivals were adopted by the followers of *Hindutva* as representing a common culture and civilization, so that Muslims and Christians are suspect if they fail to recognize this common culture and accord due reverence to its symbols (Basu et al, 1993).

Thus, for RSS, while the Hindu *Rashtra* forms the centre of its ideological base, it does not claim to be religious, because it does not aim to establish a religious Hindu state. Instead, it considers it to be a 'cultural and emotional' concept, with the nation at its centre. Thus while the "... nationals of this nation may have different religious faiths, ... they all have to subscribe to *Hindutva* or Hinduness, which is the cultural ethos of the nation..." (Kanungo, 2002). In this view, a Hindu is "any person born in this country, irrespective of his or her religion" and Lord Rama and Krishna are seen as national heroes (Kanungo, 2002). It is this that is controversial: are the symbols associated with *Hindutva* purely cultural, or do they have religious significance? It is critical to understand this definition of *Hindutva* in order to assess whether or not the Bharatiya Janata Party is a Hindu religious political party.

Borrowed symbols and rituals

As evidence of RSS's Hindu orientation, many researchers observe that "...RSS draws liberally from the Hindu past to construct its belief system... Hindu thought and practice inform the verbal symbols, signs and rituals which the RSS employs" (Andersen and Damle, 2005). According to Andersen and Damle, the founding fathers of RSS based their concept of a strong society on the Vedanta (Advaita), in turn based on the Upanishads, from which Hinduism draws much of its knowledge and wisdom.

Like the Hindu belief that *dharma* can only be realised through the acquisition of knowledge and selfless devotion to duty and worship, RSS too subscribes to the concept of worship, but with a difference: while the Hindus worshipped idols, RSS demands the worship of a 'living God' identified as the 'Hindu *Rashtra*' or nation. The nation itself is identified with the 'Divine Mother Goddess' and referred to as *Bharat Mata* or Mother India. In addition, RSS believes in following the *samskaras* for developing the 'character' of its members, for which in turn *sadhana* is critical. *Samskaras* are Vedic rites of passage that mark the various stages of a Hindu's life, including a series of sacrifices and rituals which are broadly termed *sadhana*.

RSS's affinity to the Hindu religion is also visible in the festivals that it celebrates. Every year it observes festivals like Raksha Bandhan,²⁸ Makar Shankranti or the winter solstice, and Dasera, the Hindu festival of victory of good over evil. In fact, RSS itself was founded on Vijay Dashmi day, the last and most important day in the week-long Dasera celebrations. Some of the other festivals celebrated include the coronation day of Shivaji, the great Maratha warrior king; the victory of the Hindus over the Mughals; and the Guru Dakshina day, when the RSS flag is worshipped as a guru or teacher, another concept borrowed from Hinduism. The flag itself is said to have belonged to Lord Rama and used by Shivaji. The two most telling evidences of the Hindu religious orientation of RSS, however, are the facts that its official website states that 'Any Hindu male'²⁹ can become a member of RSS (www.rss.org) and at the time of taking the oath a *swayamsewak* (member of RSS) promises to work for the "... betterment of [his] sacred Hindu religion, Hindu culture, and Hindu community..." and to devote himself to the prosperity of the 'Holy Motherland' (Andersen and Damle, 2005).

Thus, RSS espouses an ethno-religious concept of nationalism, wherein Hindu society needs to be reorganized to produce a unified nation that reveres and respects its comprehensive Hindu culture, while non-Hindus need to be assimilated into this culture. However, the fact that much of this culture reflects the philosophies and practices of Hinduism makes it difficult for RSS to completely divorce itself from the religious implications of its beliefs and to promote itself as a secular organization.

Further, its interpretation of the word *Hindutva* as representing an ethnic community with similar racial characteristics that occupies the land between the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean does not hold much strength.³⁰

A hierarchical and Hindu 'family'-based organizational structure

Finally, a Hindu *sanghathan* (organization) is the framework of reference for the pyramid-shaped organizational structure of the RSS. For the purpose of management, the *sanghathan* is organized at the national, provincial or state and local levels, with each level being headed by a team leader whose mandate is to build and strengthen the various units or *sakhas* of the *Sangh*. At the top of the pyramid is the *sarsangchalak*, the overall guide and philosopher of RSS³¹, supported by an assembly of representatives

from the various state-level assemblies, the state *sangchalaks*, *pracharaks* (preachers and promoters) and members of the central working committee. Below this, at the level of the state, is an elected assembly headed by a state *sangchalak*, who is generally an influential person from the region, to provide credibility to the organization and facilitate the generation of resources. At the local level is a *mandal* committee, which is responsible for a group of *shakhas* from a specific locality, and above this is a city (*nagar*) committee.

