

## **Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh(RSS) Role in Freedom Movement**

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Ideological predisposition has been a predominant factor in evaluating the role of various groups and individuals in the freedom struggle. Marxist and subaltern historians, who are ideologically poles apart from the Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh (RSS), have bracketed it with the Hindu Mahasabha and other Hindu organisations formed at various stages of the anti-imperialist struggle, questioning its independent identity, presumably to deride its clout in post-independent India.

The reality is different. Nagpur, where the RSS was first organised in 1925, was prone to Hindu-Muslim riots. When a riot broke out in 1927, the RSS acted as deterrent to the outbreak instead of playing an offensive role and unleashing anti-Muslim propaganda which was expected by a section of local Hindu leaders and apprehended by the Muslims. This removed the suspicion from the Muslim mind against the RSS whose presence in the Central Provinces (CP) thereupon evoked no protest from the Muslim population.

It was none other than a Muslim member of the CP Council who refuted the allegation that the RSS was a communal organisation. During the debate on the RSS in the Council in March 1934, M. S. Rahman said, "no sane Muslim would take any exception to any Hindu organisation provided its object is not aggressive and militant, but simply the betterment of the Hindu community as a whole". He asked the Government whether "any Muslim organisation had sent a representation to the Government calling upon the Government to ban the RSS?"

The leader of the House Raghavendra Rao said that there had not been any representation by any Muslim organisation against the RSS. Moreover, in pre-independent India barring a few stray incidents confined to Hyderabad, Lahore and Rawalpindi, there had not been single incident of violence between the RSS volunteers and the Muslims till 1945.

The lukewarm response of the RSS to the Hindu Mahasabha's political agenda

led the latter to form its own volunteer organisations the Hindu Militia and the Ram Sena. The RSS was increasingly seen by many Hindu organisers

including Savarkar and Moonje as too ineffectual to counter Muslim aggressiveness. Thus, a large number of volunteer organisations, for

instance the Mahavir Dal and Agni Dal in UP and Punjab, Hindu Rashtra Dal

in Poona, Hindu Rashtra Sena in Bhopal, Mukteshwar Dal and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Mandal in the CP, Shakti Dal in Jabalpur and Hindu Rashtriya

Sena in Giridih in Bihar, were formed to fight "Muslim domination."

The RSS came into existence in between the two great anti-colonial movements - the non-cooperation movement and the civil disobedience movement. While the Muslim question was dominant on the political agenda of the Hindu Mahasabha, the only ideology that the RSS recognised was anti-colonialism. Despite the commonalities of views on many issues with the Mahasabha, the RSS preferred the Congress as the prime platform for the anti-colonial struggle. The RSS leaders had a long association with the Congress. K. B. Hedgewar, the founder Sarsanghchalak, joined the Congress in 1919, the year he was assigned the responsibility to collect funds for the Hindi journal to be published by the Provincial Congress.

On the question of cooperation with Gandhi, he differed with the followers of Tilak who were working under the auspices of the Rashtriya Mandal and formed a separate organisation, the Nagpur National Union. The Union under his leadership prepared detailed programmes for non-cooperation and sent it to the special Calcutta session of the Congress in 1920. When the non-cooperation movement was launched in 1921, Gandhi faced resistance from prominent followers of Tilak like B. G. Kharparde and Moonje and others. However, the young troika of Nagpur - Hedgewar, M. R. Cholkar and Saimulla Khan - captured the leadership of the movement. It was under them that the movement got a wider social base as the lower caste weaving communities - Koshtis and Momins - participated on a large scale.

Hedgewar formed the non-cooperation board to train volunteers to spread the message of non-cooperation in the CP. He was arrested for making "seditious" speeches and sent to jail. During his trial, he questioned the *locus standi* of a foreigner to try an Indian patriot and asked, "Is there any law by which people of one country have the right to rule over the country of others?"

After the formation of the RSS, Hedgewar evolved the convention by which RSS cadres could join hands with the Congress and sometimes with the Mahasabha against the British in their "individual capacity". The anti-Simon Commission movement in the CP was led virtually by RSS leaders. By 1928 the RSS had 18 *Shakhas* mostly confined to Nagpur and Wardha. The CP Congress (Marathi) was headed by Harekrishna Joshi who was general secretary of the provincial committee and was also Sanghchalak of the Wardha unit of the RSS.

However, the fight between the Moonje and Abhyankar factions led the All India Congress Committee to intervene and it was at this juncture that both Hedgewar and Joshi withdrew from the Congress. The withdrawal was from factional politics of the Congress, not from its programmes as the RSS cadres and leaders participated in all subsequent movements of the Congress.

The Congress in its Lahore session passed a resolution for "complete Independence". The RSS extended uninhibited support to the Congress. It issued a circular to all 37 *Shakhas* which stated, "**the Indian National Congress too has adopted our goal of Independence... through the speeches it should be explained what is the meaning of Independence and why should we work with this end in view. And rallies should conclude with complimenting the Congress for accepting the goal of Independence.**"

The civil disobedience movement was launched in the CP in the form of the forest *satyagraha* in which the RSS participated on a massive scale. One of the RSS leaders, Martanda Jog, designated as *Senapati* (commander-in-chief), was made captain of the volunteers' group. He violated the law by reading proscribed literature at a public meeting in Nagpur. Hedgewar gave up the responsibility of Sarsanghchalak to participate in the movement and so did the other central office-bearers. Maharashtra, a popular Marathi daily of Nagpur, reported that when Hedgewar proceeded to inaugurate the *satyagraha* he was accompanied by thousands of people including seven to eight hundred women. He and other RSS workers were arrested.

The anti-imperialist character of the RSS and its unconditional support to the Congress movement appalled the British administration which made the first serious attempt to suppress it soon after the civil disobedience movement died out. At the end of 1932 the CP government issued a circular prohibiting government employees and their wards from participating in or associating with the RSS on the plea that it was "political and communal organisation".

In December 1933 its scope was extended to the employees and teachers of local bodies. The Government wanted to give it a communal colour since the Local Self-Government Minister was a Muslim. However, the Sangh did not make it a communal issue and targeted the colonial rule. During the budget session in March 1934, a member of the Council, V. D. Kolte, put up a **cut motion** against the government's circular. This led to a four-hour discussion during which all the speakers belonging to Brahmin, non-Brahmin and Muslim communities appreciated the work and ideology of the RSS.

A Home department report in 1940 said, "the organisation is intensely anti-British and its tone is increasingly becoming militant." The CID report revealed that RSS volunteers were "introduced into various departments of Government such as the army, navy, postal, telegraph, railway and administrative services in order that they there may be no difficulty in capturing administrative departments when the time comes."

The RSS chief M. S. Golwalkar, who succeeded Hedgewar after his death in 1940, suggested indoctrination of government employees and his speech in the Poona Officers Training Camp (OTC) of the RSS on May 3, 1942 was reported by the CID saying that, "the Sangh resolved to stand on its own legs, not minding any opposition. It was not possible to get swaraj by begging it from foreigners and this could only be achieved by strength." The history of the RSS, spanning more than two decades before India's independence, is one of active participation in the anti-colonial struggle and unconditional cooperation not only with the Congress but also with any other group committed to the liberation of the motherland.

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