



Research Paper

Staying Relevant- Growth of the Sangh Parivar Since 1947

Sumedha Verma

(Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Loreto College, Kolkata)

ABSTRACT: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is nearly a hundred years old and continues to be a contentiously relevant body in the social milieu of our country. In fact, today it boasts of being the largest non-governmental organization in India. However, for an organization of such antiquity propagating a right-wing ideological stance, the question of relevance becomes crucial. This article underlines how the RSS has managed to stay relevant in Indian society and contribute to it, through its expansion by establishing the Sangh Parivar and catering to various societal needs.

KEYWORDS-Sangh Parivar, RSS, affiliates, VHP, BJP

Received 18 Feb., 2023; Revised 28 Feb., 2023; Accepted 02 Mar., 2023 © The author(s) 2023.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. INTRODUCTION

India, is the most populous democracy in South Asia. This heterogenous population with cross-cutting allegiances of identity, community and politics coupled with multiple cultural variations, makes the process of identifying unity in diversity an interesting subject. One of the largest non-governmental organisations in India, is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The organization was created two decades prior to independence in an attempt to consolidate and propagate a sense of community among the Hindus. The RSS continues to operate across the length and breadth of the country today and has expanded its ambit considerably. The Sangh Parivar is the name given to the RSS and its affiliates in total. Today the affiliates cater to a myriad of social, cultural and professional needs, acting more or less as well networked agencies of a corporate house. The RSS sits at the apex providing broad directives and cohesion to over 30 affiliates.

Formed in 1925 under the guidance and leadership of Keshav Baliram Hegdewar, the RSS describes itself as “a unique social organisation dedicated to India's resurgence and global peace”¹. What began as an organisation with limited number of members, turned into a well-structured and omnipresent organisation soon after independence. The RSS has designed its affiliates in a manner to work within the constitutional system of the country while fulfilling its obligation towards contributing to societal growth.

It is important to note that affiliates of the RSS are key players in the dissemination of the ideology of Hindutva. Their activities primarily focus on nation building, forming cultural unity and organising society on the basis of the principles of Hindu *dharma*. Broadly speaking the affiliates of the RSS can be grouped based on the target sections they address- professional groups, socio-cultural groups, groups with religious significance and political groups. The following sections of the paper shall discuss these affiliates, their primary areas of work and their relevance in the larger scheme of affairs. The classification of groups is in no way rigid and is merely an attempt to address the issue at hand with brevity. All affiliates work under the overall supervision of the RSS and follow a strict organisational setup. Each body mirrors the ideals and characteristics that Hindutva represents- primarily the value of *seva* and *sangathan*.

THE KNOWN PARTNERS

The most well know affiliates of the RSS are the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bajrang Dal and Durga Vahini, notwithstanding political representation through the former Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) and currently, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The prominence they receive is due to their position in the public domain, making them and their activities visible. The Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) and Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) both crucial to the *Sangh Parivar* and equally popular have been discussed in a later section on professional bodies. This section will briefly address these affiliates before moving on to the other lesser known but equally effective subsidiaries of the *Sangh Parivar*.

The VHP is an ecclesiastical organisation which attempts to unite different strands of thought within Hinduism. At the time of its inception, it was nothing more than a vague arrangement of ideas and members primarily aiming to construct a social basis for a “non-Congress, non-Communist political alternative”². In spite of being a non-political body, the VHP stood for everything opposed to Nehruvian secularism and represented the Hinduisation of the Indian polity seeking support of Hindus in India and abroad. The VHP was a result of extensive discussions at Swami Chinmayananda’s Bombay Ashram in August 1964, conducted on the initiative of M.S Golwalkar and the RSS leadership to unite all Hindu religious sects under a single umbrella³. As a result of these deliberations the VHP was formed and the first World Hindu Conference was held in Allahabad in 1966. Two integral affiliates of the VHP are the Bajrang Dal and the Durga Vahini. The Bajrang Dal was formed in 1984 before the start of the Ram Janaki Rath Yatra, which was under apparent threat from ‘anti-social and anti-Hindu’ elements. This organisation aims to awaken the youth and encourage their active participation in the agitations and constructive activities undertaken by the VHP⁴. The Durga Vahini was a platform for girls and women attracted to the VHP and the Bajrang Dal- it looks to inculcate in the youth “*sanskar*, security and dynamism” while being committed to the ultimate objective of *Rashtra Dharm* and *Sanskriti*. Self-reliance and vocational training is encouraged within the group and propagated among young women alongside training in self-defence⁵.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (and previously the Bharatiya Jana Sangh) have been the political fronts supported by the RSS. The working of both these parties heavily drew on and significantly promoted the ideology of *Hindutva*. The BJS (was) and BJP are political players involved in open competition for political office in the country, it is this sole objective that sets them apart from the other affiliates. The BJP ever since its inception has stated the spread of *Hindutva* to be one of its primary goals. The party draws upon the symbolism used in the ideology of *Hindutva* and furthers it through their political platform. Political compulsions require actors to further their agenda in a certain way. The RSS has often specified that they merely loan trained cadre to the BJP, given their much discussed aversion towards politics. The interpretation of *Hindutva* in the case of the BJP is one for political agenda, thus delineating it a separate area of study. In order to unravel and simplify the relationship between the *Sangh Parivar* and its political affiliates a few central questions ought to be addressed- firstly, what is the stand of the RSS towards politics? Secondly, what was the role of the RSS in the creation of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh? Thirdly, what has the relationship between the RSS and the Bharatiya Janata Party been and finally, where does the RSS stand today vis-à-vis Indian politics? Each of these questions may take on a life of its own, if not a separate research field, the following sections shall attempt to systematically place them in perspective.

