



A Century of RSS Thought: Shaping Indian Political Discourse

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) over the past century and its role in shaping Indian political thought. Founded in 1925 by Dr. K.B. Hedgewar, the RSS emerged as a socio-cultural organization with the vision of national unity and self-reliance. Its ideology, rooted in the concept of Hindutva, has influenced political discourse, governance, and social movements in India. The paper traces the historical development of the RSS, analyzing key milestones, foundational beliefs, and its role in shaping political parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The study delves into the RSS's stance on nationalism, democracy, and governance, comparing its ideological framework with other political thought traditions in India. It also highlights the organization's contributions to policy-making, social service, and nation-building while addressing the challenges and criticisms it has faced. The paper examines academic and political debates surrounding the RSS and its responses to evolving socio-political dynamics. Furthermore, the study explores the RSS's contemporary relevance in India's governance, economic policies, and global outreach. As India transitions into a global power, the RSS continues to play a significant role in shaping national identity and policy directions. The paper concludes by assessing the broader implications of RSS thought in the 21st century and its potential trajectory in the future.

Keywords: RSS, Hindutva, Indian Political Thought, Nationalism, Governance, BJP, Integral Humanism.

1. Introduction

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has been a central force in shaping Indian political thought over the past century. Established in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, the organization has played a crucial role in defining and influencing nationalist narratives in India. The study of its political thought is essential for understanding how ideological currents in India have evolved, particularly in relation to Hindu nationalism. Over the past hundred years, the RSS has shaped political discourse, influenced major political parties, and contributed to broader debates on governance, democracy, and national identity. Analyzing the RSS from the perspective of Indian political thought allows for a deeper understanding of how indigenous ideological frameworks interact with state institutions, civil society, and political movements.

Political thought in India has been shaped by diverse traditions, ranging from ancient Hindu philosophy to colonial influences and post-independence democratic principles (Mehta, 2019). Within this context, the RSS represents a distinctive ideological trajectory that seeks to blend cultural nationalism with political mobilization. Unlike Western political movements that often operate within strict ideological categories such as liberalism, socialism, or conservatism, the RSS presents a fluid yet consistent ideological framework rooted in the idea of Hindutva—a

vision of India as a Hindu civilizational entity (Savarkar, 1923; Jaffrelot, 1996) ^[9]. While Hindutva is often conflated with Hinduism as a religion, it is, in fact, a political ideology that envisions national unity through cultural cohesion (Graham, 1993). The evolution of RSS thought over the past century reflects an ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity, religious identity and political pragmatism, and national unity versus sectarian divisions.

Studying the ideological trajectory of the RSS is significant for multiple reasons. First, its influence on Indian political institutions and electoral politics is undeniable. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India's ruling party since 2014, has strong ideological and organizational ties to the RSS (Hansen, 1999) ^[7]. Understanding the RSS's thought process helps in assessing the intellectual foundations of contemporary Indian governance. Second, the RSS has had a substantial impact on social and cultural movements, extending beyond politics into education, social service, and national security concerns (Andersen & Damle, 2018) ^[1]. Third, the study of RSS ideology provides insight into how political thought in India has responded to global influences such as colonial rule, Western liberal democracy, and economic globalization while maintaining a distinct nationalist identity (Bhatt, 2001).

This paper aims to explore 100 years of RSS thought by situating it within the broader discourse of Indian political philosophy. It will examine the ideological foundations of the

RSS, its evolution over time, and its role in shaping political institutions and public discourse. Key research questions guiding this study include: How has the RSS's ideology developed over the past century? What are its core political beliefs regarding nationalism, democracy, and governance? How has it influenced India's political landscape, both historically and in contemporary times? What are the key critiques of its ideology and functioning, and how has the RSS responded to these criticisms? Finally, what does the trajectory of RSS thought suggest about the future of Indian political discourse?

