Hindu Revival Essay, Research Paper

Hindu revivalism remains a growing force in India today. It is also a concern

among the millions of displaced Hindus scattered around the world. Its roots lie

in the belief that Hinduism is an endangered lifestyle. This notion is fuelled

by the political assertiveness of minority groups, efforts to convert Hindus to

other faiths, suspicions that the political authorities are sympathetic to

minority groups and the belief that foreign political and religious ideologies

are destroying the Hindu community. Every morning at sunrise, groups of men in

military-style uniforms gather together before saffron coloured flags, in all

parts of India, to participate in a common set of rituals, physical exercises

and lessons. For one hour each day, they are taught to think of themselves as a

family with a mission to transform Hindu society. (Andersen and Damle 1) They

are the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the largest and most influential

organization in India committed to Hindu revivalism. The RSS or National

Volunteer Organization, is perhaps the most interesting of any of India’s social

movements. The growth of the RSS provides a detailed illustration of India?s

changing face. The purpose of this paper is to provide the reader with an early

twentieth century view of an organization that emerged out of frustrations among

India?s Hindu revivalists. These revivalists were discontent with the work of

nationalists in politics, and determined to unify the Hindus of India against

the ?alien? threats within the nation. The origins of nationalist movements

in nineteenth century India can be traced to the expansion of Western, English

education. Those attracted to the new education came primarily from high caste

Hindu groups. Many of the proponents of social, political and religious reform

among Hindus were drawn from this English educated class. Until very late in the

nineteenth century, most politically articulate Indians were willing to

collaborate with the colonial administration. However, a shift from

collaboration to criticism began in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Two broad movements emerged among Hindus seeking to define their national

identity: modernists and revivalists. The modernists adopted models of social

and political change based upon Western patterns; they appreciated many of the

Western philosophies and wanted India to follow suit. The revivalist view was

based on returning to a Hindu antiquity that was thought to be superior for

governing India?a ?Hindu? nation. Many felt that this desire to recreate

the age of Hindu grandeur was also a result of English education; ideas of

patriotism and nationalism crept into these peoples way of thought. It was the

English study of the Indian way of life that added to the revivalist movement.

Revivalism included those who wanted to preserve the traditional social order as

well as those who sought to reform Hindu society as a way of strengthening Hindu

solidarity. The RSS traces its roots to the revivalist feelings that were

present at that time. The Hindu revivalists sought to recover fundamental truths

about their people. They argued that the loss of national consciousness had

created conditions that facilitated British domination of the land. By appealing

to an idealized past, the revivalists reminded the Hindu public of the suffering

and degradation experienced under British rule. The call for independence was a

logical next-step, for the degraded present could only be overcome by

eliminating the foreign intruders who had supposedly disrupted the original

blissful society. Muslim rulers and the British were identified as sources of

that disruption and many revivalist spokesmen sought to place limits on their

political power and on their cultural influence. The proposed changes in Hindu

society were justified by the proposition that the changes were not new at all,

but were in fact a revival of older, purer forms of Hindu culture that had

degenerated during foreign rule. Opposition to British rule increased among both

the moderates and the more extremists, as the contradictions between colonial

rule and new aspirations became obvious. Criticism of India?s colonial status

was supported by observation of British attitudes. The British viewed Indians

and Indian culture as inferior. Educated Indians were considerably upset when

the British began to characterize them as feminine, cowardly and

unrepresentative of the native culture. The racial arrogance often expressed by

European officials, businessmen and missionaries, made a substantial

contribution to the nationalist sentiment. Constitutional reforms that offered

increased Indian participation in the legislative bodies and bureaucracy did not

match expectations. The Western educated Indians believed that they should enjoy

the same civil liberties as the English. With the development of new techniques

of agitation, the government undermined popular trust by enforcing regulations

that further diminished civil liberties. The claims that British economic

policies caused a drain of wealth from India, further enforced the view that the

British were fundamentally unconcerned with the country?s well being.