It is but imperative to start with the context of the emergence of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh. The RSS had been averse to the idea of entering politics and continues to claim itself as an apolitical organisation. At the time of independence, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Ram Rajya Parishad portrayed themselves as representatives of the political cause of the Hindus. The RSS first ventured into politics by supporting the formation of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh. The origin of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh lay in the contradictions plaguing Indian society post-independence. The issue of Kashmir, communal violence, refugee crisis across the north western and eastern borders and the discrimination against Hindus in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) forced Syama Prasad Mookerji to resign from Jawaharlal Nehru’s cabinet. This act on the part of S.P Mookerji brought to the surface an internal division which had been long seeping in the Congress⁶. The nationalist alternative to the Congress, envisioned by S.P Mookerji led to the creation of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh⁷. Dr. Mookerji was impressed by the RSS, it is said that when he attended a *shakha* in Calcutta he was taken by ‘discipline and efficient non-political national organization of the Hindus in the country and its approach to the problems of culture, nationalism and partition had his full approval’⁸. He saw the RSS as an organization devoted to the promotion and development of *Bharatiya* culture and the spirit of solidarity among Hindus⁹. According to him, the deterioration in terms of societal relations, values and lack of unity could only be remedied by rebuilding and strengthening the Hindu culture, along with its civilizational strengths. The idea of the Hindu *rashtra* originally conceived by V.D. Savarkar and furthered by M.S Golwalkar found a supporter in S. P Mookerji who identified a commonality between the idea of the *rashtra* and the ideals of a modern democracy. As a result of a meeting with Golwalkar, Dr. Mookerji was assured of the support of the best *swayamsevak*s to help set up a party¹⁰. Balraj Madhok, a close associate of the RSS and Arya Samaj designed the manifesto of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh which came into existence on October 21, 1951. Even though the Jana Sangh claimed to be a centrist party, its rightward inclination was evident in its manifestos which displayed an empathetic approach towards the RSS. In fact, certain members of the RSS saw the Jana Sangh as the political channel they had long been waiting for. RSS influence on the Jana Sangh was visible the use of terminology and cultural symbolism. The message and teachings of epics such as the Mahabharata, Ramayana and Bhagavad Gita were used by Dr. Mookerji to extol the values of service and sacrifice¹¹. In fact, Tathagatha Roy mentions that the RSS suggested the name of the party be in Hindi and the flag be saffron in colour¹².

The Jana Sangh's electoral performance, was not as satisfactory as they would have expected. Standing up to face the Congress, which was continuing its run since independence was a tall order. The Jana Sangh was part of the Janata Coalition that replaced Mrs. Gandhi's regime in the first elections after Emergency. However, internal schisms saw the party fade away into obscurity. Created in 1980 the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was in every way the successor of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh. The manifestos of the Bharatiya Janata Party show unwavering commitment to the ideology of Hindutva. The ideological pillar for their plan of national reconstruction is a five-fold concept- *Shuchita* (probity in public life), *Suraksha* (security), *Swadeshi* (economic nationalism), *Samajik Samarasata* (social harmony) and Hindutva(cultural nationalism)¹³. The manifestos of the party almost always begin with elaborate references to India's rich cultural heritage in the most historically biased fashion, focusing only on Hindu rulers and historical figures. Their 1996 manifesto defined Hindutva as "cultural nationalism; a rainbow bridging the past and present while paving the way for a glorious future" guiding the transition from *swarajya* to *surajya*". Hindutva, according to the 1996 manifesto is the identity of the ancient nation of Bharatvarsha¹⁴. The BJP has aggressively promoted its cultural nationalism over the years, and this has yielded profitable results for the *SanghParivar* in terms of disseminating the ideology of Hindutva. By capitalising on the strength of the ideology, the BJP too has carved an undeniable position for itself in the politics of the country. A disciplined, organized cadre dedicated to a life of service and unflinching patriotism has been the greatest take away for the BJP and one of the reasons for its success streak off late.

The programmes and policies of the Jana Sangh look moderate in comparison to that of the BJP. In the year of its inception the party's manifesto emphasized on national unity and positive secularism in opposition to appeasement politics¹⁵. Patriotism, commitment to the nation and fostering the Swadeshi spirit informed all other aspects of the manifesto. The first manifesto was modelled on the lines of 'soft Hindutva' as propagated by the Jana Sangh. It promoted ideas of integral humanism, patriotism and unity. It was from 1991 that the aggressive propagation of the Hindutva agenda came to the fore. Resultantly, the BJP has managed to highlight and bring to prominence a number of issues that the Sangh had long been fighting for. One of the strongest expositions of Hindutva for the BJP was the Ram Janmabhoomi issue and the promise to reconstruct the Ram Mandir at the alleged birth place of Lord Rama. The BJP termed this as "symbolic righting of historic wrongs" and to work on improving the relations between "blood brothers" i.e. the Hindus and Muslims in India¹⁶. The reconstruction of the temple was seen by the BJP as a 'symbol of indication of our cultural heritage and national self-respect'¹⁷. As part of its programme for cultural promotion, the BJP listed the screening of epics such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata on national television¹⁸. Regarding their mission to propagate Hindutva, the BJP is in favour of- including cultural studies as part of the school curriculum, encouraging the study of Sanskrit, promoting Bharatiya classical music and dance and establishing Bharatiya Sanskriti Kendras in all districts¹⁹. In keeping with the idea of reforming education on cultural lines in 2004 the NDA manifesto spoke of strengthening 'The focus on Indian culture, heritage, and ethical values in syllabi'. This was to be done while checking the growing de-emphasis of Bharatiya languages in school and college education and intensifying the propagation of Sanskrit²⁰. These are just some examples of the BJP using the agenda of Hindutva on the political platform to garner political mileage, thus nurturing the symbiotic relationship within the *Sangh Parivar*.

