

# 'A battle between Hindutva and Hinduism is coming'

In a wide-ranging conversation, Walter Andersen speaks of the changing nature of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, how it was influenced by its different sarsangchalaks and the challenges that lie ahead of the organisation



Walter Andersen is on the faculty of the Johns Hopkins University, Washington, and Tongji University, Shanghai.

Walter Andersen is, perhaps, the only scholar to have observed, or studied, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) for nearly five decades. In intellectual circles, it is normally believed that as an organisation, the RSS is

impervious and impenetrable. Its functioning is not available for scholarly scrutiny, unless one happens to be an insider or a firm sympathiser. That is why the publication of *The RSS: A View to the Inside*, a new book Andersen has co-written with Sridhar Damle, is a true intellectual event (The duo had also produced a book, *Brotherhood in Saffron*, three decades back). Andersen is on the faculty of the Johns Hopkins University, Washington, and Tongji University, Shanghai, and before that, he was a leading South Asia specialist of the US State Department for over two decades. At a Gurgaon hotel where he is staying, he recently spoke with Ashutosh Varshney, professor of Political Science, Brown University and contributing editor, The Indian Express.

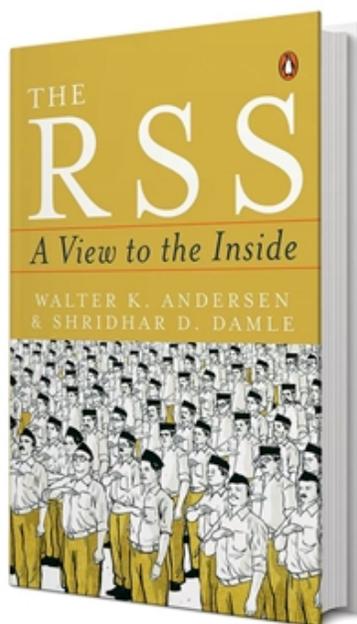
### **Let us start in a biographical vein. When did you start working on the RSS and why?**

As a PhD student at the University of Chicago, I came to India with a two-year grant to study student politics, but I stayed on for four. I came in the late 1960s and was in India until the early 1970s. Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, the great India scholars, were my mentors. I was planning to study why students enter politics, focusing on Allahabad, old Delhi and a district in Kerala. That is when I encountered the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the RSS.

### **When was the ABVP born? You say in the book that it was among the first “affiliates” of the RSS?**

The first affiliate was a woman’s group, the Rashtriya Sevika Sangh, going back to the 1930s. Then was born the Jan Sangh, followed by some schools, independently organised. Then came the labor union, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, and the ABVP, both roughly at the same time in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The model that was developed was as follows: Each affiliate of the RSS would be led or overseen by a pracharak, a full-time RSS

functionary. After the death of Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, Deendayal Upadhyay was asked to lead the Jan Sangh and Dattopat Thenagdi led the Mazdoor Sangh. Thengadi was also associated with the formation of the ABVP. By the time I came to India, the ABVP had developed a strong unit at Delhi University. I got very curious about the organisation behind it, the RSS. Through pure happenstance, I met Eknath Ranade, a remarkable man.



*The RSS: A View to the Inside* is written by Walter Andersen and Shridhar Damle. It is published by Penguin Viking. The book is priced at Rs 699.

### **What was his position?**

He was a senior RSS pracharak in Delhi. He was interested in western philosophy. At the University of Chicago, Leo Strauss, an influential political philosopher, was one of my advisors. Ranade began to ask me questions about Straussian ideas. We started meeting every two weeks at the RSS headquarters in Delhi. He would teach me Indian philosophy and I would enlighten him on Strauss. One day, he asked me if I would like to meet the

head of his organisation, MS Golwalkar. I said yes. A month later, I was informed that I would be escorted to Nagpur. A student of Delhi University, an RSS activist, took me to Mumbai by train. We travelled third class. We reached Mumbai and I spent the night in a Chitpavan Brahmin area of Mumbai. Next day, another person came and took me to Nagpur, again in third class. I was put up in the house of the head of the Mazdoor Sangh, who was away. Then, I was taken to the RSS headquarters, where I met Golwalkar. He set up a schedule for me. I was to come every morning for breakfast for five days and we would chat about a whole range of things. He also talked about the book he had written, *A Bunch of Thoughts*. It is actually not a book, but a series of speeches.

