

[In The RSS Ranks](#)

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MOVEMENTS

In The RSS Ranks

Our journalist visits a training camp outside Dehli and meets the cadre

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I reached Sewa Dham around six-thirty in the morning to be greeted by the breathtaking scene of the RSS swayamsevaks braving rigorous exercises in half-a-dozen groups. This was my introduction to the Sangh Shiksha Varga, an RSS education class for leaders. It is a three-stage affair, with the first-year program being conducted at the local level, the second year at regional centers such as Sewa Dham (25 kilometers from central Delhi), and the third at RSS headquarters in Nagpur. After each year's training, the resulting cadre take up increased responsibility for local, regional and ultimately national activities. The morning exercise program I was watching on the center's green lawns would last two and a half hours, I was told. Though my father, a lifetime associate of RSS, had the occasion to attend a shaka in the forties with the present Prime Minister of India, Sri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, I had watched their activities from a distance--not being personally inclined to the expected level of discipline or dedication.

I was abundantly familiar with the common criticisms of the

RSS--that they are very communal in their outlook, that they talk a lot about service to the nation, etc., but the business class among them use the same dubious means to earn money as other businessmen in the country, that many are as power hungry as the Congressmen and so forth. But this group was not like that. Most were obviously used to more comfort and luxuries of life than offered at this spartan camp. It was not going to be three weeks of relaxing vacation. They are separated from family, and each has to pay for his own food and expenses. They get up before dawn and are busy with a wide range of physical, intellectual and spiritual activities till ten at night. I was impressed by their lack of fatigue even at the end of the morning exercises. The camp's purpose was to turn the ordinary member of the RSS into a highly disciplined and evolved soul, in a program with similarities to army boot camp, a management development program and a religious retreat all rolled into one.

My host, Kishore Kant, who is in charge of publicity for the RSS in Delhi, explained that they had 99 trainees at this second-year camp, nearly all from Delhi. There was also a second group of 307 first-year trainees in another area of Sewa Dham, whom I did not meet. The second-year group has been subdivided into five classes depending on physical dexterity and, to some extent, intellectual acumen. The RSS is famous for its games played at the local shakas. I was especially struck by one called yog chap, a kind of dance and march in which a set of cymbals on a chain and stick are played. Those who are good at this strenuous exercise can do it for hours on end with increased energy.

One group before me was practicing with lathis, bamboo

fighting staves. Another was engaged in a form of judo, or niyudha in the ancient Indian shastras--the art of fighting without any weapons. "You have seen the lathis," explained Kant, "which are used for self defense. They are taught how one is to hit, where to hit, how to prevent getting hit."

The camp begins at 4:40 am when the saffron flag is hoisted and prayers conducted. Following the prayers, the morning exercise commences. Afterwards, everyone bathes and changes clothes. Breakfast is a simple affair of biscuits, chappatis, sprouts, milk and tea. Sanghis, as they are known, then proceed to classes where they study RSS history and philosophy, debate issues and practice public speaking. "We discuss the lives of the brave people and saints who have done a lot for the nation and its unity," said Kant. Senior RSS people address each group.

In the afternoon, group discussions take place, as the individual understanding of each is strengthened, as well as their ability to express what they have learned. Two hours of evening exercise, dinner at 8:15, followed by light discussion until 10:30 round out the day.

Graduates of these camps are expected to return to their home areas and run shakas, the basic local units of the RSS [see lead article]. "Our expectation," explained Kant, "is that after the first year, a person can run one shaka. After two years, two to three. And after three years, bigger responsibilities." Participants include businessmen, street peddlers, government servants, laborers and students. No insignia of rank distinguishes one cadre from another; all wear

the same uniform of ill-fitted khaki shorts, white shirt and black cap.

I spoke with Rajesh Verma, age 24, who was participating in the camp. "Before I joined the shaka, I used to lead a very undisciplined life, sometimes getting up as late as ten in the morning. When I joined the shaka, the people made it a point to wake me at five in the morning, get me to the park for the exercise and programs. As a result, I have gotten six more hours in my day, and with those hours I can do some work for the nation. One basic thing we are taught in RSS is that whatever job we do, it should be done inspired by the love for the country, and before undertaking any job, we must think that, 'whatever I am going to do is not going to affect my country in an adverse manner.' I used to not understand the concept of swadeshi, the use of products manufactured in India, but now I do. I used to not know what good work I could do, but now I am quite clear. For example, in our area there are slums, popularly known as 'JJ clusters' [roughly, "shanty towns"]. In the past, I used to just walk past them, but then we did a survey and I found out that in reality things were very bad. Now I teach there, and work to improve their lot."

Paramanand, a 42-year-old businessman, has been with the RSS for 21 years. He explained to me that although the daily activity takes time, because of the organizational skills he has learned, he (like Rajesh) actually has more time in a day.

I could see in both these men the kind of character development that has made the RSS the formidable institution it has become today. Its members are courteous, punctual,

efficient and enlightened about the challenges faced by Hindus of India and the nation. They endure a lot of harsh criticism, but after intermingling with them at the camp I came to the conclusion that they are neither very elated when praised, nor crushed in spirit when censured, but steadfastly dedicated to the positive transformation and upliftment of Hindus. 1Ã2
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