Edward A. Irons • Phoenix / Hong Kong

Behind the Persecution and Marginalization of Christianity in India: The RSS Religio-social Movement

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Christianity in India is under threat. Some would say this is understandable, since it is a minority religion. But India is known as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society. It has traditionally shown great tolerance toward other faiths. The number of minority religions found in India is mind-boggling. Many of these minority traditions, from Sikhism and Jainism to the followers of Rajneesh (Osho), originated in India. Religious tolerance, as well as democracy, is a fundamental value in the Indian Constitution of 1949.

However, Christianity, along with other minority belief systems, has come under criticism and sometimes active suppression from followers of militant Hinduism. This presentation looks at one of the main explanations for this situation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the "National Volunteer Corps."

A. The Kota Incident

Headline: US national accused of forced conversions, detained in Kota: Lured villagers with promises of benefits; father-in-law alleged mastermind Dainik Bhaskar English



My interest in the situation of Christianity in India was sparked after an American friend ran into some trouble there. He had spent some time in rural Rajasthan, in India's northwest. He met his wife there, and upon moving to the U.S., they started a family. As a devout Christian, he started a small-scale charity to help rural villagers. He established a 501(c)(3) foundation, Innovative Rural Development, and, with the assistance of his father-in-law, focused on helping one village in the Kota district in Rajasthan.

In April of 2025, he and his family returned to India for a visit. On the 21st, he and his father-in-law attended a dinner for the villagers. As they left the village, their car was surrounded by a large group of motorcycles. They were held until police arrived and were then taken to the police station. My friend was detained for several days. The police explained that he was engaged in religious missionary activity while visiting on a tourist visa. His father-in-law was held for several weeks on charges of giving money and food to convert tribal citizens. All the charges were eventually dropped, and my friend and his family quickly returned to the U.S. But the incident was

widely reported in local papers. Without knowing it, they had stepped on a land mine because Christian proselytization has become a hot-button issue for the Hindu nationalist right.

Anti-Christian Incidents

This one incident was minor, but not atypical. There has been an increase in anti-Christian incidents since the BJP came to power in 2014. 1,318 hate speech events were reported in 2025, 162 of which targeted Christians. These incidents occurred primarily in states controlled by the BJP. While Christianity is clearly a target, it is not the only one. Anti-Muslim incidents most likely outnumber all others.

Movement to Establish Anti-Conversion Laws

Much of the anti-minority religion activity takes the form of anti-conversion state statutes. This listing shows prominent legislative initiatives:

