

Examining the role of RSS in the freedom struggle of India

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ABSTRACT

There is a widespread controversy regarding the role of the RSS in the freedom movement, despite the fact that an ever-increasing section of the Indian population is coming to know about the RSS. It is in this sphere that this article aims to extend some original information regarding the role of RSS in the pre-independence era. Hedgewar established the RSS as a well-organised group initially composed of upper-caste Brahmans who were committed to achieving independence and safeguarding the political, cultural, and religious interests of Hindus. Following Hedgewar's death, the leadership of the organisation was taken over by Golwalkar and then by Dattatray Deoras. The entire organisation is structured in a hierarchical framework, with a national head providing advice, and regional leaders responsible for supervising the local branches. RSS places significant importance on the virtues of commitment and self-control, including both the mind and body, in order to rejuvenate the vigour, bravery, and bravery in Hindu adolescents and promote solidarity among Hindus of all social strata. The RSS actively participated in every national event summoned by the Congress throughout the freedom movement and it also played a pivotal role during the partition by actively assisting in various relief efforts and aiding Hindus in their migration. In this regard, the research paper examines the role of RSS in the freedom struggle.

Keywords: Social, Culture, Politics, RSS, Freedom, Hindutva

The Pre-independence days saw the rise of many political organisations and movements which not only influenced the then ensuing movement for Independence but were also to have far-reaching repercussions after the Independence. After the first uprising for the Independence, many cultural organisations like the Arya Samaj and Prathana Samaj were formed. Prior to the 1857 uprising, Raja Ram Mohun Roy had laid the foundation of the Brahmo Samaj whose main aim was the socio-cultural upliftment of the then downtrodden masses. All those cultural organisations and movements had the common objective of reviving the decadent state of Hindu society. The Sati Bill passed in 1829 during the tenure of the Governor General Lord W. Bentinck was a watershed event for the emancipation of the Hindu society. The widow Remarriage Act passed in 1833, at the behest of Justice Ranade, Malabari and Narmad was the conformation of the reviving trend of the Hindu Society. Later on, many religious personalities also got involved in crusading for the struggle for the rejuvenation of the Hindu society. Notable among these were personalities like Avani Dayanand and Swami Vivekanand. The basic reason for the involvement of such religious ascetics was that many of the social evils which were prevalent at that time had acquired a quasi-religious sanction, be it the caste system, child marriage or the problems of the widows.

By then many of the top leaders of the Independence movement had also started realizing that the basic reason for the subjugation of the country to foreign powers was not only political but also social. It was only a question of clear visualisation that a society infested with superstitions customs and belief could not be very strong either externally or internally. Besides, it was a basic fact that the majority of Indian population was Hindu. The evils of the Hindu Society, were directly or indirectly, guilty of the sorry state to which the country had come to pass. Even among all the prevalent ills in the society, especially the Hindu, the fragmentation of the society on the petty consideration of castes and sub-castes, classes and sub-classes can easily be pointed out as the main culprit for the sagging image and state of the Hindu Society. In such a situation, it was simply out of question to expect the Hindu society, or even the Indian population in general to stand upto the challenges posed by the antagonistic and alien forces. The state of Maharashtra deserves a special mention against this background of appalling social evils and contradictions, due to the heroic efforts of Mahatma Phule and Bal.

G. Tilak carrying the glorious tradition towards the zenith of social revival, there come upon the altar of Maharashtra the magnetic personality of Dr. Hedgewar. He was the founder of the great realisation of an equally great ideal which was to play a most significant role, both before and after the Independence of India. Needless to say, that this was none other than the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. He had found that the people were hopelessly divided and the methods tried till then for removing this greatest defect were unsuccessful. He realised that the Indians lay prostrate before the foreign rulers mainly due to lack of unity and vitality and that they needed to be revived and reinvigorated with a militant spirit. A consciousness of the glorious past of India would revive their confidence and sense of their bounden duty to regain its Independence and would also help to develop their initiative.¹ The RSS was founded in the year 1925. Though this may seem to be the very last lap of the movement for Independence, it would be quite unwise and rash to judge the socio-political influence of any organisation or movement in terms of its chronological age. It was destined for the RSS to play the role of the navigator for the Independence movement, especially via the socio-cultural channels. During the same period, the Hindu Mahasabha was also quite active to eliminate caste restrictions and the political activities of social organisations. But to the utter misfortune of the Mahasabha, by the time RSS and its leadership were avoiding political activities, it was becoming increasingly involved in politics.² In contrast to the socio-political activities of the Hindu Mahasabha, the RSS concentrated on the revival and rejuvenation of the Hindu Society. By 1930, the RSS was being widely recognised as a vigorously growing youth force not only by the Hindu Mahasabha but also by the Congress and the Britishers, and not to say of the Communists who were always more than willing to play mischievous pranks with the RSS, right from its inception.³ In the early 1930s, the RSS began to spread beyond its Marathi speaking base in the Central Provinces. The work in North India progressed so well that ten organisers (pracharks) were sent to Punjab, Delhi and the United Provinces to expand its activities. A Ibne Department Fortnightly report stated, "these militant groups (RSS) continue to multiply the para-militant nature of the RSS and can develop into a dangerous revolutionary group".⁴

