India's New Rulers
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MOVEMENTS

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What does India's future hold as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh "family" finally gets its chance to rule the world's largest democracy?

India's ruling party for the last year, the BJP, is the most prominent member of the Sangh Pariwar, a vast network of organizations ideologically affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Collectively these groups encompass over four million members and include not only the ruling party, but India's largest labor union, largest student union, largest private school system (with two million students) and major Hindu organizations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Hindu Students Council and Vivekananda Kendra, all of which have international branches.

The present prime minister of India, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, is a lifetime member of the RSS, one of the elite pracharaks who never marry but devote themselves full-time to the organization with the most minimal of monetary recompense. He was singled out back in the 1950s as one with the "right stuff" to perhaps eventually run the country, and encouraged in his pursuit of various political offices over the years. The BJP election victory and his ascension as prime minister represent the culmination of decades of effort by the RSS to guide India into an overtly Hindu national identity. The September

elections being held in India as we go to press will determine whether India is prepared to give the BJP and the Sangh Pariwar a further mandate to shape the nation's future.

Sangh Pariwar groups fall into traditional categories of social organizations. They are educationalists, labor organizers, youth groups, farmer's grievance committees, intellectual societies, fellowships of local elite, Hindu activitists and patriots. The one that isn't easily categorized is the RSS itself. It is part Boy Scouts, part Peace Corps, part citizen militia, part sports club and part self-improvement society. RSS members have responded faster and more effectively than the government itself in times of disasters such as earthquakes, air crashes and cyclones. They've aided the Indian army during conflicts in Kashmir and Bangladesh at the cost of lives. They've dug tube wells, fought the 1994 outbreak of plague in Surat, and effectively distributed food during famine. They've even disciplined queue jumpers at local temples. While decidedly Hindus, it is not a religious organization in the sense of a sect, denomination or church, for there is no RSS clergy, creed, temple or scripture. Their members belong to all Hindu denominations, sharing a devotion to India's complex spiritual heritages.

The RSS was founded in 1925 by K.B. Hedgewar. He drew inspiration from Swami Dayananda Saraswati, founder of the Arya Samaj and Swami Vivekananda, founder of the Ramakrishna Mission (where Hedgewar briefly experienced monastic life). Hedgewar was active in India's freedom movement. He was jailed one year for a "seditious speech." The judge commented during the trial that Hedgewar's defiant defense in court was "even more seditious" than the speech

for which he was arrested. The RSS was at the time of India's independence already one of the largest organizations in the country, and today with some four million members among its "family," it is decidedly the largest.

RSS stands for Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, translated into English as "National Volunteer Corps." It began in Hedgewar's birthplace, Nagpur, Maharashtra, which remains its headquarters. He believed that the problem of India lay in its people, and he sought to gain freedom from the ruling British and self-respect for the individual. To get both he proposed a fundamental overhaul of personal character and devised a system of hour-long daily meetings, called shakas, to effect it. A combination of prayer, exercise, military-style training and ideological study, the shaka remains to this day the core of the RSS. There are now, according to a report in India Abroad, 40,000 shakas with 2.5 million members in India and some, in modified form, in Europe, Africa and the Americas. Gatherings are all-male (there is a separate women's branch, the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, begun in 1936), and number 50 to 100 members each. There are four sections according to age: six to ten years old, ten to 14, 14 to 28 and 28 or older. Attendance is mandatory and a missing swayamsevak [a member, literally, "volunteer"] will receive a kindly visit from leaders the same day. Daily shakas are supplemented with yearly training camps [see pages 22?23].

Over the decades, the RSS has developed a disciplined and capable core group. All are expected to devote as much of their time as possible to RSS projects. The very dedicated elect to become pracharaks, like Prime Minister Vajpayee, who remain unmarried in order to devote themselves full-time to

RSS work. They receive no salary, live at RSS centers and have their expenses covered as needed. Pracharaks, of which there are many thousands, serve for several years, or for a lifetime.