The *shakhas*, located at the bottom of the pyramid and forming the base of the Sangh, are the most important units, each consisting of about 100 male members known as *swayamsewaks* (volunteers), and headed by a Secretary and a Chief Teacher, apart from various unit heads. The *shakhas* meet regularly and follow a set of routine activities, guided by their team leaders. As the purpose is to build up both the physical and mental strengths of individuals and to mould them into the fold of Hindu culture and tradition, the activities necessarily include physical training and team building through group games and exercises, in addition to regular discussions on themes related to the history, geography, philosophy and culture of the Hindu *Rashtra*. A familial bonding exists between the *shakha* members, with the leader of the *shakha* playing a role somewhat similar to that of the head of a Hindu extended family, including providing support at times of need. Kanungo (2002) refers to this as a “unique brotherhood” that is bound together by common observation of rituals, attire, vocabulary, discussions and participation in group games.

The RSS’s strategy is to penetrate the social structure of the country and reach out to every individual in order to build a nation that will not only be morally and socially sound but also be mentally and physically fit and united in a single national culture. An expanding network of *shakhas*, with their disciplined routine, proved to be a successful strategy for reaching out to the furthest corners of the country. Starting with a small group of *swayamsewaks* in Nagpur in 1925, the *shakhas* have grown steadily over the years.³² According to the RSS annual report for 2009, at present there are 43,905 *shakhas* in 30,015 villages and urban areas across the country. At the same time, the official website also adds that, as RSS does not keep a formal record of membership or a register of *swayamsewaks*, their exact number is difficult to count (www.rss.org).

The emergence of RSS affiliates and the concept of the ‘Sangh Parivar’

The *shakhas* were only the first step in the RSS roadmap to influence every sphere and sector of Indian society. The other critical components were the sectoral affiliates that have emerged over the years, which many critics refer to as ‘fronts’, ‘offshoots’, ‘off spring’ or ‘branches’ of RSS.³³ While the development activities of the *Sangh* itself are restricted to relief work and assistance during times of natural or man-made disasters, its ‘affiliates’ focus on specific sectors, ranging from education, empowerment of women and tribal welfare to the concerns of farmers and industrial workers, with the common purpose of nation-building in all walks of life. While the organizations do provide support to socially and economically marginalized communities, more importantly they provide a foothold for the RSS in critical sectors and hence, a means of promoting the core agenda of the Hindu *Rashtra*.

It is believed that the emergence of the organizations was need-based, often depending on the interests and efforts of individuals or groups within the RSS.³⁴ While in most cases new organizations were established, at times the RSS *pracharaks* also penetrated existing ones.³⁵ The need for such a strategy became especially urgent after the country gained independence in 1947 and disruptive activities became menacingly obvious. Thus,

- In order to confront and dissipate the energies and growing impact of the Communists in parts of the country, especially amongst student unions in the universities, Balraj Madhok, an RSS activist, formed the All India Students’ Union (ABVP) in 1948. The emphasis was not building up student power but bringing all the different elements of a university onto a common platform to effect overall change; hence, the ABVP also brought teachers into its fold. Today, the organization is one of the largest student unions in the country.
- The Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (an Indian trade union) was the other affiliate that emerged in response to the activities of the Communists amongst the working class. The BMS had its origin in the late 1940s when, under Golwalkar’s direction, one of the *pracharaks* (D.P. Thengadi) joined the INTUC, a labour union affiliated to the Congress, revived its Madhya Pradesh branch and subsequently in 1955 set up the BMS in Bhopal. In keeping with the RSS theory of assimilation of all social groups into one Indian culture and a cohesive social order, the mandate for BMS was to counter the communist ideology of class struggle and instead promote the concept of a collaborative socio-political society in which members live in harmony with each other.
- Similarly, to give shape to its objective of strengthening the minds and bodies of children and young people, RSS entered into the field of education in 1952 when Nanaji Deshmukh, a Maharastrian Brahmin, opened the first school - the Sarswati Shishu Mandir - in one of the most backward areas of Eastern Uttar Pradesh. The network of schools spread to the remotest parts of the country and was subsequently federated under an umbrella organization called the Vidhya Bharathi, which is today the largest single educational network in the country (and the focus of the case study in Section 5 of this report).
- In the same manner, the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (tribal welfare centre) was set up in 1952 in Jashpur by R.K. Deshpande, primarily to counter the influence of Christian missionaries amongst the tribals and to reconvert those who had become Christians. This was done by establishing free residential schools and hospitals and providing training and support to improve livelihoods.
- The Bharatiya Kisan Sangh was set up in Vidharbha in 1960 by Bhau Saheb Bhushkute, another RSS *pracharak*, with the primary

