

INDIA FOUNDATION JOURNAL



Editorial

- A Century of Cultural Nationalism and Nation-Building

- Dhruv C. Katoch

Focus- RSS@100

- The RSS at 100: Evolution, Ideology, and a Century of Nation-Building
- The Quiet Counter-Insurgency: How the RSS Built Nationhood in India's Restive Northeast
- Recollections of My Father's Tryst with the RSS
- Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's Grassroots Engagement with Denotified and Nomadic Tribes in Maharashtra
- A Persian in the Land of Thalis: Reflections on India, Identity, and the RSS

- Prafulla Ketkar

- Rami Desai

- Arun Sahni

- Dnyanashri Kulkarni

- Omid Babelian

- Rami Desai

Interview

- An Interview with **Shri Sunil Ambekar**, Akhil Bharatiya Prachar Pramukh, RSS, on RSS@100

International Relations

- From Strategic Depth to Strategic Nightmare: The Collapse of Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations

- Sandhya Jain

Editorial Board



Swapna Dasgupta
Former Member of Parliament,
Rajya Sabha



Sunaina Singh
Former Vice Chancellor,
Nalanda University



Shaurya Doval
Managing Director,
Zeus Caps



Zeenat Shaukat Ali
Director General,
Wisdom Foundation



Jagjeet Singh Sareen
Partner and Global Lead,
Climate Practice,
Dalberg Advisors



Mohan Malik
Professor of Strategic Studies,
UAE National Defense College



Prof. C Sheela Reddy
Dean,
Central University of
Andhra Pradesh



Saket Mishra
CEO, Venus India Asset
Finance Pvt. Ltd.



Come Carpentier
Distinguished Fellow,
India Foundation

Table of Contents

Editorial

A Century of Cultural Nationalism and Nation-Building	Dhruv C. Katoch	3
---	------------------------	---

Focus- RSS@100

The RSS at 100: Evolution, Ideology, and a Century of Nation-Building	Prafulla Ketkar	8
The Quiet Counter-Insurgency: How the RSS Built Nationhood in India's Restive Northeast	Rami Desai	15
Recollections of My Father's Tryst with the RSS	Arun Sahni	20
Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's Grassroots Engagement with Denotified and Nomadic Tribes in Maharashtra	Dnyanashri Kulkarni	23
A Persian in the Land of Thalis: Reflections on India, Identity, and the RSS	Omid Babelian	30

Interview

An Interview with Shri Sunil Ambekar , Akhil Bharatiya Prachar Pramukh, RSS, on RSS@100	Rami Desai	39
---	-------------------	----

International Relations

From Strategic Depth to Strategic Nightmare: The Collapse of Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations	Sandhya Jain	46
--	---------------------	----



India Foundation Journal

Vol. VII
Issue No. 1

January-February 2026

Editor
Maj Gen (Dr) Dhruv C Katoch
Assistant Editor
Siddharth Singh

Copyright © *India Foundation Journal*
Printed on behalf of India Foundation

Printed at Pearl Printers, C-105,
Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-1,
New Delhi-110020

Published at India Foundation,
4th Floor, Core 4-B,
India Habitat Centre,
Lodhi Road, New Delhi-110003

RNI No.- DELENG/2020/79244
ISSN 2347-1522

Annual Subscription - Rs.3000/-
Single copy - Rs.500/-

For advertising details contact
Phone: 011- 46541500 / 46021281
journal@indiafoundation.in
www.indiafoundation.in

About India Foundation

India Foundation is an independent research centre focussed on the issues, challenges, and opportunities of the Indian polity. The Foundation believes in understanding contemporary India and its global context through the civilizational lens of a society on the forward move. Based on the principles of independence, objectivity and academic rigour, the Foundation aims at increasing awareness and advocating its views on issues of both national and international importance.

With a team of dedicated professionals based at its office in New Delhi, the Foundation works with partners and associates both in India and overseas to further its stated objectives.

About India Foundation Journal

The India Foundation Journal is led by an Editorial Board of eminent scholars and leaders from various spheres of Indian public life. The bi-monthly journal covers a wide range of issues pertinent to the national interest, mainly focusing on international relations, national security, legal and constitutional issues and other issues of social, religious and political significance. The journal seeks articles from scholars with the intent of creating a significant body of knowledge with a nationalist perspective and establish a recognised forum for debates involving academicians and policymakers.

A Century of Cultural Nationalism and Nation-Building

Dhruv C Katoch*

The first quarter of the twentieth century witnessed immense global upheaval, primarily driven by the First World War (1914–1918) and the political revolutions that followed. The tectonic changes in Europe during this period led to the collapse of empires and the emergence of communist regimes.

As World War I neared its end, Europe saw the collapse of several imperial structures. The Austro-Hungarian Empire disintegrated due to military defeat, economic hardship, and the rise of ethnic nationalism, leading to the creation of new states whose borders were later recognised in peace treaties. In Germany, the November Revolution of 1918 resulted in the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II and the formation of the Weimar Republic. The Ottoman Empire also collapsed; its Sultanate was officially abolished by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey on 1 November 1922, paving the way for the establishment of the modern Republic of Turkey in 1923.

In Russia, the Tsarist regime collapsed on 15 March 1917 when Tsar Nicholas II was forced to abdicate during the February Revolution, ending centuries of Romanov rule. The Bolsheviks soon overthrew the provisional government that replaced him in the October Revolution. For the first time, an avowedly communist party led by Vladimir Lenin seized state power. It began to implement the ideas articulated in the Communist Manifesto of 1848—a critique of capitalism and a blueprint

for a classless, communist society to be brought about by a workers' revolution.

This was a time when India, too, was undergoing a profound political transformation, marked by the rise of assertive nationalism. Between 1901 and 1925, the independence movement led by the Indian National Congress (INC) evolved from moderate petitions to mass-based mobilisation, characterised by widespread public participation and an increasing demand for Swaraj—or self-government. Leaders like Lokmanya Tilak supported boycotts and passive resistance, laying the foundation for later mass movements. With Gandhi's arrival in 1915, non-violence became the guiding principle of political struggle. Events such as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919 shocked the nation and galvanised unity against British repression. With mass participation in India's freedom struggle, it became increasingly clear that the British Empire's hold over India could not endure.

While the Congress examined the political contours of a future independent nation, two other ideological currents emerged in 1925. One was the birth of the Communist movement in India, inspired by the Soviet experiment under Lenin. The CPI was formally founded on 26 December 1925 at a conference in Kanpur, though earlier attempts to form a communist group in India date from a 1920 manifesto issued in Tashkent. Ideological influence thus flowed from Moscow rather than

*Maj. Gen. Dhruv C. Katoch is Editor, India Foundation Journal and Director, India Foundation.

from Indian soil. The second current took shape within a very different ideological framework: the conviction that freedom would ultimately demand a society rooted in national consciousness and cultural unity. This belief led to the founding of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) by Dr Keshav Baliram Hedgewar in Nagpur on 27 September 1925, to nurture such a society from the grassroots up.

The RSS was founded during a period of rising communal tensions, mainly attributable to British divide-and-rule policies, such as separate electorates and communal political classification. These divisions became more pronounced after the Khilafat–Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22). Dr Hedgewar, popularly known as Doctorji, believed that political freedom would be meaningless unless society were internally strong and culturally confident. Born in 1889 in Nagpur, he came from very modest circumstances, with his parents living in poverty. As a young, brilliant doctor, he had a promising career ahead of him, but he chose to devote his life to national service. Hindu society, he observed, was fragmented by caste divisions and regional identities. It needed unity, cohesion and a disciplined structure for self-defence. Having participated in the Congress-led national movement and been associated with revolutionary groups such as the Anushilan Samiti, he concluded that political mobilisation alone could not build a resilient national society. The rise of the Hindu cultural renaissance, led by figures such as Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and Tilak, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, also profoundly influenced him. He conceived the RSS against this backdrop: to create a cadre of

individuals dedicated to national service and to overcoming caste and social divisions through collective activities, such as daily physical and social drills (*shakhas*), thereby preparing the nation for freedom through discipline and character-building. By the time Doctorji passed away in 1940, he had, in just 15 years, built a network of disciplined volunteers. The group was small and mostly confined to central India, but the organisation's roots were firm and destined to grow from strength to strength.

With Doctorji's passing, Shri MS Golwalkar, affectionately called "Guruji," led the organisation for the next 33 years, till his death in 1973. The first four years after independence were crucial. The RSS volunteers carried out extensive relief efforts and organised shelter, protection, and security in relief camps for the hundreds of thousands of refugees affected by communal violence. Unfortunately, the RSS was banned in 1948 following the assassination of MK Gandhi. This ban was imposed without following proper legal procedures, with the organisation being wrongly blamed for Gandhi's killing, but it was lifted within a year. Afterwards, the RSS adopted a formal constitution and shifted its focus toward outreach and public trust-building. These four years shaped the principles of democratic operation and decentralised organisational development.

Under "Guruji," the RSS expanded across the nation, emphasising the development of social leaders, cultural awakening, and service to marginalised communities. This period also saw significant institutional growth, with many affiliates established. The Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) was established in 1949, and

the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, a labour union, was founded in 1955. A decade later, in 1964, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a socio-religious organisation, was formed. At the same time, Vidya Bharti was set up as part of its educational outreach, and the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram was established for tribal outreach.

To address contemporary political challenges, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) was established by Syama Prasad Mookerjee in 1951 after he resigned from Jawaharlal Nehru's cabinet over profound ideological differences, particularly his opposition to the Nehru-Liaquat Pact. The BJS was created in close collaboration with the RSS, a process that reportedly included consultations with M.S. Golwalkar. The arrangement allowed Mookerjee to contribute his national reputation and serve as the BJS's guiding spirit and first President. At the same time, the RSS provided the critical organisational infrastructure and a dedicated corps of workers (*pracharaks*). As a result, the BJS was widely regarded as the RSS's political wing.

During the Emergency (1975–1977), the RSS was banned, and its leaders were imprisoned, but it continued to oppose authoritarianism through underground networks and helped galvanise democratic forces. After the emergency was lifted, the Jana Sangh and other opposition groups (including the Socialist Party, the Congress (O), and the Bharatiya Lok Dal) merged to form the Janata Party, which sought to defeat Indira Gandhi. The Janata Party won the general election and formed the first non-Congress government in India's history.

After the Janata Party's defeat in the 1980 general elections, former Jana Sangh members

exited the coalition. A year later, on 6 April 1980, they reconvened to establish a new political entity, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with Atal Bihari Vajpayee as its first president. Many now regard the BJP as the RSS's ideological centre and political arm. However, the BJP is not subordinate to the RSS; rather, the two organisations complement each other. Both are motivated by cultural nationalism (Hindutva), as conceptualised by Hedgewar and Golwalkar.

The 1980s and 1990s experienced rapid organisational growth and influence in social and political discourse. A significant moment was the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, marked by mass mobilisation and the expansion of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the RSS, on campuses. With the rise of the RSS, the BJP also expanded, gaining substantial political ground. Starting with just two seats in the 1984 elections, it won 85 seats in 1989. By 1991, it had become the official opposition, holding 120 seats, and by 1996, it formed a short-lived minority government with 161 seats. Later, it established a coalition government under Vajpayee from 1999 to 2004. After a decade in opposition, the BJP secured an absolute majority in the 2014 elections, winning 282 seats. This marked the first time in 30 years that a single party had achieved a majority in the Lok Sabha. The party improved its performance in the 2019 elections, increasing its tally to 303 seats. In the 2024 elections, it remained the largest party, although its seat share declined to 240 seats, and it continued to lead the NDA.

Since the turn of the millennium, as in earlier years, the RSS's focus has remained on social service, education, and nation-building. Under its

present Sarsanghchalak, Dr Mohan Bhagwat, the organisation emphasises social harmony and the elimination of caste discrimination while continuing to expand in rural areas and adopting modern management practices. It remains at the forefront of relief efforts for floods, earthquakes, and tsunamis, often being the first to respond and sometimes staying until long-term rehabilitation is underway. Through an extensive network of affiliates, it engages in education, social services, labour and tribal welfare, women's empowerment, ecological initiatives, and disaster response. The RSS is one of the world's largest voluntary organisations, with millions of followers and a presence in virtually every Indian district. In its centenary year, the RSS claims to have more than 83,000 shakhas, with an attendance of 4 million.

In contrast, the Communist Party of India (CPI), which, like the RSS, traces its origins to 1925, followed a dramatically different path. Inspired by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the CPI's early focus in India was anti-colonialism, mobilising peasants and industrial workers through trade unions, and advocating for social justice and economic egalitarianism.

After independence, the CPI achieved electoral success, including forming the first non-Congress government in independent India in 1957 in Kerala under E. M. S. Namboodiripad. However, internal divisions reached their peak in 1964, when ideological rifts—exacerbated by disagreements over the international communist movement and national issues—led to a significant split and the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M). Over subsequent decades, the CPI (M) became the dominant force,

establishing long-lasting, successful governments in West Bengal (1977-2011) and Tripura, and alternating power in Kerala through the Left Democratic Front (LDF) coalition. Following their defeats in West Bengal and Tripura, the communists now govern only in Kerala. In recent years, the nationwide influence of the communist movement has declined sharply. From being a major opposition force, it has now shrunk to a small presence in Parliament and in state legislatures.

Why did the communist movement fail to expand beyond a certain point, whereas the RSS, after a period of slow growth, expanded enormously and continues to grow? The answer may lie in their foundational philosophies. The RSS has emphasised the development of individuals: instilling personal character, civic discipline, and a sense of national pride. This bottom-up model aims to transform society by cultivating strong individuals who, together, form a broad social base. In contrast, the CPI's approach was more top-down: focusing on class-based mobilisation, land reforms, labour rights, and political power. Its emphasis was on collective economic and political transformation, rather than on a gradual reshaping of individual social consciousness. For CPI and its offshoots, securing political power and implementing structural reforms remained the primary objective — whereas for the RSS, cultivating committed individuals formed the sinews of a vast socio-cultural force.

It is not as if the RSS did not face challenges. Indeed, the extent of the difficulties faced has been such that most similar organisations would have collapsed under such pressures. The RSS faced and even today continues to face a perception and

media bias, primarily caused by the Marxist and self-professed ‘liberals’ who dominated academia and the media. Its ability to survive and flourish, despite these difficulties, underscores the intense dedication of its leaders and the resilience of its pracharaks—who, in service to the nation, were prepared to sacrifice everything. In the early years, the selfless leadership of Dr Hedgewar (Doctorji) and Shri MS Golwalkar (Guruji) fostered a sense of nationalism among pracharaks, a feat probably unmatched worldwide. Even after being banned in 1948 and again in 1975, the organisation continued to expand. It was banned for the third time in December 1992—a vendetta by the then-ruling party—but the ban was lifted in June 1993 after a tribunal found it unjustified. These bans

tested its resilience but ultimately enhanced its democratic credibility.