(Andersen and Damle 30) Developments in the late nineteenth century created

conditions conducive to the expansion of revivalism. Nationalism was beginning

to assert itself. The revivalist message, based on traditional Hindu concepts

regarding society, was appealing to many Indian Hindus. In pre-independent

India, the premier nationalist organization was the Indian National Congress, an

umbrella organization that accommodated a variety of interests including those

of the revivalists. However, the Congress was not entirely successful in

adequately satisfying all groups. Many Muslim leaders felt that Westernized

Hindu elite, who controlled the Congress, did not adequately respond to Muslim

interests. The same sentiments were shared by Hindu revivalist leaders regarding

the Hindu community. The founder of the RSS doubted whether the Congress, which

included Muslims, could bring about the desired unity of the Hindu community. As

the Hindu and Muslim leaders within these communities continued to feel unfairly

represented, they turned to forming other political organizations claiming to

represent their respective groups. It would be appropriate to note that there

was no cohesive community, either Hindu or Muslim, in India that was united.

These communities were divided by many barriers, and developed in each region

differently, both politically and socially. What these organizations did

represent was a certain aspect of their respective communities that was very

defensive in nature. The RSS was established in 1925 as a kind of educational

body whose objective was to train a group of Hindu men who would work together

to unite the Hindu community, so that India could once again become an

independent country. The RSS emerged during a wave of Hindu-Muslim riots that

had swept across India at the time. The RSS viewed communal rioting as a symptom

of the weakness and division within the Hindu community, and argued that

independence could be achieved only after the splintered Hindu community,

divided by caste, religion, language, and sect, united. (Andersen and Damle 32)

The formation of the RSS can be attributed to the defensive nature of the Hindu

community at the time. The deterioration of Hindu-Muslim relations and the

continual frustration with the Indian National Congress led to the rise of the

RSS. During India?s pre-independence period, the two leaders of the RSS, its

founder Keshav Baliram Hedgewar and Madhav Sadashiv Golwalker, felt that a

fundamental change in social attitudes was a necessity before any changes

occurred in the nation. The creation of a properly trained force of nationalists

would be the first step in altering such attitudes. Most revivalists argued that

Gandhi?s efforts in the early 1920s to strengthen Hindu-Muslim bonds by lining

up the Congress organization behind the Muslim protest against the dismemberment

of the Turkish Empire encouraged Muslim separatism. When he launched his first

major non-cooperation movement in India on August 1, 1920, one of the issues was

the British unwillingness to satisfy Muslims on the Turkish issue. Gandhi called

for a complete boycott of government institutions, while simultaneously

including the doctrine of ahimsa as an integral part of the movement. A

considerable number of Congress members, including many revivalists, opposed

both the objectives and tactics of the boycott. Widespread communal rioting

followed the apparent failure of Gandhi?s non-cooperation movement. (Malkani

5) Hindu revivalists were particularly alarmed by the widespread communal

rioting which took place on the Malabar coast of southwestern India during

August 1921. Events there, emphasized the revivalist concern about the dangers

facing the Hindus of the subcontinent. Muslim resentment against British rule in

the Malabar area, was coupled with anti-Hindu sentiment, and the rioting grew to

such proportions that the civil administration was unable to contain the

violence in many places. This uprising confirmed the fears of many Hindus that

the violence on the Malabar coast was a covert attempt to enhance the political

influence of Muslims at the expense of the Hindu community. It was difficult for

many to conceive how a country comprised of 85% Hindus could be unable to defend

themselves in that situation. Many Hindus feared that similar outbreaks would

occur elsewhere, and these apprehensions fuelled revivalist sentiments. The

challenge from Islam in the early 1920s was viewed by many Hindus as a threat to

their self-esteem. The proliferation of Hindu sabhas, and other ?defensive?

Hindu associations, were reactions to the growing communal violence, the

increasing political articulation of Muslims, the cultural ?Islamization? of

the Muslim community, and the failure to achieve independence. Thus, this set

the stage for the emergence of the RSS within the historical setting of modern

India. The RSS?s discipline and ideological framework were shaped by Dr.

Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, a medical doctor who had abandoned a potentially

lucrative practice to participate in the struggle against colonialism. As a

youth, Hedgewar was keenly interested in history and politics. During the early

1920s, Hedgewar became deeply engaged in Congress Party activities. At the 1920

annual Congress session in Nagpur, Gandhi had promised freedom within the year

through peaceful non-cooperation. Many including Hedgewar, decided to give the

experiment, in non-violent disobedience, a chance to prove its effectiveness.

