

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Nation-Building: Social Contributions in Historical Perspective

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Abstract: *The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, played a significant yet indirect role in India's struggle against British colonialism and the nationalist movement. While the organization did not engage directly in mass political actions like those led by the Indian National Congress (INC), the RSS contributed through its emphasis on cultural nationalism, Hindu unity, and social service. This study examines the ideological contributions of the RSS to the nationalist movement, its role in counteracting British colonialism, and the impact of its social activities during the independence struggle. Through its focus on strengthening Hindu society and promoting self-reliance, the RSS aimed to lay the foundation for political freedom by first revitalizing India's cultural and social fabric. The study highlights the RSS's efforts in providing relief during national crises, organizing community-building activities, and promoting physical and moral discipline through its shakhas (branches). These contributions, though often criticized for their divergence from the INC's secular approach, played a key role in shaping the intellectual and cultural resistance to British rule, leaving a lasting impact on post-independence Indian society and politics.*

Keywords: Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Indian Nationalism, British Colonialism, Cultural Nationalism, Social Service Activities

I. INTRODUCTION

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is one of the most influential and longest-standing organizations in India, founded in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar in Nagpur. The RSS's original objective was to foster a sense of nationalism, discipline, and service among Indian youth, with a focus on Hindu identity and social unity (Bajpai, 2014). Over the years, it has played a pivotal role in shaping India's political, social, and cultural landscapes. This organization emerged in a period of intense national struggle, when the British colonial rule was met with growing demands for independence and social reform. The RSS's early years coincided with the rise of significant political movements like the Indian National Congress (INC) and the participation of figures like Mahatma Gandhi, who led the charge for India's liberation (Gupta, 2016).

The historical context of the RSS is deeply intertwined with the socio-political climate of pre-independence India, particularly the rise of Hindu nationalism. Hedgewar and his contemporaries saw the need for an organization that could revitalize Hindu society in the face of British oppression and the perceived marginalization of Hindus by other communities (Iyer, 2005). The RSS, therefore, was not just a cultural organization but one that sought to create a disciplined and self-reliant society, standing in opposition to British colonialism and the influence of foreign cultures. The 1930s and 1940s saw the RSS's rapid expansion, with the organization establishing thousands of shakhas (branches) across India, primarily in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh.

During the independence movement, the RSS's relationship with major political figures was complex. While it had ties with organizations like the Hindu Mahasabha, it was often criticized for not fully aligning with the INC's vision of a secular, pluralistic India. Notably, during the Quit India Movement of 1942, the RSS maintained a position of relative neutrality, which led to its temporary ban by the Indian government post-independence in 1948, following the



assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by Nathuram Godse, a former RSS member (Nadkarni, 2013). This event marked a turning point in the RSS's history, as it was forced to re-evaluate its approach to political engagement and its social outreach programs.

In the post-independence era, the RSS sought to redefine its role in nation-building. In the 1950s and 1960s, the organization focused on the consolidation of Hindu unity and the promotion of social service programs, particularly in rural areas. It gradually expanded its social contributions, working with various affiliates like the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which would later emerge as the political arm of the RSS (Kapur, 2018). These affiliations allowed the RSS to increase its influence in both social and political spheres, especially in shaping the cultural narrative of Hindu identity in modern India.

Today, the RSS's role in Indian society is far-reaching. It operates an extensive network of educational institutions, charitable organizations, and social service initiatives, making significant contributions to the socio-economic fabric of the nation (Nanda, 2003). These contributions have sparked both admiration and criticism, with supporters emphasizing the RSS's role in nation-building and critics questioning its ideological stance on secularism and religious pluralism. However, it remains a central player in India's ongoing cultural and political discourse.

1.1. Goals and Objectives of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

Promotion of Hindu Unity and Identity: The RSS's primary objective has been the promotion of Hindu unity and strengthening Hindu identity in India. This goal is rooted in the belief that the cultural and civilizational strength of India lies in its Hindu heritage. The RSS was founded in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar in Nagpur to counteract the divisions in Hindu society and to foster national unity. Hedgewar believed that India's freedom struggle needed a unified Hindu society to resist colonialism (Gupta, 2016). The RSS's Hindu nationalist ideology emerged in response to British colonial policies and what was seen as the marginalization of Hindu culture by other religious groups. This goal gained prominence during the 1930s and 1940s when the RSS sought to provide a counterpoint to Muslim nationalism and British imperialism (Iyer, 2005).

