



An Introduction to Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)



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Founding and Evolution

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is a unique socio-cultural movement in India. It was founded in 1925 by Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, a physician and cultural nationalist, in the city of Nagpur (central India) on Hindu festival of Vijayadashami (Dussehra).¹

At the time, India was under British colonial occupation and Hedgewar had been active in the freedom movement. He concluded that beyond ousting British colonial rulers, India's deeper challenge was disunity and demoralisation of its Hindu society.²

Hedgewar believed that strength comes only through organization and that Hindu society needed to unite and rebuild its national character and identity to achieve independence and resurge to eminence. He envisioned RSS as a non-political, grassroots voluntary movement to organise youth and instill in them discipline, courage and selfless patriotism.

Starting with a handful of young men in Nagpur, RSS grew steadily. Hedgewar introduced the concept of daily shakha (branch), gatherings in open places where swayamsevaks (selfless self-motivated volunteers) would engage in physical exercises, drills, do prayers, and sing patriotic songs. Early on, there was no formal name or written constitution. In fact, RSS to this day has no written constitution in order to remain adaptable and mission-focused.

¹ Sunil Ambekar, *The RSS: Roadmaps for the 21st Century* (Rupa Publications 2019)

² Ratan Sharda, *RSS 360: Demystifying Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (Bloomsbury India 2018).



In 1926, the organization got its name, “Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh” after discussion among volunteers and Dr. Hedgewar was unanimously named as first Sarsanghchalak (literally “Chief,” the title for head of RSS). Hedgewar, however, shunned personal glory – he saw himself simply as a “swayamsevak among swayamsevak” (volunteer among volunteers) and insisted that Bhagwa Dhvaj (saffron flag) be revered as supreme icon or Guru of the organization rather than any individual leader.

This practice, established to emphasise that ideals are above personalities, continues in RSS activities where saffron flag is saluted as embodiment of India’s history and highest values. Alongside this, Hedgewar instituted the tradition of self-reliance through small donations: volunteers contribute “Guru Dakshina” (offerings to the Guru or master) to fund RSS activities, avoiding dependence on government or external patron and preserving RSS’s autonomy.³

After Hedgewar’s death in 1940, M.S. Golwalkar (“Guruji”) became second Sarsanghchalak. Golwalkar further elaborated the RSS philosophy and expanded its reach across Bharat over his 33-year tenure. It was under his leadership, RSS grew into a prominent nationwide movement.

