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Hundred Years of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS): Institutional Growth, Ideology, Politics, and Social Impact (1925–2025)

**Dr. Rajendra Kumar*
M.A., M.Phil., NET, Ph.D.
LLB, LLM
Professor,
Faculty of Legal Studies
HRIT University, Ghaziabad
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Abstract

This article examines the century-long evolution of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), from its founding in Nagpur in 1925 with mere 17 people to its centenary celebrations in 2025. Using contemporary reporting, organizational materials and established reference works, the paper traces RSS's institutional development, ideological foundations in Hindutva, relationships within the Sangh Parivar (including links to political parties), its social and educational initiatives, as well as recurring controversies—most notably the 1948 ban after Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. The analysis concludes with an assessment of the RSS's contemporary position in Indian civil society and politics and identifies areas for future research.

Keywords: RSS, Hindutva, Sangh Parivar, K.B. Hedgewar, Indian politics, centenary 2025, social mobilization

Introduction

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was founded on 27 September 1925 in Nagpur by Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar as a voluntary, social organization intended to build discipline

and a sense of identity among Hindus during late-colonial communal tensions. One of the main objective behind the foundation of RSS was to unite the Hindus. Over a century, the RSS has transformed into a sprawling organization with numerous affiliates, widespread social activities and deep influence on Indian politics and civil society. This paper presents a concise, evidence-based history and analysis of the RSS's trajectory, focusing particularly on structural growth, ideological content, political linkages and social programs up to the centenary year 2025.

Sources and Methodology

This study synthesizes:

- Encyclopedic summaries (Britannica, organizational biographies) for baseline historical facts.
- Official RSS material for organizational self-representation.
- Contemporary news reporting and analyses around the centenary (2025) for current events and public responses.
- Scholarly and journalistic sources on contested events (e.g., the 1948 ban) and institutional politics.

The article is a secondary synthesis (historical–institutional analysis) and does not include original fieldwork.

Founding and Early Years (1925–1940)

K. B. Hedgewar (1889–1940), a physician and nationalist activist, established the RSS in Nagpur on Vijayadashami, 27 September 1925. Hedgewar sought to create a disciplined volunteer corps (shakhas) to cultivate physical fitness, moral character and a cohesive Hindu identity in response to perceived social fragmentation and communal competition under colonial rule. The early RSS emphasized daily physical drill, moral instruction, and volunteer mobilization rather than direct electoral politics.

Institutional Consolidation and Early Controversies (1940s–1950s)

After Hedgewar's death in 1940, subsequent leadership consolidated the shakha system. A major crisis arrived in 1948—after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi on 30 January 1948 by Nathuram Godse—when the Indian government imposed a ban on the RSS (4 February 1948). The ban lasted about a year and was lifted after negotiations, conditions, and organizational assurances; the episode shaped the RSS's subsequent public posture and legal strategies.

Scholarly literature and archival work detail the ban's legal and political contours and its impact on RSS state relations.

Sangh Parivar and Political Linkages

From the 1950s, the RSS spawned or influenced a network of affiliated organizations—the Sangh Parivar—covering education, labor, students, youth, religion, and social service. Notable affiliates include the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (the political formation that later evolved into the Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP), Vidya Bharati (educational wing), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), The Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) is a student organisation in India, which was established in 1949. It's a significant student body with over 5 million members, making it one of the largest student organisations in the world. ABVP is a student wing of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a right-wing Hindutva and nationalist organisation. and others. Although the RSS officially describes itself as a non-party cultural organisation, many scholars and journalists note close operational and personnel links between the RSS and political actors, especially through pracharaks and cadres deployed into affiliated bodies.

Growth, Social Programs and Organizational Reach

Over decades, the RSS expanded its shakhas (daily local branches), educational institutions, social-service arms, and overseas outreach (HSS). By the early 21st century the organization claimed millions of volunteers and tens of thousands of shakhas; its educational network Vidya Bharati runs a large number of schools. In the centenary year, public commemorations, state-level recognitions (stamps, coins), and widespread events underscored the organizational footprint that the RSS projects across India.