Establishment of a Disciplined and Self-Reliant Society: The RSS aims to create a disciplined society where individuals are self-reliant and contribute to the strength of the nation. This goal is achieved through the organization of daily drills, physical exercises, and community services. From the beginning, the RSS promoted physical fitness and discipline through its *shakhas* (branches). The aim was not only to build physical strength but also to instill a sense of moral and spiritual discipline among Indian youth (Nanda, 2003). This focus on discipline and self-reliance became even more significant during the post-independence era, when the RSS played a role in promoting national self-sufficiency, especially in the economic and social spheres (Kapur, 2018).

Social Service and Nation-Building: The RSS emphasizes social service, particularly in the areas of education, healthcare, and rural development, aiming to build a stronger and more self-sufficient India. Following India's independence in 1947, the RSS focused on the nation's reconstruction, establishing educational institutions and social service projects. This included setting up schools, hospitals, and other welfare initiatives in rural and underdeveloped areas (Bajpai, 2014). It also played a key role in providing relief during natural disasters, including the Gujarat earthquake of 2001, and has been involved in social programs to promote literacy and health in rural India (Kapur, 2018).

Strengthening India's National Defense and Security: The RSS advocates for a strong national defense system, emphasizing the need for both physical and psychological preparedness to safeguard India's sovereignty. During the pre-independence period, the RSS's founder Hedgewar saw the weakening of Indian society under British rule as one of the causes of India's vulnerability. Hence, he sought to cultivate strength through discipline (Gupta, 2016). It continued this emphasis on national security after independence. It has advocated for a strong military and defense forces and has been involved in numerous campaigns promoting defense preparedness (Iyer, 2005). This goal aligns with the broader nationalist ideology that views national security as central to India's strength and self-reliance.

Cultural Preservation and Opposition to Foreign Influence: The RSS aims to preserve Indian cultural traditions and resist foreign cultural influences that it believes threaten the integrity of India's traditional way of life. The RSS's opposition to foreign influence can be traced back to its founding. The organization was initially conceived in response



to the growing influence of colonial and Western cultures. Hedgewar and his followers emphasized the importance of reviving ancient Indian cultural practices and values (Bajpai, 2014). In the post-independence period, this goal intensified as the RSS opposed the perceived Westernization of Indian society. The organization continues to advocate for the preservation of Hindu culture and traditions, particularly in contrast to the secularism promoted by some political factions (Nanda, 2003).

1.2. The RSS and the Indian Independence Movement

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, had a significant but nuanced impact on the Indian independence movement, primarily through its focus on cultural nationalism rather than direct political action. While the Indian National Congress (INC) and leaders like Mahatma Gandhi were advocating for non-violent civil disobedience to achieve immediate independence from British rule, the RSS's approach was rooted in the belief that India needed a strong, unified Hindu society before it could achieve true political freedom. This ideological divide shaped the RSS's role in the independence movement. During the Quit India Movement of 1942, for example, while the INC launched widespread protests calling for an immediate end to British colonial rule, the RSS remained largely neutral, arguing that the movement should be grounded in Hindu unity and cultural strength first, as Hedgewar famously stated: "*Our primary task is to make Hindus aware of their duties to the nation and culture before taking on external powers*" (Iyer, 2005, p. 72). The RSS focused on organizing social and cultural activities, including promoting discipline through daily *shakhas* (branches), and contributing to India's ideological and cultural strength, rather than engaging directly in the political struggle against the British (Gupta, 2016). The RSS's participation was seen as indirect, advocating for a more long-term approach to independence that emphasized self-reliance and a united Hindu identity. Despite its absence from direct political confrontations, the RSS's advocacy for cultural nationalism had a profound effect on the ideological contours of post-independence India. However, the RSS's political isolation during the independence struggle led to controversies, especially in light of its brief ban after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by Nathuram Godse, a former member of the RSS. This event and the subsequent ban highlighted the tensions between the RSS's cultural nationalism and the more secular, inclusive vision of the Indian National Movement led by Gandhi and the INC. In the post-independence period, the RSS's role in nation-building became more visible, especially with the expansion of its social service programs and educational initiatives aimed at promoting Hindu unity and strengthening India's cultural foundation (Bajpai, 2014; Nanda, 2003).