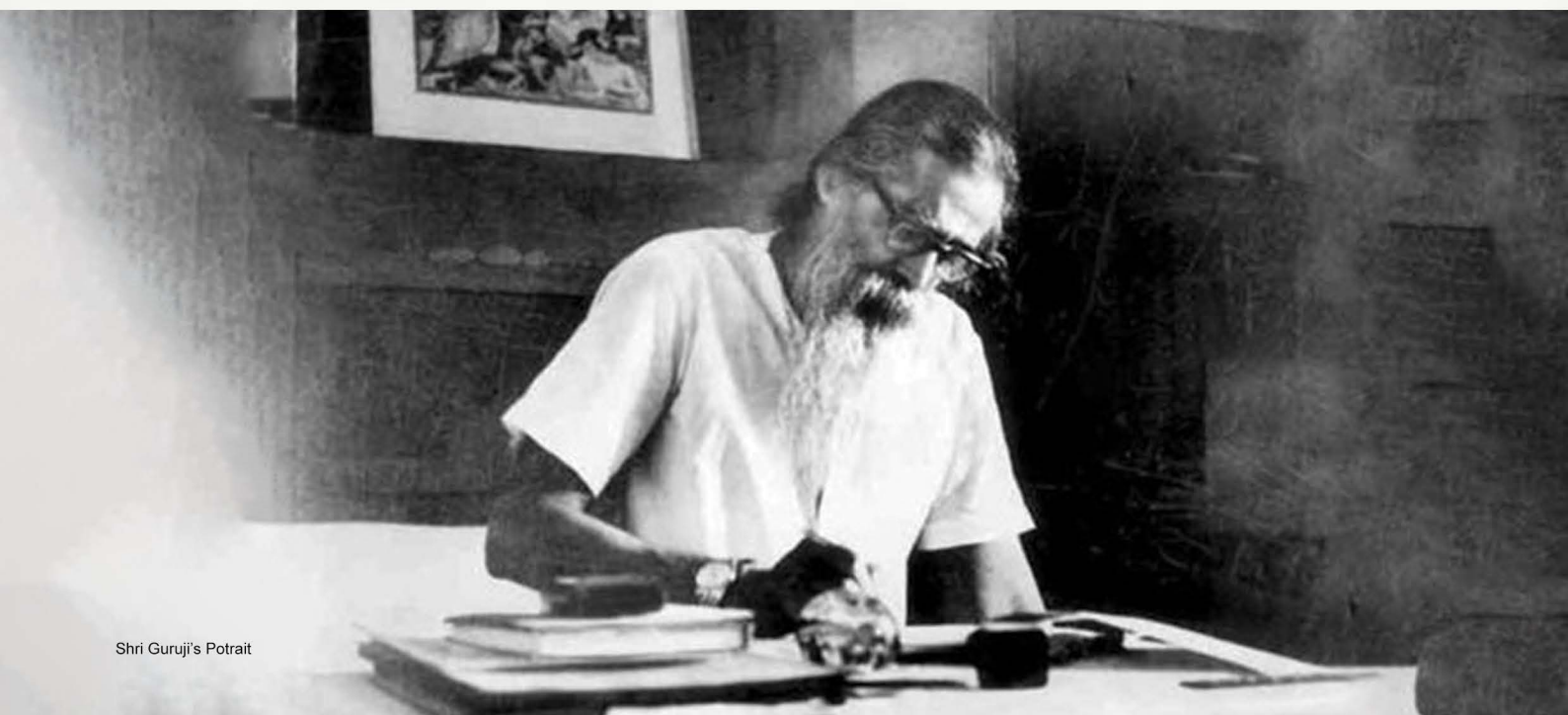
In the decades that followed, it played roles in social events such as opposing the internal emergency of 1975–77 (when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended democratic rights, RSS volunteers participated in the pro-democracy protests and many were imprisoned) and later in the mass campaigns like the Ram Janmabhoomi movement of the late 1980s.

By consistently focusing on its core mission of character-building and social unity, RSS outlasted many challenges. It has also forged organisational continuity – remarkably, in its 100 years of existence, RSS has never undergone a split or leadership schism, a fact observers attribute to its strong sense of purpose and consensual succession of its Sarsanghchalaks.

Each of the six men who served as Sarsanghchalak (from Dr. Hedgewar in 1925 up to current chief, Dr. Mohan Bhagwat has upheld the same core vision while adapting the strategy to the times, enabling RSS to evolve from a small local gathering into a pan-Indian movement today.⁴

As of 21st century, RSS is often described as the world’s largest voluntary organization. It has spread to every state of India and its values through RSS inspired organisations. RSS conducts over 83000 daily shakhas across India, attended by hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life. Beyond these daily meetings, RSS and its affiliates organise camps, service projects and training programmes that have drawn millions of participants over the decades. Indeed, no other civic movement in India’s history or for matter the world has attracted such vast numbers of dedicated selfless volunteers, several thousands have made social service their full-time life’s calling through the RSS (these full-timers are known as pracharaks).

A Pracharak is a dedicated, full-time volunteer for RSS. They are instrumental in spreading RSS ideology and carrying out its grassroots work. The position is one of great respect within the organization, entailing a life of self-discipline and renunciation.⁵



Shri Guruji's Potrait

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⁴ Ratan Sharda, RSS: Evolution from an Organization to a Movement (Rupa Publications 2020).

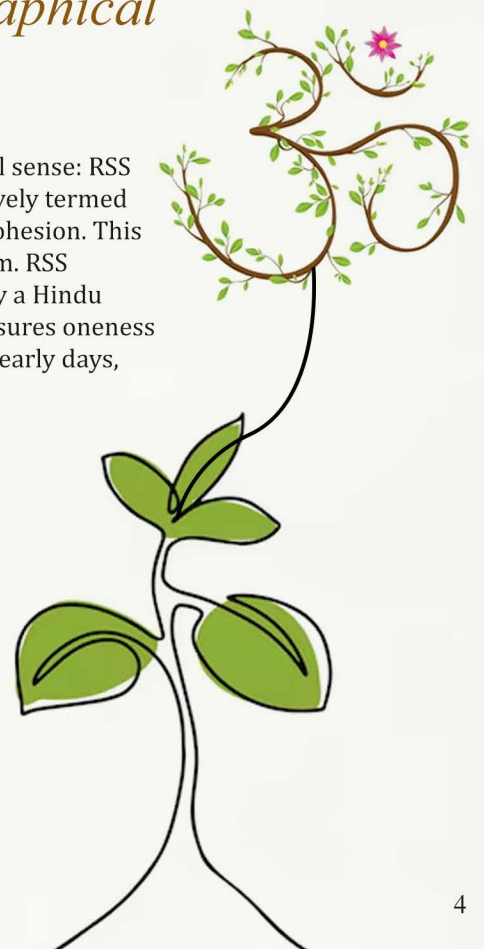
⁵ Arun Anand, Know About RSS (Prabhat Prakashan 2019).