The RSS is known to play the role of a guide and coordinator for Sangh affiliates and the annual meeting of the *Sangh Parivar* brings together the thirty plus affiliates to keep them abreast with the objectives and desired path of growth. With the BJPs success in two consecutive national elections, their position within the phalanx has been solidified to a point of exhibiting autonomy or at least pegging the BJP a step above the other affiliates. Rumours of stress between the RSS top brass and BJP supremos have often made the rounds, especially since the BJP resurfaced in 2014²¹. Of course, credit for BJPs success in the election must be attributed to the RSS cadre who systematically helped create a presence for the party from the grass-root level. The role of the RSS as a coordinator has become even more crucial now. As per reports while the RSS claims that all affiliates stand on an equal footing, it has to often assist in smoothening out disagreements that stem from the political stance of the BJP and conflicting sectoral interests of other affiliates such as the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh and the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh²². It brings to light the crucial dichotomy between electoral agenda and ideological commitment in the Indian political system. While the *Sangh Parivar* works strictly on ideological lines, the BJP has to engage in power brokerage which is fueled by populism. The silent, hard-working, low profile approach of the Sangh to make in-roads into society cannot apply to the political sphere. However, while the BJP requires the framework of the RSS to further its agenda, the latter requires the legitimate mandate of the BJP to fulfill its aims and objectives. In 2019 it was noted that members of the BJP with a Sangh background had a three times better chance of being a minister, than a member who did not hail from the Sangh. In the 2014 BJP ministry, 41 of the 66 BJP ministers had a Sangh background, making for 62 per cent of ministerial posts. The percentage rides up to 71 in 2019 where out of 53 ministers, 38 have a Sangh background²³.

Socio-Cultural Affiliates

As mentioned already, the Sangh Parivar has over 30 recognised affiliates. One of the first affiliates established by the RSS was the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, formed in 1936. Inaugurated upon the insistence of Laxmi Kelkar (1905–78) also known as ‘Mausiji’, the first *pramukh sanchalika* of the Samiti²⁴. The focus of the samiti is on “roles, duties, obligations and limitations of Hindu women with regard to their actual family and their ‘greater family’, i.e. the ‘Hindu nation’²⁵. The premise of the samiti without a doubt is a highly gendered one conforming to the ‘patriarchal premise of *matruvat paradareshu* – that all women except one’s wife are to be regarded as one’s mothers.’²⁶ Today the samiti website claims to have over 2700 daily *shakhas* and 55,000 *sevikas*. More recently the Bharatiya Stree Shakti was acknowledged as a full affiliate of the RSS. Founded in 1988 it focuses on “five key aspects or *Panchsutri*: Education & Skill Development, Mental & Physical Health, Self-respect, Financial Independence and Gender Equality”²⁷. The collective effort of the body is directed towards creating an environment of dignity and freedom for women. Closely related to the idea of women and their position in the family and society, are the objectives of the affiliate, Kutumb Prabodhan²⁸. This particular body works towards encouraging the growth of healthy family ties. These organisations clearly address the need to strengthen societal relations through the primary unit of social organisation, i.e. the family, in turn promoting *sangathan* in society. It is indeed surprising that the RSS has affiliates catering to women and acknowledging their role in society, as the RSS is perceived to be a patriarchal organisation. The nature of work carried out by the Rashtra Sevika Samiti and Bharatiya Stree Shakti cater to both modern and traditional roles of women, thus acknowledging their changing role in the overall societal framework.

An integral part of the ideology of Hindutva is image building, particularly efforts towards enhancing physical prowess. While the RSS focuses on physical exercise and traditional forms of sport in its daily *shakhas*, Kreedha Bharati was established in 1992 in an attempt to promote indigenous games in urban and rural areas²⁹. Emphasis on a healthy body in order to allow the functioning of a sharp mind is believed to be one of the strongest determinants in social cohesion according to the Sangh. Research carried out on the foundation of the RSS traces this desire for physical prowess to the early European descriptions of 19th century, claiming Indian men to be effeminate and lacking in physical built. In fact, the work of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Swami Vivekananda and V.D Savarkar paid special attention towards constructing the image of Hindus as a martial race. By the late 19th and early 20th century local *akhadas*, gymnasiums and indigenous sports were being revived across the country by nationalists.