Individual RSS members can found independent organizations, which then are part of the Sangh Pariwar. If they need assistance, some of the pracharaks may be assigned to help, bringing full-time, highly skilled executive assistance to the project. They have a penchant for long Hindi names, such as Bharatiya Prati Raksha Mazdoor Sangh (a defense sector labor union). As English equivalents are rarely offered, this creates an opacity to the Sangh Pariwar for non-Hindi speakers who can't discern what any particular organization does just from the name.

As these offshoot organizations grow, each will enlist its own members who are not part of the RSS. But always the RSS cadre within it remain highly regarded and influential. The organization's programs will be discussed from time to time with senior RSS leaders, and differences of opinion settled. In this manner a uniformity of purpose is maintained throughout the Sangh Pariwar.

An ideological movement: The RSS fits into the international trend of the last two centuries termed "nationalism." That is, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, "the state of mind in which the individual feels that everyone owes his supreme secular loyalty to the nation-state." It is contrasted to previous placement of primary loyalty to a village, family, occupational tradition or religion. Even up to recent times in India, and earlier in Europe, it was unusual for a person to ever travel

more than 50 miles from his home village in his entire lifetime. Communication was slow, television nonexistent--what to say of the Internet! The individual had little sense of belonging to a nation perhaps thousands of miles in extent.

The American and French revolutions were the first nationalist movements, and since then the concept of identity with the nation has become the accepted philosophy in most nations. Thus, while the RSS itself calls for a restoration of India's earlier glory, philosophically it is really more a part of the worldwide trend toward the modern concept of nationalism. And India, a free country for only fifty years, is still ridding itself of colonialism and working out a national identity. Rule used to be by kings, and India prospered because many of those kings followed a personal discipline rivaling that of great saints. So, too, does today's democracy require a high level of personal discipline.

But the RSS isn't India's only group trying to forge a national identity. They face competition from two fronts. One is the communists, who have their own program for India's future and have been strongly opposed by the RSS since its founding. The other, larger opposition, is of the secular-minded Indians, epitomized by Jawaharla Nehru, India's first prime minister. He and many others felt that India's backwardness and thousand years of subjugation was in part the result of the Hindu religion, and that the sooner Hinduism could be relegated to the past and replaced with modern ideas, the sooner India would become a thriving nation.

Under the British, the education system was designed by Lord

Macaulay to produce Indians who admired everything Western and despised everything Indian. After Independence, the secularists to a large extent continued this same philosophy of education, and today there remain tens of millions of Indians who admire the West and scorn their Hindu heritage. To these secularists there could be no greater threat than an RSS determined to raise generation after generation of proud Hindus.

One dramatic manifestation of this ideological divide is found in the media. Virtually all English-language newspapers and magazines in India are controlled by either secularist publishers or, in lesser numbers, by communists. Hundreds of articles appear each year in the Indian press critical of the RSS. The local language media tend to be more sympathetic, but the person relying only upon English news reports to understand the RSS will almost always get a negative impression.

What's in a word: The basic RSS concept is simple: India consists of hundreds of millions of Hindus; therefore, its national identity should be Hindu, just as the national identities of nations with a large majority of Christian or Muslim citizens are forthrightly Christian or Muslim. But then, what exactly does the RSS mean by Hindu? At times they use the term as everyone else does, equivalent to the term Sanatana Dharma, the ancient religion of India. At other times they use it to mean a geographical affiliation of all people born in India, regardless of religion, but who hold India as sacred land. In other places they consider Hindus to be those whose religion originated in India, including Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs. Sometimes they add the important qualification, "and who consider themselves

Hindu." RSS general secretary H.V. Seshadri states in his recent book, RSS, A Vision in Action, "Hindu is not the name of a religious faith like Muslim or Christian. It denotes the national way of life here [in India]. The question of one's faith does not come into play at all." One swayamsevak explained, "Non-Hindus must be assimilated within the Hindu way of life. The words Muslim and Christian denote a religious phenomenon, while the word Hindu is synonymous with the nation."