objectives of undertaking value-added research and ensuring better prices for farmers.

- In 1964, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) or World Hindu Council was launched, to bring together the different Hindu sects and their leaders under a common structure and in order to make the religion more comprehensive. Although this was not a very effective strategy, the VHP itself has evolved to be the militant arm of the RSS, spearheading several controversial movements aimed at establishing the Hindu way of life and culture, including leading the call for the construction of a temple at Ayodhya, the birthplace of the Lord Rama.³⁶
- Seva Bharathi was set up by Vishnu Kumar, another RSS *pracharak*, with the objectives of eradicating un-touchability and promoting culture and literature, as well as providing support to economically and socially marginalized communities, without any form of caste, regional or language-based discrimination. Through the Seva Bharathi, RSS is able to directly reach out to the lower castes.
- Rashtra Sevika Samiti, the first of the affiliates to have been set up in 1936 by Laxmibai Kelkar, an admirer of Hedgewar is, however, different from all the above. This is a parallel women-only organization, set up on similar lines to that of the RSS, which is open only to male Hindus.
- Finally, there is the political affiliate, the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, established in 1951, just before the first general elections, not only to protect itself as an organization but also to promote the cause of the Hindu Rashtra through the machinery of the state. The Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS) subsequently gave birth to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Thus, while over the years the RSS *shakhas* spread throughout the country, the network of affiliates also grew. Although the above organizations are the better known ones, the RSS website lists a total of nineteen organizations that it states are RSS-inspired.³⁷ Each organization is technically autonomous and both RSS and the affiliates are at pains to convince the world of their independence.³⁸ Analysing the relationship, Jaffrelot (2005b) observes not only that many of the RSS leaders are reluctant to even acknowledge the idea that a network exists but also that divergent views exist within the RSS community itself. While RSS members like L.K. Advani (the current leader) and Govindacharya (a previous leader of the political affiliate, the BJP) defend the concept of the *Sangh parivar* and state that it is a means of 'harmonizing' the divergent interests of the various organizations, K.S. Sudarshan, who was the *sarsangchalak* until recently, objected to the use of the term '*parivar*'. Instead, he believed that the network was a group of allied organizations that are commonly inspired by the 'Hindu thought process' but are otherwise independent. The significant but subtle influence of the RSS over the affiliates or allied organizations clearly comes through in Sudarshan's statement that the RSS, unlike the head of a family, cannot impose its decisions on other organizations; instead, he asserts, "...we can only suggest." It is the *swayamsewaks* who consider whether a suggestion is "...valid and get it accepted" by the concerned organization." Interestingly, this view was endorsed in the course of this study by several RSS members associated with the VBABSS and even BJP. The *swayamsewaks* ensure that "balance and cooperation is maintained", reinforcing the importance of *swayamsewaks* and the process of *shakha* building.