The formation of the R.S.S. was not merely a beginning of one more organisation but the beginning of a new movement and a distinct process which got varied interpretations by numerous social scientists and political thinkers. It was neither like Hindu Mahasabha nor like the Navjivan Bharat Sabha, either objectively or structurally. The organisation was founded by a doctor of Nagpur, Dr. K.B. Hedgewar (1889-1940) on the Vijaydashmi day without any pomp and publicity. The Liberationalist (Liberal and Nationalist) School, chiefly represented by the RSS, outright rejects both the Marxists and the Liberal Congress viewpoints and argues that India is an ancient nation is a basis of the national unity it has promoted cultural nationalism. Thus, the theory of cultural nationalism become a dominant ideology. The cultural-ideological root of the RSS lies in the political thinking of its founder Dr. K.B Hedgewar and the 'Hedgewarism', which unlike any other 'ism', is not a blueprint of an ideology but a spirit which combines the vision and action of Dr. Hedgewar.⁵ Hedgewarism dares to take a worldview and to create a solid base of the nationalism through which it endeavours to unite Hindus beyond sectional, sectarian, lingual and regional diversities and aspires to transform every Hindu into a patriot. Thus, Hedgewarism uses Hindu as a means to regenerate cultural nationalism. Dr. Hedgewar was a fiery patriot who faced seemingly insurmountable resistance in his home itself for his political activities. At a tender age of 20, he was anxious enough to raise the banner of revolt against the orthodox Brahman and opted to strengthen the hands of the elder nationalists of Nagpur. Thus, it was quite obvious that the beginning of the RSS was not for mere short-term gains, either ideological or political, but the starting of a great nationalist movement not merely to oust the Britishers or to join the political bandwagon of the so-called democratic forces of the nation, but to have a complete emancipation of the Indian populace through the first step to rejuvenating the humanitarian values and culture of the ancient land- i.e., Hindu Rashtra. It has been a mission to achieve "para- mavaai bhawan ne tumhe tatsu Rashtra" (the glorious phase of mother India), both material and mental.

The working of the RSS has distinct features and Justice H.R Khanna has called it a 'man making machine'.⁶ The wider and ever-growing network of the dedicated and disciplined workers of the RSS have not only been endeavouring to infuse a code of conduct but a Sanskar' that is to say an inbuilt and innate compulsion to follow the ethically right path voluntarily, regardless of all temptations and fears. The shadow of Hedgewar has been ever growing and 'Hedgewarian' has been on the way to replace the Gandhian-Nehruvian stream and thereby to become the mainstream of the India's social, political and cultural life. It is the only mission which

¹ Excerpt from Vol. No.II of the four volumes anthology (covering the period of 1857-1947) brought out in 1973 by Institute of Historical Studies, Calcutta.

² Anderson, W.K., "The R.S.S.", Economic and Political Weekly, Bombay, p. 635.

³ Seshadri, H. V., An Interview with the author, February 23, 1990, New Delhi.

⁴ Anderson, W.K., Damle, S.D., The Brotherhood in Saffron, New Delhi (v Saffron, New Delhi (Vistar Publications, 1987), pp. 77-78.

⁵ Sinha, R.K., "Hedgewar and Indian Nationalism", The Indian Express, April 6, 1989, p.14.

