

# India: Strictly Technical

Sunday 15 March 2020, by [AHMAD Aijaz](#) (Date first published: 7 March 2020).

**Rashtriya swayamsevak sangh (RSS), India's National Volunteer Organisation, is the oldest, largest and most successful far-right group in the world today. It is also the effective ruling power in India. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is merely a political front - one of numerous fronts - for the RSS. Narendra Modi, the prime minister, has been a functionary of the RSS all his life and it was the RSS that decided to field him first as chief minister of Gujarat (2001-14) and then as India's prime minister (from 2014). Few cabinet ministers in BJP governments, past or present, have not been loyal members of the organisation, which has never given a transparent account of its finances or its members. It claims exemption as a self-styled 'cultural organisation' - or, on occasion, 'charity' - even though it isn't at all clear whether it has ever registered itself as such.**

The RSS has also normalised Hindu nationalist violence. In 2014, around the time of the election, a number of intellectuals and journalists known for their promotion of rationality and secularism were murdered, most of them shot at point-blank range: Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare, M.M. Kalburgi, Gauri Lankesh. None of them was Muslim, but their opposition to the Hindutva project meant they were classed as what the RSS likes to call 'anti-national'. The assassinations were apparently carried out by members of a group that doesn't profess to be an affiliate of the RSS but is undeniably its imitator. Clones are now proliferating across the country. Lynchings of Muslims have become commonplace, with more than a hundred incidents reported since 2015. Parliament was told last month that 97 Muslims were killed in the course of 751 attacks in 2016, and 111 killed and almost 2500 injured in 822 attacks in 2017.

Modi was re-elected in May last year. On 5 August, the government stripped Jammu and Kashmir of statehood, dividing it into two separate territories, thus violating not only the state constitution but the Indian constitution as well. Jammu and Kashmir was the only Muslim majority state in India and enjoyed special constitutional safeguards. Abolishing these has effectively turned it into an Indian colony. A few weeks earlier, on 19 July, parliament had introduced the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill and the home minister, Amit Shah, announced the introduction of a National Register of Citizens to determine which of the country's residents are citizens and which illegal immigrants ('infiltrators', as the newspapers put it; 'termites' according to Shah). The Act stipulates that illegal immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal who came to India before 2014 as a result of religious persecution and subscribe to religions other than Islam will be given an expedited route to citizenship. This means that Muslims who faced religious persecution in those countries - Ahmadis in Pakistan or Hazaras in Afghanistan - do not qualify. Myanmar isn't one of the countries covered by the Act because the Rohingyas are Muslim and the Indian state is already busy deporting them. Michelle Bachelet Jeria, the UN high commissioner for human rights, wrote to the Indian Supreme Court pointing out that the Act contravenes any number of international statutes to which India is a signatory.

The proposed register of citizens would require every Indian to produce documents to prove their citizenship; it is estimated that around 70 per cent of the population have no such documents. This is especially true of the low castes, the rural and urban poor, forest dwellers and religious minorities.

The register was immediately identified as an attempt to deny citizenship to large numbers of Muslims. Students at Jamia Millia in Delhi and at Aligarh, the two major universities historically associated with Muslims, responded with non-violent protests. Police stormed both campuses in December, invading libraries and dorms to attack students (they also destroyed CCTV cameras).

After these atrocities a far larger protest movement emerged. Large numbers of ordinary Muslim women, most of them poor and socially conservative, neither young nor well educated, staged sit-down protests near the universities in defence of their right to citizenship. Many more such groups gathered all over the country, inspiring an extraordinary movement involving hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of people and crossing all boundaries of class, caste and religion.