The year 1921 ended without the promised swaraj. Gandhi called off the much

heralded non-cooperation campaign in early 1922, because a mob had killed a

number of policemen in the United Provinces. Hedgewar felt Gandhi had made a

serious tactical mistake. Hedgewar became increasingly disenchanted with Gandhi

and politics. (Malkani 10) The outbreak of communal rioting in 1923 caused

Hedgewar to question the previously attempted methods used to rid India of

colonial rule. The riots in his view, were the signs of a deeper social

problem?disunity among Hindus?that would have to be addressed if India were

to become independent. During this period of escalating Hindu-Muslim animosity,

Hedgewar began to develop the intellectual foundations of the RSS. A major

influence on his thinking was Vinayak Damodar Sarvarkar?s Hindutva, which

advances the thesis that the Hindus are a nation. While Sarvarkar?s work may

have provided Hedgewar with an intellectual justification for the concept of a

Hindu nation that embraced all the peoples of the subcontinent, it did not give

him a method for uniting the Hindu community. From his youth, Hedgewar searched

for a reason to explain India?s inability to ward off foreign domination. He

was disturbed that a small group of colonial administers could rule a vast

country like India with such ease. Hedgewar felt that much of India?s ancient

territory, referring to Tibet and Afghanistan, had been lost due to a lack of

Hindu unity. He believed that independence and national revitalization could be

achieved only when the root cause of India?s weakness was discovered. Some

time between 1924 and 1925, Hedgewar satisfied himself that he had discovered

the cause; the fundamental problem was psychological and what was required was

an inner transformation to rekindle a sense of national consciousness and social

cohesion. Once having created a regiment of persons committed to the national

reconstruction, he believed there would be little difficulty in sustaining a

movement of revitalization, which of course would include independence as one of

its objectives. In its inception, the RSS had two basic aims: (1.) to unite and

train Hindus to face the enemy, any alien party that was attempting to subjugate

Hinduism; and (2.) to radicalize the Hindus to hasten the British withdrawal

from India. It was founded on the auspicious day of the Hindu festival Dusherah.

The first recruits were largely Brahmin, although all Hindus were encouraged to

join. Gymnasiums or Akharas, associated with the Kshatriya life style, proved to

be the most successful grounds for finding recruits. (Jayaprasad 58) These

trained recruits would go on to be the future leaders of the country, and keep

with them the teachings and discipline of the RSS. They would also keep a close

network with the organization. The RSS argued that their strengths lay in their

ability to develop close bonds among their members and to sustain links when

members moved on or joined various RSS affiliate groups. In the communal riots

of September 1927 in Nagpur, RSS took steps which captured the attention of

Hindus far beyond the city. Eighty-nine RSS members were organized into sixteen

squads to protect various Hindu neighbourhoods. This generated widespread

publicity and captured the attention of Hindus everywhere. The paramilitary

nature of the RSS soon convinced the Central Provincial government that the RSS

could develop into a dangerous revolutionary group. It soon became the most

successful of a class of associations, which specialized in recruiting young men

and adolescents into uniformed militia bands called Shakhas. The Shakha was the

first stage of involvement, where boys would work and train together and develop

a camaraderie. Those that excelled were moved up into the full-time rank of the

organization?an organization that was extremely effective in managing and

mobilizing many people. These Swayamsevaks belonging to the ?Sangh

Brotherhood? were dedicated to the improvement of Hindu society, culture,

religion, and to the eventual creation of a Hindu Rashtra or Hindu nation.

Shakha technique was evolved by Dr. Hedgewar to achieve these aims. It offered a

unifying experience, stressing commitment and loyalty to the ideologies of the

RSS. The uniqueness of the technique lay in the active participation on national

affairs by each and every member. The physical, intellectual and mental training

was designed to prepare all sections of society for effectively involving

themselves in nation building (i.e. a grass roots philosophy). The membership

was free to all castes of Hindus as equal participants, without prejudice. The

RSS believed in the equality of all castes. They did not accept the practice of

untouchability. All members must participate in common meals, a controversial

practice at the time, but one that was used by many reformers such as the Arya

Samaj, Swami Vivekananda, and Gandhi. All followers had to conform to the

behavioural standards of the RSS, which appeared to be a mix of Brahmin and

Kshatriya standards. Prior to his death on June 21, 1940, Dr. Hedgewar chose the

RSS general secretary at the time, Golwalker, to succeed him as leader. Under

the new leadership, the RSS continued to expand rapidly during World War II.

With the pressing for an independent Muslim state by the Muslim League, the

period between 1945 to 1948 saw sharp increases in membership within the RSS,

including lower caste Hindus in areas that are now Pakistan, Punjab and Delhi.