**And what about *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, the other book by him that a lot of us have read?**

He never discussed it. I later discovered that it was not his book. The consensus is that even though his name was on *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, he was not its author.

**The consensus you are referring to pertains to the scholarly world, or one shared in Hindu nationalist circles, too?**

Their own people don't know about it. It is my scholarly judgment, though it is based on the opinions of several Hindu nationalists. *We or Our Nationhood Defined* is, of course, a harsher document about the minorities of India.

**What emerged from your meetings with Golwalkar?**

What came out was a clearer understanding of Hindutva. Golwalkar was spiritual, not religious. He did not follow religious rituals. He said, as he also did in *A Bunch of Thoughts*, that for him, India as a nation was a living god. This view was very similar to the one adopted by the romantic nationalists of

19th century Europe – that nation is that unit to which we owe our ultimate devotion, not to a religious God. The RSS is not a religious organisation. That is why, as the idea evolved further, MD Deoras, the next sarvsanghachalak (chief), opened the RSS to Muslims in 1979. His argument was that an overwhelming proportion of Indian Muslims were converts from the Hindu community. They were not foreigners. His idea of Hindutva moved towards a territorial idea. To some extent, the idea came from Savarkar.

**But that raises a complex issue. For Savarkar, even if born in India, Muslims (and also Christians) were not Indians/Hindus (the two categories were identical for him), for they could meet only two of the three criteria he laid out in Hindutva: territorial (bhumi, land of India), genealogical (pitribhumi, fatherland) and religious (punyabhumi, birthland of religion). Even in principle, Muslims could not satisfy – unlike the Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists – the third criterion. Their religion was not born in India. Hence, he argued, they could not be true Indians/Hindus. If you have a primarily territorial idea, a la France and US, then Muslims born in India are by definition Indian. I don't read Savarkar as propounding a territorial definition of nationhood in this sense. How did Deoras handle this issue, while opening the RSS to Muslims?**

Savarkar, as you know, was an atheist. He was not religious. For Savarkar, the nation had a cultural context – or icons, traditions, stories with which one could identify, much like England. Anyway, the movement was one towards territoriality. It is not that the cultural definition entirely disappeared. But, for Deoras, everybody, or almost everybody, in India was a Hindu. He was the first one to use the term Hindu to cover everyone. (And Mohan Bhagwat, the present sarsanghchalak, also refers to everyone as a Hindu: Muslims, Christians, everybody.) Deoras was also against the caste system and

untouchability. Golwalkar never spoke openly against the caste system. Deoras also started proposing the idea that non-Brahmins could be pracharakas, the highest position that one can reach after three years of training and the pledge that goes with it.

**You say in your book that there are about 6,000 pracharakas today. What pledge do they take?**

They take an ascetic pledge: they give up connections to the family, material wealth and become, in a sense, wedded to the RSS.

**Can they be married?**

Some do marry, but most do not. It has been described by some as a casteless Hindu monastic order. They perform a vital function. They are made leaders of the affiliate organisations. That, in my view, keeps the RSS family together.

**Your book says that by 2015, there were 36 such affiliated organisations.**

36 formal affiliates, including the latest one aimed at female empowerment, called Stree Shakti. There are more than a hundred waiting for a formal status, which entails a process and the judgement by the RSS that the organisation has now reached an adequate level of maturity.

**Is Bajrang Dal a formal affiliate?**

It is an affiliate of the VHP, not of the RSS. However, VHP is an affiliate of the RSS.

