

## The Civil Society Roots of BJP's Majoritarian Nationalism

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### Introduction

When the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a landslide victory in India's 2014 parliamentary elections, obliterating the opposition forces, scholars and commentators rationalized it as a vote in favor of the fuzzy notion of vikaas (development) in addition to a vote against corruption and the status quo.<sup>1</sup> The BJP had achieved the impossible: it had seemingly converted the electorate of what used to be known as a "patronage democracy" into voters for "programmatically" politics. However, the BJP's 2019 electoral victory, in spite of its missteps and failure on economic policy, poses a puzzle.<sup>2</sup> What explains the sustained popularity of the party and the mainstream cooptation of its exclusionary nationalist agenda? The rise of the BJP from a marginal force with only two Parliamentary seats in 1980 to winning consecutive historic landslides necessitates an explanation going beyond development talk, electoral arithmetic, and crafty coalitions.

It is tempting to contextualize the BJP's ascent to power as part of a recent global trend of populism predicated upon anti-minority, anti-immigration narratives by viewing it as yet another populist right-wing party that strategically uses religious polarization. However, this overlooks the party's embeddedness within the broader Hindu nationalist movement guided by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a movement which has a much longer historical trajectory than the BJP, as well as deep organizational roots

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<sup>1</sup> "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas: Collective Efforts Inclusive Growth," May 9, 2014, <https://www.narendramodi.in/sabka-saath-sabkavikas-collective-efforts-inclusive-growth-3159>; Walter Andersen, "Evolution of a Hindu-Oriented Political Party," *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 37, no. 1S (2017): S-7-19 <https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.2017.0012>.

<sup>2</sup> Anamitra Roychowdhury, "What the Data Tells Us About 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas,'" *The Wire*, May 17, 2017, <https://thewire.in/business/whatever-happened-to-modis-development>; Abhijit Mukhopadhyay, "From 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas' to 'Main Bhi Chowkidar': The Forgotten Macroeconomic Flagships," *Observer Research Foundation*, May 10, 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/from-sabka-saath-sabka-vikas-to-main-bhi-chowkidar-the-forgotten-macroeconomic-flagships-50640/>.

in civil society.<sup>3</sup>

The RSS movement envisions nationhood based on religion and includes an extensive network of grassroots organizations that reinforce the idea of majoritarian nationalism amongst varied constituencies through non-electoral appeals.<sup>4</sup> Most studies correctly trace the origins of the political ideology of Hindutva to the founding of the RSS in 1925. However, the post-independence narrative tends to focus on the electoral fortunes of the Jana Sangh (the earlier incarnation of the BJP) and then the BJP since 1980, while ignoring the steady mobilization of the electorate by the RSS's constituent organizations. Looking at the BJP and its connection to this well-resourced movement is, therefore, essential to understanding how the BJP has steadily increased its presence and legitimized its image in civil society spaces.

Throughout the checkered journey of the BJP from 1980 until 2014, its relationship with the Sangh has remained constant, with the latter providing a continuous stream of ideologues to become party staffers who take over leadership positions.<sup>5</sup> It is commonly acknowledged that the RSS, usually distanced from electoral affairs, threw its organizational weight behind Narendra Modi's 2014 campaign for prime minister, enabling it to out-compete other political parties that could not match the grassroots mobilization efforts driven by the RSS's network of affiliated organizations and cadres.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the 2019 election results become less surprising when we consider this underlying political and resource support. In fact, the government's policy decisions after coming to office in May 2019, such as the abrogation of Kashmir's special status and criminalization of instant divorce for Muslims, have been in line with the core ideological agenda of the RSS-led Hindu nationalist movement.

While BJP's new citizenship amendment laws, which use religion as a criterion to grant refugee status, have become the focal point of country-wide protests, it is clear the evolution of a majoritarian discourse on citizenship has been a long time in the making

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<sup>3</sup> Amrita Basu, *Violent Conjunctions in Democratic India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Amrita Basu, "The Dialectics of Hindu Nationalism," in *The Success of India's Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 163–89.

<sup>4</sup> Suhas Palshikar, "The BJP and Hindu Nationalism: Centrist Politics and Majoritarian Impulses," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38, no.4 (2015): 719–35; Jean A. Curran, "The RSS: Militant Hinduism," *Far Eastern Survey* 19 vol.10 (1950): 93–98.