RSS membership had previously been largely, upper caste Hindu?s in Maharastra.

The RSS was beginning to attract, and continues to attract, low income Hindus

and small shopkeepers, who were concerned with their opportunities in a

government that favoured the high class or minorities. The RSS always kept a

certain mystery and secrecy of their membership and their future plans. It was

always under some form of scrutiny or ban from the political authorities. Under

the leadership of Hedgewar, the RSS remained a cultural and social organization

committed to the advancement of the Hindu people. Although, the RSS trained its

disciples to be aggressive and protective of their culture, Hedgewar insisted

that they not get confrontational or purposely attack other communities.

Hedgewar also insisted that the RSS remain out of politics totally. Members were

allowed to join politics on their own, but the organization was to remain

completely apolitical. Hedgewar felt that politics was a ?dirty? business

and he was more concerned with training the youth, which would have a domino

effect on later politics in India. His successor, Golwalker, respected his

wishes and kept the RSS out of politics. However, with Golwalker the RSS began

to receive an anti-Muslim sentiment directly from the leader. The RSS membership

always seemed to have contempt for the Muslims as well as the British, but it

was now more evident in the writings of their leader. In his book, We or Our

Nationhood Defined, Golwalker made claims of a Hindustan that was to be the land

of the Hindus where they could practice their all-prevailing religious

traditions without contamination from European or Muslim culture. ?Any

non-Hindus in India must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion,

must entertain no idea but those of glorificationof the Hindu race and culture,

and could only stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation,

claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential

treatment.? (Brown 347) With the insurgence of new blood into the RSS from its

many student affiliate groups, the RSS began to grow and expand. The RSS

membership began to divide on its future objectives and goals. The

traditionalist of the Sangh wanted to concentrate on character building within

the Shakha and keep out of the country’s politics. The new members of the Sangh,

saw the RSS as a growing force on the subcontinent and wanted to use the

influence in a more aggressive and political way. In the end, the traditionalist

of the RSS won and the RSS stayed out of the pre-independence politics of India.

The RSS came under harsh criticism for this move, as many supporters felt that

the RSS was the only organized and influential group that could have prevented

partition. Lord Mountbatten, the last British Viceroy, announced the partition

of the Indian subcontinent on a communal basis on June 3, 1947, and termination

of colonial rule on August 15, 1947. The British created a boundary force to

keep law and order during partition but dissolved it in September 1947. Millions

of Hindus and Sikhs were left unprotected in West Punjab, and the same for

Muslims in East Punjab. Violence was everywhere as early as June 1947 and

reached its peak in September 1947. It only subsided when the minority

communities of West Pakistan (formerly West Punjab) fled to India. Golwalker had

set an example of fearlessness by moving through riot torn areas consoling

refugees in their flight to India. The East Punjab government provided

assistance, including the issuance of weapons to the RSS, while they were

organizing rescue squads to bring refugees to India. Armed Swayamsevaks were

assigned to guard Hindu and Sikh homes. They even retaliated against Muslims in

Pakistan when danger was imminent. Their rescue efforts helped bolster

confidence and pride among the demoralized Hindus and Sikhs of the Punjab area.

The growing popularity and activism of the RSS proved it an influential force to

be reckoned with. (Andersen and Damle 52) The RSS ?s humanitarian efforts

during the partition had won it respect from the people of the newly established

India. However, the government was wary that the RSS posed a political threat to

the stability of the country. Many Muslim leaders in India were growing fearful

of the anti-Muslim sentiment that the RSS members characterized. The RSS did

realize that it had to take a more active role in the political activities of

India. During the Kashmir war, when Pakistan sent in armed raiders, the Indian

Armed forces supplied arms to the RSS volunteers. These Swayamsevaks fought the

enemy on the side of the Indian soldiers. The RSS kept the supply lines moving

and carried arms and ammunition for the soldiers through hazardous areas.