**Did you have access to all sarsanghachalaks? Did you have conversations with all?**

All, except Sudarshan.

### **How does one become a sarsanghachalak?**

The predecessor chooses the successor. There is no election.

### **How has the RSS mode of functioning changed? You say in the book that it began with an emphasis on character building (charitra nirmaan). And now, it wishes to influence the state and policy process.**

Its initial view of social transformation rested on the foundation of character building in daily shakhas (assemblies). But with its number of affiliates rising, it started going in the direction of influencing the state. Its labor union, its farmers organisation, its school system, the Swadeshi Jagran Manch, even religious affiliates like the VHP have to deal with the government, for the government is all-pervasive in India. With RSS pracharakas leading all these affiliates, positions had to be formed on the domain-specific engagement with the state. For example, not simply the Jagran Manch, but even the labor union, BMS, has been opposed to foreign direct investment (FDI), whereas the BJP, the affiliate that runs governments, has been in favor of increasing FDI since the late 1990s, especially under Modi. Something like that right away necessitates engagement with the government (both when the BJP is in power and when it is not). There have been tussles over land acquisition, too. Character building remains important, but having an impact on policy and the state is now a significant RSS objective as well. The RSS could not have but gone in the latter direction, for the welfare of all of those groups that its affiliates organise critically depends on government policy and state action.

### **When clashes between affiliates emerge, what does the RSS do?**

The RSS proper sees itself as a balancer, a mediator, among the affiliates. If

no compromise can be reached, it prefers to postpone decision-making on a particular issue until a later date. But it essentially seeks to craft compromises, when internal family differences arise. In the older days, for example, it used to have diatribes against FDI. But as BJP governments started courting FDI for technology, growth and especially jobs, the RSS toned town its opposition to FDI. The RSS stridently opposed Vajpayee for its FDI embrace. Bhagwat's response to Modi's FDI stance has been muted.

### **What is the RSS view of Modi's economics, especially foreign economic policy, demonetisation and GST?**

The RSS was undoubtedly responsible for Modi's rise to the top. But it views Modi's economics with scepticism. Modi is more open to FDI and foreign trade than the RSS would like. His demonetisation and GST directly hurt groups that are the original base of the organisations: the small traders. The RSS, of course, did not pass a resolution against demonetisation or GST. That is now how it works. But it sought to influence how these policies would be implemented – to ease the burden on small traders.

**May we return to the cultural issues now? Let us first examine on language and gender, and then turn to caste and religion, which we have already discussed to some extent. On language politics, it is well known that the RSS was originally committed to promotion of Hindi. Now that the RSS has expanded its base in the South and East, can it continue to insist on the primacy of Hindi?**

It cannot, and it does not. Apart from the southern and eastern expansion, one issue also is the medium of instruction in its school system. RSS schools teach pupils in their mother tongue, though Hindi might be taught as a subject. The other interesting development is its changing attitude towards English. The aspiring middle class, whose support the RSS seeks, wants to

learn English. English also heavily contributes to national power in the international system today. The RSS could not have simultaneously sought, as its goal, a rise in India's national strength and continued its strident attacks on English. Hindi is not exclusively promoted any more.

**On caste, there are several questions. First, what is the RSS view of affirmative action?**

In the middle of the Bihar election campaign in 2015, Mohan Bhagwat had said that it was time to review caste-based affirmative action. The RSS had taken that position for long. But a political storm broke out, upon which Bhagwat quickly backtracked. And an impression grew that Bhagwat's statements had hurt the BJP. So, even if the RSS wants affirmative action reviewed, it recognises it is too politically dangerous in the Indian context.

**Another question concerns RSS opposition to the caste system. If it wants to integrate the lower castes in a way that promotes Hindu unity, what is the best way to do it? Sanskritisation (prescribing Brahminical behavioural norms for lower castes) or something else?**

Sanskritisation was Golwalkar's preferred model. But starting with Deoras and his attack on the caste system, it has been decreasing in importance. Deendayal Upadhyay's writings also spoke of egalitarianism as an ideal.