The methodological approach of this paper involves a historical and ideological analysis of RSS thought. Primary sources such as speeches, writings of RSS leaders, and official publications will be examined alongside secondary sources that critically engage with the organization's ideas and impact. The paper will also draw on scholarly debates regarding nationalism, political mobilization, and ideological transformations in India. By contextualizing the RSS within the broader field of Indian political thought, this study will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how nationalist ideologies shape state power, social movements, and cultural identity.

In the following sections, the paper will first provide a historical background of the RSS, tracing its origins and key milestones. It will then analyze the core ideological principles that define RSS thought and compare them with other political traditions in India. The paper will further examine the organization's influence on Indian politics, including its role in shaping electoral strategies, policy frameworks, and public opinion. A critical discussion of the challenges and criticisms faced by the RSS will follow, highlighting both internal ideological shifts and external critiques. The final section will assess the contemporary relevance of the RSS, exploring its current role in governance and its potential future trajectory. Through this comprehensive analysis, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of the RSS's place within Indian political thought and its lasting impact on the country's political and ideological landscape.

2. Historical Background

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was founded in 1925 in Nagpur by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, a medical practitioner and nationalist deeply influenced by anti-colonial struggles and Hindu revivalist movements. Hedgewar, who had been associated with the Indian National Congress and revolutionary groups like the Anushilan Samiti, sought to create an organization that would instill discipline, cultural pride, and a sense of collective identity among Hindus (Andersen & Damle, 2018) ^[1]. Unlike mainstream nationalist movements that emphasized direct political action, the RSS focused on long-term social and ideological transformation. Hedgewar envisioned an organization that would work at the grassroots level, building a network of committed individuals dedicated to the idea of a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation) (Jaffrelot, 1996) ^[9].

i). Origins and Founding Principles: The early years of the RSS were shaped by two key influences: the Hindu nationalist ideas of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and the organizational discipline of the Rashtriya Bhawan Mandal, a paramilitary group. Savarkar's *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1923) provided the ideological foundation, arguing that Indian identity was rooted in Hindu cultural and religious heritage rather than territorial nationalism (Savarkar, 1923). This contrasted with the inclusive

nationalism of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, who emphasized a pluralistic Indian identity (Graham, 1993). Inspired by these ideas, Hedgewar structured the RSS as a cadre-based organization that operated through daily physical drills (shakhas), ideological training, and community engagement.

One of the defining principles of the RSS from its inception was its rejection of direct participation in electoral politics. Instead, it sought to shape society through cultural and ideological means. The organization focused on character-building and discipline among young men, training them to act as custodians of Hindu identity (Baxter, 1971) ^[2]. This strategic focus on social transformation rather than immediate political gains distinguished the RSS from other nationalist groups operating at the time.

ii). Key Milestones in the RSS's Evolution: The RSS remained a relatively small organization during its first two decades, growing slowly but steadily through grassroots outreach and networking. However, its trajectory changed dramatically after Indian independence in 1947. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by Nathuram Godse, who had been associated with Hindu nationalist circles, led to a temporary ban on the RSS in 1948. Although the organization denied any direct involvement, the ban forced it to redefine its public image and reaffirm its commitment to non-violence (Andersen & Damle, 2018) ^[1]. Following negotiations with the government, the RSS was allowed to resume operations in 1949 after adopting a formal constitution that emphasized its apolitical nature and cultural focus. Despite its non-political stance, the RSS began to influence electoral politics through affiliated organizations. The formation of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) in 1951 by Shyama Prasad Mukherjee marked the beginning of the RSS's active involvement in the political arena. The BJS, which later evolved into the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), served as the RSS's political wing, promoting its ideological vision within the democratic framework (Hansen, 1999) ^[7]. The 1975-77 Emergency imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was another defining moment for the RSS. Banned once again for its opposition to authoritarian rule, the RSS played a key role in mobilizing protests, aligning itself with the broader movement for democracy (Jaffrelot, 1996) ^[9]. This period further strengthened its legitimacy as a defender of national identity and democratic values. The 1980s and 1990s saw the RSS's influence expand significantly, particularly through the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, which sought the construction of a temple at the disputed Babri Masjid site in Ayodhya. The movement, led by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and supported by the RSS, culminated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, triggering nationwide communal riots (Varshney, 2002) ^[14]. This event marked a turning point in Indian politics, solidifying the RSS's position as a key ideological force shaping Hindu nationalism.