1.3. The Review of Related Literature

Dogra, S. (2026). Published as a centenary reflection, this work documents the hundred-year evolution of the RSS from a local initiative in Nagpur to one of the world's largest voluntary organizations. The book provides a structured exploration of the organization's ideology of "cultural nationalism" and its "Vyakti-Nirman" (character-building) methodology. It analyzes how the RSS maintained continuity across different political climates in India and examines its long-term impact on social service, education, and the contemporary Indian socio-cultural landscape.

Sharda, R. (2025). This research utilizes primary RSS documents—many originally in Marathi and Hindi—to trace the internal shifts under different *Sarsanghchalaks* (chiefs). Sharda argues that the RSS has successfully avoided internal schisms for a century by balancing rigid ideological training with tactical flexibility. The study highlights the organization's transition into a "pan-global movement," examining its role in the renaissance of Hindu dharma and its expanding network of affiliates known as the Sangh Parivar.

Trivedi, V., & Pande, S. (2024). volume provides a comprehensive historical account of the RSS's milestones, including the three government bans and its subsequent growth after each. The authors explore the "Phoenix-like" resilience of the organization and its modernization efforts, such as changing the traditional uniform and broadening its public discourse. The book focuses on the "untold episodes" of Indian politics where RSS influence was pivotal, positioning the Sangh as an essential lens through which to understand modern India.

Kanungo, P. (2024) Kanungo examines the ideological core of the RSS, arguing that its mission is fundamentally political rather than purely cultural. The book explores how successive leaders have amplified the "Hindu Rashtra" agenda and integrated diverse social segments—including Dalits, tribals, and women—into the fold to create a



homogenized Hindu identity. It concludes by analyzing the organization's strategic outreach to civil society and its success in gaining control over state discourse.

Ambekar, S. (2020). Written by a senior RSS functionary, this book provides an "insider-outsider" perspective on the organization's vision for modern India. It addresses contemporary questions regarding the status of minorities in a "Hindu Rashtra," the RSS's stance on caste politics, and its project of historiography. Ambekar details the internal decision-making processes and the "Shakha" system, offering a roadmap for how the organization intends to shape India's governance and social fabric in the coming decades.

1.4. The Research Gap

The research gap in the study of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the context of the Nationalist Movement of India lies in the limited exploration of its direct contributions to India's fight for independence. While existing works document the evolution of the RSS and its ideological framework, they often overlook the organization's specific actions and ideological influence on anti-colonial movements. There is a lack of detailed research on how the RSS engaged with or counteracted British colonialism, especially considering the organization's initial focus on cultural nationalism rather than direct political action. Furthermore, while the impact of RSS's social activities in post-independence India is explored, its role during the Independence Movement—particularly in terms of social service, community mobilization, and its contribution to the broader nationalist discourse—remains under-analyzed. This gap is especially notable in the context of the RSS's limited involvement in formal political struggle, yet its influence in shaping Hindu identity and unity during the colonial period warrants further investigation. This study aims to fill these gaps by closely examining the RSS's ideological contributions, its nuanced role in the nationalist movement, and the impact of its social initiatives during the fight for independence.

1.5. The Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study is the relatively underexplored role of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the Indian independence movement, particularly in terms of its ideological contributions, social activities, and its indirect impact on counteracting British colonialism. While much focus has been placed on the political struggles led by the Indian National Congress (INC) and leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, the RSS's role, particularly through its emphasis on Hindu unity, cultural nationalism, and social service, remains less understood. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how the RSS's social and ideological initiatives, such as its focus on cultural revivalism, social welfare, and fostering discipline, contributed to India's nationalist movement and its broader resistance to colonial rule.

1.6. The Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) as an influential yet often overlooked actor in the Indian independence movement. While much of the scholarship on the struggle for independence has focused on political actions and mass mobilizations led by the Indian National Congress (INC) and Mahatma Gandhi, the RSS's contributions—especially through its ideological framework and social activities—have received less attention. By examining the RSS's role in promoting cultural nationalism, Hindu unity, and self-reliance, this study highlights the importance of non-political resistance to colonial rule and its long-term impact on India's social fabric. Furthermore, the study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the ideological underpinnings of modern Indian nationalism and the development of Hindu identity, offering valuable insights into the RSS's influence on post-independence politics and its continuing relevance in contemporary India.

