

## **The RSS: A View to the Inside**

*Reviewed by Fahad Nabeel\**

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An introspection of Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) historic 2014 election victory reflects on the incredibly crucial support provided by Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its three dozen affiliates – collectively referred to as the Sangh Parivar (Family of Organizations). The support base provided to BJP during the electoral campaign was a manifestation of its unprecedented involvement in the political arena since the establishment of RSS nearly a century ago.

Prompted by the mushrooming of RSS's affiliates, its transformation in the wake of social and economic changes since the early 1990s and the political surge of BJP, Walter K. Andersen and Shridhar D. Damle revisited their previous scholarly work on the organization, 'The Brotherhood in Saffron'. This earlier account was written about three decades ago and there was growing need for a new study on RSS incorporating the transformational changes.

Unlike other books recently written on RSS, the authors of 'The RSS' adopt a case-study method in the book. The book is spread over 14 chapters and presents a general overview of the RSS over the past three decades while also studying nine other themes related to Sangh Parivar through case studies. These themes range from cow protection and Sino-India relations to Subash Velingkar's open rebellion.

The core questions which the book aims to look into broadly include: Why the RSS has increasingly relied on its affiliates? How does it manage to maintain a linkage between itself and the affiliates? What factors glue the three dozen affiliates as a single family despite varying policy perspectives? And finally, how has the thought process regarding democracy, secularism and Hinduism evolved over the years with Sangh Parivar's increasing social inclusiveness.

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With an estimated 1.5-2 million regular participants as of 2016, participating in daily, weekly and monthly *shakhas* (meetings) across more than 36,000 locations all around India, RSS has emerged as one of the largest non-government associations in the world. Consequently, the writers are of the opinion that understanding RSS has become the pre-requisite for understanding India.

The front was founded in 1925 by Dr Keshav Baliram, a Telegu Brahmin medical doctor, who believed that deep-rooted social divisions within Hindus had resulted in a 1000 years of foreign domination in the subcontinent. He aimed to address the issue by proposing a system of training wherein individuals had to undergo character building training. Consequently, graduates of the training system were then to become role models of ideal behaviour for others, which would have resultantly become a source of unifying a highly diverse country. However, Baliram's vision could not materialize as the partition of subcontinent gave birth to Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. Meanwhile, Fabian socialist views of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, were considered as alien to Indian traditions. The national ban on the group in February 1948 (lifted after 15 months), following the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by Nathuram Godse, a former RSS member, proved as the last nail in the coffin for RSS's utopian ambitions. Consequently, RSS was reduced to 'a pariah organization to be avoided at all costs'.

The 1960s witnessed the revival of RSS and contributed towards mushrooming of its affiliates, which with the passage of time penetrated virtually all areas of Indian society from agriculture to even leprosy patients. The group increasingly expanded since the early 1990s and continues to do so till date. Presently, BJP, which is also RSS's political affiliate, has become the first political party to secure a back-to-back majority in Lok Sabha elections since 1984. The incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi, began his public-service career as a full-time RSS worker. Additionally, the largest students' group - Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad - and the largest trade union - Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh - of India are also affiliates of RSS.

While studying the cohesiveness within Sangh Parivar, the authors have identified a number of factors which maintain the state of integration among three dozen affiliates with diverging viewpoints. First, the Sangathan manti system puts 6000 trained and well qualified RSS *pracharaks* (full-time workers) at the top management positions of RSS and its affiliates. These leaders dedicate their entire lives towards the fulfilment of RSS's objectives, which results in bringing them legitimacy. Apart from this system, RSS's yearly Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha (General Assembly) and *samanvay samitis* (coordination meetings) are major platforms where all the affiliates gather to discuss key issues. The

core leadership of RSS is also constantly on road, attending several events organized by its affiliates annually and gauge the opinions of the rank and file.

Moving towards the specific themes, mostly covered in the book, the authors first discuss Muslim Rashtriya Manch (MRM). Limited success in attracting Muslims toward Sangh Parivar promoted RSS leadership to establish an independent Muslim activist organization MRM in 2002. The non-inclusion of MRM in RSS's affiliates demonstrates the ambivalence within Sangh about how to approach Muslims. Viewed as the middle ground approach for bringing Muslims into the nationalist mainstream, the MRM not only reaches out to Muslims, but also clears the existing misconceptions about Muslims among RSS members. In brief, MRM's goal is to mould Muslims in such a way that they can be accommodated by RSS on its terms with respect to its brand of patriotism.

The book also negates some commonly held notions regarding the influence of Sangh on the decision-making process of the Indian government. The authors have explained that Sangh has limited influence on government's core economic policy elements, such as issues regarding increasing Chinese penetration in the Indian market through investment and technology transfers. However, RSS's affiliates can make a difference on policy issues which do not undermine the government's core objective such as issues regarding royalty rates of genetically-modified seeds. Contrary to popular belief, there appears to be no unifying stance on various issues. For example, there are opposing views within Sangh regarding *Ghar Wapsi* (religious conversion of non-Hindus to Hinduism), cow protection and Ram Janmabhoomi temple.

Regarding Indian foreign policy, the authors believe that Sangh will support Modi's foreign policy agenda as long as it is in lines with the Indian strategic interests and contributes toward making India a militarily strong country. Sangh's support to Modi's foreign policy is demonstrated by the fact that RSS, which has historically remained suspicious of China, had not backed Swadeshi Jagran Manch's demand of stopping Chinese investments and put in place regulatory hurdles for Indian companies with significant Chinese investments.

Toward the end of the book, the authors conclude that Narendra Modi and Mohan Bhagwat, RSS's current chief, have a pivotal role to play in shaping the future direction of Sangh Parivar. They believe so considering good chemistry between the two leaders and understanding their key roles in the Parivar with Modi setting public policy, while Bhagwat supervising mediating efforts within the Sangh.

‘The RSS: A View to the Inside’ is a very good read for all those who are interested in knowing about internal workings of Hindu organizations and India itself. Through case-study method, the authors have attempted to shed light on most pressing issues faced by Sangh in recent times and how it has transformed and continues to do so to make itself relevant, socially acceptable and maintain cohesiveness within itself.