

RASHTRIYA SWAYAMSEVAK SANGH (RSS)

IMPACT: Founded in 1925 by K.B Hedgewar, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is an Indian right-wing, Hindu nationalist, paramilitary volunteer organization. In 2020, RSS had almost 585,000 members and over 57,000 branches or sakhas, including a trade union wing (Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh), women's wing (Rashtriya Sevika Samiti), student wing (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad), and economic wing (Swadeshi Jagaran Manch). The Print, an Indian news outlet, estimates that 3 out of 4 ministers in the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are members of the RSS, including the current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi.

- The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was **founded in 1925 by K.B Hedgewar in response to a series of small and large scale riots between Hindus and Muslims across northern India**. As the historian [Tapan Raychoudhuri](#) has noted, Hedgewar believed the riots were Muslim riots as he [Hedgewar] claimed that in every single case, "it is they [Muslims] who start them."
- In the Sangh's mission statement, **Hedgewar wrote: "The Hindu culture is the life-breath of Hindustan. It is therefore clear that if Hindustan is to be protected, we should first nourish the Hindu culture. It is the duty of every Hindu to do his best to consolidate the Hindu society."** In 1927, RSS co-founder — Dr. B.S. Moonje — [described the RSS](#) as an institution which could produce "the military regeneration of the Hindus" and unify the people in line with "the idea of fascism." **In 1940, M.S Golwalkar succeeded Hedgewar as head of the RSS.**
- Golwalkar, [widely regarded](#) as the ideological architect of the Sangh, is the author of We, or, Our Nationhood Defined, which maps out a vision of a "Hindu Rashtra". A March 2018 piece by Parnal Chirmuley in The Indian Express [notes](#) that **Golwalkar's vision [of a Hindu state] drew inspiration from Italian fascism, specifically Mussolini's organization of fascist paramilitary forces**. In comparing the supremacy of Hindus in India to the supremacy of the Aryan race in Hitler's Germany, **Golwalkar wrote, "To keep up the purity of its race and culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging of the country of the Semitic races— the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here .. a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by."**
- In the 1940s, under Golwalkar, RSS volunteers were [forbidden](#) from taking part in [Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's](#) "Quit India Movement" [against](#) the British empire. **During the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, Golwalkar is reported to have met with Gandhi over RSS's alleged involvement in widespread anti-Muslim pogroms**. On January 30, 1948, **Nathuram Godse, a former member of the Sangh, assassinated Gandhi. In the aftermath, Golwalkar was jailed, and the RSS banned.**
- In 2009, following the BJP's [defeat](#) in national elections, **Mohan Bhagwat— who grew up in a staunchly RSS family— took over the organization**. Leading up to the 2014 election, the Sangh **actively campaigned for the Hindu-nationalist party, backing Narendra Modi, then the Chief Minister of Gujarat, as the front runner**. **Narendra Modi is a lifelong member of the RSS, and is accused of "allowing" the 2002 massacre of Muslims in his state.**
- In recent years, the **RSS has been at the forefront of promoting Hindu-nationalism in India**, with the Sangh accused of inciting violence against India's Dalit-Bahujan community, including [hate crimes against Muslims](#), [lynchings](#) of Dalits, and [pogroms](#) against religious minorities.