<sup>5</sup> Neelam Pandey and Shanker Arnimesh, "RSS in Modi Govt in Numbers — 3 of 4 Ministers Are Rooted in the Sangh," *ThePrint*, January 27, 2020, <https://theprint.in/politics/rss-in-modi-govt-in-numbers-3-of-4-ministers-are-rooted-in-the-sangh/353942/>.

<sup>6</sup> Piyush Srivastava, "RSS Campaigns for Modi in UP to Ensure Maximum Lok Sabha Seats," *India Today*, April 5, 2014, <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/highlights/story/rss-narendra-modi-2014-lok-sabha-polls-uttar-pradesh-hindu-year-187717-2014-04-05>; R. Jagannathan, "How the RSS Is Heavily Invested in Elections 2014 and Modi," *Firstpost*, March 24, 2014, <https://www.firstpost.com/election-diary/how-the-rss-is-heavily-invested-in-elections-2014-and-modi-1448357.html>.

when we consider the ideological propagation of the Hindu nationalist movement.<sup>7</sup> As the country witnesses cultural dissonance on who has the right to belong and deals with the routinization of vigilante mob lynchings for alleged transgressions of majoritarian cultural norms, one needs to remember that this violent conceptualization of nationhood has been a slow-burning process, advanced by grassroots organizations and supported by administrations willing to turn a blind eye.<sup>8</sup>

While all of this might evoke an image of an ideological stranglehold over the Indian electorate that is unlikely to dissipate any time soon, there are nevertheless differences of opinion within the movement that surface now and then. Firstly, the rise of Narendra Modi to the top BJP leadership position actually signifies a break with the past when it comes to the RSS's modus operandi. Second, the BJP as the ruling party has often had to compromise on its obeisance to core ideals in order to navigate geopolitics and global economic forces, bringing it into conflict with affiliate organizations. This has changed the contours of the BJP-RSS relationship to a degree. Finally, with the changing nature of the electorate itself and the rise of social media, BJP's recruitment and mobilization strategies have changed as well. This indicates that we may have to reassess the future of the party and its dependence on the Hindu nationalist movement to help build a traditional support base.

### Nationalism Through Civil Society

The RSS, founded in 1925, is an all-male, tightly knit, highly disciplined, hierarchical organization that seeks to organize Hindu society and incorporate increasing segments of the public into its ranks.<sup>9</sup> Its primary operative strategy is to work at the grassroots level and transform society from the bottom up. Hindu unity has been the cornerstone and objective of almost every project the RSS has taken up, and every affiliate organization has emerged with a very specific vision of how to achieve it.<sup>10</sup> Winning elections

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<sup>7</sup> Maria Abi-Habib and Sameer Yasir, "As Modi Pushes Hindu Agenda, a Secular India Fights Back," *The New York Times*, 20 December 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/world/asia/india-muslims-citizenship.html>; Edward Anderson and Christophe Jaffrelot, "Hindu Nationalism and the 'Saffronisation of the Public Sphere': An Interview with Christophe Jaffrelot," *Contemporary South Asia* 26 vol. 4 (2018): 468–82; Milan Vaishnav, "The BJP in Power: Indian Democracy and Religious Nationalism," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 4, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/04/04/bjp-in-power-indian-democracy-and-religious-nationalism-pub-78677>.

<sup>8</sup> Johnny Harris and Christina Thornell, "The Violent Rise of India's Cow Vigilantes," *Vox*, July 24, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/7/24/20708435/cow-violence-india-muslims>; Angana P. Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen, and Christophe Jaffrelot, *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism Is Changing India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Lauren Frayer, "The Powerful Group Shaping The Rise Of Hindu Nationalism In India," *NPR*, May 3, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/05/03/706808616/the-powerful-group-shaping-the-rise-of-hindu-nationalism-in-india>.

<sup>10</sup> James G. Lochtefeld, "New Wine, Old Skins: The Sangh Parivār and the Transformation of Hinduism," *Religion* 26 vol. 2 (1996): 101–17; Christophe Jaffrelot (ed.), *The Sangh Parivar: A Reader* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

is not the only way to influence politics. To this end, the RSS has historically tended to label itself as a cultural organization, projecting itself as above partisanship and party rivalries, with the interests of the nation at heart.<sup>11</sup> This is precisely why the RSS was hesitant to endorse electoral politics before 2014.<sup>12</sup> How then is the movement able to cultivate and consolidate a loyal electoral support base, particularly when deeply entrenched cleavages of caste and language have the potential to split the Hindu vote? This section highlights the movement's strategic repertoire, particularly the provision of social services to position itself among urban slums.