The social outreach of the Sangh extends to marginalized sections through organisations such as the Kushth Rog Nivaran Samiti (1952), Arogya Bharati, Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram (ABVKA) (1952) and Samajik Samrasta Manch (1983). The work of the Kushth Rog Nivaran Samiti supports leprosy patients; as part of its aims the Kushth Rog Nivaran Samiti acknowledges the work carried out by Christian missionaries, who were among the first in providing relief to patients suffering from leprosy³⁰. Situating the efforts locally, the initiative is a commitment to the Gandhian ideal of abolition of untouchability. The Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram was created for the uplift of tribal people and forest dwellers. One of the main reasons behind its creation was the apparent threat of proselytization from Christian missionaries³¹. Formed in 1952, the ABVKA has directed its efforts towards the welfare of tribal communities through its network of “thousands of devoted volunteers across 447 Districts, 52323 Villages across India”. Their aim is to create “Samarth Bharat” i.e. an inclusive India in the true sense of the term. The ABVKA works relentlessly for amalgamation of the tribal community with the mainstream. Their progress is evident in the 4,460 schools they run in tribal areas with an enrolment of 1,25,415 students³². Integrating the thought of Ambedkar-Phule with the ideology of the Sangh, the Samajik Samrasta Manch works towards eliminating the dominance of *brahmanical* tendencies within society. They incorporate the needs of the less privileged sections of society while creating an inclusive developmental agenda. The third *sarsanghchalak* of the RSS, M.D. Deoras, can be credited for the promotion of organisational and social equality across the affiliates of the sangh while altering the tendency of *brahmanical* dominance within the affiliates³³. The need for social cohesion among a severely divided Hindu community stemmed from the need to establish strength in numbers to resist perceived threats. The Sangh affiliates are often seen implementing the idea of ‘stigmatising and emulating’ the other³⁴. This exercise entails criticism of an opposing group while inculcating their best practices. Therefore, the relief work and outreach carried out by Christian missionaries became an eye opener for the sangh affiliates who then worked towards creating greater unity within Hindu society.

The Bharat Vikas Parishad was established in 1963 and calls itself a “service-cum-sanskar oriented, non-political, socio-cultural voluntary organisation”³⁵. Through activities such as mass marriages, teacher appreciation cultural programmes and quizzes it attempts to inculcate a sense of national unity, integrity and patriotism. The creation of a “Swasth-Samarth-Sanskarit Bharat i.e. physically, economically and morally strong India” is their ultimate objective. Focusing on health of urban and rural citizens the *Sangh Parivar* further created Arogya Bharati which provides medical assistance and other basic services such as clean

drinking water and sanitation³⁶. In order to maintain cohesion among all affiliates catering to various aspects of social service the Rashtriya Sewa Bharati Sansthan was established in 2003. Through resource mobilisation, maintenance of documentation and carrying out relevant social research the organisation assists the other affiliates in their working³⁷. As per their official website there are 973 institutions carrying out work in collaboration with Sewa Bharati across 602 districts of the country and have organized over 35,560 projects³⁸. By providing regular assistance for the health of society in general and the needs of the less privileged the sangh reaches out to all sections of society. These affiliates are the best example of the virtue of *seva*, which the *Sangh Parivar* holds dear.

THE SANGH IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR

Affiliates of the *Sangh Parivar* are heavily invested in the education sector. From primary education to advanced research, there are institutions catering to these requirements. The *Sangh* has been moving in the direction of creating a National System of Education. Efforts in this area began with the laying of the foundation stone of Gita Mandir, Kurukshetra by M.S. Golwalkar in 1946. It was the first RSS affiliated elementary school. After independence the Saraswati Shishu Mandir was inaugurated in Gorakhpur in 1952. The school branched out to other states and management of affairs was handed over to state-level committees. The Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan a national level body was created in 1977 in Delhi to which all state-level committees were affiliated. The reports of 2012-13, show 5241 elementary and 2635 high schools affiliated to the central body with over 3 million students, thus making it the largest private school network in India³⁹.

In the sphere of research the Deendayal Research Institute (DRI), setup in 1968 furthers the philosophy of "Integral Humanism" while creating development models on health, hygiene, basic education, training for self-employment etc.⁴⁰. The central focus of these models is to achieve socio-economic development and attuning age old Indian Society to the modern scientific era. In the sector of science, Vijnanabharati represents a Swadeshi Science movement. It was launched as a national project in October 1991 and has an institutional presence in 22 states across the country⁴¹. As part of the Swadeshi Science movement the organisation is hoping to develop awareness and recognition for Siddha, Ayurveda, Meditation, Organic Agriculture, Vastuvidya, Forestry, Astronomy, Environment, Engineering etc⁴².

Significant efforts have been made in the direction of bringing together scholars from across disciplines with the intention of fostering research and constructive knowledge exchange. The Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Yojna is a platform for scholars of history and archaeology, from India and abroad while the Bharatiya Sahitya Parishad promotes Indian literary culture and heritage.