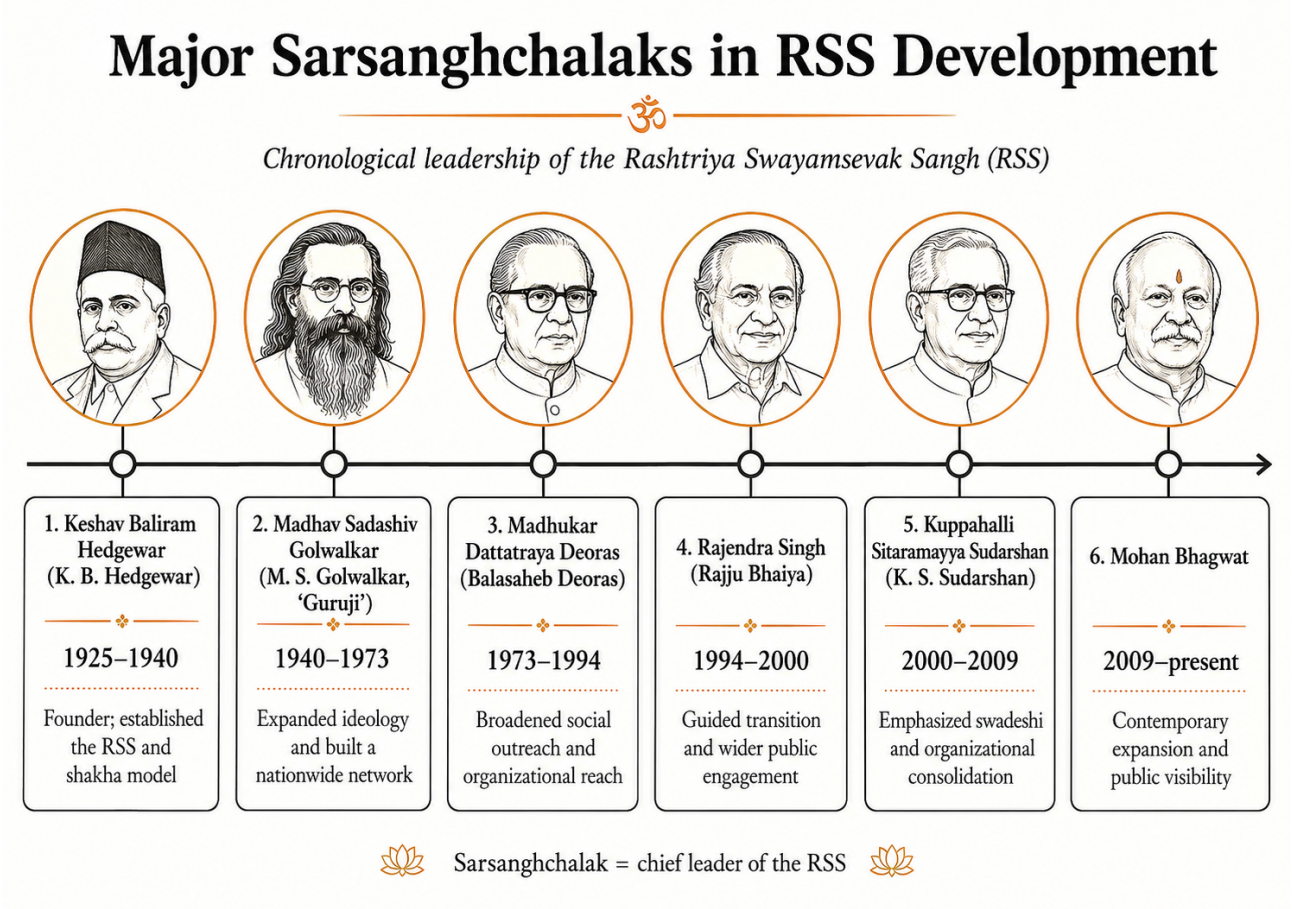
- Jharkhand: Freedom of Religion Act, 2017
- Uttarakhand: Freedom of Religion Act, 2018
- Uttar Pradesh: Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act, 2021
- Haryana: Prevention of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act, 2022
- Karnataka: Protection of the Right to Freedom of Religion Act, 2022; still in use in 2026
- Madhya Pradesh: Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 2021, which replaced the original 1968 law
- Maharashtra: Freedom of Religion Act, 2026; effective August 28, 2026
- Arunachal Pradesh: older law already in place, the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1978

What lies behind these actions, which are clearly organized? The answer goes beyond the political movement headed by the BJP to the Hindu ideology of the RSS.

B. Introducing the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, National Volunteer Corps)



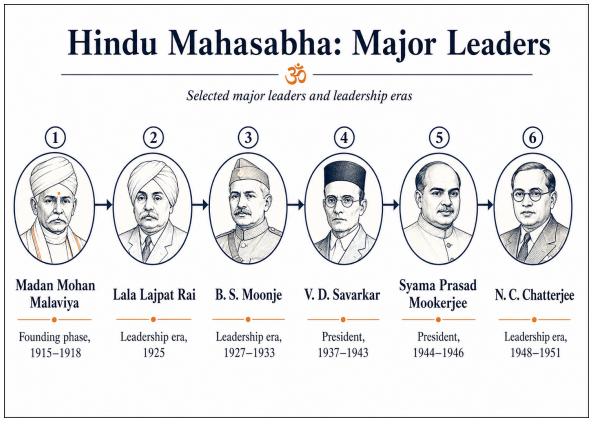
The RSS was founded in 1925 by K.B. Hedgewar. In its 100-year history, it has had only six leaders. The first three can be seen as innovators who set the stage for later success. The more recent three, including Mohan Bhagwat, the current leader, have had technological backgrounds.



The RSS can be seen as an offshoot of another Hindu nationalist organization, the Hindu Mahasabha. Founded in 1915 to advocate for the interests of Hindu populations under the British Raj, the group became increasingly nationalistic in the 1930s and 1940s. The group's fortunes waned especially after a Mahasabha member, Nathuram Godse, assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in 1948.

The fourth leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, V. D. Savarkar, developed the concept of Hindutva, "Hindu-ness," which is the core ideology of the RSS.

Ideological Predecessor





Cover of Hindutva

Hindutva

Mohan Bhagwat, the current RSS leader, regards Hindutva as more than an ideology. It is, he says, "a cultural and civilizational identity."