To advance its vision, the RSS commands a vast network of allied organizations catering to varied social groups.<sup>13</sup> Of particular importance is the RSS affiliate called Seva Bharti, which coopts the poor urban slum populations through the provision of much-needed social services such as education and healthcare.<sup>14</sup> Though this extensive welfare work seems informally organized at the neighborhood level, it is coordinated and monitored by a hierarchical structure of command. The local operations have far more impact than the BJP when it comes to the quotidian lives of people because the local command structure is more regularly connected to the community and able to respond to their needs while spreading the RSS ideological message.

While Seva Bharti ostensibly works for the welfare and social development of “backward caste” people in urban slums, the RSS and the broader Hindutva movement value these programs for their ability to build support among hitherto unreceptive communities. Mainstream media and literature often ignore these innocuous civil society initiatives in favor of more violent manifestations of Hindu nationalism, but such initiatives play a crucial part in inculcating a patriotic consciousness among the community, instilling Hindu values in children, reviving traditional Hindu culture and practices, and bringing communities closer to the BJP-RSS vision for India. This mobilization strategy works well because it targets precisely the people who have been trying and failing to catch up to the neoliberal transformation of the economy.

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<sup>11</sup> “RSS Has No Connection with Politics, Works for 130 Crore Indians: Mohan Bhagwat,” *India Today*, January 18, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/rss-has-no-connection-with-politics-works-for-130-crore-indians-mohan-bhagwat-1638089-2020-01-18>.

<sup>12</sup> Ellen Barry, “In Indian Candidate, Hindu Right Sees a Reawakening,” *The New York Times*, May 10, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/11/world/asia/in-indian-candidate-hindu-right-sees-a-reawakening.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Jaffrelot, *The Sangh Parivar*; Pralaya Kanungo, “Myth of the Monolith: The RSS Wrestles to Discipline Its Political Progeny,” *Social Scientist* 34 vol. 11/12 (2006): 51–69.

<sup>14</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, “Hindu Nationalism and the Social Welfare Strategy,” in *Development, Civil Society and Faith-Based Organizations: Bridging the Sacred and the Secular*, ed. Gerard Clarke and Michael Jennings (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008), 240–59; Tariq Thachil, “Embedded Mobilization: Nonstate Service Provision as Electoral Strategy in India,” *World Politics* 63 vol. 3 (2011): 434–69; Soundarya Chidambaram, “The ‘Right’ Kind of Welfare in South India’s Urban Slums: Seva vs. Patronage and the Success of Hindu Nationalist Organizations,” *Asian Survey* 52 vol. 2 (2012): 298–320.

Furthermore, Seva Bharti provides not just tangible services, but also offers an attractive forum for young men employed as casual laborers in the informal economy, a sector that is bereft of strong labor unions and advocacy organizations because of the failure of traditional leftist unions.<sup>15</sup> While the organization emphasizes traditional gender and family roles, Seva Bharti also offers programs for women in urban slums.<sup>16</sup> By providing a safe public space and offering activities that fit within patriarchal gender norms, such as religious rituals organized in temples, it allows women to access public space in ways that feminist movements and parties have failed to facilitate. By legitimizing itself among urban poor populations, the RSS is thus able to break from its upper-caste image and effectively mobilize marginalized lower-caste Hindus. Consequently, it is able to advance the agenda of consolidating Hindu society to counter the pathways of advancement offered by caste-based party organizations.<sup>17</sup>

### **Nationalism in the Age of Social Media**

Until the rise of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the RSS had consciously avoided associating itself with the personality cult style of leadership. The image of the *swayamsevak* (volunteer), a selfless worker in the service of nation and ideology without any personalistic reward, has been key to the RSS (and the BJP's) "brand." This ideal stands apart from most other political parties, which have denounced internal democracy in favor of nepotistic leadership decisions.<sup>18</sup> The RSS's success in mobilizing grassroots constituencies has been in part due to their meticulous and painstaking effort to build a network of support amongst urban and subaltern populations through programmatic appeals, not party figureheads.

However, the advent of Modi (who ironically started as a *swayamsevak* and has always evoked the image of selfless service to the nation during election campaigns) and Amit Shah (Modi's second-in-command) to the party organization's leadership, supported by the RSS, has undermined state leaders and quelled internal democracy in favor of

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<sup>15</sup> Chidambaram, 309.

