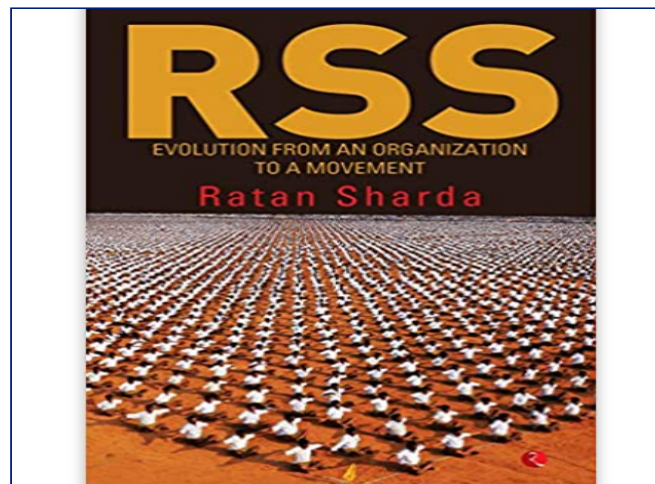


Book Review on 'RSS: Evolution from an Organization to a Movement'

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The book is rich in anecdotes and provides a glimpse of the 'brotherhood in saffron'

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In recent times, there has been a renewed interest about the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), arguably India's most controversial organization. A host of books, commentaries and articles have been dedicated towards understanding its ideology, modus operandi and its vision of Hindu Rashtra. While navigating through this enormous and diverse variety of literature, one comes across broadly two kinds of work about the Sangh, as it is popularly known. The most prominent and easily available resources are those that have painted the organization in poor light and have been authored by 'left-liberal' academics. Though some of these studies are fairly rigorous they have often used labels such as 'fundamentalist', 'fascist', 'communal' and 'anti-minority' to describe the organization, without adequately acknowledging its compassionate or humanitarian dimensions. The other body of work, which has been primarily written by swayamsevaks (RSS volunteers) themselves and mostly available in regional languages, is largely hagiographic and often does not engage in any social-scientific analysis.

There is a third body of work that has emerged in recent times that seeks to bridge the gap between the two. Ratan Sharda's recent book on the RSS is a promising addition to this third category. Spanning across nine chapters, an Introduction and an interesting Epilogue, the book provides a detailed account of the six Sarsanghchhalaks (organizational chiefs of the RSS) and the ways in which they shaped the organization. The book begins with a fascinating and detailed Foreword by Professor Makarand Paranjape who sets the context to the study by providing a short history about the organization, its entanglement with politics in India through its evolution and the ways in which it struggled with the establishment in the formative years of its growth.

The Introduction, where the author admits to being a Swayamsevak himself who has met all the Sarsanghchhalaks barring the first, sets the tone of the book. Far from being a dry narrative, the book demonstrates in many places, a personalised account of an insider's perception of the Sangh. The author mentions explicitly that the primary motivation behind writing the book was to bridge the gap in the paucity of English literature that provides a fair view of the Sangh. He also clarifies that the book focuses on the institution of Sarsanghchhalak as he is the public face of the organization. Chapter 1 further elaborates on this rationale by suggesting that the office of the Sarsanghchhalak embodies the best traditions of the RSS and that the organizational processes in the Sangh reflect the personality of the incumbent chief. This chapter also provides a glimpse of the common traits possessed by Sarsanghchhalaks; they are all academically acclaimed, are usually voracious readers, possess a high EQ and are mostly sensitive persons. The chapter also underlines their ability to blend with and adapt to local specificities such as, their capacity to learn new languages, adopt new food practices and build relationships even with detractors whom they see as potential allies.

Chapters 2- 7 provide detailed accounts of the life-histories of the six Sarsanghchhalaks; namely, K.B. Hedgewar, M.S. Golwalkar, Balasaheb Deoras, Professor Rajendra Singh (popularly known as Rajju Bhaiya), K.S. Sudarshan and Dr. Mohan Bhagwat. These detailed chapters provide fascinating and human accounts of these leaders, their strengths and vulnerabilities; Hedgewar emerges as a visionary who founded the organization; Golwalkar, a strong leader who steered the organization through the most

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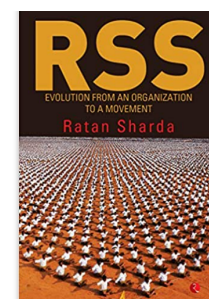
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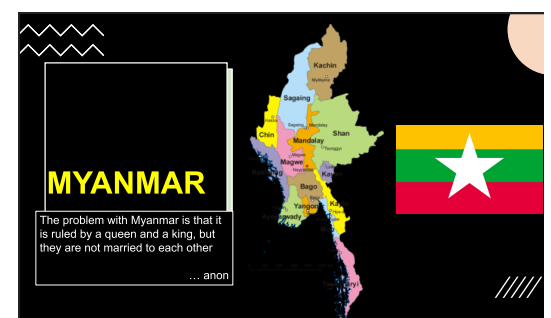
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Sangh to suit the demands of the contemporary times. Though the bulk of the book is dedicated towards narrating the individual backgrounds, challenges and triumphs of the Sarsanghchalaks, these chapters provide an important analysis of the political

The penultimate chapter takes the reader through the primary changes in the evolution of the organization such as those relating to the changes in prayer and physical fitness routine, uniform, training workshops, organizational structure and the usage of songs as part of intellectual training of the swayamsevaks amongst other things. The last chapter engages with the most controversial question of defining the scope of Hindutva. Here, the author provides a detailed account of the evolution of the term and the ways in which its scope has evolved in the Sangh and wonders whether the term ‘Bharat Rashtra’ instead of ‘Hindu Rashtra’ would make more sense. Though the book is more a perspective about the Sangh from the point of view of a wayamsevak, the author reflects^[RG1] a certain degree of reflexivity especially towards the end and this is symptomatic of a deeper realization within the Parivar about the need to find a more novel and inclusive vocabulary than before in order to expand its cultural appeal.

The book is rich in anecdotes and provides a glimpse of the ‘brotherhood in saffron’, an expression aptly coined by Andersen and Damle in their first book on the RSS. The companionship, fraternity and camaraderie shared among the swayamsevaks comes alive and makes one realize why the Sangh continues to thrive and grow as the biggest socio-cultural movement in the world. The accessible language and the invocation of the idea of the ‘family’ that is so central to the Sangh provides for a refreshing and authentic reading. For those unfamiliar with the RSS, the book is also a good introduction to the organizational and administrative structure of the Sangh, the pracharak system, the shakha routines and the training workshops that go into building a Swayamsevak.

As mentioned before, the book is a clear break from a body of work that simply eulogizes the Sangh and its leaders without drawing attention to its vulnerabilities and failures. A greater attention to this analytical dimension and greater acknowledgment of the areas of improvement for the Sangh would have greatly enhanced the study. What also remains under-analysed are the perceptions surrounding the Sangh as an archaic, backward and conservative organization. While dismissing these perceptions on the grounds of ‘ignorance’ and ‘vicious bias’ is one way of dealing with criticisms, a more intellectually rooted defence of the larger epistemic principles behind the ideology of the RSS would have been more useful.

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