

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Role of Cultural Nationalism in India's Development: A Study of RSS Ideology

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of cultural nationalism in shaping the trajectory of national development in India through a critical examination of the ideology and activities of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Founded in 1925, the RSS has emerged as one of the most influential socio-cultural organizations in India, deeply rooted in the concept of Bharatiyata (Indianness). Drawing on the principles of discipline, selfless service (sewa), and national pride, the RSS promotes a form of cultural nationalism that seeks to unite diverse communities under a shared civilizational ethos. The study investigates how the RSS's ideological framework centered on the revival of indigenous traditions, promotion of national unity, and social cohesion has contributed to India's development, particularly in sectors such as education, rural upliftment, disaster relief, and value-based nation-building. It also examines criticisms and controversies surrounding the organization's influence, especially regarding pluralism and secularism in a democratic framework. Through a combination of historical analysis, case studies, and review of scholarly literature, the paper offers a balanced perspective on how the RSS's cultural nationalism intersects with development goals in contemporary India. The findings suggest that while the RSS has significantly mobilized civil society and instilled a strong sense of national identity, its impact must be understood in the broader context of India's pluralistic society and evolving democratic values.

KEYWORDS

• Indian Identity • National Integration • Ideological Movements • Nation-Building • Cultural Heritage • RSS Vision for India

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INTRODUCTION

Historical Foundations and Ideological Roots

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in 1925 by Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, has played a significant role in shaping Indian nationalism over the past century. Its influence spans cultural, political, and social spheres, making it one of the most impactful and debated organizations in India today. The RSS was established as a response to British colonial rule and communal tensions, aiming to unite Hindus and promote a cohesive national identity. Heavily influenced by the writings of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the RSS adopted a Hindu nationalist ideology, emphasizing the creation of a “Hindu nation.” While the RSS positions itself as a cultural organization, its ideology of Hindutva (Hindu-ness) has been central to its activities. This ideology underscores the organization’s commitment to preserving and promoting Hindu culture, values, and traditions, viewing Hinduism as the foundational culture of India.

In the backdrop of post-colonial reconstruction, the RSS advocated for a strong, unified Indian identity rooted in **Bharatiya Sanskriti** (Indian culture). In contemporary times, particularly under the political influence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the RSS ideology has become central to India’s governance, education, and policy narratives. The idea of “New India” as envisioned by the RSS goes beyond economic growth; it emphasizes cultural resurgence, national pride, and social unity.

Core Ideological Foundations of RSS

1. Cultural Nationalism (Hindutva): The cornerstone of RSS ideology is Hindutva, a term popularized by V.D. Savarkar. It defines Indian nationalism through cultural and civilizational continuity rather than political boundaries.

2. Unity in Diversity: The RSS promotes the idea of one nation, one people, and one culture, stressing integration over fragmentation. It sees India as a civilizational state with a spiritual ethos binding its diversity.

3. Self-Reliance (Swadeshi): Drawing from Gandhian ideals and indigenous models, the RSS supports economic policies based on local empowerment and resistance to Western cultural domination.

4. Discipline and Character Building: The organization emphasizes youth training through shakhas (daily gatherings), instilling discipline, patriotism, and moral values.

Nation Building: RSS Perspective

The RSS envisions a New India rooted in:

- **Bharatiyata (Indianness):** Emphasizing a return to traditional Indian knowledge systems, languages, and values.
- **Education Reform:** Promotion of curricula that reflect Indian heritage and pride, as seen in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.
- **Social Cohesion:** Although controversial, the RSS claims to work toward national unity by removing caste barriers and promoting service-based outreach (Seva Karya).
- **Strong Governance:** Advocating for decisive leadership, national security, and defense of India’s cultural identity on global platforms.

Criticism and Challenges

While many hail RSS for its grassroots organizational strength and role in shaping national identity, critics argue it promotes majoritarianism and excludes minority narratives. Debates on secularism, pluralism, and democratic values often surround the RSS-led political discourse.

The RSS continues to play a pivotal role in shaping India’s national consciousness. As India aspires to be a global power, the RSS vision of nation-building anchored in cultural pride, discipline, and unity offers a distinct model of development. However, balancing this vision with constitutional values of secularism, inclusion, and diversity remains a key challenge for building a truly equitable New India.