Today, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh continues to play a significant role in shaping India’s social, cultural, and intellectual landscape. Its journey over a hundred years, from a small cultural cell in Nagpur to its extensive presence across all districts of India, demonstrates tenacity, bravery, and sacrifice in service of the motherland. Building a nation ultimately involves empowering its people.

The RSS’s role in this regard is perhaps unmatched by any organisation. That India today is more rooted in national consciousness and cultural unity is, to a large extent, a reflection of the RSS’s work over the past hundred years.



The RSS at 100: Evolution, Ideology, and a Century of Nation-Building

Prafulla Ketkar*

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, or simply the Sangh) has completed 100 years since its inception. The largest voluntary organisation in the world, whose main activity is called ‘daily Shakha’, a one-hour gathering of Swayamsevaks who play, sing, march, and resolve to work for the national cause, takes place on an open ground and is open to all. Yet the Sangh remains a mysterious organisation for social and political observers. As the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) marked 100 years since its inception on October 2, 2025, on the auspicious occasion of Vijayadashami, there was considerable national and international attention, along with the usual critics ready with their critiques. The release of a commemorative Rs 100 coin and a postal stamp by PM Narendra Modi further rattled the Communists and some of their Congress followers, along with the Islamists. Instead of getting stuck in the old rhetoric of Manuvad, anti-women, anti-constitution, and anti-minority, we should understand the secret of the success of this magnificent century-long march: it is a thought, a process, a movement, and a mission.

As one of the Sangh’s prominent ideologues, Dattopant Thengadi articulated, “The Sangh is no longer only a Rashtriya phenomenon...A key to

understanding this sky-scraping banyan tree lies in delving deeply into the myriad incidents of the hallowed life and the various aspects of the luminous personality of Dr Keshav Baliram Hedgewar. After doing so, we shall be able to clearly grasp the vision the revered Doctorji envisioned for the future of the Sangh. Without clearly grasping these, we shall never be able to understand the soul of the Sangh. The diversified shape of the Sangh is actually the blossoming and flowering of the great Doctor’s vision”.¹

The Thought

The Sangh is mysterious because, when organising the entire society as a Hindu society was a matter of ridicule, the founder of the RSS, Dr Hedgewar, declared Hindustan a Hindu Rashtra and set the objective of organising the entire society on its civilisational edifice. The self-oblivion and sense of slavery were so deep-rooted due to colonial aggression that anything to do with Hindu society, Dharma and culture looked inferior. The Sangh was established through careful deliberation during the freedom struggle. Rather than limiting its objective to attaining freedom, the Sangh began its work with a resolve to address the inherent ills of society. For the elite, educated

*Shri Prafulla Ketkar, is the Editor, *Organiser (Weekly)* since 2013. He has a experience of over 20 years in the fields of research, media and academics. He is also Advisory Committee School of Journalism, Delhi University. He has been writing on issues related to International politics and foreign policy, with special reference to China and Democracy, Hindutva, and Bharatiya Civilisation. He was also a member of the Editorial team of the recently published *Complete Works of Pt Deendayal Ji* in 15 Volumes.

under the British Raj, this was nothing but a mystery, as they took pride in seeing themselves through the colonial prism. Due to the revolutionary idea of decolonisation with a process for complete renationalisation, the Sangh looks mysterious to many.

Instead of a formal set-up of objectives and structures, the founder, Dr Hedgewar, chose to develop a thought process based on collective decision-making, in which the focus was on hearing various viewpoints democratically and arriving at a consensus that would enable the achievement of a bigger goal or objective. Through his experiences in multiple ongoing movements for Bharat's independence, his diagnosis of the core problem was precise and clear. He identified that a lack of sense of selfhood due to colonisation and the deterioration of social structures were the root causes of our political and mental subjugation. The individual character was entirely disassociated from the national character. Unless these issues were addressed, genuine independence could not be attained or retained, was his fundamental conviction behind the formation of the RSS.

Sangh means awakening the national spirit in people, enabling them to rise above the narrow feelings of caste or community. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi rightly pointed out while releasing the commemorative coin and postal stamp for the RSS centenary year, "It (Sangh) was the revival of an ancient tradition, wherein the nation's consciousness manifests itself in new forms from time to time to face the challenges of each era. The Sangh is a sacred incarnation of that eternal national consciousness in this era".² Like earlier sages, the Sangh's founder and his ardent followers

never claimed to do anything new; instead, they invoked ancient indigenous values to address contemporary challenges. Hence, the key difference between other initiatives and the Sangh is that while others tried to form their own organisations in society based on personality or ideology, the Sangh began functioning to organise the entire society on the edifice of national consciousness.

The Organisation

The process for addressing national problems was also unique and innovative – rooted in the land's ancient philosophy but with modern characteristics. A one-hour Shakha, with Bharat Mata as the only Goddess to be worshipped, became the training ground for Swayamsevaks, who would organise their remaining twenty-three hours with a national consciousness. Through this training, meticulous planning, time management, team games, patriotic songs, and collective resolve, they were able to nurture values that contribute meaningfully to national reconstruction. These Swayamsevaks, while working in various spheres of national life, such as labour, education, the arts, and healthcare, further imbued the values instilled in the Shakha through organisation-building and structural reforms grounded in Bharatiya values.

Since its inception, the RSS has faced hostility and antagonism from the ruling class before and after the independence of Bharat. From the secret police under the British Raj to a direct ban under Nehru's regime, the Sangh was not supposed to survive as an organisation or a thought. No other organisation faces such pressure to devise solutions to every problem the nation faces as the Sangh

does. From admirers to critics, the Sangh is questioned for failing to do certain things without understanding its intentions. As a progressive unfoldment of an idea, the Sangh never claimed to be the solution provider for everything. In fact, the original idea behind the Sangh was to do nothing except run Shakhas and train swayamsevaks. When society as a whole imbues the Sangh's virtue of collective consciousness rooted in our cultural ethos, the organisation's independent status would not be required, as the leadership has stated. The Sangh facilitates, and society undertakes, difficult tasks such as the liberation of the Ram Janmabhoomi. In essence, the Sangh seeks to mobilise societal power to effect the desired change. Naturally, it becomes a masterful and magnificent journey for all. Instead of getting trapped in the Western prism of militant, paramilitary, communal and fascist, we need to understand the Sangh from an indigenous viewpoint rooted in the soil to grasp the secret of its success.

The Progressive Unfoldment

The journey to organise Hindus for the complete independence of Bharat from colonial clutches had to go through phases of ridicule, neglect and opposition. It was a process of 'progressive unfoldment', as one of the key thinkers of the Sangh school of thought – Shri Dattopant Thengadi – had remarked. In the first phase, the task was to proclaim Bharat as a Hindu Rashtra and Hindus as the inheritors of this great ancient civilisation. The RSS founder, Dr Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, after drawing lessons from the full spectrum of the freedom struggle – ranging from Satyagraha to revolutionaries – began to address

the root causes of colonisation. Instead of focusing solely on how to attain independence, he began to consider why we had lost it.

He concluded that society was not organised and divided along multiple fault lines of caste, sects, and regions. Naturally, there was a lack of understanding of our national identity. Unless these issues were addressed, complete independence would not be possible, as this medical doctor diagnosed about our society. Instilling a sense of patriotism from childhood, nurturing discipline and infusing pride in the ancient civilisation were his primary goals. This phase can be called organisation for its own sake. The entire Shakha system and its functional aspects evolved through collective decision-making. Taking children together to organise the entire society was naturally a matter of mockery for many. Dr Hedgewar achieved this feat during his lifetime, with 128 of these children relocating to different locations across Bharat and establishing the Shakhas. Meanwhile, inspired by the Sangh's work, which began in 1925, Smt Lakshmibai Kelkar, Vandaniya Mausiji, as she is affectionately called, initiated similar work among women, the Rashtra Sevika Samiti.

In the second phase, Bharat experienced the tumultuous and bloody partition. The colonisers left, leaving behind a partitioned motherland and a colonised mindset. Sangh moved from the goal of complete independence to the protection of Hindu Dharma, Sanskriti and Rashtra. Sri Guruji Golwalkar, the second Sarsanghchalak, provided the ideological foundation for the movement, clarifying the idea of Hindu Rashtra – based on a common culture and heritage, motherland and

ancestry. Sangh did not remain confined to Shakhas but diversified into various spheres of national life, with swayamsevaks traversing different sectors to build organisations in accordance with national wisdom. From the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) in 1949 to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in 1964 was a period of disseminating the Sangh's thought through various organisations to address the specific challenges posed by renationalisation. Student, labour, religious, educational, legal, intellectual, healthcare – no single field has remained untouched by Sangh thought rooted in Bharatiya soil.

The third phase began after the emergency, when society first realised the Sangh's strength during the fight to restore democracy. Those with negative perceptions started to take the Sangh seriously. At the same time, communists began targeting the Sangh intellectually, labelling it communal, fascist, right-wing, etc. The Sangh engaged with society through various movements and service activities. Following the birth centenary of Dr Hedgewar in 1989, service activities increased substantially.

Movements such as the Ekamata Yatra, the Ram Janmabhoomi Liberation struggle, and the Swadeshi Abhiyan galvanised society and changed the intellectual and political atmosphere of Bharat. Hindutva became a cultural force in Bharat that could no longer be ignored. Obviously, forces rattled by the cultural rejuvenation of Bharat created the saffronisation and Hindu-terror bogey to target the Sangh. Instead of undermining the Sangh's work, this further invigorated the national environment with a sense of cultural resurgence. After 2006, the birth-centenary year of Sri Guruji Golwalkar,

the Sangh began talking about systemic change.

The journey to organise Hindus for the complete Independence of Bharat from colonial clutches had to pass through phases of ridicule, neglect and opposition. Those phases could not have been overcome without the struggle and sacrifices of millions of Swayamsevaks and their families. The Sangh has considered the virtuous power of society to be its strength and has consistently sought the participation of *sadhus*, *saints*, and other social organisations in the larger mission. The RSS acknowledged the contributions that enabled it to operate during disasters, build thousands of service projects, and create participatory movements, from the Vivekananda Rock Memorial to the reconstruction of Ayodhya's Ram Mandir. The Sangh does not seek credit; rather, as a movement, it seeks to encompass everything righteous and pro-Bharat, thereby differentiating itself from all other organisations.

The Movement

As a movement, the Sangh has been a multidimensional endeavour that is difficult to understand through a political prism. RSS is essentially a movement for decolonisation and renationalisation. Making everything national in tune with the times and everything foreign in tune with the national ethos is the essence of this movement. Swadeshi, as a movement, does not mean merely buying indigenous goods and boycotting foreign ones, but reorganising the entire system in line with the national ethos and requirements. From historical perceptions to political structures, Bharatiya thought has to be recontextualised in a reformed manner.

So casteism should be eradicated, but that does not mean Hindu Dharma should be denounced. Babar and Aurangzeb should be rejected as invaders; therefore, Muslims should not be considered their inheritors. All Bharatiya languages should be respected and accepted; that does not mean foreign languages should be censored. Such a process is not possible without the Sangh's thought and actions becoming an inclusive and participatory movement. Through Swayamsevaks, the Sangh has devised unique mass-contact programmes. The collection drive for monetary contributions towards the reconstruction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya is a classic case study in this regard, where millions of people from all corners of Bharat, cutting across caste, community, and regional lines, contributed to the reconstruction of the civilisational monument. The Sangh aims to identify itself with society through a collective national consciousness, rather than remaining separate from it.

Resolve for Selfless Service

When everyone expected an extravagant celebration to mark its centenary, the Sangh reiterated its resolve at the national council in Bangalore in March 2025 to 'present a role model before the world of a harmonious and organised Bharat, taking the entire society together under the leadership of righteous people'. Instead of outlining big-bang programmes, the Sangh renewed its resolve to promote the resurgence of Bharat, focusing on three points: acknowledgement, introspection, and rededication.³

The initiative for social transformation will galvanise the entire Bharat to be part of the eternal

resolve of the Sangh to reconstruct Bharat for the global good. With more than 83 thousand Shakhas, 60 lakh Swayamsevaks, 1.77 lakh service projects, and more than 32 inspired organisations, the RSS, as a movement, has created a network of selfless individuals working for the motherland. In any natural or man-made calamity, or any threat to the nation, Sangh Swayamsevaks would come forward without waiting for any formal instructions from the top. If you ask them why they are doing this, or what they get out of it, the answers would be the same – it is our duty to Bharat Mata.

The collective decision-making model enables the Sangh to assess its performance critically. At the last ABPS, the task of taking the organisation to each block level was addressed through *Shatabdi Vistaraks* (full-timers for the Centenary Year). This was supported by surveys, participatory rural development, skill enhancement, and environmental programmes tailored to local requirements. The panch-parivartan – five-fold transformation activities, namely strengthening the family institution and inculcating the values of duty, national selfhood, an environmentally friendly lifestyle, a harmonious collective life, and overcoming all divisions and discrimination – are the monumental tasks the Sangh has undertaken for the centenary year. These objectives cannot be fulfilled without the support of all constituents, irrespective of caste, community, region, and gender. The sense of 'Swa' or selfhood is not limited to Bharat, but it guarantees that all nations can chart their own path of development in accordance with their culture and character.

Through continuous introspection and assessment, the number of Shakhas has increased

by ten thousand, with more than five thousand locations added in the last year, yet Swayamsevaks remain unsatisfied. At the Prant Pracharak Baithak, targets are renewed, and the message is taken to all sections of society through community-level events. The two points that seemed pertinent to the RSS in the centenary year were the need to continue the work humbly and always to remember the purpose of existence.

The Ultimate Objective

The Sangh is difficult to understand because it is unparalleled; it is the only organisation that seeks to dissolve itself into society. It may not be easy to understand from the outside, but it is very easy to internalise if you become part of it. That is what the RSS Sarsanghchalak has decoded as the secret behind the success of this mysterious and miraculous journey, which turns out to be magnificent and masterful.