The RSS's agenda clearly emerges as one of 'nation building' with a 'Hindu' orientation. Over the years, RSS has stood firmly by its argument that 'Hindu' in this case refers not so much to the religion as to the people living in a specific geographic area and their culture, values and practices. The people themselves are in turn identified not so much by their religion, caste or community, but by virtue of their relationship to the nation state. However, the conditionalities attached to these values and practices are so closely identifiable with the religion and its philosophy that it is difficult to convincingly separate the organization from the religion. The perpetuation of these defined values and practices is the core purpose of RSS, for which it spreads into every sector of the society, including the political life of the nation. While RSS itself solely focuses on the task of nation building, the 'affiliates', which have no apparent functional linkages with the parent organization, nevertheless contribute to taking the core agenda forward, although perhaps with varying degrees of commitment. In addition, affiliates like VHP and Bajrang Dal have taken the Hindu *Rashtra* and nation-building agenda to the realms of communal militancy, which makes it even more difficult for RSS to retain its professed cultural, non-religious image. The next two related questions that need to be answered are how RSS's political affiliate, the BJS-BJP, emerged and how closely it is aligned to the agenda of building a Hindu nation.

Bharatiya Jan Sangh and the Bharatiya Janata Party: a growing need for a political stake.

The Bharatiya Jan Sangh, and subsequently the Bharatiya Janata Party, thus emerged during the expansion of the RSS's agenda to influence every sphere of society with its ideology of a Hindu *Rashtra*. Both the constitution of RSS and its leaders claim that RSS is just a cultural organisation, with no political ambitions or, as noted above, a religious agenda. However, these claims have again and again been debunked by political writers. This section firstly describes and analyses the reasons for RSS's attempts to seek political power through its political affiliates, the Jana Sangh and subsequently the Bharatiya Janata Party. Secondly it describes the evolution of BJP as a national party and the nature and extent of its engagement with RSS's core *Hindutva* agenda.

The initial years of political reticence

In the initial two decades of its existence (in fact until the end of the 1940s), RSS painstakingly tried to keep itself out of active politics, apparently fearing that such involvement would corrupt the minds of the *swayamsewaks*, encourage personal ambitions and result in rivalry and discord within the organization. Hedgewar, although linked to political parties like the Congress and Hindu Mahasabha, was wary of any involvement that in his eyes would compromise the agenda and work of RSS. Perhaps the

single greatest political act in his life, soon after the establishment of RSS, was his participation in the 'Dandi March' in 1930³⁹, which resulted in his arrest and a year in jail. While in prison, however, Hedgewar established a good rapport with fellow Congress inmates, which subsequently helped him to expand the RSS network. Similarly, Hedgewar was not only inspired by some of the leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha (Sarvakar, Monjee) but, through his association with the Mahasabha, a mutual benefit association, was also able to expand the influence of RSS into the northern and north-western parts of the country. Hedgewar's apparent strategy was to impress the Hindu leaders with the strength and skills of RSS's trained and highly disciplined volunteers by lending them for the Mahasabha sessions and subsequently, encashing the goodwill generated, rather than joining the Mahasabha as a political entity. Basu et al (1993) observe that Hedgewar wanted RSS to remain a 'cultural' organization pursuing long term goals through "...quiet but sustained physical-cum- ideological training of cadres." Basu et al add that this 'cultural'/'political' tension has persisted throughout the history of RSS.

Golwalkar carried this concept further, aspiring to make RSS the "radiating centre" (Jaffrelot, 2005a) of all the ideals of (Hindu) society. He thought that politics could never build a patriotic nation of people; instead believing that culture "...moulds a nation on right lines" (Bhishikar, 1999). Thus Golwalkar concluded that there was no need for a conscious entry into the political sector in order to further the cause of the Hindu *Rashtra*. Instead, cultural *samskaras* (traditional norms) and a selfless cultural organization would, in his view, bring about a state of "chaste nationalism". In other words, it appears that Golwalkar aimed at influencing political power in the long run by establishing a Hindu *Rashtra*, the ideals of which would encompass all spheres of life. Thus, in the decades after its establishment until 1950, although RSS was not actively involved in politics, it cleverly used its political connections to expand its network and outreach, while cautiously engaging with political parties. It also took pains not to antagonize the British rulers and tried to keep away from the limelight.

Interestingly, the first decisive brush with the government came soon after independence, when RSS was banned because of its (past) association with Nathu Ram Godse⁴⁰, the assassin of Mahatma Gandhi. RSS was declared unlawful in 1948 and a large number of its members were arrested. In spite of persistent negotiations with the government (led by Nehru), attempts to raise the bogey of Communist insurgencies and the promise of support, the government did not lift the ban until 1949, when RSS agreed to organize itself as a duly registered body, with a written constitution, confine itself only to the cultural field and function with transparency.⁴¹ RSS did not oppose the conditions set, again perhaps because it did not want to attract undue attention and obstacles to its work; however, the demands of some RSS members for it to actively participate in politics became louder and more persistent, with the RSS leadership finally succumbing to popular demand.