PROFESSIONAL GROUPINGS

Making its way into the professional lives of individuals, the *Sangh Parivar* has affiliates in nearly every major representative body. Some of the well-known affiliates are the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS)- the trade union wing; the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) the students wing and the Akhil Bharatiya Rashtriya Shaikshik Mahasangh (ABRSM)- the teachers wing. D.B. Thengadi was instrumental in the growth of the BMS. Conceptualised as a counter to Left trade unions, the BMS strongly rejects class struggle and remains critical of capitalist greed while rejecting both capitalism and communism. The BMS focuses their efforts in involving workers in management and establishing healthy employer-employee relations; according to them strikes ought to be used only when all efforts of conciliation fail⁴³. Ideologically, the BMS has a very distinct approach, rooted in *Bharatiya* culture, they completely reject western norms. Their most evident effort in this regard being their attempt to commemorate the contribution of the labourers on *Vishvakarma* puja instead of labour day on May 1⁴⁴.

The Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) was formed under the guidance of Balraj Madhok in 1948. The student wing was among the first subsidiaries and was created to harness the latent force of the student community, directing them towards constructive goals. Through activities such as sports meets, cultural programmes, blood donation and relief camps, the ABVP hopes to inculcate a sense of responsibility among the youth. Initially conceived to stay above partisan politics, the ABVP is a major player in student politics across the country, to quote the ABVP "We are 'above student politics' but we also accept that social activity cannot be non-political in a strict sense."⁴⁵. Their entry into politics was due to the growing influence of Jayaprakash Narayan's anti-corruption movement in the 1970s⁴⁶. With over 2.2 million members it is one of the strongest growing affiliates of the *Sangh*⁴⁷. Teachers from across the country of pre-primary to university levels have representation in the Akhil Bharatiya Rashtriya Shaikshik Mahasangh (ABRSM) which was created in 1988⁴⁸. The purpose of this body is to improve social, educational and economic status of teachers. The organisation encourages and ensures participation of teachers in policy formulation, management and strives to limit if not remove non-teacher administrative control.

Doctors and lawyers are represented through the National Medicos Organisation and Akhil Bharatiya Adhivakta Parishad (ABAP) respectively. Mobilisation of medical professionals helps the *Sangh Parivar* further its objective of *seva* to society, by collaborating with other affiliates engaged in providing medical and

relief assistance⁴⁹. The ABAP focuses its attention on bringing about judicial reforms that are in consonance with the culture of the Indian civilization, claiming that framers of the Constitution merely imitated the west while devising our own constitution⁵⁰. Farmers find representation through the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh, which was formed in 1979. Assistance is provided to farmers in the form of loans, establishment of labour organisations and improved farming method knowhow⁵¹.

Interestingly, *Sangh* affiliates also address and assist consumer-producer relations and small entrepreneurs. The Sahakar Bharati concentrates its efforts on strengthening the co-operative movement in the country⁵². Volunteers of the Sahakar Bharati work towards the betterment of *vanavasis* (tribal communities), small farmers, landless labourers, rural artisans, jobless technicians and consumers from the middle and lower income groups⁵³. The Laghu Udyog Bharati, formed in 1994, represents the interests of small entrepreneurs and carries out programmes which help entrepreneurs navigate the complex regulations of the Indian bureaucracy. The Swadeshi Jagran Manch was set up in 1991 to create awareness among the masses on important economic issues⁵⁴. Inspired by the ideals of the Swadeshi movement the organisation has laboured to educate the masses on liberalization, exploitation by MNCs, poverty, international agreements on trade and the plight of native industries and their suffering at the hands of the government.

Of the myriad interests represented by RSS affiliates, there is one group which works dedicatedly for retired service men. The Akhil Bharatiya Poorva Sainik Seva Parishad (ABPSSP) is actively involved in bringing together former service personnel, on a 'non-political platform', without distinction of rank and service⁵⁵. They attempt to channelize their ingrained discipline, collective energy, devotion to duty and dedicate it to the interest of the nation. The Akhil Bharatiya Poorva Sainik Seva Parishad was registered under the Indian Societies Act in 1999. It aims to provide assistance to the government and security forces to enable them defend the country and its unity and integrity⁵⁶. Support is also extended to all National level programmes of the Government of India e.g., 'Swach Bharat,' 'Ek Desh aur Ek Jan' and 'Adarsh Gram Yojana' linking it up with War Heroes/ Gallantry Award Winners and Martyrs.

THE SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

Some organisations, though not officially considered affiliates play an integral role in furthering the agenda of the *Sangh Parivar*, these are the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, the Rashtriya Sikh Sangat and Muslim Rashtriya Manch. Dharendra K. Jha considers the Sanatan Sanstha, the Hindu Yuva Vahini, the Sri Ram Sena and the Abhinav Bharat as fringe organisations working indirectly along the lines of Hindutva and adhering to the ideas of Savarkar⁵⁷. However, as mentioned earlier this article covers only those affiliate that are directly associated with the RSS.

Keeping in mind the strength of the Indian-Hindu community beyond the borders of India, the RSS has maximised their efforts in creating a global network for the expatriates. The Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) can be considered as the overseas counterpart of the RSS with their presence in the US and at least twelve other countries. Every HSS unit is both administratively and legally independent from each other and the RSS proper. However, they are often assigned full-time RSS *pracharaks* from India⁵⁸. The RSS desire to attain Pan-Hindu unification and representation of expatriates is what drove this programme. The first overseas *shakhas* were established in Kenya and Myanmar in 1947 by emigrant *swayamsevaks* from India, who were responsible for the spread of the RSS overseas⁵⁹.