⁶ Khanna, Justice, H.R., A Lecture delivered by him on November 7, 1988. Arts Faculty, Delhi University, Delhi.

moves constantly and consistently without any stop like motion of the earth. The natural corollary is the expansion of the RSS at a wide scale in each and every aspect of the life. The political career of Dr. Hedgewar was spread over the period 1905 to 1940. In the first phase (1905-18) of his political life, he was a staunch Tilakite but his faith in Tilak was not a blind one. Tilak argued for political activities as the first priority but Hedgewar endorsed Tilak's approach and declared, "There is no politics for a dependent nation other than the politics of the freedom movement." It is a *sine qua non* for it. The second phase of the political career of Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS was spread over the period 1919-1925. It was marked by his active participation in the Congress session of Nagpur and the non-cooperation movement. In the post first world war period his differences with Tilak and Dr. Moonje come to the surface. He refused to toe Tilak's line of 'passive cooperation' during the war period and separated himself from the political forum of Tilakaites, that is, 'Rashtriya Mandal' and formed 'Nagpur National Union' to campaign for 'complete independence'. The most conspicuous political action of Hedgewar was his voice against both imperialism and capitalism. He moved a parallel resolution at the Congress session of Nagpur in 1920 stating, the goal of the Congress is to establish a republic in India and to free the countries of the world from the exploitation of the capitalist countries.⁷ He also used the words 'imperialism and capitalism' as synonymous terms giving the impression that the malady of imperialism could be ended by replacing world order. His declaration of 'pure independence' was the vision for a democratic world order, as he had openly declared in a court during his trial for an alleged seditious speech, "the only government that has a right to exist in any part of the globe is a government of the people, for the people and by the people". This period may be termed as a period of transition and mass leadership in the political life of Dr. Hedgewar, which led to the constitution of the ideological under-structure of the RSS. The third phase of political life of Dr. Hedgewar spanned over the period 1925-40 during his revolutionary life and subsequent agitationist politics under the stewardship of Gandhi in which he realised the lack of cultural bonds among the people and found that politics was a power game, which led him further away from active politics. The last event of political importance in which he had participated was the 1930 Salt Satyagraha. He, however, subsequently distanced himself from the Gandhian concept of Hindu-Muslim unity and launched his new movement of Hindu regeneration that is the RSS. In this period, the RSS actively participated in the National Movement for freedom.⁸ After the demise of Dr. Hedgewar in 1940, M.S. Golwalkar took over as Sarsanghachalak of the RSS. In anticipation of the expected Hindu-Muslim troubles after the post second world war period, the R.S.S. had decided at the very beginning of the second world war not to antagonise the Government in any manner.⁹ The strategy adopted to achieve this end was to cautiously avoid any overt political activity and also to avoid rendering help to the Hindu Mahasabha, but this decision acquired a controversial over tone within the rank and file of the RSS. The general approach of Golwalkar was one of extreme caution in order to avoid the wrath of the British Government.¹⁰ Against this background, the RSS took the decision not to participate in the Quit India movement of 1942.¹¹ This was only an instance of the march towards the summit of the basic ideology of Dr. Hedgewar which becomes quite clear from his address to the Swayamsevaks during courting arrest in 1931 in the process of Salt Satyagraha in which he had said that real patriotism did not lie in the filling up of jails voluntarily but in the effort to rejuvenate and revive the cultural nationalism of the Indian populace, which could only be brought about through coherent and persistent efforts on the parts of the Swayamsevaks in accordance with the RSS ideology.¹² After the second world war the country came face to face with the dreaded communal monster of the partition. In the face of such a danger, the RSS though at that time only a small but strongly independent organisation, tried its best to mobilise public opinion and especially the opinion of the top brass of the Congress against the outcry for partition. Some critics have levelled the charge against the RSS that it has acted as an instrument in the hands of the British Imperialists by means of its philosophy of Hindu revivalism which had as its logical consequence the segregation of the Indian population on Communal Lines. Further, they say that this had decelerated the process of the movement for independence. This is not at all true, they even blame it for the partition of the country because of its philosophy of Hindu revivalism which, in their view, must have led to the surfacing of the fears of various minority communities. Though at the superficial level this charge seems to be in surmountable, a slight analysis will render it hopelessly sterile.

The RSS had a different idea of the independence of the country, which was not limited to the mere transfer of political power from alien hands to native ones.¹³ Independence, in the real sense of the term, could be said to be attained, only when through the socio-cultural regeneration of the society, the individuals would start

⁷ Seshadri, H.V., Dr. Hedgewar, Bombay (Sahitya Sindhu, 1981), pp. 48-49.

⁸ Sankhdhar, Prof. M.M., Organiser, January 29, 1989, p.19.

⁹ Anderson, W.K., "The RSS", Economic and Political Weekly, Bombay, March 11, 1972, p.589.

¹⁰ Chandra, Prof. Bipan, JNU, New Delhi, An Interview with the author, February 28, 1990, New Delhi.