(Andersen and Damle 53) In the closing months of 1947, senior political figures

became increasingly outspoken about the danger of the RSS becoming an

independent political force. The national Herald of Lucknow expressed this fear

in editorials published. It compared the RSS with the paramilitary form of the

German Nazi party. The RSS had been accused of being a secret society in that

what they said or showed was mostly meant to hide the reality. The daily

activities of the RSS were said to be a means of organizing Hindu society and

promoting Hindu culture. To be political is no crime, and in a democracy every

individual and association has the right to act politically. However, the RSS

has been accused of being an organization that tries to camouflage its

characters and objectives, thus giving many, every reason to be suspicious of

its on goings. Many felt that the RSS had all the characteristics of a fascist

organization. (Goyal 14) Many senior RSS figures maintained a hesitant attitude

regarding party politics in Independent India. Many felt that this was a corrupt

system and the RSS should have no involvement. Nevertheless, the more activist

youths were demanding some RSS involvement in politics. The main objective was

to gain political protection as the RSS was banned after the assassination of

Mahatma Gandhi; an event many people held the RSS responsible for. The RSS was

reinstated only after presenting a new constitution to the government which

stated that it was a non-political, cultural organization and would preach

religious tolerance. (Brown 348) But by this time contempt for the RSS had risen

to the most top level of government?Prime Minister Jawarhalal Nehru. Nehru and

his successors would all keep a watchful eye on the RSS with continuous

scrutinizing and banning of many of its activities. The RSS maintained a strong

relation and presence with student groups. These groups were a pool for new

membership for the Sangh. The RSS wanted to expand its base and get involved

with the masses of India. It was very successful in aligning itself with several

labour unions and agricultural unions. The RSS kept away from the large

capitalistic businesses. Even though the RSS won the support of these unions,

the ideology of the organization never appealed to the common peasant in India.

The Hindu Mahasabha, the Arya Samaj and the RSS were the most prominent

organizations dedicated to Hindu revivalism. There was a lot of cross membership

between these groups. However, the RSS steered away from the political Hindu

Mahasabha, as much of the public also considered this group responsible for

Gandhi?s death. The Mahasabha became insignificant in Indian politics. The RSS

gave its support to the new Jana Sangh, the predecessor of the Bhartiya Janata

Party (BJP). It was time that the RSS expand its affiliation with other groups;

it was now a reality if the organization was to improve the country it had to be

involved somewhat in politics. Of the religious organizations, the Arya Samaj in

Northern India was a close ally of the RSS. The Arya Samaj predates the RSS in

its Hindu revivalism movement. They often supported the RSS or its affiliates,

but also kept themselves separate. Other religious organizations came directly

from the RSS family tree, the most prominent of these is the Vishwal Hindu

Parishad (VHP). The VHP was seen as the more extreme religious arm of the RSS,

just as the Jana Sangh (later the BJP) had been seen as the political arm of the

RSS. Many criticize the VHP as an organization that takes on more extreme

projects on behalf of the RSS, such as the destruction of the Babri mosque in

Ayodhya, December 6, 1992, allowing the RSS to maintain its claim to being

purely a cultural organization. The VHP has also grown to become a large

organization and is at present comparable to the RSS in strength, numbers and

ideals of higher morals. There was lots of cross membership within the different

organizations. The RSS lent its prominent members to these groups to help serve

or organize projects and campaigns. The RSS?s support of the VHP allowed its

members to participate in more activist projects concerning Hindu revivalism.

Its support of the Jana Sangh and the BJP also allowed its members to get

involved on the Indian political scene in a very large way. Although these

organizations?the RSS, VHP, BJP, Arya Samaj, Hindu Mahasabha and

others?differ in their ideologies or methods, they all seem to be connected by

a strong network and a commitment to Hindu revivalism. In recent years, these

groups have received a strong nod of popular support and political importance.

India?s current government will most likely be a coalition formed around the

BJP. The new millenium will be an interesting and trying time for the 1 billion

plus of India. Being the major exponent in spreading Hindu nationalism, the RSS

had come under much attack for their actions, policies and supposed hidden

agendas. They have always maintained themselves as a cultural organization,

despite other allegations. One cannot help but sympathize with them for the

concept they uphold based on valid fears when one takes a look at Indian history

and politics. The RSS have been credited for much humanitarian efforts during

partition and after, but they have also been a factor in the rising communal

feelings in India. Albeit the RSS is considered by many as a secret

organization, its claims of rather being a silent organization still remains

with its ultimate goal of seeing India realizing Hind Swaraj. The only thing the

RSS must remember is that they are not the only nationals of India. In a

democratic state such as India all voices must be heard. Mother India has many

other children, whether they are Hindu, Sikh, Christian or Muslim.

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