Non-Hindu (mostly Muslim) participants were allowed into RSS *shakhas* in 1979. The Muslim Rashtriya Manch, was formed by the RSS in 2002 to work among the Muslim community⁶⁰. A large number of RSS-affiliated schools boast of a considerable number of Muslim students. The MRM's national convener, Indresh Kumar, has stated that the MRM has passed resolutions "advising Muslims to support a ban on cow slaughter, honour the Hindu demands on Ram Janmabhoomi and remove Article 370 of the Indian Constitution (which grants autonomous status to the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir)—and that none of these cultural/political issues undermined Islam as a faith"⁶¹. The MRM carries out programmes which are aimed at "convincing Muslims to abstain from eating beef, to practise yoga, accept the great epics (the Mahabharata and the Ramayana) as part of their own cultural legacy and respect Ram as a cultural icon."⁶² In spite of the RSS links to the MRM, the latter has never been included on any official list of RSS affiliates. There is no denying the fact that the senior leadership of the RSS were the catalyst for its formation, and have supported it since its commencement. K.S. Sudarshan who was the *sarsanghchalak* at that time, was present for the official launch and attended every national convention of the MRM until his death in 2012. In spite of their efforts to include the Muslims within the fold of the Hindu Rashtra, the RSS faces a dilemma with regard to the extent of their support to the MRM. Andersen and Damle identify the two-fold problem faced by the Sangh- "On the one hand, the sangh does not want to offend those of its many Hindu members who have negative views of Indian Muslims and Islam. On the other hand, it genuinely wants to bring Muslims closer to what it considers the national mainstream, both for reasons of political stability and to help the BJP garner political support among Muslims"⁶³.

The *Sangh* has extended its hand of cooperation to the Sikh community as well. The Rashtriya Sikh Sangat was formed in 1986 against the backdrop of the anti-Sikh riots and has over 500 branches across the country. The body works in Punjab, Haryana and parts of Rajasthan to consolidate the RSS ideology. It shares the concern of the Sangh parivar over “forced conversions” and proselytizing efforts of missionaries in distant areas of Punjab and Rajasthan. The organisation has been accused by other Sikh groups for colluding with the RSS to blur the lines of distinction between the Hindus and Sikhs. GS Gill, national president of the Sangat in 2017 went on record to say “We do not shy away from accepting our connection with the RSS. They support and nurture us, but also respect our gurus and our faith as a separate religion.”⁶⁴.

THE ROLE OF THE RSS: MAINTAINING COHESION IN THE PARIVAR

With over thirty affiliates one is compelled to look into their uniting cause. Undoubtedly the ideology of Hindutva has a clear role to play in this regard. The ideology itself is not clearly defined but adheres to certain basic ideas such as *seva*, *sangathan* and upholding Hindu culture and traditions. Before delving into the importance of these concepts to gauge the relevance of the affiliates, due attention must be paid to the single most important uniting factor- the RSS. Since its formation the RSS has had five *sarsanghchalaks*. In spite of going through a common training programme each of these *sarsanghchalaks* had their own vision for the growth of the *Sangh Parivar* while promoting the ultimate objective of Hindutva. During his tenure, Hedgewar kept the nature of the organization simple and constant. His successor M.S. Golwalkar who took care of the RSS for 33 years preserved the structure of the organization and handed it over virtually unchanged to Madhukar Deoras. Golwalkar for his part focused on the character building programmes within the existing *shakha* system. Credit for transforming the RSS into an activist organization goes to M. D Deoras. The intense path charted out by Deoras saw the RSS get involved in areas of education, tribal uplift, rural development and social service⁶⁵. In fact, it was Deoras who helped rid the RSS of its *brahmanical* leanings and opened up the organization to Christians and Muslims⁶⁶. Under the leadership of Deoras the BMS and ABVP were encouraged to pursue work at the grass root level which could help translate into political support. Deoras was succeeded by Rajendra Singh who was the first non-Brahmin to head the RSS. His tenure saw the establishment of mediatory mechanisms to resolve differences among the affiliates. K.S Sudarshan’s tenure as *sarsanghchhalak* saw the RSS-BJP differences come to light. He had been critical of the party leadership on multiple occasions. In fact, Sudarshan went to the extent of suggesting that veteran party leaders- Vajpayee and Advani retire and allow young leaders to take centre stage after the BJP’s defeat in 2004. Rajendra Singh and K.S Sudarshan had relatively shorter tenures as *sarsanghchalaks*- less than a decade in comparison to their predecessors and successors. The incumbent *sarsanghchhalak*, Mohan Bhagwat played a key role in assisting the BJP in the 2014 general elections. His approach reflects the traditional view of the RSS, wherein the organization and ideology are considered to be more important than any individual, thus discouraging the cult politics being practiced by the BJP. His visionary approach helped the BJP create a populist agenda by reconciling the interests of the socio cultural and economic affiliates.

The idea of *seva* is integral to the cause of Hindutva, it implies service to mankind and society. All the affiliates discussed above primarily cater to a section of society and provide undeterred, extensive service in times of peace and calamities. The RSS acts as the *pater familias* and in spite of the two bans faced by the organization in 1948 and 1975-77, it has successfully established a vast organizational network. However, it often appeals to conflicting interest groups which creates a significant strain on the unity within the *Parivar*. Since the mid 1940s the RSS has been organizing annual meetings with its affiliates to ensure commitment to a broad code of conduct⁶⁷. Andersen and Damle argue that

*“the bonds of community and family advocated by the RSS ‘have a salience to those who feel rootless’, and this is especially true in the case of ‘developing countries where new economic and administrative systems have rapidly undermined institutions and moral certitudes which traditionally defined a person’s social function and relationship to authority’”*⁶⁸.