¹¹ Deshmukh, Nana, R.S.S., A Victim of Slander, New Delhi (Vision Books, 1979), p.133.

¹² Seshadri, H.V., (All India General Secretary of the R.S. S.), Bangalore, An Interview with the Author, February 23, 1990, New Delhi.

¹³ Bhardwaj, Dr. Chandra Prakash, (Director, Archives, DRI, New Delhi), An Interview with the Author, January 21, 1990, New Delhi.

feeling pride in adhering to the golden values of our ancient motherland. The RSS leadership was vigilant enough to perceive the secessionist and separatist propensities of a great faction of the Muslim population at an early stage. It could clearly perceive the tendencies to minority appeasement and political bargaining in the name of freedom movement. It had even predicted the sorry state of the country which it came to pass in 1947, that is, the partition of the country. The only way to curb such malicious under-dealings was to bring the Hindu population under one banner in the name of common socio-cultural background which would in turn check the Muslim illusions of its minority strength and the consequent bargaining power.

In the early 20th century, there was a palpable need to reorganise and rejuvenate the Hindu society on militant political-cultural lines. This indeed could not be ignored because the vast majority of the Indian populace were Hindus. It was only a question of the personality who would be willing and strong enough to perform this mammoth task under Dr. Hedgewar's stewardship. Indeed, India was politically dependent at that time but even more glaring was its dependence and even obliteration at the cultural forum. Though there were many nationalist leaders to provide both liberal and militant leadership, to the nation in its fight against colonialism but nobody was on the scene who could lead the majority section of the Indian society to cultural independence and revival. It was at this opportune moment that Hedgewar emerged on the political-cultural arena of the national politics and especially the militant political scene of Maharashtra. Hedgewar did not have an ounce of doubt that the ancient culture of our motherland was vibrant enough not to allow any foreign power to cast its ominous shadow over it. Therefore, he was fully convinced that something was lacking drastically in our socio-cultural set up. He was quick to come at the root of the malady, that is to say, namely, it was the growing attraction towards the accidental values of life, which was born more out of our ignorance of our cultural heritage than any positive values constitutive of the Western values. Thus, Hedgewar emphasised the cultural revivalism of the country rather than its political independence. It was because of this viewpoint that though he started his public life as an ardent supporter of Tilak and Dr. Moonje, later joining the Congress also and even being associated with underground militant outfits, he could not find in these associations and had finally to take over the role of the propounder and propagator of his own conviction on cultural politics. It was in this background that the RSS was formed in the year 1925. During the first world war, when Hedgewar was a staunch supporter of Tilak, the weak initiatives of the Congress in its pursuit of political independence became blatantly obvious. This has been so because of the stand adopted by the Congress especially the liberals that they should cooperate and support the British Government in its time of peril. Opposed to this was the viewpoint of the extremists in the Congress particularly Tilak who said that India could not have any moral justification for extending support to its subjugators irrespective of the circumstances in which the latter were caught. Tilak professed the belief that it was the sole and pious duty of all Indians to free the country from the shackles of colonialism whatever be the means Hedgewar being an ardent supporter of Tilak at that time also endorsed this view and worked for its propagation and implementation. Closely following the heels of the war there was the disaster of the Jallianwala Bagh in 13th April 1919, which further fired the conviction of Hedgewar. Something tangible had to be done very soon. He did not have to wait much. In 1920, at the Nagpur session of the Congress, he acquired the illustrious distinction of being the first Indian to move a bill in favour of the total independence of the country not merely the 'dominion status'. But unfortunately, the Standing Committee of the Congress did not approve it. The second resolution he moved at that session concerned the total freedom and democracy of other countries from imperialism.¹⁴ In the wake of the call for the first non-cooperation movement in 1920, Hedgewar was totally involved in the political activities of the movement. He was even imprisoned in 1920 for his anti-state activities. The 'Chauri Chaura' incident occurred in 1922, to the utter disappointment of Hedgewar, Gandhiji called halt to the movement. Hedgewar vociferously protested against this.