iii). Role in Shaping Indian Political Discourse: Over the past century, the RSS has played a crucial role in defining the contours of Indian political thought. By emphasizing cultural nationalism, it has provided an alternative ideological framework to the secularism espoused by the Indian National Congress. Through its vast network of

affiliates, collectively known as the Sangh Parivar, the RSS has influenced education, social policy, and national security debates (Bhatt, 2001).

The rise of the BJP as India's dominant political party in the 21st century has further cemented the RSS's relevance. Leaders with RSS backgrounds, including Prime Ministers Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Narendra Modi, have shaped national policies in alignment with the organization's ideological perspectives (Palshikar, 2018) ^[10]. While the RSS continues to officially distance itself from direct political engagement, its ideological guidance remains instrumental in shaping governance, electoral strategies, and national debates on identity and citizenship.

The historical trajectory of the RSS demonstrates its resilience and adaptability. From its origins as a small cultural organization to becoming one of the most influential socio-political forces in India, the RSS has successfully navigated political challenges while maintaining its ideological core. Understanding its historical evolution provides crucial insights into the broader dynamics of Indian political thought, particularly the intersection of nationalism, democracy, and cultural identity.

3. Core Political Ideology

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has developed a distinct ideological framework over the past century, rooted in the philosophy of Hindutva, cultural nationalism, and disciplined societal organization. Unlike political movements driven primarily by short-term electoral goals, the RSS's ideological foundation is based on a long-term vision of national regeneration through social cohesion and character building. The ideas of its founder, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, and one of its most influential leaders, M. S. Golwalkar, continues to shape its worldview and strategic direction.

i). Foundational Beliefs and Hindutva: At the core of RSS ideology is the concept of Hindutva, a term originally articulated by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1923). While Savarkar was not directly associated with the RSS, his definition of Hindutva as the cultural and civilizational identity of India deeply influenced the organization's ideological foundations. Hedgewar embraced this perspective and envisioned the RSS as an institution that would strengthen the Hindu society from within, ensuring that India's national character remained rooted in its ancient cultural traditions (Hedgewar, 1930).

M.S. Golwalkar, who became the RSS's second Sarsanghchalak (chief) in 1940, played a crucial role in refining and expanding the organization's ideological framework. In his seminal work, *Bunch of Thoughts* (1966), Golwalkar outlined the RSS's vision of an organic and united Hindu society. He argued that the strength of a nation lies in its cultural unity and that India's civilization had historically been shaped by Hindu philosophy and ethos. According to Golwalkar, the notion of nationhood was not merely political or geographical but was deeply intertwined with civilizational continuity and shared cultural consciousness (Golwalkar, 1966) ^[6].

Golwalkar's views on national unity emphasized discipline and social harmony. He saw the RSS as an instrument for nurturing *samskaras* (values) among individuals, ensuring that every Hindu recognized their

duty towards society and the nation. He strongly believed that the Hindu way of life had the inherent ability to integrate diverse traditions and communities within its fold, fostering unity rather than division (Golwalkar, 1947). This perspective led the RSS to prioritize social service, education, and character-building over direct political involvement, reinforcing its belief in long-term national transformation through grassroots efforts (Thakur, 2015) ^[12].

ii). Nationalism and the Idea of Bharat: The RSS conceptualizes nationalism in cultural and civilizational terms rather than as a modern political construct. Hedgewar, deeply influenced by the struggle against colonial rule, viewed nationalism as an expression of historical and cultural continuity. He believed that India's national identity was shaped by its indigenous traditions, which had been eroded by centuries of foreign rule (Hedgewar, 1930). His solution was to instill a sense of discipline, unity, and pride in Hindu heritage, making it the cornerstone of national resurgence.