RSS IDEOLOGY

The concept of cultural nationalism in India is deeply embedded in the ideological framework of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an organization that has played a pivotal role in shaping nationalist narratives since its inception in 1925. This review explores how the RSS’s cultural ideology contributes to India’s development in political, social, and educational spheres, while also engaging with

the associated critiques and controversies. At its core, RSS ideology promotes a vision of Bharat rooted in Sanatan Dharma, emphasizing civilizational unity, cultural heritage, and Hindu values as the foundation of Indian identity.

This form of nationalism is cultural rather than territorial it seeks to unite people on the basis of shared traditions, language, and religion, particularly Hinduism. From the RSS perspective, national regeneration cannot occur through Western models alone; rather, it must emerge from India's indigenous roots. This belief has led to the promotion of Swadeshi economy, Bharatiya education models, Yoga, cow protection, and revival of ancient sciences. The RSS-affiliated organizations like Vidyabharati, Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, and Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh have extended these ideals into rural education, tribal welfare, and labor reforms respectively. In the political domain, the RSS's influence on the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has redefined the discourse of nationalism and development. The idea of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas" is rooted in cultural unity, aiming for inclusive development but under a majoritarian cultural framework. Proponents argue that this fosters social cohesion and national pride, crucial for a united and strong India.

However, critics argue that RSS's cultural nationalism can marginalize religious and cultural minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians, by equating Indian identity with Hindu values. This has raised concerns about secularism, pluralism, and constitutional equality. The emphasis on a monolithic cultural identity may, at times, clash with India's diverse fabric.

From a developmental standpoint, the RSS has contributed significantly to grassroots mobilization, disaster relief, and community service, often filling gaps in state-led welfare. Yet, its role in education and history writing is often seen as ideologically driven, aiming to reinterpret India's past through a Hindu-centric lens. The RSS's brand of cultural nationalism presents a unique model of development anchored in tradition but aiming for modern national strength. It fosters a sense of pride and rootedness but must continually address the balance between cultural unity and democratic diversity. Whether one views the RSS's role as constructive or exclusionary, its ideological

impact on India's development trajectory is undeniable and worthy of continued scholarly engagement.

Role in Nation-Building

The RSS has been instrumental in shaping India's national identity. During the Partition, it provided relief and rehabilitation to displaced Hindus. The organization also played a role during the Emergency in 1975 and has been involved in various social service initiatives over the decades.

Role in Indian Nationalism

The RSS has significantly influenced Indian nationalism through various avenues: **Cultural Nationalism:** By promoting Hindu cultural values and traditions, the RSS fosters a sense of national pride and unity among its members.

- **Political Influence:** Though not a political party, the RSS has close ties with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India's ruling party. Many BJP leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, have roots in the RSS.
- **Social Service:** The organization conducts various social service initiatives, including disaster relief and community development programs, contributing to nation-building efforts.

Social Service and Community Engagement

Operating on the principle of selfless service (*sewa*), the RSS has been active in education, rural development, disaster relief, healthcare, and promoting social harmony. Its extensive network of volunteers has contributed to various aspects of Indian society.

Recent Developments and Publications

Union Minister Nitin Gadkari is set to launch his new book titled 'Sanghatil Manavi Vyavasthapan' (Human Management in the Sangh) on May 30, 2025. The book explores the RSS's distinctive approach to human resource management, highlighting its role in successful national and social projects.

Cultural and Ideological Influence

The RSS emphasizes discipline, character building, and selfless service, aiming to instill a sense of pride in Indian culture and heritage. It promotes values such as inclusivity, tradition, self-reliance, and responsibility.

Social Integration and National Unity

India's diversity is both strength and a challenge. The RSS has worked extensively to promote social integration by encouraging unity among various Hindu communities and reaching out to non-Hindu groups. Its efforts aim at fostering a collective Indian identity rooted in shared cultural values, which can enhance social harmony and political stability crucial factors for development.