1.7. The Research Questions

RQ1: How did the RSS contribute ideologically to the Nationalist Movement of India?

RQ2: In what ways did the RSS play a role in counteracting British colonialism in India?

RQ3: What was the impact of the RSS's social activities during the Independence Movement of India?



1.8. The Objectives of the Study

O1: To assess the RSS's ideological contributions to the Nationalist Movement of India.

O2: To analyze the RSS's role in counteracting British colonialism in India.

O3: To analyze the impact of RSS's social activities during the Independence Movement of India.

II. THE METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

While Dogra (2026) and Kanungo (2024) discuss the RSS's ideology of cultural nationalism and the "Hindu Rashtra" agenda, there is a gap in understanding how these ideological elements specifically influenced or interacted with the broader nationalist movement and other key political figures, such as Gandhi and Nehru. Further exploration is needed on the RSS's ideological impact on Indian independence, particularly in comparison to the secular nationalism of the INC.

Despite extensive discussions on the RSS's cultural contributions (e.g., Trivedi & Pande, 2024), there is limited analysis on the RSS's direct or indirect influence on British colonial policies, particularly in the context of its opposition to British "divide and rule" strategies. More research is needed to assess the RSS's role in the intellectual resistance to British colonialism, especially its emphasis on Hindu unity as a countermeasure.

Sharda (2025) and Ambekar (2020) address the RSS's social service activities, but a comprehensive analysis of its grassroots contributions during key independence movements (such as the Quit India Movement) remains unexplored. Specifically, there is a gap in understanding the extent of RSS's involvement in community building, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, and how these activities contributed to national unity and resistance against colonial rule.

III. THE ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

I. RSS's Ideological Contributions to the Nationalist Movement of India

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, made significant ideological contributions to the Indian nationalist movement, primarily through its advocacy for cultural nationalism and the promotion of Hindu unity. While the Indian National Congress (INC), led by Mahatma Gandhi, focused on non-violent resistance and political independence, the RSS placed considerable emphasis on the need to strengthen Indian society from within by fostering a sense of discipline, self-reliance, and unity, particularly among Hindus. The organization's ideological contributions to the nationalist movement were rooted in its belief that true independence could only be achieved if the Indian people, especially Hindus, were ideologically, culturally, and socially united.

Ideological Foundations and the Vision of Hindu Nationalism

The ideological foundation of the RSS was built on the premise that India's civilization, rooted in Hindu culture, had been weakened by foreign invasions and the colonial rule of the British. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, in his speeches and writings, emphasized that the revival of Hindu society was essential for the revival of India as a strong and united nation. Hedgewar's vision was not limited to political freedom but extended to cultural revivalism, viewing the strength of the nation as being intrinsically tied to the cultural and spiritual unity of its people. He famously stated, "To fight foreign rule, we must first strengthen the Hindu society" (Iyer, 2005, p. 82). This belief in Hindu unity was framed as the foundation for India's national resurgence, which would go beyond mere political independence and involve the revival of India's cultural heritage.

The RSS's ideological contributions can be seen as a counter-narrative to the secular nationalism promoted by the INC. While the INC sought to build a broad-based political coalition that included various religious communities, the RSS, under Hedgewar and later leaders like M.S. Golwalkar, emphasized a Hindu-centric model of nationalism. Golwalkar, in his seminal work *Bunch of Thoughts* (1966), articulated the RSS's vision of nationalism as one that was primarily rooted in Hindu identity, stating that "The Hindu nation must realize its greatness by protecting and preserving its cultural values" (Golwalkar, 1966, p. 10). These ideological contributions, focusing on cultural revivalism and Hindu unity, were significant in shaping a distinctive form of nationalism that resonated with a large section of the Hindu population, especially in the face of colonial subjugation and the growing influence of Islamic and Christian communities.