What is the ultimate objective of this endeavour, undertaken with the penance and sacrifices of millions of Swayamsevaks and their families? As Dadarao Parmarth, the former Sarkaryavah of the RSS, who pioneered the Sangh's functioning in the erstwhile Madras province, put it in one of his epic replies, the RSS is an evolution of the life mission of the Hindu nation. What is that life mission? As Sarsanghchalak Dr Mohan Bhagwat clarified in his Vijayadashami address, "From time to time in world history, Bharat has played a significant role - it has restored the lost balance of the world, providing Dharma that instils a sense of restraint and discipline in global life"—a precise articulation of the life mission of the Hindu nation.⁴

Even this articulation is not new. In one of his

speeches, the second Sarsanghchalak Sri Guruji Golwarkar articulated, "World peace is in fact our ultimate goal. In fact, it has been our nation's life mission, and we have to fulfil it. To give lessons in peace to the world on a spiritual level and to create a sense of oneness in the whole of humanity has been our real national mission since ages".⁵ How can this goal be achieved, Sri Guruji clarifies, "Only when we succeed in bringing together crores of our own people and imbuing them with our sublime cultural values and sterling character and motivating them for the achievement of that mission".

Sangh sought to inculcate values of individual and national character and to build a network of people willing to move from 'me' to 'we'. As Swami Vivekananda articulated, Bharat has a destiny to fulfil and a message to deliver to the world. In this sense, the rise of Bharat is not meant to build another exploitative superpower. The Sangh seeks to reenergise Bharat's destined role in mitigating global challenges by making it a righteous power. Sangh is not interested in *RSS ki or Dr Hedgewar ki Jai, but only in Bharat Mata ki Jai*, with the ultimate objective of Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah (May All Be Happy), which should be and can be our national goal!

What Dr Hedgewar envisaged as a seed has now unfolded through various phases, spanning inception, evolution, expansion within national life, and, finally, acceptance and transformation. Over the last century, thousands of Karyakartas have sacrificed their personal lives as Pracharaks; lakhs of them have balanced their family life with their Sangh work, and millions of families have contributed to the Sangh cause, enabling the national mission to be fulfilled. The Sangh has won

the confidence of society, despite consistent demonisation and hatred from colonised minds. Social expectations are high, but the Sangh does not intend to be the sole saviour. Instead, as Dr Hedgewar envisaged, society should organically create internal systems to reform and sustain itself when it faces external challenges, and foster a sense of belonging.

The ideals that Bharat stands for should be reflected in our individual and collective lives, so that the world at large can take inspiration from

them. Every individual should selflessly consider the national interest so that Bharat can focus on the universal interest, which is the ultimate vision of the RSS – the idea of *Param Vaibhav*. The pinnacle of glory for Bharat Mata is to guide humanity on the path of harmonious, peaceful and blissful living. Though this is nothing new from the Sangh's point of view, how this is articulated and expected to take shape in the coming years is more precise and tangible. The process of the Sangh and society becoming coterminous is taking shape.

References:

- 1 *Dattopant. "What Sustains Sangh."* Dattopant Thengadi, 9 Nov. 2019, dbthengadi.in/what-sustains-sangh..,
- 2 *PM Addresses the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh Centenary Celebrations.* www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pm-addresses-the-rashtriya-swayamsevak-sangh-centenary-celebrations.
- 3 *"ABPS: RSS Resolves for the centenary year to build a harmonious & organised Hindu Society for World Peace & Prosperity" -* <https://organiser.org/2025/03/23/283333/bharat/resolve-on-occasion-of-sangh-centenary-building-a-harmonious-and-organised-hindu-society-for-world-peace-prosperity/>
- 4 *Sangh, Rashtriya Swayamsevak. "Excerpts of the Speech by Param Poojaniya Sarsanghchalak Ji on the Occasion of Vijayadashmi Utsav, Nagpur."* Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2 Oct. 2025, www.rss.org/Encyc/2025/10/2/shri-vijayadashami-speech-by-sarsanghchalak-ji.html.
- 5 *Shri Guruji (Madhav Sadashivrao Golwalkar), Second Sarsanghchalak of RSS, as quoted in SHRI GURUJI – Pioneer of A New Era by C P Bhishikar, Translated by Sudhakar Raje, Sahitya Sindhu Prakashan, Bangalore, 1999, p. 81*



The Quiet Counter-Insurgency: How the RSS Built Nationhood in India's Restive Northeast

Rami Desai*

When I first travelled to Guwahati in the early 2000s, the city seemed frozen in a gentler era. It lacked the speed and sensory overload of Delhi, the city I had left behind, and felt worlds apart from the analytical rigour of my postgraduate studies in London. Guwahati then was an urban space characterised by modest infrastructure, limited tourism, and a rhythm of life described locally as *lahey lahey*—slowly, patiently, without rush. The hills overlooking the mighty Brahmaputra gave the city an impression of serenity, reinforced by the cultural traces of old tea-plantation families with their Burma teak furniture and perennial pianos. It was easy, initially, to romanticise this slower-paced world.

But the idyll dissolved quickly. Beneath the gracious hospitality and the early closing of homes and shops lay an unmistakable atmosphere of fear. Social gatherings ended by nine in the evening. Guests returned home in small convoys. Business families spoke in hushed tones about kidnapping risks and extortion demands. Even displays of minor prosperity—such as an expensive car or a new house—were seen as calculated risks. The city was not understated by choice; it had been made so by violence. Around the year 2000, conflict-related deaths in Assam included more than 300

militants and nearly 400 civilians (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2001). The state's name travelled across the country not for its tea or temples, but because of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), a separatist organisation formed in 1979 that sought an independent, sovereign Assamese state (Phukon, 2002). ULFA's operations were not isolated: the group maintained ties with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and Myanmar's Kachin Independence Army, embedding Assam's violence within a web of regional insurgency (Sinha & Goswami, 2011).

As I travelled further through the Northeast, I realised that the insurgent landscape extended well beyond Assam. Almost every state harboured its own militant outfit promoting an ethnic-nationalist vision of sovereignty. NSCN's vision of "Nagaland" spanned Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh, redefining territorial boundaries based on Naga identity rather than current state borders (Shimray, 2008). Tripura's National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) sought to establish a sovereign Tripuri homeland, while Meghalaya's Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA) campaigned for a Garo homeland. Manipur, where insurgency had persisted since the 1960s, saw groups like the United National

*Rami Desai is an author, anthropologist, and scholar specializing in the North Eastern region of India. She holds degrees in Anthropology of Religion and Theology from King's College, London. Her research focuses on ethnic identity, tribal issues, and insurgency. She is a Distinguished Fellow at the India Foundation and regularly contributes to major newspapers and news channels.

Note: A version of this article has earlier been published in *Open the Magazine*.

Liberation Front (UNLF) demanding an independent socialist state (Haokip, 2016). Throughout the region, these movements fostered a widespread us-versus-them mentality, with local populations often caught between state forces, militant organisations, and the pressures of survival (Misra, 2000).

It was in this environment that I began my own research on insurgency, travelling to remote districts where roads were unreliable and militant checkpoints operated with impunity. One of my early journeys took me to Dima Hasao, where an overnight bus ride included multiple stops by armed groups collecting “road tax”—a euphemistic term for illegal extortion. Exhausted, I checked into a school run by the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), an organisation inspired by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The school offered free boarding and education for tribal children who lacked access to basic schooling. Its headmistress—a retired State Bank of India employee from Pune—had chosen to spend her post-retirement years in this conflict-ridden area. Her quiet determination challenged every stereotype of RSS-affiliated workers as doctrinaire or rigid; here was a woman who could have lived comfortably in Maharashtra but instead taught in a district where insurgency was routine.

The children at the school quickly reshaped my understanding of how nationalism is experienced far from the nation’s metropolitan centres. They were most excited to tell me about their recent trip to Mumbai, their first time on a train and their first sight of the sea. For them, the school was not simply an educational institution; it was their gateway to an India they had only

imagined. Their simple joy at singing the national anthem each morning stood in stark contrast to the separatist rhetoric dominating the region. In communities where separatist groups enforced identity boundaries violently, these children lived a form of innocent nationalism that undermined the ideological clarity of those who insisted they were citizens of future sovereign homelands rather than of India.

Across the Northeast, I observed this pattern repeated. For each separatist group, there was an RSS *shakha* or an affiliate organisation—collectively known as the Sangh Parivar. These included the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti, Seva Bharati, Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, and the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP). Their work was quiet, decentralised, and persistent. Scholars often describe the RSS network as “cellular,” capable of adapting to different social environments through embedded volunteers, long-term cultural engagement, and welfare activities (Andersen & Damle, 2019). The Northeast was no exception.

The question that repeatedly struck me was how this network had penetrated so deeply into a region characterised by linguistic diversity, missionary influence, and violent separatism. To grasp this, one must look back to 1946, when the first RSS *shakha* was founded in Guwahati on 27 October by three pracharaks—Dadarao Parmarth, Vasant Rao Oak, and Krishna Paranjpe (Deshpande, 1993). Their mission aligned with the organisation’s broader aim: uniting people through a shared national-cultural narrative that transcended ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities.

Early expansion was driven more by social engagement than political mobilisation. Initiatives

such as the Pahari Sewa Sangh, later incorporated into VKA, aimed to build relationships with tribal communities through active participation in daily life. This was not superficial cultural outreach typical of state-led programmes. Instead, it involved establishing mutual trust through prolonged immersion. Anthropologists studying the region observe that such trust-building is vital in overcoming the lingering suspicion of “mainland India” (Baruah, 2003). By the 1970s, every district in Assam had an RSS *shakha*.

The Assam Movement (1979–1985), which stemmed from concerns about migration from Bangladesh, marked a significant turning point. While the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) called for the removal of all “foreigners” from electoral rolls, the RSS argued for keeping Hindu Bengalis, many of whom were religious refugees fleeing persecution (Weiner, 1983). The ABVP’s involvement in the movement helped prevent separatist groups from dominating its narrative. These actions gradually enhanced the legitimacy of the RSS among some sections of Assamese society, which had previously been cautious of external influence.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the RSS focused more of its energy on Christian-majority regions—Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Mizoram. Instead of opposing Christianity directly, the organisation aimed to revive and institutionalise indigenous belief systems. One of the most frequently cited cases, documented in ethnographic research, involves Rajesh Deshkar, a pracharak who worked with tribes in Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh to give visual form to the deity Rangfraa (Longkumer, 2018). Over several

months, he sketched multiple versions of Rangfraa based on tribal descriptions. When a statue was finally commissioned and brought from Rajasthan, many villagers reportedly hid in awe and fear, having never visualised their deity in physical form. Today, more than a hundred Rangfraa temples are found in the region.

Similar patterns appeared as the Sangh supported the revival of Sanamahism in Manipur, the Heraka movement among the Zeliangrong tribes of Nagaland, and the Seng Khasi faith in Meghalaya. These initiatives resonated with local communities who felt culturally marginalised by aggressive missionary networks. Scholars argue that the Sangh’s success in these regions arises from its ability to localise nationalism by embedding it within indigenous worldviews rather than imposing an external ideology (Jaffrelot, 2011). In doing so, the RSS developed a language of belonging that was neither homogenising nor assimilationist but rooted in “civilisational commonality.”

However, this journey was not without a heavy cost. Advocating for national unity in the Northeast often involved confronting separatist groups that saw nationalists as barriers. ULFA carried out several killings of RSS workers over the years. Shashikant Chauthaiwala, a seasoned pracharak, recounts in his memoir the murders of Murli Manohar, Omprakash Chaturvedi, and Pramod Narayan Dikshit, along with Assamese pracharakas Sukleshwar Medhi and Madhumangal Sharma (Chauthaiwala, 2015). In Tripura, the combination of militant activities by the NLFT and the anti-Hindu stance of the then CPI-M state government Chakraborty. Despite negotiations at the national

level, all four were executed in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2000). Such incidents highlight the brutal reality of nationalist mobilisation in regions where sovereignty itself is disputed.

Yet the Sangh persisted. From a single *shakha* in 1946, its network expanded into hundreds of educational institutions, hostels, training centres, and daily *shakhas* across the region. Their work fostered a countervailing narrative to militant separatism: one that portrayed India not as an external power but as a shared civilisational space. For tribal children who travelled to distant Indian cities for the first time, nationalism was not an abstract idea but an experience of geographic and emotional connection. Through thousands of small interactions—singing the national anthem each morning, travelling beyond their districts, interacting with volunteers from across the country—students encountered a version of India difficult to reconcile with separatist visions.

This cumulative influence has transformed the sociopolitical mindset of the Northeast. While separatist groups exploited fault lines of language, ethnicity, and religion, the RSS aimed to dissolve them through cultural outreach, welfare initiatives, and ideological perseverance. Many scholars argue

that the Sangh's model in the Northeast exemplifies one of the most successful cases of grassroots nation-building in India's postcolonial history (Andersen & Damle, 2019). The organisation's capacity to withstand violence, adapt strategies, and embed itself in local contexts has allowed it to become a key player in shaping regional political awareness.

Today, the work continues—*lahey lahey*, slowly but steadily. The psychological distance between the Northeast and the rest of India has narrowed significantly, even as challenges persist. The figure of Bharat Mata, the symbolic representation of the nation, gains significance only when children from the most remote corners can encounter other parts of the country. Like the children of Haflong who saw the sea for the first time, a unified national imagination emerges not from state slogans but from lived experience.

The story of the RSS in the Northeast is thus not merely about organisational expansion but about transforming how belonging is understood in a region historically marked by fragmentation. It is the story of nationalism experienced quietly rather than loudly proclaimed, cultivated through relationships rather than coercion. And it remains, by its very nature, unfinished.

References:

- 1 Andersen, W. K., & Damle, S. D. (2019). *The RSS: A view to the inside*. Penguin Random House.
- 2 Baruah, S. (2003). *Confronting constructionism: Ending India's Naga war*. Journal of Peace Research, 40(3), 321–338.
- 3 Chauthaiwala, S. (2015). My journey as a pracharak. *Suruchi Prakashan*.
- 4 Deshpande, R. (1993). *The RSS in the Northeast: The beginning*. Suruchi Publications.
- 5 Haokip, T. (2016). *Ethnic conflicts and their implications in the Northeast*. Strategic Analysis, 40(1), 36–49.

- 6 Jaffrelot, C. (2011). Religion, caste, and politics in India. *Columbia University Press*.
- 7 Longkumer, A. (2018). Reform, identity and narratives of belonging: The Heraka movement in Northeast India. *Routledge*.
- 8 Ministry of Home Affairs. (2000). Annual report 1999–2000. *Government of India*.
- 8 Ministry of Home Affairs. (2001). Annual report 2000–2001. *Government of India*.
- 9 Misra, U. (2000). The Periphery strikes back: Challenges to the nation-state in Assam and Nagaland. *Indian Institute of Advanced Study*.
- 10 Phukon, G. (2002). ULFA and the rising of Assam. *Vikas Publishing*.
- 11 Shimray, U. A. (2008). *Naga identity: End of ethnicity?* Economic and Political Weekly, 43(23), 21–24.
- 12 Sinha, A. C., & Goswami, U. (2011). Indian Northeast affairs: Continuity and change. *Concept Publishing*.
- 13 Weiner, M. (1983). *The political demography of Assam's anti-foreigner agitation*. Population and Development Review, 9(2), 279–292.