Philosophy and Ideological Foundations

RSS was founded on a simple yet profound idea: that national resurgence of India (Bharat) required revitalising the society's core cultural values and oneness.

Dr. Hedgewar and his successors viewed Hindu civilisation as enduring fabric of the nation. In their words, “the Hindu culture is life-breath of Hindusthan” without which India would just be a mere geographical entity, not a nation with soul.⁶

Here the term “Hindu” is understood in a cultural and civilisational sense: RSS sees India's ancient heritage, philosophies and way of life (collectively termed Hindutva, meaning “Hindu-ness”) as national identity and social cohesion. This does not denote a theocratic agenda but rather cultural nationalism. RSS sanghchalaks have repeatedly stated that “Hindu Rashtra” (literally a Hindu Nation) refers to a nation rooted in ethos of the shared culture; ensures oneness in diversity and equal respect for all communities. In fact, from its early days, RSS emphasised that; it stands against divisiveness.





The organization's prayer has the line "Tan Samaj, Man Samaj" (body and mind dedicated to society) indicating that service to society is service to the divine and it calls for welfare of the entire world. The core philosophy of RSS can be summarised as cultural unity, selfless service and universal goodwill.

A key philosophical tenet of RSS is the idea of strength through shared Samskruti (culture); only a strong, united society can safeguard its freedom and dignity. It is the duty of every Hindu to do his best to consolidate the Hindu society, one early RSS resolution declared, with Sangh acting as the instrument to carry out this task.⁷ This focus on unity also translates into social inclusivity. The RSS considers all Indians as part of one extended family. RSS often invokes the ancient Sanskrit ideal of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam"; "the whole world is one family."

In practice, RSS has, over the years undertaken many initiatives to erode caste barriers and promote social harmony. For example, RSS shakhas have always been open to people of all castes and background, inter-dining and oneness across social strata is common in its gatherings. Spiritual humanism advocated by the RSS holds that there is a divine spark in every individual; thus service (seva) to the poor or afflicted is considered a form of worship.

Indeed, humanitarian relief and community service have become a prominent aspect of RSS work. Since its inception, RSS and its volunteers have been mobilised for relief during natural disasters and national crises; from helping refugees during Partition of India in 1947, to earthquake and flood relief in later years. This philosophy of seva (selfless service) combined with patriotism helped RSS evolve as an organization devoted to the nation's uplift rather than centered in self-interest. Even some prominent critics of RSS have acknowledged personal integrity and dedication of its rank-and-file.

RSS inherently distrusts personality cults or authoritarianism in leadership. The concept of leadership in RSS is that the ultimate guru is the ideal (symbolised by saffron flag), not any living person. No leader is considered infallible or beyond the organisational principles. Early on, Dr. Hedgewar cautioned members never to treat him or any individual as a supreme leader.⁸

RSS ideology hopes for a futuristic society where no dictatorial power is needed at all; where social institutions run harmoniously guided by Dharma (righteous moral order). In training its volunteers, RSS thus puts great stress on humility, discipline, respect for elders and democratic teamwork.

The daily routine of shakhas where volunteers collectively perform drills and take turns leading activities is meant to ingrain an ethos of cooperative action without egotism. By prioritising "nation before self" and emphasizing that the mission is bigger than any one individual, RSS philosophy seeks to create character-rich citizens who can serve the nation in various capacities.



⁷ Rajendra Singh (Rajju Bhaiya, 4th Sarsanghchalak), The RSS: Perspective and Vision
⁸ n1

Vision and Mission for India's Future

From the beginning, RSS vision has been all-round national rejuvenation of India based on its civilisational values. Dr. Hedgewar often spoke of an independent India rediscovering its past glory. He famously remarked,

Even if the British leave, unless Hindus are organised as a powerful nation, where is the guarantee we shall be able to protect our freedom?⁹

This encapsulates RSS long-term mission: not just political freedom, but building a society that is self-confident, united and capable of resisting external threats and internal social evils.