Golwalkar further developed this idea by distinguishing between territorial nationalism, which defines nationhood based on geographical boundaries, and cultural nationalism, which views a nation as an organic entity rooted in shared heritage and traditions (Golwalkar, 1966) ^[6]. He argued that India, or Bharat, had always been a civilizational state rather than a modern nation-state in the Western sense. The RSS thus advocates for a national identity that transcends political structures and is grounded in cultural and spiritual values (Jois, 2000).

iii). Democracy and Governance: While the RSS has always maintained that it is a non-political organization, its ideological vision has had a significant impact on governance and democratic discourse in India. Hedgewar and Golwalkar both viewed democracy as an effective system when rooted in national unity and cultural integrity. They believed that Western models of democracy, if applied mechanically without considering India's unique socio-cultural realities, could lead to fragmentation rather than progress (Thakur, 2015) ^[12].

Golwalkar, in particular, stressed the importance of leadership that prioritizes national interest over individual or party politics. In *We, or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939) ^[5], he emphasized that governance should be guided by national duty and selfless service rather than personal ambition. He admired ancient Indian political systems, which he believed were based on decentralized governance, community leadership, and adherence to dharma (moral duty) (Golwalkar, 1939) ^[5]. This perspective aligns with the RSS's emphasis on self-governance, social responsibility, and disciplined nation-building.

Over time, the RSS's ideological stance on governance has found resonance in policies that emphasize national security, economic self-reliance, and cultural education. The organization's focus on *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency) and indigenous development aligns with its belief that India's progress should be driven by its own historical strengths rather than external influences (Jois, 2000). This has translated into advocacy for policies that support traditional knowledge systems, vocational training, and community-driven development initiatives (Chaturvedi, 2019) ^[3].

iv). Social Harmony and Integration: A critical aspect of RSS ideology is the emphasis on national unity through

social cohesion. Golwalkar viewed societal divisions, whether based on caste, language, or religion, as impediments to national strength. He called for an integrated Hindu society where caste distinctions would be replaced by a collective sense of duty towards the nation (Golwalkar, 1966) ^[6]. This perspective has informed various RSS initiatives aimed at promoting social harmony, including campaigns for temple entry for marginalized communities, rural development programs, and disaster relief efforts (Chaturvedi, 2019) ^[3].

The RSS has also sought to integrate India's tribal communities into the national mainstream through organizations like the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, which works towards education, healthcare, and economic empowerment in tribal areas (Andersen & Damle, 2018) ^[1]. These efforts reflect the RSS's belief that all sections of society should contribute to national development while preserving their cultural heritage.

v). Comparison with Other Indian Political Ideologies:

The RSS's ideological framework differs significantly from other dominant political traditions in India. While the Indian National Congress historically promoted a pluralistic and secular nationalism, the RSS emphasizes cultural nationalism as the defining principle of Indian identity. In contrast to leftist ideologies that prioritize class struggle and economic redistribution, the RSS advocates for organic social unity and national strength through self-reliance and cultural pride (Jaffrelot, 1996) ^[9].

Unlike socialist movements that look to state-led economic planning, the RSS supports decentralized economic models inspired by traditional Indian practices. This aligns with its broader vision of governance, where national interest and community-driven initiatives take precedence over rigid ideological frameworks (Jois, 2000).

4. Influence on Indian Politics

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has played a crucial role in shaping India's political landscape over the past century. While it positions itself as a cultural and social organization rather than a political entity, its ideological influence extends deeply into governance, policy-making, and electoral politics. Through its network of affiliate organizations, collectively known as the Sangh Parivar, the RSS has contributed to the rise of political parties, mobilized mass movements, and shaped public opinion on key national issues.

i). Role in Shaping Political Parties: The most significant political impact of the RSS has been its role in the formation and growth of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The political journey began in 1951 when Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, with support from RSS leaders, established the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS). The BJS provided a political platform for the RSS's ideological vision, advocating for cultural nationalism, self-reliance, and a strong national defense (Baxter, 1971) ^[2]. Although the BJS remained a relatively small political force for several decades, it steadily built a base among sections of the Indian middle class, traders, and Hindu nationalist groups.