Recollections of My Father's Tryst with the RSS

Arun Sahni*

The centenary celebrations of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) have resonated widely, captivating the imagination of people not just in India but globally. The organisation's recent visibility, driven by its nation-building initiatives and the selfless dedication of its Swayamsevaks, has drawn considerable attention to India's profound heritage and civilisational strengths. For me, a life dedicated to soldiering reveals an essential truth: the ethos and very soul of this unique organisation and its flagbearers reflect values remarkably similar to those that define a soldier.

This deep realisation has inspired me to write this article: a personal account sharing the pivotal role the RSS played in my father's life and, by extension, in our own formative years. The RSS, through its vision, disciplined action, and structured activities, profoundly impacts individuals. It undeniably fosters empathy for fellow humans and instils a deep-seated desire to respect, understand, and absorb the rich values and vast knowledge of our civilisational heritage.

This article is also a tribute to my father, Lt Col Varinder Kumar Sahni. A dedicated nationalist and army officer, he carried the indelible scars of the Partition, having grown up in Rawalpindi. After

his retirement, he once again became a committed *karyakarta*, joining the RSS *shakha* in Jagadhri/Yamuna Nagar. I believe he later transitioned into a *pracharak*, engaging actively in all Sangh activities across the Jagadhri-Ambala region. Furthermore, he was involved in some capacity with the esteemed publication, the *Organiser*, at the regional level.

The article recounts what my father shared with us as we grew up and, more recently, what I discovered in his personal diary after he passed away. It aims to capture the essence of those agonising pre-partition times and his involvement with the emerging but influential RSS. It was during those challenging moments that his personal association with this unparalleled organisation began. Their vision and impartial engagement with society drew him into their fold. Being an emotional person, he was deeply affected by the events leading to and including the partition, like most of that generation who had to endure these horrific times.

He rarely spoke about those bygone days, as they likely stirred mixed memories. To provide context for the environment and period at that time, the family, a year before partition, was somewhat unsettled, as the family's patriarch, my grandfather,

*Lt Gen Arun Kumar Sahni is a decorated, scholar-soldier, with 40 years of commissioned service in the Indian Army. In his last assignment, tenanted the second highest rank of the army, he was the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of one of the six operational commands of the Indian Army. In addition to his Command assignments of leading military formations, his important staff appointments include 'Chief Operations Officer' of an Infantry Brigade in Sri Lanka as part of Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), Colonel General Staff responsible for operations of a Counter Insurgency Force in Jammu & Kashmir, 'Principal Staff officer' at Army Headquarters, Delhi, and 'Director General Information Technology'.

a Rai Sahib and a distinguished lawyer, died suddenly of a heart attack. Thus, when partition appeared imminent, the family elders moved to Delhi on the advice of those already working there. My father remained in Rawalpindi to manage the family's assets and continue his work as a chemical engineer. I assume that both personal circumstances and external factors led to my father's increased involvement with the RSS.

A brief overview of the status of RSS in the 1940s, based on historical records. It was active in Rawalpindi, establishing a network of *shakhas* as part of its expanding presence across undivided Punjab. During the 1947 Partition, it played a crucial role in organising relief efforts and protecting Hindu and Sikh communities, including coordinating evacuations and reuniting separated families. The organisation had founded the *Punjab Relief Committee* and the *Hindu Sahayata Samiti*, with multiple branches, to support refugees. It set up more than 300 relief and security camps across the affected regions. The youth of that generation shaped and carried out their vision.

Another factor that contributed to my father's attraction, admiration, and respect for the RSS was his passion for history and his interest in India's civilisational and spiritual vibrancy. His sentiments aligned more with the Sangh when he started working in the communally charged environment of the '*Soda Ash factory of Alkali Chemical Corporation of India*' in June 1947 at Khewra, Jhelum district (now Pakistan). By then, religious polarisation had become quite marked in northern India. Although the factory was managed by the British, with most senior officials being Hindus, the British leadership favoured the other

community and ignored their excesses, including threats to colleagues of different religions. It was here that he first mentioned in his diary that there were members of the RSS in the organisation, and I presume it was here that he joined.

My personal recollection of his association with the RSS dates back to the early 1960s, when we visited Delhi on holiday to see my grandmother. My father was an Army Officer, and when in Delhi, he would meet some of his old acquaintances from Rawalpindi days (before partition) and always visited the RSS office complex at Jhandewala — 'Keshav Kunj' at Karol Bagh, New Delhi. Being the eldest child, I often accompanied him. I was always fascinated to observe the unique bond he shared with these Rawalpindi friends, who were traders, office workers, and some entrepreneurs. Most of them were active in Sangh activities and lived near Old Delhi, Azadpur Market, and Civil Lines. They came from very different backgrounds but were united by the shared hardships they endured in Rawalpindi from August to October 1947. These emotions are understandable and relatable, as we in the army also develop unbreakable bonds with our colleagues when serving and operating in demanding environments.

His diary contains entries detailing the locations and times of violence, communal killings, and the forcible seizure of properties in Rawalpindi, particularly of those who had moved to relief camps. It also records their frustration with the biased attitude of government officials, police, and the officialdom in general, of Pakistan. In these circumstances, they were all thrown together in Rawalpindi, actively engaging with the Sangh, while offering support and solace to each other, as their

families had been relocated to safer areas. The teachings and discipline of the Sangh ensured that these young, idealistic youths could protect the Hindu community remaining there while also safeguarding their assets.

What was intriguing was the way these young men selflessly gave away their expensive flight tickets to India to those less fortunate, who, in their opinion, needed to be evacuated urgently. This humane act of donating costly tickets, sent by their parents with difficulty, must be seen in the context of that era, when mobile phones were unavailable, and landline access was limited. Additionally, the communication infrastructure had been disrupted due to unceasing violence, destruction, and looting. Over time, their activism was deemed anti-national, and they came under scrutiny by local authorities. It was only when they seemed to cross a red line that they left their homes. My father finally

evacuated on 07 October 1947, when his personal safety was at stake.

Fast forward to the 1980s, and I observed his enthusiasm for attending the shakaa, inspiring youth with his experiences and his unwavering dedication to the community. His post-retirement life once again became meaningful, radiating energy and joy. I did meet his colleagues of the Sangh, some of whom are now senior officials of this vibrant organisation. Being in the Army, I did not get involved with the Sangh, but I am certain that my father's activities influenced my own opinions and dealings.

I conclude by emphasising that the lives of many, like my father's generation, were shaped by the values and discipline of the Sangh. I am confident that their collective efforts have laid the foundation for nation-building and paved the way for us to realise our national aspirations.



Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's Grassroots Engagement with Denotified and Nomadic Tribes in Maharashtra

Dnyanashri Kulkarni*

Through a qualitative study of long-term projects in Maharashtra, including the institutional Eklavya Ashram Shala at Yamgarwadi and the widespread Palawarchi Shala bridge schools, the research examines how the RSS translates ideological principles into sustained social practice.

Introduction

India is known for its immense diversity, with numerous communities with distinct cultures and occupations; among these are the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs). These communities are historically mobile, with a peripatetic lifestyle, and are known to have provided essential goods, services, and entertainment to settled agrarian societies. From pastoralists and hunter-gatherers to artisan groups, entertainers, and religious performers, these communities carved out intricate ecological and economic niches (BOKIL, 2002).

However, one of the most damaging yet less discussed chapters in the history of these communities began with the British colonial administration's enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871. This legislation notified specific communities as "criminal by birth" (INDIA, 2008). Furthermore, the Act imposed a regime of severe

oppression: compulsory registration at police stations, restricted movement, and forced settlement in monitored colonies that were "just short of jails," surrounded by barbed wire (Organiser, 2017).

Although the Act was repealed in 1952, following India's independence, and the communities were "denotified," the change in nomenclature did little to improve their conditions or remove the deep-seated social stigma (BOKIL, 2002). As noted by activist Girish Prabhune in an interview (Organiser, 2017), even decades later, communities such as the Pardhis were routinely treated as "usual suspects." This legal history transformed their social role from specialised service to perceived criminality, leaving only a long shadow of exclusion.

DNTs present a classic case of social exclusion (BOKIL, 2002). Beyond social exclusion,

*Dnyanashri Kulkarni is a Research Fellow at India Foundation and a PhD candidate at the Jindal School of International Affairs, specializing in European Studies, with a research focus on the rise of conservatism and its impact on international relations. She has previously served as a Consultant at the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), where she worked on initiatives in cultural diplomacy and global academic exchange. Dnyanashri holds a Bachelor's degree in French Literature from the University of Mumbai and is DELF-certified from Alliance Française. A former Rotary International Youth Exchange Scholar, she spent a year in France, gaining immersive cross-cultural experience and language proficiency. Her academic and professional journey reflects a deep interest in the intersections of culture, ideology, and diplomacy, and she is committed to bridging policy research with meaningful global engagement.

they face a multifaceted crisis, including the erosion of traditional livelihoods due to environmental degradation, restrictive laws, and modernisation; limited access to education, healthcare, and political representation because of the absence of a fixed domicile; and the persistent legacy of the criminal tag, which leaves them vulnerable to human rights violations and societal exclusion (organiser, 2013). In response to this marginalisation, a significant counter-narrative and rehabilitative movements have emerged.

Activists and scholars argue that these communities are not merely deprived but are the true bearers of traditional Bharatiya knowledge and custodians of ancient skills in metallurgy, stone carving, herbal medicine, and art, as evidenced by historical sites such as Ajanta and Ellora (Organiser, 2017). This perspective advocates 'habilitation' rather than 'rehabilitation' (Organiser, 2017). Institutional mechanisms such as the Bhatke Vimukta Vikas Parishad (BVVP) adopt this approach, emphasising changes in societal mindsets, providing innovative educational hostels, securing civic rights for DNTs, and restoring their dignity and rightful place in society (Organiser, 2013).

This article aims to address the under-examined role of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its networks in framing the discourse and engaging with India's Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs). It specifically investigates how the RSS's ideological construct of social harmony (*Samajik Samarasta*) is applied to the DNT issue. The article's primary objectives are threefold: first, to critically analyse the RSS approach; second, to examine the on-ground

mobilisation and "habilitation" work of the RSS; and third, to evaluate the implications of this engagement, assessing whether it facilitates genuine empowerment and integration, and strategically incorporates marginalised communities into a mainstream cultural and political fold. Ultimately, the article seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how the RSS navigates this complex terrain of historical stigma, welfare, and identity politics.

For this research, a qualitative approach is adopted, involving site visits and volunteer work at projects run by the RSS-affiliated initiative 'Palawarchi Shala', particularly in Maharashtra, which provided firsthand observation. Furthermore, an institutional study of the broader RSS-affiliated school at Yamgarwadi is conducted to understand how ideology is translated into structured social practice. In addition, a semi-structured interview with Uddhav Kale, President, BVVP, was beneficial in critically understanding ground-level perspectives. Triangulating participant observation, institutional analysis, and community testimony, this methodology provides a grounded, nuanced analysis.

Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes

According to the 2008 report (INDIA, 2008), roughly 10 per cent of the population in India is Denotified and Nomadic. The British enacted the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA), 1871, as a preventive policing measure that branded entire communities as "criminal by birth." This law institutionalised collective punishment, surveillance, restrictions on movement, forced registration, and confinement

in settlements. Furthermore, the 1911 revision expanded state power and allowed the arbitrary notification of communities based merely on ‘reason to believe,’ blood relations, or local elite testimonies.

However, scholars and historians who have studied the history of these communities draw attention to one crucial aspect of this criminalisation, which lies in the history of the 1857 uprising. Many nomadic and semi-nomadic groups participated in the 1857 freedom movement, which worried the administration. They did not want it to snowball into a ‘national movement’ (INDIA, 2008). On the other hand, nomads carried information from one part to the other, and their lifestyle included linking different communities, which made the British particularly nervous. Against this background, the British prepared a list of Criminal Tribes, in which nomads, shifting cultivators, and forest-dwellers were classified.

To date, the Indian Constitution does not include any special provisions for the Denotified or Nomadic Tribes. However, some of these tribes and communities are included in the lists of SCs, STs and BCs/OBCs. Although a large number of these tribes are on these lists, they have not been able to avail themselves of the rights enshrined in the Constitution. Secondly, it is important to note that although some of these tribes and communities are included in the SC, ST and OBC lists, anomalies have been noted. For example, the Banjara community has been included as ST in Andhra Pradesh and Orissa; as OBC in Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan; and as SC in Punjab, Delhi and Karnataka. However, it is also important to highlight that there has been

significant progress, as such anomalies have been at least partly addressed in certain states, for example, in the state of Maharashtra.

RSS efforts in Maharashtra

RSS believes that social transformation (samajik Parivartan) will only be realised when “Sajjan Shakti” (the power of good people) comes together. RSS further believes that Samajik Samarasata (social harmony) is not merely a political or social strategy, but an “article of faith” (RSS, 2024).

Within this broader context, social organisations began engaging with these communities to address their long-term exclusion. In Maharashtra, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) began focused work among these communities on 2 October 1991. In the early 1990s, RSS workers in Maharashtra came into close contact with Pardhi and other denotified communities and witnessed extreme poverty, limited schooling, and social neglect. According to accounts within the movement, specific tragic incidents, including the deaths of children from the Pardhi community who had earlier interacted with RSS shakhas, deeply affected the volunteers. This prompted senior workers, such as Dada Idate and Girish Prabhune, to commit to sustained rehabilitation efforts rather than to short-term charity or relief.

RSS’ approach is rooted in long-term social integration. Rather than treating communities as permanent victims, the emphasis is on restoring dignity and self-confidence through education and social stability. This approach aligns with the broader RSS philosophy, which seeks to combine cultural belonging with practical uplift.

The RSS intervention among the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes communities is structured around four key pillars: **Shikshan (education), Swalamban (self-reliance), Sanman (dignity), and Suraksha (security)**. Education was identified as the most urgent need, as generations of children had grown up without access to stable

schooling. The work began on a small scale with just ten students from the Pardhi community. These children were provided with residential support, including regular meals and shelter. This was particularly important because many families lived nomadic or semi-settled lives, making regular schooling difficult.



Image 1: Inauguration image of school in Yamgarwadi in 2011

In 1995, this effort was institutionalised with the establishment of the Eklavya Prathmik Ashram Shala. Ashram schools have long been used in tribal welfare models to provide residential education to children from remote or marginalised communities. The Eklavya school followed this model but placed special emphasis on first-generation learners. Over time, the school expanded beyond primary education to include secondary levels. Today, nearly 450 students from Classes 1 to 10 are educated through this initiative. For many families,

this school became the first stable educational institution their children had ever experienced.