After independence in 1947, RSS mission evolved into what it calls “Panch Parivaratran” total transformation or renaissance of society. The oath taken by swayamsevak was accordingly updated from striving for “freedom of the nation” to striving for the “comprehensive development of nation (Hindu Rashtra).”¹⁰ The term “Hindu Rashtra” in RSS usage does not mean a theocratic or nation state, but an all inclusive nation enlightened by the age-old “Sanatana Dharma” (governance guided by eternal values) of India’s heritage.

In practical terms, RSS vision for India has been of a country that is strong and self-reliant, just and inclusive, a nation that can be a moral leader on the world stage. RSS leaders often invoke the aspiration of India becoming a “Vishwaguru” (world teacher or guide), contributing yoga, spirituality and a harmonious worldview for global welfare.

Contemporary RSS thinkers articulate a vision for development that merges modern progress with traditional values. For instance, current Sarsanghchalak Mohan Bhagwat has spoken about creating a society where science and technology advance hand in hand with spiritual wisdom and ethical conduct. RSS thinkers promote ideals such as Integral Humanism (a philosophy originally propounded by Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya) which envisions a model of development balancing material and spiritual well-being.¹¹ In social terms, RSS’s vision includes eradication of social ills like caste discrimination, uplift of the underprivileged, and acknowledging women power, (Naari Shakti) all within a framework of cultural continuity rather than imported ideologies.

A striking articulation can be noted in the book entitled “The RSS: Roadmaps for the 21st Century” by its current all India in-charge of media. He imagines that by 2047 (when India will celebrate 100 years of independence), RSS would have so deeply infused its values into society that there may be no need for RSS as a separate entity, because its mission would be fulfilled by society at large.

He writes that “Sangh would become indistinguishable from Indian society,” like sugar dissolved in milk, sweetening the whole without remaining separately visible.¹² This idea often phrased in RSS as “Sangh samaaj banega” (the Sangh shall transform into society) reflects an ultimate goal where the organisation’s ideals of unity, discipline and selfless service are broadly adopted by people, obviating the need for a distinct cadre.

In near term, however, RSS leaders see their role as cultural nation-builders: guiding societal elevation, fostering cultural nationalism especially in youth and responding to national needs. RSS vision consistently emphasises working beyond realm of government with communities and individuals to effect change in character and consciousness.

In a way, RSS is a guiding, providing and protective force in society, a phrase it often uses to describe itself; guiding moral values providing service and relief, and protecting cultural integrity.



⁹ n5

¹⁰ n1

¹¹ Integral Humanism: An Analysis Of Some Basic Elements (2016) Deendayal Upadhyay

¹² n1

Organisation and its Working

RSS is unique in its organisation structure, highly disciplined, yet informal and unconventional. There is no official membership or fee. One becomes a member (swayamsevak) simply by attending local shakha and participating regularly.

There is also no age bar or qualification; boys typically join in childhood or youth, men of all ages (and in parallel, women can join the separate but allied Rashtra Sevika Samiti) can be part of the movement.

The basic unit is the Shakha which can be as small as a dozen volunteers who meet daily (or weekly in some cases) in a neighbourhood park or any open space. The shakha usually lasts about an hour and includes physical exercises (like yoga, games etc.), moral anecdotes, discussions and singing of an RSS prayer that salutes Bharat Mata (Mother India). This routine has been the bedrock of RSS training, it instills physical fitness, friendship and a sense of discipline and equality.



From thousands of such shakhas, RSS cadre emerges. These local units are grouped for coordination into district, regional and provincial levels (in Hindi: Zilla, Prant, etc.), up to all-India level. The organization as a whole is headed by Sarsanghchalak (Chief). The Sarsanghchalak is not elected by a contest; traditionally, he is chosen by consensus or designated by his predecessor and serves for life (though one in recent times chose to retire due to age and health). Despite this singular leadership at the top, RSS working style is consultative. There is an apex council called Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha (ABPS) or general council that has representatives from all states and major allied organisations that meet annually to discuss and decide broad policies.