When the Khilafat movement was launched jointly by the Congress and the Muslim organisations in order to restore the crown of Turkey, Hedgewar was very much clear about its long-term implications, as it openly reflected the support extended to foreign crown and countries merely because of the expediency of doing so on purely communal lines. If the Congress and other non-Muslim organisations were to support this movement it would clearly go to further faster the communal and separatist tendencies of the Muslims of India. It had to be checked at the right time. He saw the seeds of separatist and communal tendencies of the Muslims in the Lucknow Pact of 1916. This was the rationale behind the decision of Hedgewar in not cooperating into the Khilafat movement and even protesting it.¹⁵ The question arises whether Hedgewar was prejudiced against the Muslims. This question is vividly answered when we reflect over the independence in the next 25 years following the Khilafat movement, which had much to claim from the attitude shown during the Khilafat movement. The demand for a separate Muslim nation and eventual formation of one were rightly the fruits of the free which had grown from the evil seeds of separatist tendencies germinated during the Khilafat

¹⁴ Malkani, K.R., *The RSS Story*, New Delhi, (Impex India, 1980), p.8.

¹⁵ Seshadri, H, V., (All India General Secretary of the RSS.) Bangalore, An Interview with the Author, February 23, 1990, New Delhi.

movement.¹⁶ The fears of Hedgewar were rightly proved by history. Therefore, the branding of the opposition to the Khilafat movement as stark sign of prejudiced communal view is nothing but a malevolent campaign against the bold and realistic views adhered to by Hedgewar. The Khilafat movement had imparted enough zeal and energy to Hedgewar's mind for the excursion of the realistic dreams into the tangible material word. Thus, the RSS was formed in 1925. The rest of the period Hedgewar's life were totally devoted to the strengthening and spreading the RSS network and ideology. He deliberately side-lined the political aspect of the national movement because he was deeply convinced that even if the political independence was attained without the necessary national cultural vibrance, it would be of no avail and rather it would make us live in fool's paradise as we would be taking ourselves to be independent when infact we would be all the more strongly chained to the cultural values of the alien land. His courting arrest in 1930's salt satyagraha was only an act of solidarity in support of the fight of the Congress against the British Rule. It was not designed to gain any political mileage for the RSS and he had courted arrest in his individual capacity which is also clear from the fact that he appointed Mr. Paranjpe as the Sarsanghachalak of the RSS in the meanwhile, so that the work of the RSS would not get hampered because of his participation in the movement which was a more a token of solidarity extended to the Congress.

On Dec. 15, 1932, the Governor-in-Council of the Central Provinces issued orders prohibiting government servants from attending RSS Shakhshas. Sometime later, this order was made applicable to municipal and district board employees. Even Gandhiji was greatly impressed by the activities, of the RSS and it is clear from his remarks when he greeted Dr. Hedgewar on Jamunalal Bajaj's farm on Dec. 29, 1934 with the words, "well, Dr. Hedgewar I thought, I was the only organiser in India but there is another and that is Dr. Hedgewar". Gandhiji also said: "from all points of view you are doing excellent work. It is not against national interest to organise Hindus without hating others".¹⁷ Gandhiji was very much impressed by the firm resolve of the RSS to organise Hindu Society over and above all consideration of caste and sects. When the second world war broke out in 1939, the RSS had to openly come out against the stand adopted by the Hindu Mahasabha that the British Government should recruit more Hindus in Indian army, because it would be equivalent to strengthening the hands of the British which was even at that time placed over the necks of all the Indians. With the demise of Dr. Hedgewar, the reins of the RSS passed over to M.S. Golwalkar, With the advent of the "Quit India Movement" in 1942 the top echelon of the Congress were promptly arrested, yet the RSS gave full freedom to its members to participate in the movement in their individual capacities. The organisation of the RSS was not involved in it directly because it had not chosen in the face of the rudderless movement. It rather chooses to concentrate on its primary objective of national to do cultural renaissance. Soon after the end of the second world war, the communal cauldron of the demand for partition had started to take its toll. This demand for partition had been addictively pursued by M.A. Jinnah and Iqbal. But the Congress has also much to be blamed for because of its policy of Muslim appeasement despite many of their outrightly provocative and separatist activities. The large-scale exodus in the wake of partition on the North-Eastern and the Eastern border of Bengal, especially across the plains of Punjab. It saw the massive slaughter of Hindus and Muslims while Muslim League had outrightly proved itself to be anti-India. The Congress also, because of its lukewarm response to the partition holocaust, could not be said to be in reality nationalistic in its character. It was the RSS, who mobilized its members to give the necessary protection to the masses crossing over from Pakistan to India, in the face of dire threats of their lives. It is clear therefore, that the RSS played both an orthodox and an unorthodox role in the freedom movement of the country, the latter being logically prior to the former taken in the pure sense; hence it had to play an even more important role after the independence and it, of course, did not belie the expectation.

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