Alongside the Yamgarwadi school project, another complementary initiative, the '**Palavarchi Shala**', was launched around 2003–04 across Maharashtra. These schools, currently numbering about 95–100, focus on students in Classes 1 to 7 to prevent early dropouts. In 2018-19, I had the opportunity to visit, volunteer, and interact with students and mentors at 'Gopal Wasti' near Vitthalwadi, District Thane, Maharashtra. The



Image 2: Gopal Wasti Palavarchi Shala Rakhi Celebration in 2018

project I visited was conducted in a temple, where around 35-40 students from Classes 1 to 7 were enrolled. From my interactions with the mentors, I learnt that many children from these communities struggle with formal schooling due to language barriers, irregular attendance, and a lack of academic support at home. The 'Palavarchi Shala' model addresses this by assigning dedicated mentors and support teachers to help students cope with the curriculum and examination system.

It is pertinent to note that these RSS initiatives functioned, or rather were sustained, for many years without government financial assistance. Until 2019, the schools and hostels were largely funded through donations, volunteer work, and community participation. In an interview with Mr Uddhav Kale, he highlighted that government support began only later and remains limited. He mentioned that even after government funding was

introduced, it covered only a portion of the total students. Hence, these institutions still continue to rely on non-state support. It is worth noting that this pattern is consistent with broader studies on DNT welfare, which note that these communities often fall through gaps in policy implementation despite being officially recognised as vulnerable groups.

The work of RSS among Denotified and Nomadic Tribes communities is notably carried forward through institutional frameworks such as the Bhatke Vimukta Vikas Pratishthan and the Bhatke Vimukta Parishad. These bodies not only focus on service delivery but also on raising awareness and advancing policy recommendations. They provide insights not only into the historical injustice faced by denotified tribes but also into how they continue to suffer even today, and they demand targeted policy interventions rather than

generic welfare schemes. In recent years, there has been growing public recognition of these issues, for e.g., the official observance of Bhatke Vimukt Diwas on 31 August in Maharashtra.

The Way Forward

The way forward for the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes communities should move beyond fragmented welfare measures towards a comprehensive, long-term policy framework. While community-driven initiatives, such as the RSS-led educational and rehabilitation efforts, have demonstrated the importance and success of sustained engagement, the deprivation and social stigma faced by these communities require stronger institutional support and policy clarity. Therefore, a **separate and clearly defined policy framework (dhoran)** for Denotified and Nomadic Tribes should be formulated at both the state and national levels.

Secondly, education should remain the central pillar of future interventions. Building on RSS' residential and bridge-school models, strengthening access to secondary and higher education, and ensuring scholarships for first-generation learners are essential. Similarly, it is essential to incorporate **skill development and livelihood programmes** that promote self-reliance and reduce intergenerational poverty. Furthermore, vocational training, entrepreneurship support, and market linkages can help break dependence on informal and insecure occupations.

As inferred from interactions with Mr Kale and the mentors of the 'Palawarchi Shala' project, up to 2019, the educational initiatives for these communities operated without government financial

support. However, a turning point occurred in 2019, when the Maharashtra government began providing financial assistance for students in Classes 1 to 7. This was the first instance of state support for the project in Maharashtra. Furthermore, in 2021–22, the scope of assistance was extended to include students in Classes 8 to 10. However, despite this government support, it remains limited in scale and coverage. For instance, at present, the financial assistance provided by the state government is sufficient for only 250 students, whereas the total number of beneficiaries is considerably higher. As a result, a substantial portion of educational and residential costs continues to be borne by non-governmental efforts.

As discussed above, the state government in Maharashtra has introduced a few welfare schemes to support the educational, financial, and social upliftment of Vimukta Jatis (Denotified Tribes), Nomadic Tribes, Special Backward Classes, and Other Backward Classes. Regular audits and systematic impact assessments must support these initiatives to ensure transparency, accountability, and effective implementation.

Lastly, mere financial aid and reservation policies won't be sufficient to integrate them into the mainstream social order. Public awareness, legal safeguards against discrimination, and the cultural identity of these communities should be considered for holistic development.

Author Brief Bio: Dnyanashri Kulkarni is a Research Fellow at India Foundation and a PhD candidate at the Jindal School of International Affairs, specializing in European Studies, with a research focus on the rise of conservatism and its impact on international relations. She has previously

served as a Consultant at the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), where she worked on initiatives in cultural diplomacy and global academic exchange. Dnyanashri holds a Bachelor's degree in French Literature from the University of Mumbai and is DELF-certified from Alliance Française. A former Rotary International Youth Exchange

Scholar, she spent a year in France, gaining immersive cross-cultural experience and language proficiency. Her academic and professional journey reflects a deep interest in the intersections of culture, ideology, and diplomacy, and she is committed to bridging policy research with meaningful global engagement.

References:

- 1 *Bokil, Milind. "Facing Exclusion: The Nomadic Communities in Western India."* Indian Journal of Social Work, vol. 63, no. 1, 2022, pp. 33-45, ijsw.tiss.edu/collect/ijsw/import/vol.63/no.1/33-45.pdf.
- 2 *National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes.* Report of the National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes. *Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India, Dec. 2017, socialjustice.gov.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/1date%20Commission.pdf*Organiser. (2013, November 10). *A unique experiment for rehabilitation of nomadic communities*, organiser.org/2013/11/10/53430/general/r9a7b4214/
- 3 "Nomadic Communities: Nomads Are True Bearer of Traditional Knowledge." Organiser, 25 Dec. 2017, organiser.org/2017/12/25/119857/bharat/nomedic-communities-nomads-are-true-bearer-of-traditional-knowledge/
- 4 *Hosabale, Dattatreya. "RSS Pledges to Join the Whole Society to Move Forward for Samajik Parivartan."* Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 17 Mar. 2024, www.rss.org/Encyc/2024/3/17/RSS-pledges-to-join-the-whole-society-to-move-forward-for-Samajik-Parivartan.html



A Persian in the Land of Thalis: Reflections on India, Identity, and the RSS

Omid Babelian*

Introduction

In a world where our understanding of cultures often dissolves into the fog of preconceptions, and political ideas are reflected through the distorted mirrors of cliché, approaching the lived reality of an ancient society—especially one as layered as India—requires stepping away from ready-made narratives and towards direct experience. India cannot be understood through a single viewpoint or label; it resembles a thali—a diverse, multi-layered spread whose meaning becomes clear only when its elements are seen together rather than in isolation.

This note seeks to explore how direct interaction with groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) can contribute to a more accurate understanding of certain social and cultural dynamics within India—not as an endorsement or rejection, but as an attempt to situate the organisation within the broader “thali” of India’s complexity. RSS occupies an influential space in India’s public life, and that influence has

generated a wide range of interpretations, often sharply divergent.

Ram Madhav, in *The Hindutva Paradigm* (2024), offers a thought-provoking observation: “**The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is difficult to understand but easy to misunderstand**” (*ibid.*, 1). This statement does not define the organisation; rather, it underscores the importance of our method of understanding. Many external interpretations capture only one part of the picture and extend it to the whole. Direct engagement—speaking with members, observing activities, and encountering the organisation in practice—can help complete that picture, whether by confirming prior assumptions or complicating them.

Approaches rooted in distance, especially those shaped by dominant frameworks in Orientalist scholarship, tend to emphasise certain aspects of organisations, such as the RSS, while overlooking others. In contrast, firsthand experience opens space to observe the broader

*Omid Babelian is a researcher at the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), Iran’s leading think tank dedicated to Track 1.5 and Track 2 diplomacy. He holds a Master’s degree and a Ph.D. in World Studies with a specialization in the Indian Subcontinent. His doctoral research focuses on an analysis of the Hindutva discourse. Additionally, he works on the Indian Ocean region, examining the maritime dimensions of international relations and the role of regional actors in shaping global dynamics. His academic and professional work centers on the political, social, and cultural dynamics of South Asia. At IPIS, he actively contributes to research initiatives that foster dialogue and support Iran’s strategic diplomatic engagement. Beyond his regional specialization, Omid has a profound interest in cinema, the philosophy of art, political thought, and international literature. His interdisciplinary approach allows him to combine political analysis with cultural and philosophical insights, enriching his contributions to the study of international relations and global diplomacy.

cultural, social, and political spectrum that becomes visible only from within. The goal is not to render quick judgments but to acknowledge the complexity that is often flattened in external analyses.

Iran and India, linked through long-standing historical ties and shared intellectual traditions, provide fertile ground for deeper dialogue and mutual understanding. This note suggests that approaches based on direct observation—including engagement with the RSS—can help us move beyond common stereotypes and towards a more nuanced, multi-dimensional view of India’s cultural, philosophical, and political landscape—one shaped not from a distance, but through direct experience.

1. The Challenge of Perception and Research Methodology

The serious, sustained study of any civilisation, particularly one as ancient, vast, and symbolically intricate as India, must commence with a fundamental critique of its own methodological assumptions. The philosopher **Slavoj Žižek** posed a deceptively simple yet profoundly unsettling question that serves as an essential starting point for cross-cultural inquiry: “**What if the way we perceive a problem is already part of the problem?**” This proposition is far more than a mere philosophical query; it is a crucial epistemic imperative when engaging with a culture defined by layered history and deep symbolic resonance. The lens through which an external observer views a complex culture—whether shaped by inherited academic paradigms, geopolitical frameworks, or prevailing media narratives—often predetermines the nature and shape of the very “problem” being

analysed, as the observer is fundamentally entangled in the phenomenon itself.

This profound methodological truth was repeatedly encountered throughout the trajectory of research on South Asia, spanning from master’s-level work on the subtle concepts underlying **Gandhi’s ahimsa** to doctoral-level inquiries into the complexities of **Hindutva** and the organisational ethos of the **Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)**. The researcher’s own conceptual frameworks often become intrinsically woven into the landscape being surveyed, making objective distance a constant struggle.

A well-known adage shared among those who attempt to grasp India succinctly captures this recurring sense of intellectual humility and the scale of the challenge: “When you first arrive in India, you think you can write a book about it. Soon, you realise that only an article may suffice. And eventually, you understand that even a single sentence about India is profoundly difficult to write.” India is not a static object of study; it is an oceanic, multi-hued, living world of continuous experience that necessitates profound intellectual modesty and an acknowledgement of its near-infinite complexity. Every attempt to provide a singular, definitive explanation invariably uncovers new layers of complexity, thus continually reaffirming Žižek’s core warning: the means of perception are themselves entangled within the problem’s definition.

Consequently, any attempt at an authentic, academically rigorous understanding of contemporary Indian phenomena, particularly the ideological nuances of Hindutva and the structure

of the RSS, must involve a deliberate and critical effort to transcend the **Western constructs** that have historically dominated global scholarly discourse. As articulated in **Edward Said's** foundational critique, *Orientalism* (Said, 1978), Western scholarship has frequently constructed knowledge less as a means of genuine understanding and more as an exercise in subtle cultural power and intellectual domination. Numerous conventional Western analyses of both Hindutva and the RSS often inadvertently reflect these pre-constructed frameworks—which may be rooted in political reductionism or secularist assumptions—rather than the actual, lived realities and self-defined terms used by the Indian actors themselves.

To penetrate beyond these external analytical veils, the only effective methodology is one of direct, prolonged, and sustained dialogue. The most reliable and nuanced insights were derived from years of direct interaction with influential Indian thinkers, including **Ram Madhav**, and from extensive, candid engagement with a wide array of grassroots members within the RSS. The key finding was that the most authentic comprehension emerges when the voices are heard **in their own terms and idiom**—whether expressed in regional languages or in English, which serves as a pragmatic and crucial bridge for cross-cultural conversation—rather than relying solely on generalised, abstract, or politically charged secondary interpretations originating from external sources. This commitment to primary, experiential, and dialogic engagement is the absolute prerequisite for effectively navigating and overcoming the challenge of perception.

2. Iran and India: Mythic and Civilizational Kinship

The relationship between Iran and India is not merely one of geopolitical proximity or intermittent historical interaction; it is defined by a deep-seated, fraternal, and structural kinship. This profound connection is best captured by the timeless, powerful metaphor of **Rama and Lakshmana** from the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*. Lakshmana is portrayed not as a mere secondary figure, but as the embodiment of unwavering ethical fortitude and constant, loyal companionship, whose presence and support are essential to Rama fulfilling his complex and challenging **dharmic duties**. In this same vein, Iran functions as a natural, almost mythic, counterpart—a true sibling civilisation—for interpreting and understanding India. It serves not as an external critic but rather as a **co-originating cultural force** whose shared roots illuminate the fundamental structures of the other. This powerful, enduring mythic analogy underscores the deep, shared foundations that inextricably bind the two great civilisations.

This conceptual parallelism extends far beyond mere literary metaphor, penetrating the core of shared linguistic, philosophical, and moral structures. In the Indian civilizational paradigm, **Dharma** functions as the multifaceted cornerstone defining ethical, social, and cosmic order. The term is inherently holistic, encompassing duty, law, righteousness, virtue, and the appropriate way of living in alignment with universal truth (Klostermaier, 2007). In parallel with ancient Iranian thought, closely analogous principles are manifest in **Asha**, which defines cosmic order,

fundamental truth, and the ethical conduct necessary to maintain that order. Complementing this is **Dâd**, which denotes the specific principles of justice, equity, and social equilibrium. A critical, unifying convergence between these two systems is the strong prioritisation of **right action (praxis)** over passive doctrinal belief, consistently emphasising ethical living as the highest measure of human alignment with the universal order.

This deep structural kinship is unequivocally supported by the presence of significant **shared mythic symbols**, most conspicuously the veneration of the **sacred cow**. This animal transcends its status as livestock to become a powerful symbolic entity in both cultural narratives. In Vedic texts and throughout Indian culture, cows symbolise abundance, vitality, divine insight, and the profound principle of cosmic generativity. This widespread veneration resonates deeply with parallel Iranian motifs and cultural memory. In the **Avesta**, the life-giving cow (*gâu*) is understood to embody essential cosmic energy crucial to creation and continuous sustenance.