It is this confusing morphing meaning of Hindu that causes concern among non-Hindus. Does the RSS just mean that when Hindus ran India in the past, all non-Hindu faiths--Jews, Christians, Parsis, etc.--harmoniously lived in the country and would again in their "Hindu Rhastra" [state]? Or do they mean to absorb by some means the Muslims and Christians under a Hindu identity? That is an action difficult for those religions--who have tighter definitions of their religious identification--to see as anything other than a form of subjugation.

The political fix: The RSS philosophy is to build a Hindu nation person by person and therefore it has a built-in aversion to politics, considering it a rather messy business involving too many compromises and not really making fundamental changes in the nation. Though it has always had an affiliated political party, its level of involvement has varied according to the interest and inclinations of RSS leaders. The first two, Dr. Hedgewar and M.S. Golwalker, kept the organization at a distance. The next two, Balasaheb Deoras, who became sarsanghachalak in 1973, and Prof. Rajendra Singh, who took over the leadership post in 1994, have greatly increased the

level of political involvement. In part, they've done so out of self-protection, having been banned three times since Independence by hostile Congress governments.

The last 25 years of political involvement by the Sangh Pariwar has had mixed results. Unable to gain an absolute majority, Vajpayee's coalition government could accomplish little. In earlier victories, the BJP has gained power in several states and in the capital district of Delhi, where it ruled for five years. But despite its stand against corruption, the BJP rule in Delhi, according to Hinduism Today correspondent Rajiv Malik, "resulted in no discernable reduction in corruption at any level of society or government." As a result, they lost the next Delhi election to the Congress Party. If the BJP gains a majority in the national parliament with the September elections, the Sangh Pariwar will, for the first time, have a clear mandate.

Critics: "The RSS is a much loved, and at the same time, a much-hated organization," states Malik. Madhu Kishwar is editor of Manushi magazine and advocate of women's rights in India. In her recent book, Religion at the Service of Nationalism, she objects passionately to what she calls the criminalization of politics in India. She spares neither the Congress Party, excoriating them for their complicity in the anti-Sikh riots following Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984, nor the local RSS shakas for their part in the deadly 1987 Meerut riots and other anti-Muslim activities. Criminal elements in political parties is an India-wide problem; one the RSS apparently has not escaped.

Other criticisms of the RSS as secret or totalitarian seem

misplaced, or simply malicious. They are not secretive; their basic books are published in entirety on their web site. The local shakas are held in public parks and anyone can attend. The connections between the Sangh Pariwar organizations are hardly conspiratorial. Everyone in India knows their affiliation to the RSS. The organization does not advocate dictatorship, acquisition of power by violence, supremacy of the state over the individual, conquest of "lesser nations" or any form of racial purity. The call for a "Hindu nation" doesn't equate to racial purity, given that Hindus in India include members of four of the five major races of man.

Walter K. Andersen is coauthor of The Brotherhood in Saffron, and the Clinton administration's advisor on the RSS. His book was the result of several years of field research with Indian collaborators. In one section, he records the class notes of a young swayamsevak: "A swayamsevak should behave like an ideal person in society. He should not commit any anti-social action and damage the image of the Sangh. The RSS was organized to prevent the further disintegration of Hindu society. We purposely avoid taking credit for achievements, though in reality, many things have been done by us. Those who attend shaka are one, and the remaining are divided by caste and class. Government cannot change the nation; selfless people change it. So we have to create a cadre of workers in different fields and on different levels, and then planning will be successful."

Andersen concludes, "Hedgewar was convinced that a fundamental change in social attitudes was a necessary precondition of a revived India, and that a properly trained cadre of nationalists would be the cutting edge of that

change." What we see today as the Sangh Pariwar is the result of seventy years of devotion to Hedgewar's visions and methods by millions of Hindus and a powerful backlash against Indians who have become alienated from their Hinduness.

With reports by Rajiv Malik, Delhi

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