The 1975-77 Emergency imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi marked a turning point in RSS's political influence. The RSS played a leading role in mobilizing opposition to the Emergency, aligning itself with pro-

democracy forces, including socialist and Gandhian groups (Jaffrelot, 1996) ^[9]. Many RSS workers were imprisoned during this period, further strengthening the organization's political credibility. In the post-Emergency elections of 1977, the BJS merged with other opposition parties to form the Janata Party, which briefly governed India. However, ideological differences led to the collapse of the Janata Party, prompting the formation of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1980 under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L. K. Advani (Hansen, 1999) ^[7].

Over the next few decades, the BJP expanded its reach, particularly through the Ram Janmabhoomi movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which called for the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya. The RSS and its affiliates, especially the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bajrang Dal, played an instrumental role in mobilizing public support for the movement. The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the subsequent political realignment helped the BJP emerge as a dominant force in Indian politics (Varshney, 2002) ^[14]. The rise of the BJP, culminating in its electoral victories in 1998, 2014, and 2019, has ensured that the RSS's ideological vision remains a key influence in national governance.

ii). Impact on Policy and Governance: Even though the RSS does not directly engage in governance, its influence on policy-making is evident in multiple domains. The organization's emphasis on self-reliance and indigenous economic models has contributed to the push for Aatmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India), a policy framework emphasizing domestic manufacturing, entrepreneurship, and national economic independence (Chaturvedi, 2019) ^[3]. Similarly, the RSS has actively advocated for education policies that promote Indian cultural heritage, leading to reforms in school curricula that emphasize indigenous knowledge systems and traditional sciences (Palshikar, 2018) ^[10].

National security and defense policies have also been influenced by the RSS's advocacy for a strong and self-sufficient military. The organization has consistently supported policies that prioritize national security, border defense, and counter-terrorism strategies. The emphasis on strategic autonomy and strengthening India's defense infrastructure aligns with the RSS's belief in a robust national identity (Andersen & Damle, 2018) ^[1].

In the realm of social policy, the RSS has promoted welfare initiatives through its affiliate organizations. Groups like the Seva Bharati engage in rural development, disaster relief, and education for underprivileged communities, reinforcing the RSS's vision of national service (sewa dharma) (Hansen, 1999) ^[7].

iii). Influence on Social Movements and Public Opinion: The RSS has been a key driver of social mobilization in India. Its extensive network of shakhas (daily training and ideological discussion units) allows it to engage with millions of people at the grassroots level. Through these shakhas, the RSS has cultivated a disciplined cadre committed to its vision of national unity and social harmony (Jaffrelot, 1996) ^[9].

The organization has also played a role in uniting various Hindu sects and communities under a common national identity. Efforts to integrate Dalits and tribal communities into mainstream Hindu society have been

central to its social outreach. The Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, for instance, has worked to uplift tribal populations while reinforcing their connection to Hindu cultural traditions (Chaturvedi, 2019) ^[3].

Public debates on issues such as Ghar Wapsi (religious re-conversion), Love Jihad (alleged forced conversions through interfaith marriages), and cow protection have been shaped by the RSS's ideological stance. While these issues remain politically sensitive, they reflect the RSS's commitment to preserving what it views as the core tenets of Indian civilization (Thakur, 2015) ^[12].

- iv). Critique of Political Strategies and Outcomes:** Despite its widespread influence, the RSS has often faced criticism for its role in electoral politics and policy influence. Some critics argue that its involvement in political affairs contradicts its original claim of being a non-political organization. However, the RSS maintains that its role is to provide ideological guidance rather than to seek political power directly (Andersen & Damle, 2018) ^[1].

Another area of debate is the tension between the RSS's long-term vision and the short-term political pragmatism of the BJP. While the RSS advocates for ideological purity and cultural revival, electoral politics often demands coalition-building and compromise. This has occasionally led to friction between the RSS leadership and BJP governments on issues such as economic liberalization and foreign policy (Palshikar, 2018) ^[10].