<sup>16</sup> Amrita Basu, "The Gendered Imagery and Women's Leadership of Hindu Nationalism," *Reproductive Health Matters* 4 vol. 8 (1996): 70–76; Tanika Sarkar, "Pragmatics of the Hindu Right: Globalization and the Politics of Women's Organisations in India," *Communalism and Globalization in South Asia and Its Diaspora* (Routledge, 2010), 87–104; Manisha Sethi, "Avenging Angels and Nurturing Mothers: Women in Hindu Nationalism," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37 vol. 16 (2002): 1545–52.

<sup>17</sup> Kama Kellie Maclean, "Embracing the Untouchables: The BJP and Scheduled Caste Votes," *Asian Studies Review* 23 vol. 4 (1999): 488–509.

<sup>18</sup> "Bhagwat Cautions RSS Cadres against Crossing Limits for BJP, Says Can't Chant 'Namo Namo,'" *The Indian Express*, March 11, 2014, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics/bhagwat-cautions-rss-cadres-against-crossing-limits-for-bjp-says-cant-chant-namo-namo/>.

much more centralized decision-making.<sup>19</sup> It is unclear how this may change the strategic relationship between the RSS and BJP.<sup>20</sup> Once seen as an unstoppable juggernaut, the BJP lost key state legislative elections in the last year.<sup>21</sup> After the BJP's most recent debacle in the Delhi legislative elections in February 2020, the RSS pointed fingers at BJP's failure to revitalize grassroots organizational networks as the reason for the rout.<sup>22</sup> It has been speculated that the BJP's swift progress on several core issues in 2019 was an olive branch to smooth over ties with its parent body in the face of past critiques during its first term in office from 2014-2019.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, what happens when the BJP, with its corporatist leanings, distances itself policy-wise from the RSS on other issue areas? Already, there have been instances where the labor unions and the agricultural worker's association aligned with the RSS have broken ranks to express dissent against government policy. The government's economic decisions such as demonetization, the Goods and Services Tax, fuel hikes, and other

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<sup>19</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, "The Modi-Centric BJP 2014 Election Campaign: New Techniques and Old Tactics," *Contemporary South Asia* 23 vol. 2 (2015): 151–66; The Wire, "The Rise of the NaMo Cult and What Lies Ahead for 'New India,'" <https://thewire.in/politics/narendra-modi-cult-bjp-election-victory> (accessed 26 April 2020); Rediff, "The Powerful PMO That Modi Heads," <https://www.rediff.com/news/special/the-powerful-pmo-that-modi-heads/20190822.htm> (accessed 26 April 2020).

<sup>20</sup> Dinesh Narayanan, "View: What Shape Will the BJP-RSS Dynamics Take under Modi 2.0?," *The Economic Times*, May 26, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/view-what-shape-will-the-bjp-rss-dynamics-take-under-modi-2-0/articleshow/69498073.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>21</sup> "BJP Loses Fifth State Election as India Rocked by Citizenship Protests," *The Guardian*, December 24, 2019, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/24/india-jharkhand-election-modi-bjp-loses-citizenship-protests>.

<sup>22</sup> "PM Modi, Shah Cannot Always Help: RSS Cautions BJP after Delhi Loss," *Business Standard*, February 20, 2020, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/pm-modi-shah-cannot-always-help-rss-cautions-bjp-after-delhi-loss-120022001414\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/pm-modi-shah-cannot-always-help-rss-cautions-bjp-after-delhi-loss-120022001414_1.html); Sanjay Singh, "BJP Grassroot Workers Hope the Delhi Loss Will Teach a Lesson to Modi, Shah," *Firstpost*, February 12, 2015, <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/bjp-grassroot-workers-hope-the-delhi-loss-will-teach-a-lesson-to-modi-shah-2093163.html>; "RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat Reviews Factors behind BJP Debacle in Delhi," *The Economic Times*, February 12, 2015, <https://m.economictimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/rss-chief-mohan-bhagwat-reviews-factors-behind-bjp-debacle-in-delhi/article-show/46214480.cms> (accessed 26 April 2020).

<sup>23</sup> Smita Gupta, "Modi 2.0: Prime Minister in a Hurry," *The Hindu Businessline*, November 23, 2019, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/know/modi-20-prime-minister-in-a-hurry/article30047979.ece>.

measures have also come under friendly fire from within the movement.<sup>24</sup> As such, can the Hindu nationalist movement sustain its momentum when its various constituent organizations are at loggerheads on critical policies?