The shared, powerful archetype is explicitly reflected in the heroic narratives of both traditions, particularly the detailed role of the cow in the Iranian narrative:

- In the Iranian national epic, the **Shahnameh**, the miraculous, nurturing cow named **Barmaiye** (also known as Bermaiye) plays a pivotal, life-saving role. **Barmaiye** provides essential sustenance and sanctuary to the young **Fereydun**, the hero destined to rise and ultimately overthrow the tyrant **Zahhak**. The cow's presence at the start

of Fereydun's life is not merely an incidental detail; it is a profound symbolic act. **Barmaiye** embodies the life-giving, protective, and foundational energies necessary for the eventual triumph of **Asha** (truth/order) over the chaos and injustice represented by Zahhak. Fereydun's ability to restore equilibrium in the realm is thus tied back directly to the sacred, nurturing entity that supported him in his infancy. The cow, in this sense, is an active agent of providence and the continuity of moral order.

- In parallel Vedic traditions, ancient heroic or semi-divine figures, such as **Trita**, are frequently aided—either symbolically or directly—by sacred bovines in their profound struggle to confront chaos, combat disorder, and restore the vital principle of **Dharma**.

In both heroic cycles, the cow serves as a consistent and vital facilitator of moral order and cosmic justice, acting as a bridge between human heroic action and the essential divine or cosmic orchestration. This symbolic and thematic continuity clearly shows that India and Iran are not merely “others” to each other; they form **twin civilisations** that share fundamental archetypes, deeply ingrained ethical imaginative frameworks, and identical cosmological concerns (Thapar, 2013). Fereydun's successful restoration of balance after defeating Zahhak, rooted in the victory of cosmic law and order, closely parallels the Indian concept of **dharmic heroism**, as powerfully exemplified by the complex moral responsibilities borne by figures such as Rama and the Pandavas in their respective epics.

3. Shared Ethical and Spiritual Frameworks

The foundational connection between India and Iran extends well beyond shared myths and historical contact, reaching into the deepest layers of human spiritual and existential experience. This shared intellectual and moral ground is most vividly articulated through fundamental philosophical concepts and parallel poetic expressions that inherently convey profound complexity.

The Philosophical Core: Dharma and Asha (Ashé)

The intellectual bedrock of both civilisations is characterised by concepts that actively **resist simple, one-to-one translation** into Western languages, reflecting the unique, integrated nature of ethics, cosmic order, and societal structure within their respective worldviews.

- **Dharma (India):** As the quintessential framework, it encompasses duty, moral law, righteousness, and, most pivotally, ethical praxis. It serves as a comprehensive guide to individual conduct and as the mechanism for maintaining social and cosmic order (Klostermaier, 2007).
- **Asha (Ancient Iran):** This principle functions analogously, serving as the ultimate definition of universal truth, cosmic harmony, and the necessary ethical conduct required of humans to align with this cosmic reality.
- **Dâd (Iran):** Complementing *Asha*, *dâd* provides the specific, actionable framework for administering social justice and ensuring equitable equilibrium within the community structure.

These terms are critically important because they universally encode the principle that moral conduct is entirely inseparable from societal accountability and personal alignment with a greater, transcendent universal order. Understanding the foundational importance of **Dharma** and **Asha**—and their shared emphasis on **action (praxis) over abstract belief (dogma)**—is essential for interpreting both the overall trajectory of Indian civilizational thought and the practice-focused ethical framework adopted by the RSS. The core commonality is the belief that religious or traditional life is primarily defined by **conduct and moral responsibility**, establishing right action as the final measure of alignment with cosmic law.

The Poetics of Bewilderment: Nanak and Hafez

The sheer continuity of the spiritual quest and the expression of universal existential doubt are powerfully captured in the poetry of two great spiritual masters: **Guru Nanak**, the founder of Sikhism, and the Persian poet **Hafez**. Both articulate a shared human predicament—the sense of spiritual and cognitive **astonishment (ta’ajjub)** when confronted by the immense, baffling complexity of existence. Guru Nanak gives voice to this deep sense of bewilderment and the necessity of self-search in his striking verses: *“I remain astonished in the search for myself. / In darkness, I find no path. / Bewildered in pride, I weep with regret. / How can one attain salvation?”* (Granth, 2004, 202, trans. Grant)

This clear expression of spiritual searching, existential confusion, and the difficulty of finding the correct moral path is mirrored with remarkable

thematic fidelity in the ghazals of **Hafez** (Hafez, 2004): “*From every side I went; nothing but astonishment increased. / Alas, this desert and this infinite path!*” Hafez laments the boundless, inherently confusing nature of the spiritual and moral journey, underscoring the desperate need for guidance in the dark: “*In this dark night, the path to purpose is lost; / Come forth from a corner, O guiding star.*”

For the scholar, these deep thematic resonances are not merely intellectual curiosities; they provide a crucial, empathetic framework for engaging with India. They permit the researcher to view Indian civilisation not as a collection of alien or exotic practices, but as a vibrant, living tradition that grapples with the same fundamental moral and spiritual concerns that have informed and shaped Iranian intellectual and ethical traditions for millennia. The Iranian perspective, deeply rooted in its own long history of ethical reflection and heroic mythology, thus offers a uniquely natural and sympathetic lens for interpreting the core, enduring dynamics of Indian civilisation.

4. Identity, Cultural Confidence, and Introspection (The Jam-e Jam)

Civilisations that have successfully preserved a deep and continuous historical consciousness naturally cultivate a strong cultural confidence—an intrinsic and powerful awareness of their own value, the endurance of their legacy, and the vital necessity of self-preservation through ethical and moral consistency. This profound characteristic is clearly visible in the histories of both Iran and India. In the Indian context, when the socio-cultural movement of Hindutva is examined at its deepest

level, it can be seen as a disciplined and deliberate expression of this very confidence: a commitment to achieving ethical and cultural coherence and to actively nurturing civic and moral responsibility among its followers.

The Allegory of the Jam-e Jam

The poetry of Hafez provides the most vivid and compelling allegory for this essential process of cultural introspection: the **Jam-e Jam**. This legendary cup symbolises universal insight, wisdom, and a comprehensive vision of the world. Hafez employs it to critique the human tendency to seek validation or knowledge from external sources, while the ultimate truth resides within the self and one’s own tradition. His famous couplet offers a profound and inescapable admonition for all studies of civilisation: “*For years my heart sought the Jam-e Jam from others; What it possessed itself, it sought from the stranger.*”

This couplet emphasises that true understanding, authentic cultural knowledge, and a grounded sense of identity must spring from within the civilisation itself. They cannot be reliably derived from external imitations, reactive criticisms, or dependence on the approval of outsiders. The Jam-e Jam, as a symbol of self-knowledge, underscores the fundamental principle that genuine cultural authenticity emerges from deep, internal reflection—not from external appropriation or copying.

RSS and the Quest for India’s Jam-e Jam

In earlier years, members of the RSS and similar organisations generally preferred to speak little about their beliefs or internal practices with outsiders. As a result, most accounts and interpretations of the organization and of Hindutva

were produced by individuals outside the group, which often led to widespread misunderstandings. At times, the movement was labelled as a fascist ideology, while at other moments it was dismissed as a closed, antiquated tradition resistant to any innovation.

Fortunately, the movement's new generation has approached public engagement with a markedly different perspective. They write fluently in English, participate actively in international conferences, and maintain high levels of dialogue and interaction. This renewed approach has not only enabled the group to be better understood but also facilitated a deeper understanding of India's cultural heritage. A sense of cultural confidence has emerged, and when speaking with students and young people in India, this fresh understanding is immediately perceptible. Members talk with genuine enthusiasm about India's cultural and historical legacy, as if the RSS itself is in search of its own "**Jam-e Jam**" for India: reclaiming, recognising, and reintroducing the rich identity and heritage of the civilisation.

5. Experiential Findings and Hindutva as Ethical Praxis

In the quest to gain a deeper understanding of Hindutva and the philosophies of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a closer examination of the positions taken by its prominent leaders is essential. One key observation in this regard is the assertion made by Mohan Bhagwat, the head of RSS, who emphasised that Hindutva cannot exist without Muslims. He stated, "If we do not accept Muslims, then it is not Hindutva. Hindutva is Indian-

ness and inclusion" (as cited in Madhav, 2024, 250). This statement highlights an essential aspect of Hindutva that often goes unrecognised: it is not merely a political ideology but a vision of inclusivity that seeks to bring diverse communities together under the broad umbrella of Indian identity.

This inclusiveness is particularly evident in the everyday, voluntary activities of RSS members. Throughout India, the Sangh's Shakhas and volunteer groups are actively engaged in crisis response efforts, such as flood relief and disaster management, demonstrating their commitment to serving society at large. These volunteers, driven by a sense of duty to their country and humanity, are not merely seeking political power or religious dominance; they are guided by a deep commitment to the moral and spiritual well-being of their nation.

This deep sense of inclusion and community service highlights the core values of Hindutva, which emphasises cultural self-realisation rather than opposing external forces. RSS, through its volunteer efforts and educational activities, aims to strengthen a shared sense of identity among all Indians, surpassing the divisions often created by external narratives.

From my own experience, and in conversations with figures such as Ram Madhav, a central question emerged: Does Hindutva aim to create a melting pot, where all groups merge into a single, homogeneous entity, or is it more akin to the thali (traditional Indian meal) where various distinct elements are served side by side, maintaining their individuality while complementing one another? The answer is not about forced homogenization but about respecting the unique flavours of each

component while recognising their collective harmony. This “distinct flavour” defines Hindutva – a flavour unique to India, rooted in centuries of cultural, philosophical, and spiritual history.

This is not about exclusion, but about embracing cultural self-confidence – the confidence that I, as an Indian, possess the *Jam-e Jam* of my civilisation, which defines my identity. The goal of RSS, in this context, is to restore the proud and ancient identity of India or Bharat. It is a process of self-empowerment, one that seeks to reclaim the moral and cultural treasure of the civilisation that has existed for millennia, not merely as a reactionary force but as an active, reflective force of cultural revival.

The Continuity of Ethical Praxis and Conclusion

In conclusion, the Hindutva movement, when understood in its true context, goes beyond the simplistic political caricatures often imposed upon it. It is not about rejecting diversity or excluding others; rather, it is about fostering a sense of unity and shared moral responsibility among all who identify with Indian civilisation. Hindutva, as articulated by the RSS, is a call to recognize India’s ancient wisdom, cultural autonomy, and moral self-confidence. By internalizing this identity, the RSS and its followers aim to revitalize the ethical and spiritual foundations of Indian civilization, affirming that the essence of Hindutva is not division, but unity rooted in cultural pride and responsibility.

In this sense, Hindutva fundamentally seeks to restore the ethical and cultural identity of Indian society, particularly by emphasising moral action

and social responsibility. Viewed through this civilizational lens, Hindutva emerges as a conscious continuation of a shared ethical lineage between Iran and India. In both civilisations, concepts like *Dharma* (in India) and *Asha* (in Iran) serve as foundational principles for aligning individual conduct with cosmic and social order. These concepts not only help define ethics and global harmony but also emphasise the primacy of ethical action (praxis) over abstract belief. In this framework, Hindutva is seen not just as a political ideology, but as a living, ethical worldview—one that actively seeks to build unity through cultural pride and moral responsibility.

Thus, much like the *Jam-e Jam* in Persian literature, which symbolises ultimate wisdom and truth, Hindutva also calls for an internal realisation of these truths; an ethical and cultural self-recognition. RSS and its followers aim to rejuvenate India’s moral and spiritual legacy by embracing a vision of unity, not division, rooted in cultural pride and social responsibility.

In essence, the Hindutva movement is a call to reclaim India’s heritage—not just politically, but ethically and culturally—while fostering a spirit of collective moral responsibility. This is the deeper vision of Hindutva: not merely a political stance, but a profound commitment to unity and pride in one’s civilisation, deeply rooted in the belief that a nation’s strength lies in its shared ethical traditions and cultural coherence. Through this process, RSS seeks to highlight the importance of a vibrant, living tradition; one that continuously nurtures its moral compass, ultimately bringing people together in a cohesive, ethical, and culturally proud society.

References:

- 1 Hafez, S. (2004). *The Divan of Hafez*. Trans. D. Newman. London: Routledge.
- 2 Grant, G. (Trans.). (2004). *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. New Delhi: Guru Granth Sahib Academy.
- 3 Klostermaier, K. (2007). *A survey of Hinduism* (3rd ed.). New York: State University of New York Press.
- 4 Madhav, R. (2024). *The Hindutva Paradigm*. Westland Publications Limited
- 5 Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- 6 Thapar, R. (2013). *The past before us: Historical traditions of early India*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.



An Interview with Shri Sunil Ambekar, Akhil Bharatiya Prachar Pramukh, RSS, on RSS@100

Rami Desai*

Rami Desai:

Sunilji, let me start with a very simple question: could you explain in your own words what RSS is?

Sunil Ambekar:

RSS is an organisation where you can voluntarily contribute to the nation and society while preparing yourself for that purpose. It's simple: just as you love your mother, it's an extension of that love towards Bharat Mata. This entire process, this journey, is RSS. Anyone, any ordinary person, can join RSS. They come to the shakha, enter the RSS circle, and over time, through shakha exercises, learning about the country, our ancestors, and the present situation, they develop good discipline. This enables them to serve society and develop qualities like teamwork. Over time, they form a Sangha, which means working in a group. Basically, it is a network of networks. A shakha is one network that does the networking in its locality, and the association and combination of all these networks form the Sangha. So, in short, it's a voluntary organisation. Everyone works together for the country.

Rami Desai:

Towards a common goal of safeguarding our national interests?

Sunil Ambekar:

You can say the word indicates: 'National' means the character is national, the goal is the nation's glory or to make the nation better, and the way is volunteerism and working together. So, it's called a Sangh, and the name is very indicative of what it is.

Rami Desai:

Its core ideology is Hindutva. Do you think Hindutva has changed over time or in its definition?

Sunil Ambekar:

No, the definition of Hindutva remains the same. We only change its expression or contextualise it according to the times. That means the context keeps changing when we speak of it today. For example, Hindutva is essentially the idea that there is one common element in everyone and that we are all connected. We are connected, so we have a relationship with each other; therefore, we should care for one another and create a world

**Shri Sunil Ambekar is the Akhil Bharatiya Prachar Pramukh of RSS.*

**Rami Desai is an author, anthropologist, and scholar specializing in the North Eastern region of India. She holds degrees in Anthropology of Religion and Theology from King's College, London. Her research focuses on ethnic identity, tribal issues, and insurgency. She is a Distinguished Fellow at the India Foundation and regularly contributes to major newspapers and news channels.*

where people consider each other their own and care for each other. This way of living in the world is Hindutva; this is Hindu culture, basically, that's it.