5. Challenges and Criticism

As a century-old organization with deep ideological and social influence, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has faced its share of challenges and critiques. While it has been widely recognized for its role in nation-building, character development, and fostering social cohesion, it has also encountered opposition from various political, academic, and ideological quarters. Some of these critiques stem from misunderstandings, while others arise from ideological differences. Over the years, the RSS has adapted to these challenges while staying committed to its foundational principles.

- i). Misconceptions and Media Narratives:** One of the primary challenges faced by the RSS is the way it is often portrayed in mainstream discourse. Some sections of the media and academia have labeled the organization as exclusivist or majoritarian, overlooking its broader emphasis on national unity and cultural renaissance (Andersen & Damle, 2018) ^[1]. The RSS maintains that its vision of Hindutva is cultural rather than religious and that it seeks to unite the country by reinforcing India's civilizational identity. However, its critics sometimes interpret this emphasis on cultural nationalism as being exclusionary, leading to persistent debates about its ideological position in a diverse society (Jaffrelot, 1996) ^[9].

Another recurring criticism is the claim that the RSS functions as a parallel power structure to the government, influencing policy and political decisions from behind the scenes. However, RSS leadership has consistently reiterated that it is a non-political organization that only provides ideological guidance rather than interfering in governance (Palshikar, 2018) ^[10]. The organization's decentralized nature and grassroots engagement reinforce this distinction, as its primary focus remains social and cultural rather than electoral politics.

- ii). Legal and Political Challenges:** Over the decades, the RSS has faced several legal and political challenges. It was banned on three occasions—first in 1948 following the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, again during the Emergency in 1975, and later in 1992 after the Babri Masjid demolition. In each instance, the bans were lifted after inquiries found no direct involvement of the RSS in unlawful activities (Hansen, 1999) ^[7]. These periods of restrictions were significant moments in the organization's history, testing its resilience and commitment to constitutional principles. Rather than weakening the RSS, these challenges strengthened its organizational discipline and public support.

The RSS has also faced opposition from certain political groups and ideologies that see its nationalist approach as a counterpoint to their own worldviews. Leftist intellectuals and sections of the liberal establishment have often criticized the RSS's emphasis on cultural continuity and national unity, preferring instead a more Westernized understanding of secularism and pluralism (Varshney, 2002) ^[14]. However, the RSS asserts that its vision is rooted in Indian traditions, which historically have been inclusive and accommodating of diversity within a shared civilizational framework.

- iii). Internal Adaptation and Evolution:** Another challenge for the RSS has been the need to evolve with changing socio-political dynamics while remaining true to its core ideology. Over the years, the organization has expanded its outreach, incorporating new areas such as environmental activism, technology-driven initiatives, and youth engagement (Chaturvedi, 2019) ^[3]. It has also played a more visible role in issues such as economic self-reliance and rural development, demonstrating its ability to adapt to contemporary concerns while upholding its foundational values.

6. Contemporary Relevance

In the 21st century, the RSS remains one of the most influential socio-cultural organizations in India. Its impact extends beyond politics, shaping national consciousness, governance frameworks, and societal values. As India undergoes rapid economic and geopolitical changes, the RSS continues to play a vital role in maintaining cultural continuity and fostering national unity.

- i). Influence on Governance and Policy:** While maintaining its non-political stance, the RSS's ideological framework has had a noticeable impact on governance. The emphasis on Aatmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) aligns with the RSS's long-standing advocacy for economic self-sufficiency and indigenous entrepreneurship (Palshikar, 2018) ^[10]. Similarly, educational reforms that incorporate traditional Indian knowledge systems and values resonate with the RSS's vision of national resurgence through cultural awareness.
- ii).** National security and defense policies have also been influenced by the RSS's advocacy for a strong and self-sufficient military. Its call for strategic autonomy aligns with policies that prioritize indigenous defense manufacturing and a proactive foreign policy approach (Andersen & Damle, 2018) ^[1].
- iii). Expanding Social Outreach:** Beyond policy and governance, the RSS has significantly expanded its role in social development. Organizations such as Seva Bharati continue to work in the fields of education, healthcare, and disaster relief, demonstrating the RSS's

commitment to grassroots nation-building (Chaturvedi, 2019) [3]. The Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram's efforts in tribal welfare have further reinforced the organization's focus on social integration and empowerment.