In its early years, therefore, RSS emerges as an organization that was wary of attracting undue attention from the British-ruled state, perhaps out of fear of retaliation from a stronger force and obstruction to its own agenda. RSS's association with the Congress and even the Mahasabha, with whom it shared an ideological kinship, was limited primarily to expanding its own network. Even when faced with a total ban by the independent Indian government, it chose to quietly accept the ban and negotiate a revocation of the order, rather than enter into a position of open confrontation with the state. The subsequent strategy of establishing a political affiliate hence appears to be a well thought out move that paved the way for an initial association with the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS) and the eventual formation of the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Association with Bharatiya Jan Sangh: self preservation or propagation of an ideology?

While its own existence was a primary reason for associating with a political party, putting a stop to what some of the thinkers within RSS called the 'un- Bharatiya and anti- Bharatiya' policies of the government was another reason. What, however, was most significant was the articulation of a need to forward the cause of Hindu *Rashtra* not only through its own efforts but also through the state machinery. It was also emphasized by some members of the RSS that it "...must develop a political wing for the more effective and early achievements of its ideals."⁴² Several people from within and outside the organization, especially the younger *swayamsewaks* and *pracharakas*, were certain that RSS had to confront the powers that be with its own political party, whereas the more traditional elements, including Golwalkar, were reluctant to step directly into the political arena.

According to Bhishikar (1999), Golwalkar remained firm in his resolve of not entering into politics; however, at the same time he "...did not think it proper to suppress the workers' desire to participate in politics. So, while keeping the organisation ...fully aloof from politics, gave the workers the freedom to enter the political field."⁴³ RSS workers were therefore allowed to join Shyama Prasad Mukherjee⁴⁴ and help him to set up the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS) in 1951. Mukherjee himself had been trying to persuade Golwalkar for several years to support him in his political endeavours, to set up the BJS as a Hindu nationalist alternative to the Congress, but until then had failed to make any headway. With the RSS and BJS joining hands, the latter found itself equipped with a trained and disciplined organizational cadre. Soon not only did the young RSS cadres become the backbone of the Jan Sangh, but through them the RSS headquarters in Nagpur is also believed to have had close contact with and control of the political party.

Several accounts⁴⁵ reiterate the compelling and influential role played by RSS in the 25 years of its existence and how BJS became dependent on RSS on several scores, especially related to organizational development and manpower. When Mukherjee died in 1953, soon after the creation of the party, Deendayal Upadhyaya, an RSS *pracharak*, took over as secretary of the party and marginalized the non-RSS members. Upadhyaya evolved a strategy of appointing trusted RSS workers as *sangathan mantries* or 'organizing ministers' in key positions at the national and state levels in the party. The *sangathan mantries* were the channel that allowed RSS to monitor the pulse of BJS and mould it accordingly, and this is a strategy that has been continued

with the BJP, the successor of BJS. In fact, the concept of the *sangathan mantries* was subsequently introduced into the other affiliates of RSS and became, despite vehement denial by RSS to date, a subtle means of control.

Subsequently, under Balasaheb Deoras, who succeeded Golwalkar, the BJS gathered more strength and established itself as a tough competitor to the Congress, with considerable reach. In fact Deoras is credited with bringing the RSS into open politics when he realized the need for a 'national ideology' after independence. Deoras reorganized the RSS to respond to the political requirements. Thus, the hierarchical structure of the RSS was re-formatted and aligned with electoral constituency boundaries; the *shakhas* were given a bigger role in elections to the legislature as well as other bodies, including trade unions; and the area of work of RSS, the parent body, and its affiliates was divided up, with RSS managing and controlling the affiliates. In addition, attempts were made to improve the funding situation, with RSS full-time workers to be employed by educational and other institutions at no cost to the RSS and some transparency introduced into the fundraising process. Apparently, more funds were collected in BJS-ruled constituencies, indicating the advantage of linking up with a political party.