Now, when a new context arises, such as how you behave in another language, that language is also connected to you; find its commonality. If someone attacks our country, we must certainly defend it, but we should not indulge in warmongering or go around fighting unnecessarily. We will definitely protect our religion and culture in our country. If someone else attacks, then at that time we will think about defending ourselves. This means that if there are other cultures or civilisations in the world, we are not against them. So, these expressions keep changing. In today's time, for example, caste has come into society, but Hindutva has no place for caste or discrimination. There is no place for disparity or anything like that. It is a social evil, so we have to focus on how we can eradicate this social evil or this disparity or the discrimination that happens among people. So many missions arise from this. If someone has broken or insulted our temple, then restoring it becomes a mission. So, there are many missions and expressions. But the basic idea is that we are connected to each other, living together by caring for one another. That is the essence of Hindutva.

Rami Desai:

What is the role of 'Religion' in Hindutva?

Sunil Ambekar:

If we look at it in the context of India, there are multiple Hindu religions based on Hindutva. In India, there are multiple religions that can be called sects, which we can also call dharma, panth, or

sampradaya; there are many such traditions. That is why you can practise any religion.

But where does the role of Hindu Dharma come in? It comes in when you consider other paths as good and true, respect them, and are ready to live joyfully with them. So, this is what Hindutva is about, or you set your life in such a way that you can live with everyone and take everyone along. You also see the divine element in creation, so you do not worry about the environment only because humans are in trouble. We believe that the same element exists there too, so we are connected to it. Therefore, adjust your life to live with it. It is inclusive, and that is why we say Hindutva goes on being inclusive to the point of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, the world is one family. So, it goes on; the journey starts and moves towards that part.

Rami Desai:

Earlier, you spoke about caste. I'll come back to that. But these days we've heard a new word: Gen-Z. We've also seen a certain amount of manipulation of the term Gen-Z in the neighbourhood. How much attraction does Gen-Z have towards the RSS in India, and do you visualise anything for the next 100 years to bring Gen-Z closer to the RSS structure?

Sunil Ambekar:

First of all, if we talk about the youth of India, whom you are calling Gen-Z, they are aspirational. They want to take India forward. They believe in the Constitution of India. They want to contribute to India's progress in a constructive way. So, today's Gen-Z is like this: they say 'Bharat Mata ki Jai.' They are connected to their religion and

culture, and that's why, in a way, the ideas that RSS holds are ideas that today's youth subscribe to. And as far as Gen-Z is concerned, every generation is Gen-Z.

Those who were part of the freedom movement were also Gen-Z. They sacrificed everything for the country's independence. When the Emergency was imposed, they were the ones who went to jail and fought to restore democracy. I think even after 2011, when corruption became a major issue and atrocities against women came to light, our country's youth came out and said, 'This will not work.' They then turned it into constructive political change. So, I believe that Gen-Z in our country is on the side of building the nation, not destroying it. They are on the side of the Constitution, not of removing it. They are here to contribute to the country, not to abuse anyone. They are here for constructive contribution, and I think RSS is working along the same lines. That's why most people subscribe to RSS ideas.

Rami Desai:

Rahul Gandhi ji sometimes says things like the RSS wants to change the Constitution. Who is he talking about?

Sunil Ambekar:

No, I think they should look at it. First of all, the Gen-Z of India, when they first became active, were against the Emergency. Who were they against? You can understand who imposed the Emergency. Then, in 2011, when corruption and atrocities against women became issues, Gen-Z in India became active again. Who were they against then? They should understand this, I feel.

That's why the youth of India is absolutely sensible and is moving forward in the right way to work positively.

Rami Desai:

You asked about the role of women in RSS. Do you believe they have a role? If so, what is it? And in the future, do you think women will ever be included in shakhas?

Sunil Ambekar:

I feel that even today, in the field shakhas, there are the Sangh's women shakhas, the Sevika Samiti, and the men's field shakhas, all of which essentially carry the name RSS. So, both continue to function even today. The committee was formed in 1936, and women's involvement in all these activities, whether it's decision-making in public life, various activities, or service initiatives, is continuously increasing. In the diverse organisations run by RSS volunteers, there is also a large number of women. They are in leadership roles, even at the top leadership level, so many people are working actively. As far as the topic of field shakhas is concerned, I feel that is a matter for society. The Sangh cannot decide that. Shakhas are held in localities. The day the people of the locality feel that such a shakha should be held, it will happen.

Rami Desai:

So, is it open?

Sunil Ambekar:

I think this depends on social norms and the circumstances of society at that time. So, in my view, that is not the important point. What is

important is whether your outlook towards women is participatory or not, and whether it is equal or not; that is far more significant. If you look at it from those two criteria, I feel everything is positive.

Apart from that, see, our swayamsevaks have already started doing things like holding family shakhas at home during the COVID period. Even now, every shakha will have a monthly get-together of all the families of the swayamsevaks who attend that shakha. This has already started. So once a month, there will be a get-together at the level of each shakha. This has begun now, and it will take some time to implement fully because the Sangh grows organically. Nothing happens in one day by issuing an order; it will take its course.

By the way, every family is involved: we are family-based. The entire family participates. Without the involvement of families, the Sangh's work cannot continue. The shakha's work takes place at the Sangh location, such as physical exercises, but the rest of the work takes place at home. So, the whole family is involved; this has been the case from the very beginning.

Rami Desai:

So, anything is possible. Now, if we talk about caste, the Sangh's point of view has always been that caste-based discrimination is unnecessary and should be done away with. But what is the RSS's point of view on the caste census?

Sunil Ambekar:

No, this is something we have discussed earlier as well. I believe all Hindus are one, and in a way, there should be no discrimination or bias. However, in our country, for some time, certain people faced

discrimination, and as a result, some were left behind socially in every way. Many measures are being taken for this, and they have society's support. So, if governments need data to carry out such work, they can collect it. Beyond that, there should be no politics over this; that is the Sangh's view. I feel that people today are sensible; we can see this in society. So, I think efforts for Hindu unity will continue, and at the same time, efforts to bring those who have been left behind socially to equality through various governmental and social schemes will also continue. Both these tasks must go hand in hand. And no one should be allowed to politicise this. To this end, we are constantly trying to make society aware.

Rami Desai:

Now, I would like to focus a little on international issues. In the neighbourhood, we have seen a situation involving minorities, especially Hindus. What is the Sangh's view on this? And is it true, as we have observed, that their numbers have declined over time? In Bangladesh, we see their suffering increasing. Are they truly helpless? Is there no one to support them? What is their future?

Sunil Ambekar:

I feel that the incidents that have occurred in our neighbourhood, especially in Bangladesh, where atrocities were committed against Hindus and all minorities, are certainly unfortunate, and everyone will condemn them. Now, as far as the question of a solution is concerned, I feel that the stronger India becomes, the more its influence will be felt there. Because even there, it is extremely

necessary to strengthen those forces that do not want such things to happen. That is why I feel we have been repeatedly telling the government that it must take a political initiative to tighten things so that these repeated incidents, which occur due to state sponsorship or government silence, can be stopped through strong political measures. We have been raising this issue repeatedly and will continue to do so. Ultimately, you see, making a country like India strong is very important to stop such forces, and we need to move in that direction. It is also very important to have clarity on this issue within India. The good thing this time is that when these atrocities happened against Hindus, everyone in India came together to oppose them. At the very least, there should be no politics over this in India, and we should speak in one voice. Efforts in this direction are absolutely necessary, and we are continuously working towards it.

Rami Desai:

So, how will this effort happen?

Sunil Ambekar:

We are speaking to everyone so that all Hindus speak with one voice and one message. Politically, an environment should be created where no one steps forward to say anything contrary, and everyone speaks positively. When a positive message is raised at the national level, only then will the government's stance, whether raised domestically or on international platforms, carry strength and have an impact. That is why it is very important that the whole of India stands behind this. Only then will we be able to protect our people there, so that the government in Bangladesh can

take concrete measures on this issue.

And those international forces that, directly or indirectly, support Pakistan's terrorist intentions and activities, or those that help similar forces in Bangladesh, and many international powers that remain silent on such matters, because of this, incidents occur in countries like Bangladesh. This is why there is an international dimension to this issue. Such an environment should be created in India, and, at the international level, no nation can support those who engage in such activities. Only then will this stop. And those in Bangladesh who do not want this to happen, or political parties and forces there that consider this wrong, will also be strengthened by this. From that, a solution to the problem will emerge naturally.

Rami Desai:

Across the world, we have seen nationalist governments come to power, whether you call them right-wing or governments that prioritise their national interest. At one point, we felt there was some commonality with us. Do you think there can be any cooperation with such governments internationally? Will they understand what you mentioned about our neighbourhood? Or is this also part of our debate about missionary influence that sometimes comes in? How can we work together?

Sunil Ambekar:

Look, when it comes to hard diplomatic questions, the government has to create pathways through its influence and dialogue. And the country that remains strong and can present its views effectively always sees the situation move in its favour. It can put forward its points in its own way.

That's why finding new friends on the international stage and strengthening itself on that basis is important. I feel a good government always makes efforts for this, and the Government of India is doing so. So that is a good step.

But the most important thing is that India must become as capable and strong as possible in every respect. Only then will our words carry the weight we want. That's why, as the Sangh, we are constantly working to make people across India understand the importance of unity, participation, and awareness of these issues, which we call understanding who is a friend and who is an enemy. We are continuously working to awaken this awareness in India. And we believe that through this, a very positive environment will be created in the country, and the future will be very bright.

Rami Desai:

Sunil ji, although I could ask you many more questions because this conversation is so interesting and I think those watching will hear aspects they may never have heard directly, I want to ask one last question. This is the centenary year of RSS. RSS is national, but does it have an international agenda in the coming years?

Sunil Ambekar:

Look, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh operates within India, focusing on how the unity of Hindus can help make this nation stronger and better, whether in terms of life values, prosperity, or strength. But today, the most important context is that the entire world, including developed nations, is seeking solutions to contemporary problems in a single way. In that, India's Hindutva approach can

be very useful. So, the idea is to demonstrate this approach in practice within India, because merely talking about theory will not help. We need to show it in action and then engage in dialogue with people internationally. Many people are visiting India these days, and we are already having such conversations and sharing ideas.

For example, when we talk about the environment, it cannot be solved by technology and politics alone. People will have to change their lifestyles. When our demands change, the market and technology cycles will change as well; that's when real change will happen. Planning only for 30–40% of people will not work. We need to think about what living standards the world can sustain for 140–150 crore people in India and 700–800 crore people globally. We must bring those at the bottom up and tell those at the top who are over-consuming, "You are a burden; contribute and correct this." So, we need to find such pathways.

Today, there is a problem in families: people are not connecting the economy and the family. This connection is necessary. If families stay together, economic prosperity will be sustainable; otherwise, it won't. For example, if five people live in one house, that's one house. But if the average drops to 2.5 people per house, as in the US, we will need two houses instead of one. Currently, we have 28–30 crore houses. If the family average becomes 2.5, we will need another 30 crore houses. What will that do to the economy? So, culture and the economy must be linked. This has not been done globally so far. Many topics are connected to this, including the environment, cultural understanding, family structures, and societal issues.

Take women's issues: from feminism, people have moved to wokism because solutions are not being found. There can be solutions within family structures. We need Familism, not Feminism, actually. We don't believe in 'isms,' but if I had to use a parallel term, I would say that. So, people need to adopt this. There are countless solutions. For health, the lifestyle we advocate, such as yoga, is already being adopted. So, there are solutions for the modern and developed world. And for the future world we envision, there are many solutions. If we do not accept others' viewpoints as true or valid, the world will become enemies of one another. There cannot be peace. Even now, people say the 21st century belongs to AI, yet wars are still happening. Even near our country, there are forces that still believe in terrorism.

This can only change if we embrace India's

vision of many religions, but one dharma and one culture, which we can call human dharma, namely Hindu dharma. Everyone needs this. Only then can we live peacefully; otherwise, it's not possible. So, I believe the experiments and explorations we have conducted here, and the collective efforts to take India forward, will be helpful in the entire world. From that perspective, we will engage in dialogue with people across the globe in the coming times.

Rami Desai:

Sunil ji, thank you for so eloquently setting out the future vision for us. Thank you very much. On behalf of India Foundation, we are very honoured to have this interview with you.

Sunil Ambekar:

Thank you.



From Strategic Depth to Strategic Nightmare: The Collapse of Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations

Sandhya Jain*

In the last quarter of 2025, Afghanistan's Taliban regime performed a political backflip and raced to repair and strengthen strategic and economic ties with India. By far the most striking overture came from Industry and Commerce Minister Nooruddin Azizi, who urged the Afghan Hindu and Sikh community, which had fled to India, to return, stating that the country needed their skills, particularly in healthcare and trade.[1] Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, the first high-ranking official to visit India in October 2025, met senior Sikh and Hindu community members and assured them of their safety and the rebuilding of their places of worship. It may be recalled that after a deadly attack on a gurdwara in 2022, the Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee in Delhi had urged the Government of India to evacuate the remaining Sikh families from Afghanistan.

New Delhi opened a new chapter in the old 'Great Game' on 9 October 2025, recognising the Taliban regime in a masterly act of realpolitik and inviting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi to visit India. Muttaqi secured a temporary exemption from UN sanctions and arrived directly from Russia, the only country to have fully recognised the regime to date. Thus, Russia, China and India are friendly towards Afghanistan, while Pakistan is inimical. The United States, having ousted Prime Minister Imran Khan, needs Pakistan to help it

secure the Bagram airbase again, which it needs to exert pressure on the Iranian regime.

Muttaqi met Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow on 7 October. Before departing for New Delhi, Lavrov emphasised, "The military presence of any extra-regional players could only lead to destabilisation and new conflicts." The Bagram Air Base was built by the Soviet Union during its presence in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, and Russia has de facto control over it. [2] Journalist Natiq Malikzada observes that America needs the airbase because it overlooks China's western Xinjiang region and its nuclear programme at Lop Nur.[3] It would strengthen America's position vis-à-vis China, Iran, Russia, and Central and South Asia.

Strategically, Afghanistan lies at the intersection of several non-Western connectivity projects: China's Belt and Road Initiative, Russia's "Greater Eurasian Partnership" linked to the Eurasian Economic Union, and north-south routes linking the Caspian Sea to the Indian Ocean. Beijing has been working on a Kabul-Islamabad channel to expand the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). By formally recognising the Taliban, Russia secured a foothold in Central Asia's transport redesign. In fact, the geopolitical interests of Russia, India, and China align in Afghanistan and across the broader Central Asia.

*Sandhya Jain is a political analyst, independent researcher, and author of multiple books. She is also editor of the platform *Vijayvaani*.

By befriending the Taliban regime, India offset Islamabad's ties with Dhaka. It signalled to Washington that, following the erasure of its legacy in Bangladesh and Nepal and the return of Pakistan to Dhaka, India would pursue its strategic interests in the region. India has recovered ground in Sri Lanka.