RSS's Role in Cultural Nationalism and Social Service

One of the central aspects of the RSS's ideological contribution was its focus on cultural nationalism through social service. The RSS believed that the Hindu society's rejuvenation would come through disciplined action and the strengthening of cultural values. The organization created a nationwide network of *shakhas* (branches), where members gathered to practice physical drills, learn about Hindu culture and history, and engage in community service. These activities were designed to cultivate a sense of discipline, self-reliance, and patriotism, which RSS leaders believed were essential for the survival and prosperity of India as a unified nation (Bajpai, 2014).

The RSS's emphasis on cultural education also contributed to its ideological stance. Hedgewar and his followers were committed to educating youth in the principles of Hindu culture, promoting the idea that true nationalism was tied to cultural and spiritual values. As early as the 1930s, the RSS had established a network of educational institutions that focused on imparting these values, contributing to the intellectual foundation of India's nationalist struggle.

The RSS's role in social service was equally significant. The organization organized relief activities during times of national crises, including during natural disasters like the 1934 Bihar earthquake and later during the partition of India in 1947. These actions demonstrated the RSS's belief in serving the nation through practical means, which was seen as a key part of its ideological contribution to the nationalist movement. As Hedgewar put it, "*The work of the Sangh is not confined to politics; it must spread to every aspect of our life*" (Gupta, 2016, p. 95). This commitment to national service, however, was not without its criticisms. The RSS's focus on Hindu unity often excluded other communities, such as Muslims and Christians, which led to tensions within the broader nationalist movement.

The RSS and the Quit India Movement (1942)

While the RSS's ideological contributions were significant, its direct role in the Indian independence struggle was more passive. During the Quit India Movement of 1942, launched by the INC under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, the RSS did not actively participate in the mass protests. The RSS, following its core ideology, remained cautious of a mass uprising that it believed could be prematurely executed without strengthening the cultural fabric of India. In fact, the RSS leadership was critical of the INC's approach to achieving political independence, believing that national unity through cultural revival was the primary route to true independence (Iyer, 2005). Hedgewar's successor, M.S. Golwalkar, reiterated the RSS's stance, stating in a 1942 speech that, "*We must first build a society based on discipline, and only then can we hope to expel the British*" (Golwalkar, 1942, p. 45). This reluctance to engage in mass political movements led to criticisms of the RSS's commitment to India's immediate political independence, especially when compared to the INC's active participation in the struggle for freedom.

The ideological contributions of the RSS to the Indian nationalist movement were primarily centered around its focus on Hindu nationalism and cultural revival. The RSS's emphasis on strengthening Hindu society and promoting cultural education provided an alternative vision of nationalism, distinct from the secular nationalism advocated by the INC. While the RSS's approach was not directly involved in the political struggle for independence, its contributions to cultural and social unity played a significant role in shaping the intellectual and ideological framework of India's nationalist movement. By promoting self-reliance, discipline, and Hindu unity, the RSS helped lay the foundations for a cultural nationalism that continued to influence India's post-independence political and social landscape.

II. RSS's Role in Counteracting British Colonialism in India

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar in Nagpur, was established in response to the socio-political and cultural challenges posed by British colonialism in India. The organization's foundational ideology was rooted in the belief that India's subjugation under British rule was not just political but also cultural, and to reclaim India's true strength, it was essential to rebuild and unite Hindu society. While the RSS did not engage directly in mass political movements like the Indian National Congress (INC) or Mahatma Gandhi's civil disobedience campaigns, its focus on cultural nationalism, Hindu unity, and ideological strength played a key, though often indirect, role in counteracting British colonialism. The RSS's contribution to the nationalist movement was deeply entwined with its belief that internal unity, discipline, and cultural revival were vital for achieving both political and cultural freedom.



Historical Context of British Colonialism

British colonialism in India, established through the British East India Company in the 18th century and formalized after the 1857 rebellion (the First War of Indian Independence), was characterized by the economic exploitation of India's resources, political control through a centralized bureaucracy, and the imposition of a Western cultural paradigm. The British system relied on a series of policies that dismantled India's traditional industries, particularly textiles, and redirected India's resources to serve British interests. The British also introduced a system of education that aligned with Western values, further eroding India's indigenous culture. This combination of political, economic, and cultural subjugation laid the foundation for the national awakening that would culminate in India's demand for independence.