- In 1992, RSS had campaigned for the destruction of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, arguing the Mughal era structure was built on top of the birthplace of the Hindu God, Ram. Following the BJP's landslide electoral victory in May 2019, Mohan Bhagwat reaffirmed the Sangh's commitment to the masjid-mandir (mosque-temple) debate at an RSS-education camp, saying, "Ram's work will be done." In December 2019, after the Supreme Court of India ruled in favor of the destruction in November 2019, three RSS leaders were charged with "committing a deliberate and malicious act intended to outrage religious feelings and uttering words with deliberate intent to wound the religious feelings of a person" in Karnataka, India, for reenacting the demolition of the mosque.
- In April 2019, The Caravan reported a new initiative by the RSS to bring "true nationalist narrative" to Indian academia. **Since BJP came to power in 2014, prominent historians such as Romila Thapar have argued that the Sangh is "attempting to foreground revisionist histories with a glorified view of a Hindu past" by rewriting school textbooks, setting up "RSS-model schools", and lobbying streaming platforms to remove "anti-nationalist" content.** Balmukund Pandey, the head of the historical research wing of the RSS, is on record asserting: "The time is now to restore India's past glory by establishing that ancient Hindu texts are fact not myth."
- **Since its early days, RSS has been linked to white supremacist organizations in Europe and North America.** In 2011, Anders Breivik— the Norwegian mass murderer— hailed India's Hindu nationalist movement as a "key ally in a global struggle to bring down democratic regimes across the world", listing the websites of the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the National Volunteers' Organisation, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad as resources.
- The **Sangh has also been linked with Hindu-American advocacy groups in the U.S, chief among them the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) in Washington, D.C.** Mihir Meghani, co-founder of HAF, is a long time member of Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, and has spoken at conferences organized by Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America, the international religious branch of the RSS. **Meghani is also the author of Hindutva: The Great Nationalist Ideology where he writes, "The future of Bharat is set. Hindutva is here to stay. It is up to the Muslims whether they will be included in the new nationalistic spirit of Bharat.** It is up to the government and the Muslim leadership whether they wish to increase Hindu furor or work with the Hindu leadership." In April 2006, Meghani wrote a letter to the editor of India Abroad, stating "The essay I wrote nearly fifteen years ago representing **some of the views I held as a teenager cannot be held up as representative of my views now or the views of the Hindu American Foundation.**"
- In 2005, the Hindu America Foundation (HAF) partnered with the Vedic Foundation and the Hindu Education Foundation, to push the state of California to change passages on Hinduism in official school textbooks. In a February 2006 cover story, Siliconeer, a monthly magazine for south Asians on the west coast, said the changes in curriculum that HAF was pushing for reflected "chauvinistic political agendas" seeking to equate the history of India with the history of Hinduism. Recently, **HAF board member Rishi Bhutada served as the official spokesperson of "Howdy Modi," the RSS backed rally for India's BJP prime minister held in Houston, Texas on September 22, 2020.**
- In October 2019, **HAF invited Aarti Tikoo Singh, who claimed, in a Twitter exchange with Tarek Fatah, that "Islamophobia is a bullsh*t word thrown in as a slur by those who have irrational fear (phobia) of any criticism of Islamic extremism [and] regressive Muslims."** In April 2019, after city councils across Canada voted to allow the Islamic call to prayer (adhan) to be

broadcasted for a few minutes a day during the holy month of Ramadan, Fatah claimed that the Muslims wanted the public adhan to become a “permanent feature”, and that Greek Town (as the neighbourhood of the mosque is known) might soon become “Islamabad.” Fatah was retweeted by Ravi Hooda, who commented that the decision— to broadcast the adhan— opened the door for “separate lanes for camel & goat riders” or laws “requiring all women to cover themselves from head to toe in tents.” Writing for Foreign Policy, Steven Zhou identified Hooda as a volunteer for the local branch of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, which represents the overseas interests of the RSS.

- HAF served as a “partner organization” for an event marking Hindu Heritage month in October 2022. The **flier announcing the event includes HAF’s logo, and the chief guest and keynote speaker of the event was Dattatreya Hosabale, the general secretary of the RSS.** Other supporting organizations of the event included the VHPA and the HSS. **A disclaimer on the announcement for the event notes that “it should be noted that HAF was not part of the committee that invited the speakers for the inaugural program** that took place on October 1, 2022.”
- **In February 2020, following anti-Muslim pogroms in Delhi, 16 RSS cadres were arrested and charged with murder and rioting.** At least 53 people were killed during the violence, almost three quarter of whom were Muslims. According to The Guardian, the catalyst for the pogrom is widely acknowledged to have been a comment by Kapil Mishra, a BJP leader, who issued a public ultimatum declaring that if the police did not clear the streets of a protest against a new citizenship law seen as anti-Muslim, his supporters would be “forced to hit the streets”.
- Today’s RSS tries to distance itself from its past. But **according to Arundhati Roy, “its underlying ideology, in which Muslims are cast as treacherous permanent ‘outsiders,’ is a constant refrain in the public speeches of BJP politicians, and finds utterance in chilling slogans raised by rampaging mobs.** For example: ‘Mussalman ka ek hi sthan—Kabristan ya Pakistan’ (Only one place for the Muslim—the graveyard, or Pakistan). In October this year, Mohan Bhagwat, the supreme leader of the RSS, said, ‘India is a Hindu Rashtra’—a Hindu nation. ‘This is non-negotiable.’”