The atmosphere among the protesters was largely peaceful and festive. The government provided the menace. Anurag Thakur, the finance minister, addressed huge rallies of RSS supporters with the chant 'Desh ke ghaddaron ko, goli maro saalon ko,' which translates (in polite language) as 'These anti-national traitors, shoot them all.' Leela Ram Gurjar, the BJP MP from Haryana, told a crowd: 'Today's India is not the India of Nehru; this is not Gandhi's India. Today it is Modi's India and if we get a sign from him we will wipe them out in an hour.' 'Them' clearly meant 'Muslims'. Parvesh Verma, another BJP MP, warned the women staging a sit-down protest at Shaheen Bagh, some of them holding copies of the preamble to the Indian constitution, that 'hundreds of thousands are gathering there. They will enter your houses, rape your sisters and daughters, kill them. There is time today, Modi and Amit Shah will not come to save you tomorrow.'

These are just a few examples. Such incitements to violence were repeated hundreds of times in Delhi and the states around it, where the RSS is strongest. By mid- February, ultimatums were being issued to the protesters to give up their sit-ins. The onslaught began in the third week of February. The Delhi State Minority Commission estimates that around two thousand people were brought in from outside Delhi in the preceding days. By 23 February there were Hindu nationalist squads all over north-eastern Delhi - killing, raping, setting fire to houses, businesses and mosques - while Modi was busy entertaining Trump. At no point did the prime minister or any member of his cabinet condemn the violence.

Two months earlier, on 12 December, Gregory Stanton, the founder of Genocide Watch and the author of *The Ten Stages of Genocide*, had addressed a group of Congressional and US government officials in Washington. According to him, India was then at the eighth stage. Things have only got worse. The comparison of recent events to Kristallnacht, widely made in the Western media, is not misplaced.

The RSS is estimated to have sixty thousand branches all over the country. It also commands dozens of affiliated fronts - organisations of women, workers, peasants, students, forest dwellers, caste communities and so on - not to mention paramilitary groups. In *The RSS*, A.G. Noorani helpfully includes a list of known affiliates that takes up two dozen lines of small print. Walter Andersen and Shridhar Damle - less helpfully - tend to repeat verbatim information given out by the RSS itself. According to them, the RSS has 36 affiliates and another hundred or more that it counts as its own but which don't have official affiliate status. They give a figure of one and a half to two million participants in daily RSS branch meetings, along with six million 'alumni and affiliate volunteers' (whatever that means). Together, these affiliates and milling crowds of veterans and members constitute the '*Sangh parivar*' (family of the Sangh); the RSS itself is said to be the mata (mother) of all.

The violence stirred up by the RSS has sometimes escalated into fully-fledged ethnic cleansing, as it did, for example, during the Gujarat pogrom of 2002, which took place soon after Modi became the state's chief minister. For the most part, though, violence has been administered in homeopathic

doses. Since Modi consolidated his power last year by winning a clear parliamentary majority, the RSS has gone on the offensive not only against Muslims but against large sections of the democratic opposition. Key state institutions – the Election Commission, the higher judiciary and the police – have fallen into line. Indeed, much of the police force has been acting in consort with RSS thugs in the cities and small towns of the northern states, as well as in cities like Bengaluru (known until recently as Bangalore) in the south; in January, they did nothing to prevent – and even encouraged – a lengthy rampage at Jawaharlal Nehru University. In Hyderabad, large contingents of armed RSS paramilitaries have staged marches through the city centre and Muslim neighbourhoods, with the co-operation of the city and state administrations. Mohan Bhagwat, the current head of the RSS, said recently that the organisation

could assemble its cadres to fight much faster than the Indian army in a situation of war ... The Sangh will prepare military personnel within three days, something that the army would do in six to seven months. This is our capability. Swaymsevakas [RSS cadres] will be ready to take on the front if the country faces such a situation and the constitution permits us to do so.

This is classic RSS rhetoric. Bhagwat invokes the constitution, national need and patriotic duty in ‘a situation of war’ – but no such war is even remotely at hand. The threat of irresistible power is clearly directed at the numerous ‘internal enemies’ whom the RSS like to call ‘anti-nationals’.