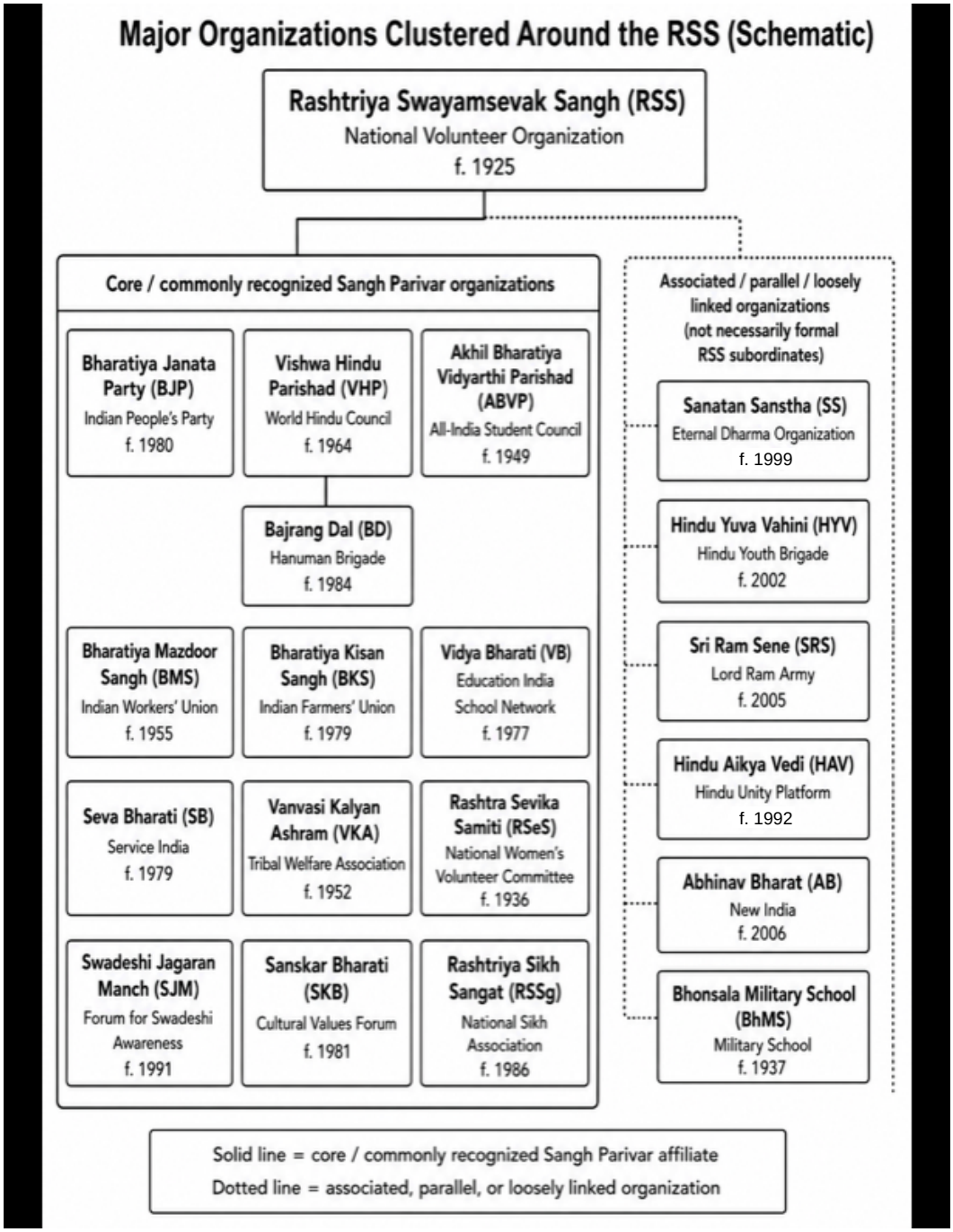
Hindutva provides an overarching "civilizational governance narrative" that transcends religion, caste, language, or region.

The primary growth strategy of the RSS has been to establish subsidiary organizations that adhere to Hindutva and focus on different constituencies. The RSS provides ideological guidance and training for leaders. The subsidiaries implement policy and interface with other groups and the media. This has resulted in a wide-ranging family.

This discussion focuses on four organizations under the RSS or, in one case, closely allied with the RSS. While some of the groups, like the BJP, operate nationwide, most of them are regionally focused.