Secondly, with the demographics of the country changing (India now has one of the world's youngest populations), Internet coverage rapidly expanding, and social media platforms such as TikTok and WhatsApp becoming more readily accessible than credible, fact-checked sources of information, it has become easier to mobilize around wedge issues.<sup>25</sup> The BJP has taken to WhatsApp groups and Twitter for political messaging, campaigning, and winning public support, relying more on its information technology cell and less on the rank and file organizations working at the grassroots level.<sup>26</sup> Thus, this trend raises a question mark over the movement's strategy of building deep social roots.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

If constricting the operation of extremist organizations operating stealthily in urban slums was not difficult enough, monitoring and regulating social media propaganda is an even more arduous task. All across the world, in an era of social media, it has proven difficult to balance free speech rights against hate speech laws and monitor the spread of propaganda and false narratives. Does the BJP's increasing self-reliance affect its reciprocal relationship with the RSS and other constituent organizations? Is this likely to affect the strength of the Hindu nationalist movement that has benefitted from close coordination among its various affiliates? Ultimately, these trends may portend a much more incendiary variant of nationalism, one that combines demagoguery with populist exploitation of wedge issues, one that is not ideological, but merely expedient.

Yet, even as the BJP's recruitment and mobilization strategies keep pace with the zeitgeist, its attendance at RSS conclaves and consultation over key policy areas through backroom

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<sup>24</sup> Varghese K. George, "RSS-Affiliated Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh Calls for Protests against Policy Measures of Narendra Modi Government," *The Hindu*, January 2, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bharatiya-mazdoor-sangh-calls-for-protests-against-policy-measures-of-modi-govt/article30463545.ece>; Debobrat Ghose, "Only Rich Are Getting Richer: RSS Affiliated Bodies Disagree with PM Modi's 'acchche Din' Policies," *Firstpost*, June 2, 2015, <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/rich-getting-richer-rss-affiliated-bodies-disagree-pm-modis-acchche-din-policies-2274964.html>; Joe C. Mathew, "RSS Affiliate Trade Union Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh Opposes Modi Govt's Disinvestment Plans," *Business Today*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/rss-affiliate-trade-union-bharatiya-mazdoor-sangh-opposes-modi-govt-disinvestment-plans/story/357098.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Sahana Udupa, "Enterprise Hindutva and Social Media in Urban India," *Contemporary South Asia* 26 vol. 4 (2018): 453–67.

<sup>26</sup> "Lok Sabha Elections: BJP Admits NaMo TV Is Run by Its Information Technology Cell," *Scroll.in*, April 11, 2019, <https://scroll.in/latest/919666/lok-sabha-elections-bjp-admits-namo-tv-is-run-by-its-information-technology-cell> (accessed 26 April 2020); Samarth Bansal, "How the BJP Used Technology to Secure Modi's Second Win," *Centre for International Governance Innovation*, June 12, 2019, <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/how-bjp-used-technology-secure-modis-second-win>.

<sup>27</sup> Pradeep K. Chhibber and Susan L. Ostermann, "The BJP's Fragile Mandate: Modi and Vote Mobilizers in the 2014 General Elections," *Studies in Indian Politics* 2 vol. 2 (2014): 137–51.

channels has continued unabated.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, the RSS announced recently that it had conducted a national survey of its nearly 15 lakh (1.5 million) members to harness their full potential through tailoring social schemes that would best utilize their skills.<sup>29</sup> Herein perhaps lies the truth about why the BJP-RSS relationship has continued to work well against all odds. The BJP's rise to power gives the RSS the means to influence a range of policies from education curriculums, to food, to commerce without "getting its hands dirty" in the daily churn of politics. At the same time, the RSS, whose visibility and membership has increased in recent years in part due to the BJP, is able to mobilize a vast constituency on a regular basis, gradually priming society to be receptive to BJP's electoral machinations. A carefully nurtured quid pro quo such as this is unlikely to end as long as the shared vision of a Hindu nation remains.

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<sup>28</sup> Ashish Pandey, "RSS, BJP Chiefs Attend 3-Day Long Meet in Andhra Pradesh to Discuss 2019 Polls," *India Today*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/lok-sabha-2019/story/rss-bjp-chiefs-attend-3-day-long-meet-in-andhra-pradesh-to-discuss-2019-polls-1328799-2018-08-31>.

<sup>29</sup> "RSS to Activate 15 Lakh Members through Social Programmes," *The Hindu*, March 14, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/rss-to-activate-15-lakh-members-through-social-programmes/article31064285.ece>.