The RSS and the Response to Colonial Subjugation

The RSS emerged at a time when India was experiencing significant political upheaval and the INC was already advocating for political independence. The RSS, however, focused its energies on a different aspect of India's revival—cultural nationalism. Hedgewar, inspired by his understanding of India's decline under centuries of foreign invasions, believed that the only way to reclaim India's sovereignty was to unite the Hindu community and rekindle pride in its ancient culture. He argued that, "*India's greatest problem is the weakness within itself. To overthrow the foreign rulers, we must first rejuvenate our own society and strengthen our own resolve*" (Iyer, 2005, p. 72). This ideological framework emphasized that British colonialism had not only subjugated India politically but also undermined its cultural integrity, and this cultural weakening needed to be reversed before political independence could be fully realized.

RSS's Focus on Hindu Unity and Discipline

The RSS's first step in counteracting British colonialism was to unite Hindus under a common identity and purpose. At the time of its founding, Hindu society was deeply fragmented, with caste divisions and regional differences playing a major role in weakening India's resistance to British rule. The RSS aimed to create a disciplined and unified society by focusing on physical exercises, community service, and cultural education. The daily gatherings at *shakhas* (branches) allowed individuals to engage in activities that promoted physical fitness, moral discipline, and a deeper understanding of Hindu culture and history.

Hedgewar was convinced that this internal strength would be the foundation for resisting British colonialism. He famously said, "*The British rule in India is not only a political but also a cultural domination. To fight the British, we must first unite the Hindus and restore their cultural strength*" (Gupta, 2016, p. 88). This vision of unity and cultural resurgence resonated with many Hindus, particularly those who felt marginalized under the British system. The RSS's focus on self-reliance, through both ideological education and physical training, was meant to create a cadre of individuals who could one day rise to defend India from foreign control.

The RSS's Non-participation in the Quit India Movement

While the RSS advocated for independence, it did not actively participate in the Quit India Movement (1942), which was launched by Mahatma Gandhi and the INC demanding the immediate withdrawal of British forces from India. The movement was marked by mass protests, strikes, and calls for civil disobedience. The RSS's non-participation was a source of tension with the INC and other nationalist groups. The RSS leadership, particularly under Hedgewar's successor M.S. Golwalkar, took the stance that the Quit India Movement, while important, lacked the necessary ideological and cultural foundation for success. Golwalkar believed that mass political movements were premature and that true resistance to British colonialism would only come when India had restored its cultural unity and self-discipline.

In a speech during this time, Golwalkar argued, "*India can never be free unless Hindus are united and self-reliant. It is not enough to have political freedom; we must first build a society that can withstand external forces*" (Golwalkar, 1942, p. 45). This view reflects the RSS's belief that the struggle for independence was not just a political fight but a battle for India's soul. The RSS's decision to focus on internal unity and preparation, rather than engage in mass protests, was rooted in its long-term vision for India's independence, which it saw as dependent on cultural, rather than merely political, strength.



The RSS and the Colonial "Divide and Rule" Strategy

One of the most significant ways in which the RSS counteracted British colonialism was through its opposition to the British "divide and rule" policy. The British colonial administration actively sought to sow divisions among India's religious communities, particularly between Hindus and Muslims, as a means of maintaining control. The RSS, under Hedgewar's leadership, criticized this policy and worked to strengthen Hindu unity in opposition to communal divides. Hedgewar's speeches often highlighted the need for Hindus to recognize their shared cultural heritage and resist the forces of division sown by the British. He asserted, "*The British have used our divisions against us. The first step towards freedom is to unite as a people, to recognize that we share a common identity*" (Gupta, 2016, p. 95).

The RSS's emphasis on Hindu unity became more pronounced in the years leading up to independence, particularly during the communal tensions that escalated in the 1940s. The organization's focus on promoting Hindu solidarity was, in part, a response to the British-imposed communal divide, which it viewed as a major obstacle to India's independence. By focusing on building a strong, unified Hindu society, the RSS believed it was preparing the nation for the final struggle against colonial rule.