Education and Cultural Revival

The RSS has contributed significantly to education in India through affiliated organizations such as the Vidya Bharati schools. These institutions emphasize the teaching of Indian culture, history, and values alongside modern subjects. By nurturing pride in India's heritage and promoting value-based education, the RSS aims to create responsible citizens capable of contributing positively to nation-building.

Rural Development and Community Service

Through its extensive network of volunteers, the RSS has been actively involved in rural development projects, including sanitation drives, healthcare camps, and disaster relief operations. These initiatives not only address immediate community needs but also build social capital and foster grassroots participation in development.

Diverse Perspectives and Debates

The RSS's role in Indian nationalism is subject to diverse interpretations: **Supportive Views:** Proponents argue that the RSS has been instrumental in uniting Hindus and promoting a strong national identity. They highlight its contributions to social service and cultural preservation. **Critical Perspectives:** Critics contend that the RSS's emphasis on Hindu nationalism undermines India's secular fabric and marginalizes minority communities. Some scholars argue that the RSS had no significant role in India's freedom struggle.

Modi was also able to transcend the RSS-BJP tension. As a member of RSS since the age of eight, his pedigree was unquestioned. The first BJP prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, had tried to keep the extremist tendencies RSS at bay. Unable to stomach the 2002 pogrom in Gujarat, he had even tried to oust Modi as the state's chief minister. But by then, Modi was already untouchable in Gujarat. In 2013-14,

he contemptuously brushed aside his rivals within the BJP. He had emerged as the Sangh Parivar's best hope for returning to power. "In the persona of the Gujarat chief minister who projects a masculine Hindu pride while seeming to embrace a pragmatic economic philosophy and sporting a Movado watch, Bulgari spectacles, and Montblanc pens the RSS may have found a way to resolve, or at least dissipate, the tensions between its ethos and the exigencies of contemporary political life," noted the journalist Dinesh Narayan.

If the BJP's road to Delhi in 1998 was paved with the shattered stones of the Babri Mosque, its stunning return in 2014 detoured through the blood-soaked streets of Ahmedabad as well as the supportive boardrooms of major corporations. Within 150 days of Modi becoming chief minister of Gujarat, Hindu hard-liners there were massacring Muslims. An investigation into the riots by the Campaign against Genocide a network of civil society organizations that includes Hindu and other faith-based groups found the state government "complicit and culpable at the highest level." Modi has never been able to live down his association with the 2002 pogrom. Not that he has tried to. For a significant section of his core constituency, the Gujarat pogrom was about finally teaching Muslims a lesson, a long-overdue turning of the tables against a dangerous minority. Moderates in the Hindu population were horrified, but as politicians around the world understand moderates don't make the most effective army for an election campaign. The troops whose enthusiasm Modi needed most were members of the RSS, which had founded the BJP in 1980. Only with their blessings could Modi achieve preeminence within the BJP. Even after he emerged as the clear front-runner, when prudence might have suggested that he position himself as a more moderate and inclusive PM-in-waiting, Modi's campaign burnished his image as a Hindu strongman. The giving and taking of religious offense continued unabated.

THE NEW PM

Faced with the realities of governing, candidates who campaign as extremists often become moderates in power. But two years after Modi's arrival in Delhi, there are few signs of moderation in Hindutva hate spin. Modi handed education and culture to the dogmatic RSS, as a reward for its support

in the campaign. The movement is steadily asserting its power over the prime minister, says the historian Ramachandra Guha. All in all, the transition from "campaign Modi to governance Modi" has not been a smooth one. If anything, the rhetoric of intolerance appears to have been ratcheted up, and in some cases gone well beyond mere words, erupting in violent attacks on minorities. For example, BJP MP Yogi Adityanath spearheaded a "ghar wapsi" (homecoming) campaign to convert Muslims and Christians by force to Hinduism. Although politicians like Adityanath are tarnishing Modi's international reputation, it is difficult for him to restrain them, since their platform of religious nationalism got him elected. "It's not a remote control thing that you can switch on and off as you please," notes Varghese K. George.