The way the RSS poses the question of culture goes to the heart of the Indian variety of majoritarian nationalism. Its primary claim is that culture is not simply an aspect of social life but fundamental to identity; not something acquired in the course of history, but constitutive of a people. The basic grammar of this belief comes from the earliest days of Europe’s own right-wing nationalisms. V.D. Savarkar (1883-1966), who did more than anyone else to give modern Hindu nationalists their lexicon, invented the word ‘Hindutva’ to designate a blood-and-soil cultural essence unique to India, and claimed that the religious beliefs codified as Hinduism are simply aspects of this essence. The RSS presents Hindu nationalism as a cultural nationalism of which Hinduism per se is the defining ingredient. Indian culture, it’s argued, is so deeply defined by its Hindutva essence that no non-Hindu can be fully admitted; religions that didn’t originate on Indian soil – Islam and Christianity in particular – are alien essences. Should Muslims and Christians even be allowed to live there? There have been various answers. Savarkar once claimed that the solution the Germans had found for the Jews would be appropriate for Indian Muslims. At the time he was writing, in pre-Partition British India, Muslims constituted around a quarter of the population; the number has dropped to closer to a sixth, but this still is around two hundred million people. Genocide on this scale may be unrealistic, but thoughts of it have never been entirely absent from the hearts and minds of many Hindutva zealots.

More diplomatically, religious conversion is recommended. It’s sometimes said that Muslims and Christians could have a place in India if they accepted the supremacy of Hindu culture and religion, becoming hyphenated Hindus: Christian-Hindus, Muslim-Hindus. More recently, the RSS suggested setting up an organisation for Muslims: they cannot join the RSS itself but might be permitted to come under its umbrella and do its bidding. Proclamations of this sort are designed to illustrate the RSS’s ‘liberal’ spirit, its willingness to re-indigenise those led astray by foreign religions and include them in the fold, even if as a slightly inferior breed.

The next step in the RSS’s programme is the conversion and consolidation of the religio-racial majority, the Hindus, into a permanent political majority, and for citizenship itself to be determined by religious affiliation – hence the new citizenship legislation. But many of the Indians who lack proof of citizenship are Hindu – poor, low-caste, rural Hindus in particular. How will the RSS square that circle? Perhaps Hindus will be able to claim citizenship simply by virtue of being Hindu while all

others will need to present documentation. No one knows how the plan will take shape.

The RSS was founded in 1925, during a decade that saw the rise of the multi-denominational, national movement that is generally associated with Gandhi and Nehru; it was also a time of great labour unrest, strikes and the growth of communist groups. The RSS and similar organisations emerged in opposition to such activism, committed to the revivalist project of rebuilding the fallen 'Hindu race' after centuries of 'Muslim tyranny' ('race' and 'nation' were used synonymously - a linguistic hangover from British rule). Like other nationalist formations of that period around the world - such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Phalangists in Lebanon - the RSS was inspired by both the Italian and German variants of fascism. Nehru never wavered in his insistence that the RSS was 'fascist in the strictly technical sense of the word'. But the RSS has never been merely imitative, and three aspects of its originality deserve special emphasis.

First, the RSS was founded on the principle that the Hindu nation needed a religious, cultural and military renaissance before it would be strong enough to attempt a final confrontation with its adversaries. It therefore set out to instil among the majority the idea of an all-encompassing Hinduness that followed the definition provided by the RSS itself - and that was defined, too, in opposition to its imagined enemies. Only by achieving this goal would the RSS be able to convert a demographic majority into a political majority. The catch was that in post-Independence India there were too few non-Hindus to prevent Hindus from monopolising political power in any case, and - more significantly - most Hindus did not subscribe to the RSS's project. At this point the majoritarian project revealed itself to be an aspect of a much larger far-right mission. Power was wanted not for all Hindus, but for those tutored, trained and even armed by the RSS. Any Hindus who opposed the RSS - communists, liberals, atheists, 'pseudo-secularists', Hindus who believed in religious tolerance and plurality - would be converted or denounced as 'anti-national'.