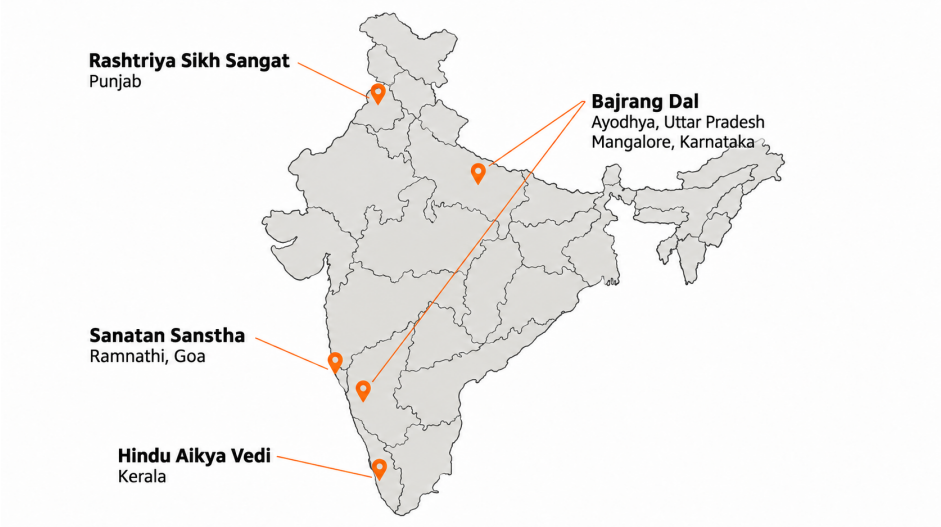
The RSS provides ideological guidance and training for leaders.

The RSS Network



The RSS network

C. Four Examples



Map of the four organizations

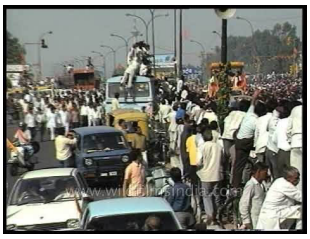
1. Bajrang Dal: The Shock Troops

Bajrang Dal

The first RSS subsidiary is the Bajrang Dal. Founded in 1984 as the youth brigade of the VHP, the main religious group under the RSS, the Dal has had a high profile and reputation for violence.

The immediate reason for the founding was Hindu mobilization during the Ayodhya movement.







Discipline was loose in the beginning. Since 1993, the group has tightened discipline and set up training camps for members.

In practice, the Bajrang Dal is able to send large numbers of members, usually young men, to support a cause. This support has at times led to violence.

Demographic Profile

Most of the members have lower levels of education. They range in age from 15 to 35. They are often unemployed. They are generally "eager to assert themselves."





Bajrang Dal supporters and emblem

The New Hanuman



Hanuman, a traditional Hindu deity and a key figure in the Ramayana, has become a potent symbol for the Bajrang Dal. His traditionally playful image has been reworked into a militant figure.

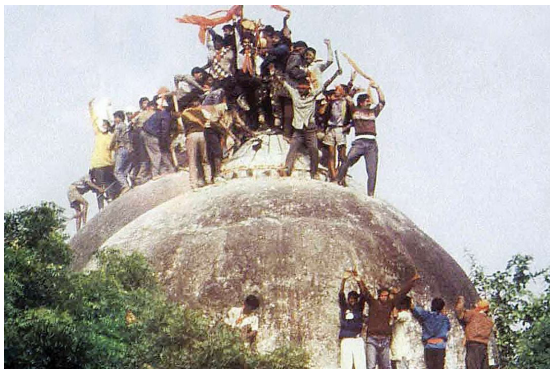
Demolition of the Babri Masjid, 1992

Agitation around the Babri Masjid (mosque) at Ayodhya culminated in its demolition on Dec. 6, 1992.

New cause célèbre: love jihad

In recent years, the Bajrang Dal's attention has shifted to other issues of concern to Hindu nationalism, such as religious conversion and the eating of meat.

A particular focus is "love jihad," the allegation of a Muslim strategy to lure Hindu women into marriage and so increase the relative population of Muslims in India.



Babri Masjid

As paraphrased by Christophe Jaffrelot in 2015, a Bajrang Dal pamphlet contends that rescuing one Hindu girl is equivalent to saving a hundred cows. In other words, this issue is more critical for Hindus than protecting sacred cows.