US President Donald Trump's enthusiastic embrace of Pakistan's army chief, General Asim Munir, who has already visited the White House three times, came as a shock to New Delhi. Washington is offering Rawalpindi air-to-air missiles for F-16 fighter jets and other equipment, and Pakistan has invited the US to build and operate a new seaport near Iran's Gwadar, on the same Makran coast. India, however, is being subjected to punitive visa norms, 50 per cent tariffs, and pressure to repudiate the purchase of Russian oil, among other measures.

During Muttaqi's meeting with Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar, India upgraded its "Technical Mission" in Kabul to an Embassy (October 10, 2025) and allowed the regime to take charge of the Afghan embassy in New Delhi. Unsurprisingly, Pakistan launched airstrikes on Kabul while the delegation was in New Delhi.^[4] However, by October 12, 2025, Afghan forces retaliated with airstrikes on Lahore, using US Super Tucano jets left behind during the American exodus. Afghans attacked 27 locations along the border, including Paktia, Khost, Jalalabad, Helmand, Kunar, and the Durand Line, and claimed to have killed 58 Pakistani soldiers (Pakistan admitted 23 dead). Saudi Arabia urged restraint but declined Islamabad's request to join the hostilities, clarifying that the new defence pact between the two nations

was limited to operations against the Houthis of Yemen.

Muttaqi asserted, "Afghanistan will safeguard its borders and its national interest... We achieved our military objectives last night, and our friends, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, have expressed that this conflict should come to an end, so we have paused it from our side for the time being..." He denied that Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) cadres are present in Afghanistan. Despite agreeing to extend the 48-hour ceasefire, the Taliban claimed that Islamabad carried out airstrikes along the Durand Line, killing eight citizens, including three Afghan cricketers, in the Urgun and Bermal districts.

During a second high-level visit to New Delhi on 20 November 2025, Afghanistan's Commerce and Industries Minister Alhaj Nooruddin Azizi announced that Kabul had halted all transit trade through Karachi and was shifting its global access to the India-backed Chabahar route.^[5] Leading a business delegation at the PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PHDCCI), he urged the Indian private sector to invest in the route to make it viable and competitive. Addressing the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM), Azizi offered the country's long-idle mines to India for exploration, particularly the gold mines.^[6] New Delhi has expressed interest in the mining sector.

A joint study by the Pentagon and the US Geological Survey found that Afghanistan has nearly USD 1 trillion in untapped mineral resources, including copper, gold, iron ore, chromite, barite, coal, lead, natural gas, petroleum, precious and semi-precious stones, salt, sulphur, lithium, talc, and

zinc, across more than 1,400 sites. The gemstones include high-quality emeralds, lapis lazuli, red garnet, and ruby. These deposits were surveyed decades ago but never developed.

Accusing Pakistan of blocking trade routes for political purposes, Afghanistan's Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, advised Afghan traders to reduce trade with Pakistan and conclude all deals with pharmaceutical firms within three months. Afghanistan's leading pharmaceutical company, Raoufi Global Group, and Zydus Lifesciences Limited of India signed a USD 100 million memorandum of understanding in Dubai on 27 November 2025.[7] Zydus Life Sciences will export medicines to Afghanistan and help transfer technical know-how for domestic drug production.

Afghanistan has also stopped exporting tomatoes and other vegetables to Pakistan and redirected vegetable and fruit sales to Russia, Uzbekistan, and other countries. Once the largest buyer of Pakistani rice, Afghanistan will now purchase rice from India.

These diplomatic moves have neutralised Pakistan's strategy of keeping the Taliban hostile to India. Under the Karzai and Ghani regimes, India built dams, power lines, roads, schools, and even the Parliament building as goodwill gestures to the Afghan people. The Taliban, however, aligned with Pakistan and bombed the Indian embassy in Kabul (July 2008), kidnapped Indian engineers (2019), and allowed ISI-backed terror groups to operate camps on its soil.

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India completed all existing projects and provided food

and medicines as needed. In 2021, India quietly reopened its embassy to facilitate the shipment of wheat to the country. In his meeting with S. Jaishankar on 10 October 2025, Muttaqi recalled, "Over the past four years, and particularly during the earthquakes, India was the first country to respond. Afghanistan looks at India as a close friend. We want a relationship based on mutual respect and people-to-people ties." In the joint statement issued at the end of his visit, Muttaqi condemned the terrorist attacks on Pahalgam in Kashmir; both sides reaffirmed support for each other's territorial integrity.

Professor Mohammad Ayoob of Michigan State University, US, notes that although Pakistan created the Taliban movement in the 1990s, supported its war with the US-backed regime in Kabul, and expected the Taliban's 2021 takeover of Afghanistan to provide it with strategic depth, the recent clashes along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border showed that the Taliban had turned against its mentors.[8] On deeper reflection, the amicable relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan were "an aberration", and Kabul had opposed Pakistan's membership in the UN because of the Durand Line, which divides the Pashtun homelands.

Jaishankar symbolically gifted five ambulances to his Afghan counterpart as part of a larger gift of 20 ambulances and other medical equipment to support the Afghan people. These include MRI and CT scanners, vaccines for immunisation, and cancer medicines. Six new health projects will be finalised later, and drug rehabilitation materials will be provided through the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

India has promised to help reconstruct homes destroyed in the Kunar and Nangarhar earthquakes, as well as residences for forcibly repatriated Afghan refugees (from Pakistan), and to support the rebuilding of their livelihoods. India has pledged to maintain and complete existing projects in Afghanistan and to discuss new development priorities identified by Afghan authorities. The two nations will collaborate on water management and irrigation projects.

The India-Afghanistan Air Freight Corridor will support increased trade and commerce between the two countries. India has increased scholarships and university places for Afghan students and offered to support Afghan cricket and other sports. The new visa module (since April 2025) will issue more medical, business, and student visas for Afghan citizens. The two nations reaffirmed their joint resolve to combat cross-border terrorism in all its forms.

A positive outcome of Muttaqi's visit is enhanced connectivity, with direct flights from Mumbai, Delhi, and Amritsar to Kabul and Kandahar, among other routes. Lauding the increased flights between Kabul and Delhi, Muttaqi said, "An agreement was also reached on trade and economy... We also invited the Indian side to invest, particularly in minerals, agriculture, and sports. We also discussed the Chabahar port... We also requested the opening of the Wagah border as it is the fastest and easiest trade route between India and Afghanistan..."

However, noting continued tensions on the Wagah border, Aam Aadmi Party MP Vikramjit Singh Sahney[9] said, "The biggest game changer

is that His Excellency and the Indian government have agreed that flights from Amritsar to Kabul will begin. Pakistan is not letting the Attari-Wagah land route open, and Afghan drivers are not being allowed to come here in trucks. This is our way to fight this..."

Interestingly, soon after the recent border clashes, the Taliban supreme leader, Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, ordered the Ministry of Water to build dams on the Kunar (Chitral river in Pakistan), which could reduce the flow of water to Pakistan's northwestern region.[10] With India moving to check the Indus waters, Pakistan could find itself in a tight corner.

Istanbul talks

For many years, Indian generals and strategic analysts have warned of a possible two-front war with Pakistan and China. Now, with Washington forcing New Delhi to improve ties with Beijing, which is being pressured on multiple fronts, it is Islamabad that fears a two-front war with India and Afghanistan! Given the new tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the peace talks between the two countries in Istanbul were crucial.

The Istanbul peace talks collapsed dramatically on 28 October 2025 over US drone operations and cross-border terrorism.[11] The stunned mediators from Qatar and Turkey struggled to continue the dialogue, but to no avail.

The immediate trigger was the Pakistani delegation's admission that Islamabad has a firm agreement with the US allowing drone operations from Pakistani territory. This enraged the Afghan side, which demanded assurances that Pakistan

would not allow US drones to violate Afghan airspace. Although initially agreeable, the Pakistani delegation recanted after an “unknown phone call” from Islamabad and said they had no control over American drones or the activities of the Islamic State (Daesh). The Qatari and Turkish mediators described the breakdown as “sabotage by design.”

Major General Shahab Aslam, head of the Special Operations Division of the ISI and head of the Pakistani delegation, demanded that the Afghan Taliban “summon and control” all groups operating against Pakistan, including the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The Afghan side countered that TTP members were Pakistani nationals and that Kabul had no authority over them.

The failure of the Istanbul talks stalled the peace process and heightened the risk of military confrontation along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Afghan sources warned that any future Pakistani strikes would be met with “reciprocal action” against Islamabad. Pakistan’s Defence Minister Khawaja Asif accused Kabul of acting as New Delhi’s tool.[12] Appearing on Geo News’ primetime show *Aaj Shahzeb Khanzada ke Saath*, Asif said the Afghanistan-Pakistan negotiations in Turkey collapsed after four or five reversals by the Afghan side. He accused Kabul’s power brokers of sabotaging progress under India’s influence.

Mohammad Suhail Shaheen, the Islamic Emirate’s ambassador to Qatar and a member of the negotiating team in Istanbul, said that Islamabad requested that the Islamic Emirate guarantee no security incidents on Pakistani soil, but the Afghan delegation asserted that each country is solely

responsible for its own security.[13] Shaheen said Pakistan was trying to blame the Afghan government for an attack by a former CIA asset of Afghan origin in Washington and for a drone strike against Chinese citizens in Tajikistan, though most of the attacks destabilising the region are organised by Pakistan. Kabul denied that the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) operates from Afghan territory or organises attacks inside Pakistan. After the talks failed, Pakistan reopened the Torkham crossing on 01 November 2025 to allow Afghan nationals who had taken refuge in Pakistan to return home.

Afghanistan has shrugged off Western sanctions and purchased oil directly from Russia. The first fuel-loaded train arrived in Herat on 07 December 2025, after which the authorities announced plans to expand trade and build partnerships without middlemen. This is a significant geopolitical statement against Islamabad’s practice of using trade corridors for political leverage. By diversifying its trade partners, Kabul is mitigating Pakistan’s dominance over its economy.

In the third high-level visit to India in less than three months, the Afghan public health minister, Noor Jalal Jalali, arrived in the capital (Dec 16, 2025) to strengthen health cooperation, exchange expertise, and coordinate joint efforts.[14] The discussions are expected to focus on capacity-building for Afghan health workers, the import of quality medicines and medical equipment, and other health-related cooperation. In November, India delivered 63,734 doses of influenza and meningococcal vaccines, 73 tonnes of life-saving

medicines, vaccines, and essential supplements to Kabul to help meet the healthcare needs of the population.

The Taliban regime values India for the humanitarian and health assistance provided despite political turbulence. Kabul is now looking forward

to the arrival of an Indian ambassador, even as the border crossings between Afghanistan and Pakistan remain firmly closed. General Zia ul-Haq's dream of strategic depth in Afghanistan, which mesmerised the military leadership for over three decades, has become a bitter nightmare for Pakistan.

References:

- 1 "Taliban Commerce Minister Urges Afghan Sikh and Hindu Communities to Return." Afghanistan International, 21 Nov. 2025, www.afintl.com/en/202511218042.
- 2 Russia Hosts Taliban Delegation and Warns Against Foreign Military Presence in Afghanistan | Military.com. 7 Oct. 2025, www.military.com/daily-news/2025/10/07/russia-hosts-taliban-delegation-and-warns-against-foreign-military-presence-afghanistan.html.
- 3 Malikzada, Natiq. "The Case for an American Bagram Air Base." The National Interest, 5 Oct. 2025, nationalinterest.org/blog/silk-road-rivalries/the-case-for-an-american-bagram-air-base.
- 4 "Taliban FM begins first visit by senior Afghan leader to India since 2021." Al Jazeera, 9 Oct. 2025, www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/9/taliban-fm-begins-first-visit-by-senior-afghan-leader-to-india-since-2021
- 5 "Afghan Commerce Minister Urges Expanded Use of Chabahar Port, Says Govt. Considering Five-Year Tax Exemption for Arriving Industries." The Hindu, 20 Nov. 2025, www.thehindu.com/news/international/afghan-commerce-minister-urges-expanded-use-of-chabahar-port-says-govt-considering-five-year-tax-exemption-for-arriving-industries/article70307544.ece
- 6 "Afghanistan Offers Idle Mining Sites to India; Assocham Urges Caution on Geological Challenges." The Tribune, 24 Nov. n.d., www.tribuneindia.com/news/business/afghanistan-offers-idle-mining-sites-to-india-assocham-urges-caution-on-geological-challenges/.
- 7 "\$100 Million Boost for India-Afghanistan Trade Marks Setback for Pakistan." NDTV, 22 Dec. 2025, www.ndtv.com/world-news/100-million-boost-for-india-afghanistan-trade-marks-setback-for-pakistan-9713380
- 8 "Why Pakistan and Afghanistan Turned on Each Other." The National Interest, nationalinterest.org/blog/silk-road-rivalries/why-pakistan-and-afghanistan-turned-on-each-other.
- 9 "Sahney Reveals Amritsar-Kabul Flights as Strategic Move to Counter Pakistan's Blockade." MSN, 23 Oct. 2025, www.msn.com/en-in/news/India/aap-mp-sahney-reveals-amritsar-kabul-flights-as-strategic-move-to-counter-pakistan-s-blockade/vi-AA1OnRYl
- 10 "Afghanistan to Construct Dams on Kunar River Following Border Clashes with Pakistan." News on AIR, All India Radio, 24 Oct. 2025, www.newsoneair.gov.in/afghanistan-to-construct-dams-on-kunar-river-following-border-clashes-with-pakistan/

- 11 "Pak-Afghan Peace Talks Fail amid US Drone Dispute, Diplomatic Meltdown in Istanbul." NDTV.com, 22 Dec. 2025, www.ndtv.com/world-news/pakistan-afghanistan-peace-talks-fail-amid-us-drone-dispute-diplomatic-meltdown-in-istanbul-9533115.
- 12 "Pakistan's Khawaja Asif Accuses Kabul of Being India's Puppet, Vows Revenge." India Today, 29 Oct. 2025, www.indiatoday.in/world/story/pakistans-khawaja-asif-accuses-kabul-of-being-indias-puppet-vows-revenge-glbs-2809917-2025-10-29
- 13 Ariana News. "IEA Rejected Pakistan'S Demand for Security Guarantees: Shaheen | Ariana News | Afghanistan News." Ariana News, 1 Nov. 2025, www.ariananews.af/iea-rejected-pakistans-demand-for-security-guarantees-shaheen.
- 14 Azizi, Ahmad. "Taliban Health Minister Visits India as Contacts Deepen." Amu TV, 16 Dec. 2025, amu.tv/216277.





India Foundation
Wishes it's Readers
A Very Happy
and Prosperous
2026