Deoras also drew other affiliates like ABVP and the BMS into the political activities of RSS and groomed them to topple 'corrupt and inefficient' governments like that in Gujarat and Bihar in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Obviously, BJS also gained from its association with RSS. According to the political historian Bipin Chandra (1998), BJS "drew its organised strength, centralised character and ideological homogeneity from the RSS." However, as Bruce Graham (2005) concludes, in describing the crisis of leadership and organization of the BJS, the party was also greatly handicapped by its image as being close to, if not dependent on, the RSS; its image as an extremist organization with intolerant views on the relationship between Hindus and other religious communities; and inexperienced leadership that worked in relative isolation and anonymity. Besides this, tensions between the RSS and non-RSS members of BJS were reported, for several reasons, including the RSS's controlling style as against the open democratic style favoured by BJS, leadership issues and the introduction of communal elements into the party agenda. Some within the BJS felt (justifiably) that the party was being used and that the RSS was "...working its way into the political arena through the Jan Sangh" (Graham, 2005).

In fact, the control of RSS over BJS was so complete that the power of parliamentary leaders of the party appeared to be over-ridden by the central organizational group (under the control of RSS). So while, largely by virtue of its association with the RSS, the BJS became an organized party, perhaps also because of this association, it could not make much progress.⁴⁶

Many political historians (for example, Curran and Gold, cited by Kanungo, 2002; Graham, 2005) believe that RSS's advocacy of a Hindu state, its rightist orientation, and its anti-Congress stand, apart from its organizational structure and the militant nature of the organisation, all point towards the fact that it had political ambitions from its inception. RSS was very much concerned with political power, but approached politics as a 'battle for the cultural heart of the nation' rather than quarrelling about 'party programmes'. It preferred to play the role of an 'institutional guru' to the nation, while keeping its own image clean. BJS was the first opportunity that RSS got to test this approach.

Subsequently, as part of its strategy, from time to time RSS also mobilized its other affiliates, like the ABVP, BMS and VHP, to lead specific movements, instead of solely depending on its political affiliate.

Merger with the Janata Party: ideological and political accommodation

The post-Nehru era (mid-1960s), as stated earlier, saw the monopoly of the Congress being challenged after it had peaked during the reign of Indira Gandhi in the mid-1970s. The RSS, like many others, began to object to Gandhi's authoritarian style of functioning and supported Jayprakash Narayan's movement of 'total revolution', without being obviously involved in political activities. Again the association was mutually beneficial because, while RSS acquired the support and sanction of a respected Gandhian leader, Narayan got the benefit of the RSS cadres. As a result, when the opposition parties gathered together to put up a united front (Lok Sangarsh Samiti - LSS) to carry forward the movement initiated by Jayaprakash Narayana against Indira Gandhi, Nanaji Deshmukh, who had earlier been a *pracharak* and was at the time the Organizing Secretary of the BJS, became the General Secretary of the LSS. The struggle intensified and ended in the declaration of an internal emergency, the arrest of several opposition leaders and also another ban on RSS (1975). There are conflicting versions of RSS's reaction to the ban: some suggest that it was cautious, did not want to take a confrontational position with Indira Gandhi and kept a low profile; but on the other hand it is supposed to have played a key role, working closely with LSS and providing support from its leaders and cadres at the cost of large scale arrests of its members.

The political activities of RSS thus became more pronounced and visible. As a result of its interactions with political parties, after the emergency, RSS became ideologically more accommodating and was quite instrumental in the formation of the Janata Party (JP).⁴⁷ The BJS, which by that time was faced with internal leadership problems, was merged with the Janata Party, which subsequently came to power in 1977 as a result of its courageous stand against authoritarianism and the excesses during the internal emergency declared by Prime Minister Gandhi between 1975 and 1977. Some of the prominent RSS members of BJS became cabinet ministers in the newly formed government led by the Janata Party. Subsequently, RSS also tasted victory in the Assembly (state level) elections later in the year, when some of its *swayamsewaks*, as members of the Janata Party, became chief ministers of states like Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.⁴⁸