Ideology: Hindutva and Nationalism

RSS draws on the conceptual framework of Hindutva popularized in the 1920s and 1930s. The organization emphasizes cultural nationalism, civilizational unity, and a vision of India centred on Hindu cultural norms and values. At the same time, definitions and interpretations of Hindutva vary: supporters emphasize cultural revival and social service, while critics charge the ideology with majoritarian bias and exclusionary tendencies. Scholarly debates consider how RSS frames citizenship, pluralism, and the secular state in India.

Political Influence: From Jana Sangh to BJP

The RSS's most consequential political impact has been indirect but decisive: enabling the rise of a political movement that culminated in the BJP. Many BJP leaders have RSS backgrounds; organizational labor and cadre-mobilization have been important in electoral strategy and governance networks. The relationship is complex—RSS maintains organizational autonomy and periodically distances itself from electoral tactics—yet the structural links between Sangh bodies and political actors are central to understanding contemporary Indian politics.

Sar-Sanghchalak:

The Sarsanghchalak (Chief) serves as the head of the RSS. The position is decided, through nomination, by the predecessor. Since the formation of the RSS in 1925, six individuals have served as the Sarsanghchalak. The Sar-sanghchalaks of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in chronological order are:

1. Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar-**1925-1940**
2. Sh. M.S. Golwalkar-**1940-1973**
3. Sh. Madhukar Dattatraya Deoras-**1973-1994**
4. Sh. Rajendra Singh-**1994-2000**
5. Sh. K.S. Sudarshan-**2000-2009**
6. Dr. Mohan Baghwat-**2009-Till Date**

Controversies and Criticisms

Key controversies across the century include:

- The 1948 ban and the lingering questions about links between fringe violent actors and organized nationalism.
- Accusations of majoritarianism and communal polarisation by critics, balanced by the RSS's emphasis on service, relief work, and cultural programs.
- Debates over the role of Sangh institutions in public education, state policy influence, and civil liberties. Scholarly literature documents both grassroot social work and political contestation.

The Centenary (2025): Public Display and Narrative

The RSS completed 100 years on Vijayadashami, 2025. Centenary events across India included mass shakha gatherings, cultural programs, and high-profile ceremonies in Nagpur (the site of founding). Government-level recognitions (e.g., commemorative postage stamps and coins) and

speeches by national figures accompanied the celebrations. These public displays function both as internal commemoration and as an assertion of national cultural influence. News reporting covered large centenary events and the national conversation around the RSS at 100.

Impact Assessment: Social, Political, and Cultural

Assessing a century of activity, the RSS's impact can be summarized along three axes:

- 1. Social:** Large volunteer networks active in relief, education, rural outreach and community work have produced tangible social programs and institutional capacity in many regions.
- 2. Political:** Through the Sangh Parivar, the RSS has shaped political discourse, cadre supply, and policy influence—most visibly via the BJP's rise to national governance.
- 3. Cultural:** The RSS's vision of cultural nationalism has reshaped debates around national identity, history, and public culture in India—prompting both revivalist currents and contested civic debates.

At the same time, the RSS's legacy remains contested: scholarly critiques highlight risks of majoritarian exclusion, while supporters emphasize social cohesion and national regeneration. Robust social-science research—longitudinal studies of local shakhas, empirical evaluations of affiliated schools and service programs, and comparative work on civil-society mobilization—remains essential for balanced assessment.

Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

The RSS's first 100 years show an organization that has successfully institutionalized volunteerism, created a broad ecosystem of affiliated bodies, and exerted sustained cultural and political influence. Its century-long story is one of organizational adaptation—negotiating bans, expanding social programs, and consolidating informal political influence. Future research should emphasize: (a) micro-level studies of shakha activities and local social outcomes; (b) archival work on the 1948–49 period and post-ban negotiations; (c) comparative studies of volunteer-driven social movements; and (d) empirical analyses of the Sangh Parivar's influence on policy and education.

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