- iv). In response to modern societal changes, the RSS has also increased its engagement with the youth through initiatives such as the Vivekananda Kendra and IT Milans (forums for IT professionals). These platforms allow young professionals to connect with the RSS's vision while contributing to national development in their respective fields (Thakur, 2015) [12].
- v). **Global Reach and Indian Diaspora:** The RSS's influence is no longer confined to India. With a growing Indian diaspora, organizations such as the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) have emerged worldwide, promoting cultural awareness and community service among overseas Indians. These global affiliates work towards fostering a sense of identity and connection to Indian traditions among second-generation immigrants while engaging in humanitarian initiatives (Hansen, 1999) [7].
- vi). **Future Trajectory:** Looking ahead, the RSS's role in shaping Indian political and social thought is likely to continue expanding. As India emerges as a global power, the RSS's emphasis on national self-confidence, cultural identity, and social harmony will remain relevant in guiding the country's development trajectory. While challenges and critiques will persist, the organization's ability to adapt and remain committed to its foundational values ensures its continued influence.

7. Conclusion

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has played a pivotal role in shaping Indian political thought and discourse over the past century. Founded in 1925 by Dr. K. B. Hedgewar, the organization emerged with the vision of revitalizing India's cultural and national identity. Over the decades, it has influenced political parties, policy frameworks, and social movements while maintaining its commitment to grassroots mobilization and ideological clarity.

Historically, the RSS has evolved from a small group of volunteers into one of the most influential socio-political organizations in India. Its ideological framework, rooted in cultural nationalism, has guided the development of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and later the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Through its extensive network of affiliates, including the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bajrang Dal, and Seva Bharati, the RSS has actively engaged in social service, education, rural development, and cultural preservation.

The core political ideology of the RSS emphasizes nationalism, social cohesion, and self-reliance. Inspired by the writings of leaders such as M.S. Golwalkar and Deendayal Upadhyaya, the organization promotes the idea of Hindutva as a unifying cultural force rather than a religious identity. Its views on democracy and governance advocate for a decentralized yet disciplined national structure that aligns with India's civilizational ethos. Despite ideological differences with other political movements, the RSS has remained steadfast in its vision of a strong and self-sufficient India.

The RSS's influence on Indian politics is undeniable. While it does not directly participate in electoral politics, its ideological guidance has significantly shaped governance strategies, national policies, and public opinion. The rise of the BJP, particularly after the 1980s, can be attributed in part

to the organizational discipline and ideological foundation provided by the RSS. Additionally, its role in mobilizing social movements, such as the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, has had lasting political implications.

Despite its contributions, the RSS has faced criticism and challenges. Misconceptions about its ideological positions, accusations of exclusivism, and political bans at different points in history have tested its resilience. However, the organization has consistently adapted, emphasizing dialogue, social service, and cultural engagement. It has expanded its outreach through modern initiatives, including youth programs, technology-driven platforms, and international organizations such as the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS). As India continues its journey as a rising global power, the RSS's relevance remains strong. Its advocacy for *Aatmanirbhar Bharat*, national security, and cultural awareness aligns with contemporary governance priorities. Moreover, its role in fostering national unity amid socio-political changes highlights its enduring significance in Indian political thought.

The century-long journey of the RSS underscores its deep-rooted impact on India's political and social landscape. Whether through political influence, ideological contributions, or grassroots mobilization, the RSS has left an indelible mark on the nation's history. As it moves forward, the organization's ability to balance tradition with modernity will shape its continued role in India's evolving democracy.

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