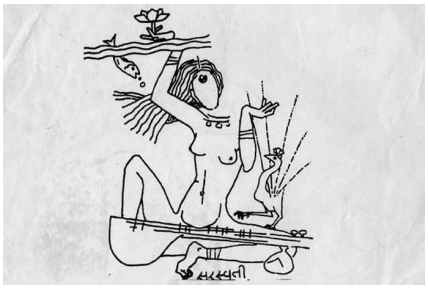
Other issues involving the Bajrang Dal include:

An attack on Muslims at Naroda Patiya in February 2002

Anti-Christian riots in Odisha, 2008

Parading of Awadhesh Kumar on a donkey in Uttar Pradesh over alleged conversions to Christianity

Bajrang Dal members have been implicated in and sometimes found guilty of involvement in criminal actions. The group's strategies have changed over time. There is now less open brutality and more covert action, such as bombings.



M. F. Husain illustration from the presentation

Cultural policing: action against artist M. F. Husain Saraswati, 1976

Bajrang Dal actively monitors artistic creations seen to be disrespectful of Hinduism. The group demonstrated against the well-known artist M. F. Husain for depictions of the goddess Saraswati.

In Mangalore: How It Works

In Mangalore, the Dal has functioned both as a cause of unrest and a protection racket for small businesses. As one Muslim shopkeeper notes,

"You do not just get security guards from them but also an assurance that you will be spared from any Hindutva activity."

2. Hindu Aikya Vedi (Hindu Unity Forum)

The second group, the Hindu Aikya Vedi, was established in 1992 in Kerala after riots in Poonthura.

- The purpose was to coordinate among Hindu religious bodies.
- The HAV became a mass organization after communal violence in Marad in 2003.
- It was spurred into action by the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities report of 2009.
- The HAV attempts to establish connections with local Dalit and lower-caste organizations.



Sasikala Teacher, former President, HAV

Playing Caste Politics: The National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities

The commission recommended the inclusion of converted Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims in the list of Scheduled Castes.

So converts became eligible to vie for seats reserved for Scheduled Castes, something that had not been true before.

Converts could also gain seats in educational institutions and government jobs.

This was perceived as a threat to Hinduism from Christian and Muslim populations.



As Kummanam Rajasekharan, former HAV general secretary and Kerala BJP president, stated:

Our demand is to abolish all devaswom boards and pass a Kerala Hindu Religious Institutions Act that would bring temples on equal footing with the places of worship of other communities.

The Target: Devaswom Boards

- The HAV has targeted the five Devaswom boards that manage the 3,000-plus temples in Kerala.
- This autonomous institution is unique to Kerala.
- The HAV argues the temples should be managed by individual traditions, not the boards.
- The HAV also contends that donations are going to state coffers, thus available to support anti-Hindu interests.
- The HAV formed parallel "temple protection committees."
- At the same time the HAV continues to hold shakhas (training meetings) on temple grounds.

Caste, Community, and Coalition Politics in Kerala

- Kerala has had a complex political history of its own. Social reform movements produced influential community organizations: the NSS among Nairs, the SNDP among Ezhavas, and several Pulaya organizations.
- Nairs are historically a forward or upper-caste community; Ezhavas are classified as an Other Backward Class; Pulayas are Dalits.
- The LDF has traditionally received substantial support from Ezhavas, Dalits, and other working-class constituencies.
- The UDF has traditionally been stronger among Christians and Muslims, while also attracting Nairs and sections of other Hindu communities.
- These all reflect historical tendencies. But the various groups are not fixed voting blocs, and allegiances can change.

Hindu Aikya Vedi seeks to overcome these divisions by constructing a common Hindu identity.

How It Played Out in 2016

In the 2016 elections, the BJP-led NDA allied with the newly formed BDJS, led by figures associated with the SNDP Yogam. The BJP received 10.5% and the BDJS approximately 4%, giving the alliance about 15% of the vote. It was not an overwhelming result, but it was an increase for the BJP.



SNDP Yogam chief Vellappally Natesan, in 2025

3. Sanatan Sanstha: Hindutva NRM



Jayant Balaji Athavale

The third group, Sanatan Sanstha, was not established by the RSS. Instead, its goals are clearly congruent with Hindutva. The Sanstha can be considered an ally of the RSS.

The Sanatan Sanstha was established by Jayant Balaji Athavale, who had been a hypnotherapist in London in the 1970s.

Athavale wrote The Science of Spirituality (Adhyatma Shastra) in 1987. Athavaleism can be seen as a form of spiritualism.

He then established Sanatan Sanstha in 1999 in Parvatiwada, Goa.