On a day-to-day basis, much of the operational leadership lies with Sarkaryavah (General Secretary) and a team of Pracharaks (full-time functionaries) for various zones and projects. Notably, even the Sarsanghchalak, though supremely respected, is expected to live a simple life like any other pracharak, the RSS norms discourage any cult around him in line with its ethos.

One hallmark of RSS organisational culture is spirit of selflessness and volunteerism at every level. All RSS functionaries, from local shakha volunteers up to Sarsanghchalak, are unpaid. Many give their full time to RSS's work, renouncing professional careers and often remaining bachelors to be more mobile. They are the Pracharaks. Highly respected, they are supported by the wider volunteer groupings when it comes to basic needs, they do not draw salaries or fee. This voluntary character has won admiration from many, as it has produced honest and austere leaders.

RSS internal decision-making emphasises consensus; a famous instance often cited is that major resolutions sometimes are deliberated until unanimity is reached rather than pushed through by majority vote. The absence of internal power struggles has been credited to RSS principle that positions are responsibilities, not privileges.¹³ Indeed, in RSS lexicon, an official post is referred to as zimmedari (responsibility) highlighting duty over authority. This approach has helped keep the organization cohesive over generations.

Another striking aspect of RSS structure is its network of inspired organisations, often called the “Sangh Parivar” (Sangh family). While RSS confines its scope to running shakhas and enlisting volunteers with capacities and capabilities, those volunteers are encouraged to work in different sectors of national life. Over time, dedicated swayamsevaks have founded a plethora of organisations aligned with RSS ideals: e.g., Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) in student affairs, Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) in labour and trade unions, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in the sphere of religious and cultural activities, Seva Bharati for charitable service projects, Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram for tribal welfare, Vidya Bharati running schools, among many others.

Some RSS members in 1951 helped form the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (and later the Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP) to offer a political platform inspired by its philosophy though RSS itself pointedly stays out of party politics as an organization. Through these myriad like-minded bodies, RSS volunteers hold key presence in social, cultural, educational, developmental, labour and even political fields across India.¹⁴

This expansive ecosystem allows specialised work while the RSS core focuses on its primary task of character-building. The parivar organizations operate autonomously but maintain fraternal relations with the RSS, a coordination forum called the Samanvay (coordination) committee ensures that Parivar organisations communicate and uphold common values. RSS is the ideological and moral guide while its inspired organisations like the ABVP, ABVKA etc., implement those ideas in their respective domains.

Throughout its organisational evolution, RSS has adapted to changing times. In recent years, it has evolved some practices; for instance, the earlier khaki shorts as uniform were replaced by trousers in 2016 and it has begun using digital tools for internal communication and outreach. Yet, the essence of its organisational model remains daily shakha and personal bond between swayamsevaks as brothers (and sisters) for a common cause.

RSS often likens its growth to a banyan tree: from a tiny shoot it has grown with many branches; some branches grow roots of their own, but all are connected by a shared trunk of core values. As the RSS approaches its centenary beginning October 2025, it continues to stress being a movement; one that hopes to carry forward an age-old civilisational mission of cultural oneness and service.



¹³ Arun Anand, *The RSS: A View to the Inside* (Prabhat Prakashan 2018)

¹⁴ RSS Official Website (www.rss.org)

RSS is a 100-year-old movement that has played a significant role in Bharat's modern history and society.

It began as a humble effort by Dr. Hedgewar to unify and uplift a colonised society and has since blossomed into a massive cadre-based movement with a distinct philosophy of cultural nationalism (Rashtriyatva) combined with strong ethic of selfless service.

Its history reflects dedication, resilience through challenges and steady expansion of influence via its organisational network. For an international observer, RSS might appear enigmatic; at its heart it can be understood a movement driven by vision for national renaissance grounded in the idea that a nation's true strength lies in its cultural soul and character of its people.

RSS affirmative creed of service to the nation in the spirit of unity continues to inspire millions of its volunteers. As India navigates 21st century, RSS is a powerful force, invoking the past to inspire future, steadfast in the belief that an awakened and organised society, motivated by its own brand of cultural nationalism and timeless values, is the key to Bharat's destiny.



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- ⁹ n5
- ¹⁰ n1
- ¹¹ Integral Humanism: An Analysis Of Some Basic Elements (2016) Deendayal Upadhyay
- ¹² n1
- ¹³ Arun Anand, The RSS: A View to the Inside (Prabhat Prakashan 2018)
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