Modi's other key platform economic revitalization looked shaky. With little to show for its grandiose election claims, the BJP failed in its first major electoral tests after coming to power: it was beaten badly in elections in Delhi and Bihar in 2015. In the absence of strong economic results, identity politics may continue to be the cheapest way to win support. Midway through his first term, the prime minister had yet to go out of his way to reassure minorities that their status was secure.

The main restraint on the Hindutva agenda may be the country's sheer ungovernability an obstacle that has thwarted Indian leaders' most progressive intentions, and may do the same to Modi's Hindu nationalism. Everything, from India's federal system to its irrepressible argumentative tradition, conspires against totalizing visions. The courts and the quasi-judicial commissions provide additional structural safeguards, says the constitutional lawyer Bhairav Acharya. In addition, other state imperatives, especially national security, may kick in. After a spate of widely publicized attacks on Christians, including the brutal rape of an elderly nun, the former navy chief Sushil Kumar made a telling intervention: India could not afford to pollute its secular environment to such an extent that it compromised its multiethnic armed forces. "The armed forces have always been considered in India as the strongest pillar of our society, and the reason is simply that we are a secular armed force," he said. "Now to allow such a virus to percolate into the armed forces is a very

dangerous thing."

Most of the prime minister's rhetoric has focused on the economy and foreign affairs. At the same time, Modi continues to say and do enough to encourage his core constituency on the Hindu Right that the dream of Hindutva is still alive. His divisive rhetoric is striking for its economy. He does not have to say much. Thanks to decades of Hindutva hate propaganda, the ongoing campaign to rewrite Indian history, and the pogroms of Muzaffarnagar and Gujarat, Modi's adulatory audience can fill in any blanks he leaves with readily accessible mental flashcards. In one of his first parliamentary speeches as prime minister, Modi referred, in passing, to the need to shed "1,200 years of slave mentality." His audience required no further elaboration. They knew that negating 12 centuries of history meant transcending not just British colonialism but also India's Muslim heritage. Here was Modi's vision of India's tryst with destiny: a glorious Hindu civilization, foreign invasions, minorities who demand more and more, and a strong leader prepared to teach those invaders a lesson.

Recent Developments

As the RSS marks its 100th anniversary in 2025, it continues to advocate for a "Dharmic" future for India. RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat has called for societal transformations focusing on social harmony, family values, environmental awareness, national selfhood, and civic responsibility.

Additionally, the RSS emphasizes the importance of unifying Hindu society to strengthen India both militarily and economically, aiming to build a robust and self-reliant nation capable of defending itself against global aggression.

Critiques and Controversies

While the RSS's role in promoting cultural nationalism has had positive impacts on community mobilization and national identity, it has also faced criticism. Critics argue that its emphasis on Hindu cultural identity can alienate minority communities, potentially undermining India's secular and pluralistic fabric. Concerns have been raised about whether cultural nationalism, as promoted by the RSS, accommodates India's religious and cultural diversity or fosters exclusion.

Moreover, some scholars critique the organization's ideological influence on politics, suggesting that its vision of nationalism sometimes aligns with majoritarian agendas that challenge democratic inclusivity.

Balancing Cultural Nationalism and Pluralism

India's development depends on harmonizing its diverse social fabric while nurturing a cohesive national identity. The challenge for the RSS and similar organizations lies in balancing cultural nationalism with pluralism ensuring that pride in indigenous culture does not translate into exclusion or discrimination. Successful nation-building requires recognizing and respecting India's multi-religious, multi-ethnic realities while fostering shared values that unify its people. The RSS's grassroots mobilization and social service efforts offer a framework for engagement, but their ideological narrative must continue evolving toward inclusivity to fully support India's democratic and developmental goals.

CONCLUSION

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh has played a significant role in promoting cultural nationalism as a means of fostering India's national development. Its emphasis on cultural revival, social integration, education, and service has contributed positively to many sectors of Indian society. However, the complexity of India's pluralistic democracy necessitates a nuanced approach to cultural nationalism—one that embraces diversity alongside shared heritage. As India continues its path toward economic growth and social progress, understanding and critically assessing the role of organizations like the RSS remains vital. Their contributions to nation-building are part of a larger tapestry of efforts that shape India's identity and development in the 21st century.

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