In 1939 the RSS had 40,000 members and five years later the strength grew to 76,000⁶⁹. Today the RSS is the largest non-government association in the country, with an estimated 1.5–2 million regular participants in nearly 57,000 local *shakhas*, 14,000 weekly *shakhas* and 7000 monthly *shakhas*, taking place across 36,293 different locations nationwide as of 2016⁷⁰. In addition, there are some 6 million alumni and affiliate volunteers. The number of daily *shakhas* have grown at an unprecedented rate in 2015 and 2016, expanding from 51,332 daily *shakhas* in March 2015 to almost 57,000 a year later⁷¹. The RSS in addition has about 6000 full-time workers (*pracharaks*), about one half of whom form the bureaucratic framework of the organization, while the other half are on loan to affiliated organizations⁷². The number of service programmes being led by the RSS and its affiliates was 5000 in 1989 and the number grew to 1,40,000 in 2012 and 1,65,000 in 2015⁷³.

In an organization of this magnitude maintaining cohesion is a mammoth task. With each affiliate pursuing specific aims and objectives, remaining integrated with parent body while maintaining their individual relevance is extremely difficult. Andersen and Damle argue that the organizational cohesion of the *Sangh Parivar* exists due to two factors. First is, “the *sangathan mantri* (organizational secretary) system practised by all affiliates and the autonomy granted them by their parent body”⁷⁴. Second, the RSS also organizes formal and informal intra-*parivar* discussions of common issues, often focusing on how government policy will affect them. Decision-making within the various affiliated organizations proceeds only by consensus⁷⁵. However, the association of affiliates with the parent body, i.e. the RSS is not always evident. Jaffrelot argues that many of the affiliates do not openly proclaim their links to the RSS to avoid dissuading prospective members⁷⁶. This particular approach was used by the political parties till some time ago.

II. CONCLUSION

The level of cohesiveness displayed by the *Sangh Parivar* is commendable as is the volume of membership to its various affiliates. The numerical expansion of the *Sangh Parivar* is the most evident development in the period post-independence, particularly from the late 60s and early 70s. Along-side the numerical growth there has also been a significant increase in dependence of the affiliates on each other. While the RSS does provide support to all bodies as discussed earlier, the affiliates assist each other in the furthering of their ultimate agenda- spreading Hindutva. The desire for *sangathan*, with an emphasis on character building is evident. What is most striking, is the effort aimed at integrating the tribal and socially backward communities. It represents the desire to unite Hindu society while dismissing age old discriminatory practices. However, the quest of homogenization of society through the work of the affiliates faces a two-fold challenge. Firstly, the rigid ideals that formed the very inspiration and spirit of this ideology cannot be ignored. These tendencies can become a cause of friction within the *Sangh Parivar*. Secondly, a large section of society is more favourable of a secular climate. Nonetheless the growth of the *Sangh Parivar* in terms of its affiliates goes to show their desire to remain relevant in an ever changing society. The fact remains that the *Sangh* affiliates cover every major aspect of societal organization and have significantly worked towards strengthening the weakest sections in order to create a greater sense of unity.

¹“Vision and Mission” Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh accessed June 23, 2022

<https://www.rss.org/Encyc/2012/10/22/rss-vision-and-mission.html>

²Katju, Manjari. *Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Indian Politics*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003 pg 2

³Pg. 4 ibid

⁴<https://vhp.org/>

⁵Katju, Manjari. *Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Indian Politics*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003 pg 5

⁶*Bharatiya Jana Sangh Party Documents 1951-1972 Volume I*. New Delhi: Bharatiya Jana Sangh, 1973

⁷Roy, Tathagata. *Syama Prasad Mookerjee: Life and Times*. Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2018. Pg. 288

⁸ Pg. 298, ibid

⁹Pg. 300, ibid

¹⁰Pg. 299, ibid

¹¹Pg. 301, ibid

¹² Pg. 301, ibid

¹³BJP Manifesto 1996, 1998

¹⁴BJP Manifesto 1996

¹⁵BJP Manifesto 1996, 1998

¹⁶BJP Manifesto 1991

¹⁷ibid

¹⁸ibid

¹⁹BJP Manifesto 1996

²⁰BJP Manifesto 2004

²¹Anand, Arun. “How and why the relationship between the RSS and BJP has worked so well”. *First Post*, May 28, 2022.

²² Mukhopadhyay, Nilanjan. “RSS Meeting: Do Modi and Shah still ‘rely’ on Sangh Parivar?”. *The Quint*, September 10, 2019.

²³ Arnimesh, Shanker and Pandey, Neelam. “RSS in Modi govt in numbers- 3 of 4 ministers are rooted in the Sangh”. *The Print*, January 27, 2020.