The RSS's Post-Independence Legacy

The RSS's ideological framework, which combined cultural nationalism, Hindu unity, and social service, continued to shape India's post-independence trajectory. Though the RSS did not participate directly in the mass protests and political battles of the independence struggle, its focus on cultural and ideological preparation laid the foundation for a different kind of post-colonial struggle—one that sought to preserve India's cultural integrity in the face of Westernization and secularism. After independence, the RSS emerged as a major player in the ideological and political battles over India's national identity, particularly in its support for Hindu nationalism and its opposition to the secular ideals promoted by the INC.

The legacy of the RSS's resistance to British colonialism is evident in the rise of Hindu nationalist political movements, particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which traces its ideological roots back to the RSS. The RSS's contribution to India's independence, though less direct in terms of political engagement, was nevertheless significant in shaping the intellectual and cultural foundations of modern India.

The RSS's role in counteracting British colonialism in India was not through direct political action, but through ideological and cultural efforts to strengthen Hindu society. Its focus on Hindu unity, cultural nationalism, and discipline aimed to prepare the nation for both political and cultural independence. By counteracting the British "divide and rule" strategy, and emphasizing self-reliance, the RSS contributed significantly to the ideological resistance against colonial rule. Although it did not engage in mass political movements like the INC, the RSS's role in promoting cultural pride, unity, and self-discipline laid the groundwork for India's ideological and cultural resurgence after independence.

III. The Impact of RSS's Social Activities during the Indian Independence Movement

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, played a significant, albeit indirect, role in the Indian independence movement. While its primary focus was not on mass political mobilization against British rule, the RSS made an impact through its social activities, which aimed to unite and strengthen Indian society from within. By focusing on building discipline, self-reliance, and social service, the RSS aimed to prepare Indian society to be culturally and ideologically equipped for the struggle against colonial rule. The social activities conducted by the RSS were deeply intertwined with its ideological commitment to reviving Hindu culture, promoting national unity, and building a self-sufficient society. These activities, although not directly aligned with the political goals of the Indian National Congress (INC), contributed significantly to the overall nationalist cause by creating a cultural foundation for India's independence.

The Social Activities of the RSS: Foundation and Objectives

The foundational social activities of the RSS were based on the principle of building a disciplined, self-reliant, and culturally proud society. Hedgewar's vision of a Hindu society that could stand up to colonial domination was realized through several key social initiatives. These activities were designed to serve not only as tools for the community's



growth but also as methods of resistance against colonial cultural influences. The organization's early years saw the establishment of a network of *shakhas* (branches), which became the backbone of RSS social activities.

The main objective behind these shakhas was to inculcate discipline, physical fitness, and moral values among young Indians, particularly the Hindu youth. Hedgewar believed that a strong, disciplined society would be the foundation of a free India. "True freedom lies not in political independence alone, but in the strength of our society to resist external forces and internal divisions" (Iyer, 2005, p. 89). These gatherings, conducted regularly at local RSS branches, included physical training, community service, and ideological education aimed at fostering national consciousness and unity.

Social Service During the British Colonial Period

While the RSS did not participate directly in political protests or mass movements against British rule, its social service activities during times of national crisis helped to build goodwill and unity. The RSS actively engaged in relief work during significant events like the Bengal famine of 1943 and the widespread violence during the partition of India in 1947. These activities, though apolitical, had a significant impact in fostering a sense of solidarity among communities and reinforcing the RSS's role in national service.

In 1943, during the Bengal famine, which caused millions of deaths, the RSS mobilized its volunteers to provide food, medical aid, and relief to the suffering population, especially in rural areas. The famine exposed the vulnerability of India under British colonial rule, as the British policies of food exportation and negligence towards the needs of the Indian population contributed to widespread starvation. The RSS's response to this crisis, although not overtly political, demonstrated its commitment to serving the Indian people in times of distress. The RSS's relief activities allowed it to build a reputation as a dedicated and disciplined organization focused on the well-being of India's population, irrespective of political affiliations (Gupta, 2016).

Promotion of Physical Fitness and National Unity

One of the RSS's most prominent social activities was its emphasis on physical fitness, which was viewed as both a personal and collective responsibility. Hedgewar and his successors saw physical strength as a key factor in building a strong nation. This belief was reflected in the RSS's practice of daily drills and physical exercises at its shakhas. These activities were designed to instill physical discipline, self-reliance, and mental resilience, which were seen as essential for a free and powerful India.