The second striking feature of the RSS is that unlike European irrationalisms and fascisms it didn't fashion a discourse in opposition to the country's institutional framework, instead preparing itself over the decades for a long march through the institutions, capturing one rampart after another. Its ability to wait for almost a hundred years - without jumping the gun after many interim triumphs - has been impressive. This raises, on a much larger scale, the question that has arisen in many parts of Europe: is it really all that difficult for the far right to come to power through liberal institutions?

Finally, there is the organisational labyrinth that the RSS has fashioned in order to carry out a revolution from the right in a country where a democratic system of representative government, with all its constitutional intricacies, has been entrenched for more than seventy years. The solution the RSS has devised is ingenious. As an organisation it is profoundly hierarchical and secretive, shunning electoral politics in its own name. Its mass political front, the BJP, is headed by veteran RSS members who implement policies that conform to guidelines set by the RSS high brass. When needed, for instance, during provincial and national election campaigns, tens of thousands of trained RSS cadres are thrown into the fray as full-time 'volunteers'. RSS cadres have a distinctive uniform and are given rudimentary military training; they stir up trouble and are sometimes implicated in killings - which are usually carried out by men in civilian dress. Over the decades, the RSS has become very adept at this combination of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary mobilisation.

Noorani, a distinguished lawyer and a scholar of India's judicial history, has produced the most comprehensive one-volume history of the RSS to date. He begins with a summary of the religiously defined, Hinduised nationalism that rose up in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, much of it aggressively militant in tone. Several similar organisations were founded before the RSS. Secular Indian liberals have tended to want to see the RSS as a marginal social pathology in an otherwise healthy body politic, but Noorani suggests that the RSS gives organisational form to a structure of feeling that has been widespread from the earliest days of colonial society: believers have included some leaders of the

Congress party, senior members of the bureaucracy and judiciary, literary intellectuals, historians and so on. The idea that Hindus and Muslims are fundamentally and irreconcilably different seems to be more widespread and persistent among the Hindu intelligentsia than among their Muslim counterparts. In 1924, as Noorani relates, Lala Lajpat Rai, a leader of the Congress and the right-nationalist Hindu Mahasabha Party, proposed a partition of India on religious lines, a territorial division almost identical to that enacted by Radcliffe and Mountbatten in 1947. The idea of Indian nationhood emerges as a contested terrain, with contrary articulations sometimes coexisting in the same person. In his early writings Savarkar advocated Hindu-Muslim unity within a composite nation; but once he discovered the special Hindu claim to Indian nationhood, he decided that Muslims and Christians were eternal outsiders. Noorani is sensitive to such complexities.

The liberal cosmopolitanism of late colonial bourgeois Bombay still shapes Noorani's outlook. Andersen and Damle, however, are old intimates of the RSS. Andersen tells us that the RSS's affiliates outside India are typically called Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS); Damle was for a long time the Sanghchalak (chief convener) of the HSS in Chicago and introduced Andersen to the RSS, and even to M.S. Golwalkar, its then head, when Andersen came to India as a doctoral student in the late 1960s. So their joint association with the RSS goes back half a century. Their co-authored book of 1987, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism*, was one of the earliest monographs on the subject. Damle also tells us that this latest book (published in India as *The RSS: A View to the Inside*) was written at the suggestion of Modi himself. Over the years Andersen has divided his time between academic institutions and the South Asia Division of the State Department, serving at one point as chief analyst for the region. Noorani has gathered his facts from hundreds of diverse sources; Andersen and Damle cull theirs largely from RSS functionaries, along with its affiliates and publications. But there is an advantage to their partisanship: much of the data they provide is not available from independent sources, though for that reason it's also hard to say how reliable it is. For anyone who wants to know how the RSS would like to present itself to a mainstream, middle-class, centre-right and academically competent audience, this is a useful book to read.

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**P.S.**

The RSS: A Menace to India

by [A.G. Noorani](#).

LeftWord, 547 pp., £33.75, September 2019, 978 81 934666 8 1

Messengers of Hindu Nationalism: How the RSS Reshaped India

by [Walter Andersen](#) and [Shridhar Damle](#).

Hurst, 405 pp., £25, April 2019, 978 1 78738 025 7