However, the non-RSS members of the Janata Party, fearing that the RSS would again attempt to take control as it had in the

case of the BJS, tried to persuade RSS to merge with the youth wing of the party. Deoras rejected the move, ironically on the grounds of the need for RSS to maintain the purity of its long term cultural objective. RSS, he thought, should never become a part of the government - although he did not seem to have any qualms in associating with political fronts like the BJS and the Janata Party to influence the government. Instead, Deoras is said to have used his links with the ruling Janata Party to strengthen the RSS presence in sectors like adult education and social welfare, perhaps ensuring access to resources as well as expanding his support. Kanungo (2002) adds another dimension to this reasoning, suggesting that his strategy was also a way to prop up the flagging resource position of a fast-growing RSS and its affiliates and accommodate its full-time workers in remunerative projects. The effects of the two-pronged strategy was to expand the outreach of RSS as well as its influence in the government.

The victory of the Janata Party was, however, short-lived, as it was in turn plagued by internal conflicts and power struggles. As a result, the party lost its electoral mandate in the mid-term general elections in 1980 and when the blame game started, the issue of 'dual membership' of the RSS faction represented by the Jana Sangh within the Janata Party again raised its head. The detractors of RSS alleged that the Janata Party's association with RSS through its Jana Sangh members gave it a communalist image and wanted the latter to merge with the youth wing of the Janata Party. The RSS refused and instead opened its door to non-Hindus, while at the same time continuing with its mission of uniting the Hindu community. However, as no mutually acceptable solution could be arrived at, the national executive of the Janata Party took a decision to expel all former Jan Sangh (RSS) members from the party. Meanwhile, the RSS leadership, disillusioned with the internal fights, had also come to the conclusion that it was best for the Jan Sangh members to move out of the Janata Party and form their own political group. The expelled members thus came together and formed the Bharatiya Janata Party in April 1980.

Conclusion: Religious forces that attempt to gain political power may establish political parties, often leading to conflicts in states based on secular principles, such as India. Some of the main religious political parties in South Asia are also engaged in the provision of welfare services. Their reasons for doing so are often suspect, although evidence on their motives and strategies is scarce. As part of a larger study of the welfare wings of religious political parties, this research examined the Indian context.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which as head of a coalition has held power at the national level and by itself in several states, is not a religious political party as such. However, it has strong historical and ideological bonds with the self-proclaimed 'social organization', the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), which pursues a *Hindutva* agenda and has established a large network of affiliates, many involved in social welfare activities.

Based on existing sources and extensive interviews with key informants in Madhya Pradesh, where the BJP was in power at the time of the study, and Uttar Pradesh, where it had been ousted some years previously, this study seeks to understand why the BJP and RSS have a compelling need for each other and to what extent the BJP, as the political offspring of the RSS, is influenced by it. In addition, it examines the relationships between the BJP and Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan (VBABSS), the educational affiliate of RSS, in order to obtain a better insight into the BJP's role in furthering RSS's *Hindutva* agenda.

The study found that

- The RSS promotes the idea of a Hindu religious nation through its use of the cultural concept of *Hindutva*, a doctrine that holds that the Indian identity and nation is defined by Hindu culture, which is closely linked to the Hindu religion. It reflects the aspirations of a section of the Hindu community by responding to perceived threats to Hindu culture and seeking to sustain the supremacy of the Hindu upper castes.

- Some of the RSS's organizational offshoots (the *Sangh Parivar* network) have adopted militant and communally exclusive tactics, but many are involved in the provision of social welfare services, including the Vidya Bharati, which has developed a vast network of schools — both the RSS itself and these affiliates are faith-inspired.

The BJP and Vidya Bharati are two of several organizations through which the RSS promotes the idea of a Hindu *Rashtra* (nation).

Some implications of these findings are that

- The BJP will have to address the contradictions that arise from its relationship with the RSS and the place of the *Hindutva* agenda in its political platform, in order to maintain its political support and win office.

- The national and state ministries dealing with education must deal with the pressure to 'saffronize' the curriculum to reflect *Hindutva* ideology (including a re-writing of Indian history), in both government and Vidya Bharati's schools, many of which are registered with the central and state education boards.

The relationships between the organizations studied are fragile and, while the RSS and Vidya Bharati's determination to achieve their goals will continue to reinforce their desire to work together, the BJP may find itself having to part ways with them or to re-invent itself.

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