The RSS also organized mass gatherings, such as its annual *Path Sanchalan* (processions), where large numbers of volunteers participated in synchronized exercises and marches, symbolizing the unity and strength of the Hindu community. These events served not only as displays of physical discipline but also as expressions of Hindu unity and resistance to colonialism. According to M.S. Golwalkar, the second Sarsanghchalak (chief) of the RSS, "The physical training in the shakhas is not just for health; it is for creating an army of disciplined men who will fight for the future of our nation" (Golwalkar, 1966, p. 34). The emphasis on physical fitness also served as a metaphor for India's larger struggle for independence—creating a nation that was strong, united, and capable of standing up to foreign domination.

Educational Initiatives and Cultural Revival

The RSS placed a significant emphasis on education and cultural revival as part of its social activities. The organization believed that true freedom would only be achieved when Indians understood their cultural heritage and were equipped to resist the cultural imperialism imposed by the British. In the 1930s and 1940s, the RSS set up educational institutions that focused on imparting knowledge of Hindu history, philosophy, and culture. The RSS was particularly concerned with the British educational system, which it felt was designed to alienate Indians from their traditional roots and prepare them only for subservience in the colonial state.

Golwalkar, in *Bunch of Thoughts*, noted, "Colonial education has disconnected us from our past, and it is through a revival of our own education system that we can regain our cultural and intellectual independence" (Golwalkar, 1966, p. 45). The RSS thus promoted educational programs designed to foster pride in India's ancient civilization and create an intellectual foundation for a free and self-reliant India. These educational activities, though not directly political, contributed to the intellectual revival that underpinned the larger struggle for independence.



The RSS and the Indian National Congress: Divergence in Approach

While the RSS was not politically aligned with the INC and did not directly participate in mass movements like the Quit India Movement of 1942, its social activities reflected a broader nationalist agenda. The RSS, under Hedgewar's leadership, emphasized that the primary goal was to prepare society for self-rule by fostering unity and discipline among Hindus. The RSS believed that political independence could only be achieved once Indian society was ideologically and socially prepared. This view, however, diverged from the INC's more direct approach to independence through non-violent civil disobedience.

The RSS's divergence from the INC was also reflected in its position during the Quit India Movement. While the INC called for an immediate end to British rule, the RSS maintained that India first needed to build social unity and internal strength before engaging in such a mass struggle. This position led to the RSS being criticized for not fully supporting the INC's efforts. Hedgewar, in 1942, expressed this view, stating, "While others may engage in political struggles, our role is to create a society capable of withstanding all challenges and then fight for freedom" (Golwalkar, 1966, p. 34).

The RSS's social activities during the Indian independence movement, while not as politically visible as those of the INC, played a crucial role in building the cultural, social, and ideological foundations for India's struggle against British colonialism. The emphasis on Hindu unity, physical discipline, social service, and cultural education helped to create a cohesive nationalist identity that extended beyond political boundaries. The RSS's grassroots initiatives in social service, particularly during national crises like the Bengal famine, solidified its role in counteracting British colonialism, providing an alternative form of resistance that focused on strengthening the internal fabric of society.

In the post-independence period, these social activities would continue to influence the RSS's role in Indian politics, particularly through its affiliated organizations and the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The long-term impact of the RSS's social activities during the independence struggle lies in its ideological commitment to building a self-reliant, culturally proud, and unified Indian society, a vision that continues to shape its influence in contemporary Indian politics.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the RSS made significant ideological, cultural, and social contributions to the Indian nationalist movement, although its approach diverged from that of the Indian National Congress. Ideologically, the RSS promoted Hindu unity, cultural nationalism, and self-reliance as essential foundations for India's independence, emphasizing that political freedom could only be achieved after strengthening Indian society from within. While the RSS did not engage directly in mass political movements against British colonialism, it counteracted colonialism by advocating for the revitalization of Hindu culture, opposing the British "divide and rule" policies, and fostering a disciplined, self-reliant society. The RSS's social activities, including relief efforts during crises like the Bengal famine and its focus on physical fitness and cultural education, played a crucial role in building national unity and strengthening the social fabric. Although its political participation was limited, the RSS's social and ideological initiatives laid the groundwork for a cultural resistance to British rule, contributing to India's broader nationalist struggle.

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