The group's principal ashram is at Ramnathi, Goa.

Other related organizations also sprang up, creating a mini-ecology of related groups around the Sanstha.

The overall goal is to establish Hindu Rashtra, India as a nation based on Hinduism.

In religious terms, the objective is to destroy durjans (evil forces) who indulge in bad habits.



Bomb Cases

Sanatan Sanstha members were implicated in several bombing incidents.

In 2008, a bomb exploded at Thane in protest of the play Amhi Pachpute.

Another bomb exploded at an auditorium in Vashi.

In October 2009, a bomb exploded in Madgaon, Goa, near a Narkasura effigy contest.

Maharashtra police submitted a request to ban Sanatan Sanstha in 2011. All six defendants tried in the combined 2009 Goa cases were acquitted at trial.



Effigies of Narkasura, the demon king, are burned at the start of Diwali every year.



Narendra Dabholkar

Assassination Case 1 (alleged links)

There are alleged links with assassinations also. The Sanstha has generally been in conflict with "rationalist" groups.

Narendra Dabholkar of Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (MANS, est. 1989) was assassinated in 2013.

He had championed an anti-superstition bill in 1989.

The state government eventually passed the Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and Other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act in 2013.

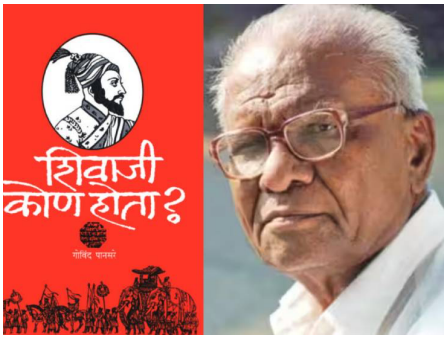
In May 2024, the trial court convicted two defendants and acquitted three.

Assassination Case 2 (alleged links)

Another critic of Sanatan Sanstha, Govind Pansare, was killed in 2015.

Pansare was a leader in the Communist Party of India. Interpretation of Shivaji, a medieval ruler, as tolerant of non-Hindu religions angered the Sanstha.

Who Was Shivaji? A book by Govind Pansare



Govind Pansare and the cover of his book



Pansare's reflections on fundamentalism are worth quoting:

We are living in a world where religious forces, overpowering the views and practices advocated by Gautam Buddha...have generated a beastly fundamentalist frenzy and captured power. Our task is ...to win back those who are deceived by them in order to defeat these forces.

Govind Pansare, 2015

4. Rashtriya Sikh Sangat: Incorporating Sikhism into Hindutva

The fourth group, the Rashtriya Sikh Sangat, was formed in 1986 after anti-Sikh riots in which 2,733 people were killed in Delhi.

The goal of the Sangat is to integrate Sikhs and subsume their religion into Hinduism.

The Sangat claims to be following the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib, the central scripture of Sikhism.

A Climate of Political Tension in the Punjab

Rulda Singh, the Sangat's Punjab president, was shot in Patiala in July 2009 and died on August 15.

A Khalistani group claimed responsibility.

The Sangat was not implicated in this, but takes advantage of the political tensions.



Image from the Punjab section

Ideological Underpinnings

1985 article by Ram Swarup claiming Sikhs are members of Hindu society

"There is nothing in Sikhism…which is not derived from the scriptures of Hinduism"

"…the Sikhs themselves were only a sect within the larger Hindu society"

The establishment of the Sikh religion is explained as being a conspiracy abetted by the British scholar Max Arthur Macauliffe. His writings are "thought-equipment for Sikh intellectuals."



Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar

The Sarba Sanjhi Gurbani Yatra: Things do not always go according to plan

A nationwide yatra (pilgrimage) was planned by the Rashtriya Sikh Sangat for August 2004.

It was to include holy sites connected with both Sikh gurus and Hindu saints.

Threats were reported. The yatra was cancelled.

Conclusion

Looking at these four organizations aligned with the RSS, it is clear that Hindutva provides a common ideological framework.

Each of the four organizations has a unique relationship to the RSS and the overall Sangh Parivar (the group).

Subsidiary unit activities respond to local conflicts involving conversion, caste, religious identity, and political competition.

Organizational decentralization permits experimentation, resilience, and plausible deniability.

Anti-Christian mobilization is best understood as part of a wider Hindutva ecosystem than as a single centrally directed campaign.

Explore the Latest Directory:

Greater Phoenix Religious Directory

Greater Phoenix Religious Directory QR code

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