²⁴Bhatt, Chetan. *Hindu Nationalism- Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths*. Oxford: Berg, 2001 pg 136

- ²⁵“About Rashtra Sevika Samiti” Rashtra Sevika Samiti accessed May 25, 2022 <https://sevikasamiti.org/About-RSS>
- ²⁶Bhatt, Chetan. *Hindu Nationalism- Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths*. Oxford: Berg, 2001 pg 138
- ²⁷“Reach” Bharatiya Stree Shakti accessed May 28, 2022 <https://www.bharatiyastreeshakti.org/bss/>
- ²⁸Katiyar, Prerna. “RSS seeks to revive concept of family time with all-new Kutumb Prabodhan project” *Economic Times*, June 10, 2017.
- ²⁹“About Us” Kreedha Bharati accessed June 2, 2022 <https://kreedabharati.org/>
- ³⁰“About Us” Kushtarog Nivaran Samiti accessed May 26, 2022 <http://kushtarognivaranasamiti.org/about.html>
- ³¹“Background” Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram accessed May 28, 2022 <https://vanvasi.org/about-us/>
- ³²Damle, Shridhar. D and Walter. K Andersen. *The RSS a View to the Inside*. Gurgaon: Penguin Viking, 2018 pg 35
- ³³ibid
- ³⁴Jaffrelot, Christophe. *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics 1925 to the 1990s*. London: Hurst & Company, 1996
- ³⁵“Working for a Mission”, Bharat Vikas Parishad accessed May 29, 2022 <http://bvpindia.com/about-us-2/about-us/>
- ³⁶“About Us” Arogya Bharati, accessed May 30, 2022 <https://arogyabharti.org/>
- ³⁷“Our Approach” Rashtriya Sewa Bharati accessed May 29, 2022 <https://www.rashtriyasewabharati.org/about-rashtriya-sewa-bharati>
- ³⁸ibid
- ³⁹Damle, Shridhar. D and Walter. K Andersen. *The RSS a View to the Inside*. Gurgaon: Penguin Viking, 2018 pg 34
- ⁴⁰“Deen Dayal Research Institute” accessed May 28, 2022 <http://chitrakoot.org/driindia/home.html>
- ⁴¹ibid
- ⁴²ibid
- ⁴³<https://bms.org.in/bms-at-a-glance/>
- ⁴⁴Basu, T., et al. *Khaki Shorts Saffron Flags*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993. Pg. 12
- ⁴⁵“History” Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad accessed June 2, 2022 <https://www.abvp.org/history-2>
- ⁴⁶Damle, Shridhar. D and Walter. K Andersen. *The RSS a View to the Inside*. Gurgaon: Penguin Viking, 2018 pg 32
- ⁴⁷Pg. 34, ibid
- ⁴⁸“An Introduction” Akhil Bharatiya Rashtriya Shaikshik Mahasangh accessed June 9, 2022 https://abrsm.in/pdf/ABRSM_Ek_Parichay_English.pdf
- ⁴⁹“Our Story” National Medicos Organisation accessed June 3, 2022 <http://www.nationalmedicosorganisation.org/nmo-intro/>
- ⁵⁰“About Us” Akhil Bharatiya Adhivakta Parishad accessed June 4, 2022 <http://www.adhivaktaparishad.org/about.php>
- ⁵¹“History” Bharatiya Kisan Sangh accessed June 4, 2022 <https://en.bharatiyakisansangh.org/static/history.aspx>
- ⁵²“About Sahakar Bharati” Sahakar Bharati accessed June 15, 2022 <https://sahakarbharati.org/about-sahakar-bharati/>
- ⁵³ibid
- ⁵⁴“Movement” Swadeshi Jagran Manch accessed June 2, 2022 <https://www.swadeshionline.in/page/movement>
- ⁵⁵“Aims and Objectives” Akhil Bharatiya Poorva Sainik Seva Parishad accessed June 17, 2022 <http://abpssp.in/>
- ⁵⁶ibid
- ⁵⁷Jha, Dharendra. K. *Shadow Armies: Fringe Organizations and Foot Soldiers of Hindutva*. New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2017
- ⁵⁸Damle, Shridhar. D and Walter. K Andersen. *The RSS a View to the Inside*. Gurgaon: Penguin Viking, 2018 pg 43
- ⁵⁹Pg. 46, ibid
- ⁶⁰Pg. 82, ibid
- ⁶¹Pg. 83, ibid
- ⁶²Pg. 109, ibid
- ⁶³Pg. 93, ibid
- ⁶⁴Ramachandran, Smriti K. “RSS respects Sikhism, not trying to merge it with Hinduism: Rashtriya Sikh Sangat chief” *Hindustan Times*, October 25, 2017.
- ⁶⁵Damle, Shridhar. D and Walter. K Andersen. *The RSS a View to the Inside*. Gurgaon: Penguin Viking, 2018 pg xiv
- ⁶⁶Pg. xiv, ibid

⁶⁷Pg. 235, ibid

⁶⁸Pg. xvi, ibid

⁶⁹Jaffrelot, Christophe. *Hindu Nationalism A Reader*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007 pg 3

⁷⁰Damle, Shridhar. D and Walter. K Andersen. *The RSS a View to the Inside*. Gurgaon: Penguin Viking, 2018 pg

xi

⁷¹ibid

⁷²ibid

⁷³ibid

⁷⁴Pg. 23, ibid

⁷⁵Pg. 24, ibid

⁷⁶Jaffrelot, Christophe. *Hindu Nationalism A Reader*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007 pg 13