**If so, why not have Dalits or OBCs as sarsanghchalaks? All sarsanghchalaks thus far have been from the upper castes, and actually, excluding one (Rajendra Singh), all have been Brahmins.**

There have been Dalit and OBC pracharakas. Modi, an OBC, was a pracharak. An OBC or Dalit sarsanghchhalak is only a matter of time.

**What is the RSS view on [BR Ambedkar](#)? We know that the RSS was originally opposed to the Indian Constitution, whose principal architect was Ambedkar. We also know that the RSS opposed Ambedkar's attempt to reform Hindu family laws.**

Whatever the past, Ambedkar is now a hero.

**But Ambedkar was anti-Hindu. His writings make it plain that the caste system, an unmitigated evil, is the essence of Hinduism. He also abandoned Hinduism before his death.**

That is exactly why, I believe, there will eventually be a battle between Hindutva and Hinduism. Hindutva emphasises the oneness of Hindus, whereas ground realities are very different. Let me give an example.

Following the egalitarian ideology, Tarun Vijay, an RSS ideologue and former editor of Panchjanya and Organiser, once led some Dalits into a temple in central India, where they had not been before. He was beaten up, but few in the RSS family vocally supported him. They kept mostly quiet. As one important RSS functionary put it to me, the key question is: how do we keep our organisation intact if we do move towards an egalitarian Hindu society?

**Let us turn to gender and family now. What is the RSS view of an ideal Hindu nari (woman)?**

Golwalkar writings definitely emphasised that being a wife and mother were the ideal roles for a woman. But there is also a strain of thinking that idolises the Rani of Jhansi, and her valiant fight against the British during 1857. Both images have existed.

**What if a woman is gravely unhappy in a marriage? Does she have the right to divorce?**

I have certainly known RSS women, who were divorced. But there is no doubt that the RSS places a great deal of emphasis on the value of the family and a woman's role therein.

**Let us finally return to the relationship of the RSS and Muslims. Your book says that Golwalkar repeatedly used the term “ek hazaar saal ki ghulami” (one thousand years of servitude). You also say that Deoras changed that, and in 1979, opened the RSS to Muslims. [Narendra Modi](#) has often used the term “barah sau saal ki ghulami” (twelve hundred years of servitude), which is more in the Golwalkar vein than in the Deoras mold. At any rate, the implication of the Golwalkar and Modi statements is that India's colonisation began with the arrival of Muslim rulers either in the 8th century in Sindh or the 11th century in Delhi. This militates against the historian's argument that it is the British who started colonising India in 1757. The Delhi Sultanate or the Mughal era was not a period of colonisation. However offensive Babur or Aurangzeb were, the other Mughal kings Indianised themselves, even married into Rajputs, and developed commitments to India. The British did not Indianise themselves. They were the real colonisers. How can one justify the term Mughal colonialism?**

I don't think many RSS activists, or even pracharakas, would disagree with the distinction you are making between the British and Mughals. When Deoras invited Muslims to join the RSS, he did argue that Muslims were mostly India-born, and therefore Indian.

**But despite that ideological development, PM Modi returned to the Golwalkar understanding.**

There is clearly a generic problem, here. Even those RSS ideologues, who want Muslims to enter the RSS, would like them to accept India's "historic culture".

**But India's "historic culture" — the arts, the languages, the everyday manners, the poetry, the architecture, the music — have a lot of Muslim contributions.**

I agree. But they continue to argue that South Indian Muslims, or Indonesian Muslims are ideal Muslims. South Indian Muslims speak the regional languages; and Indonesia, a primarily Muslim country, has the Ramayana as its national epic.

**But that implies that Urdu, which was widely spoken in North India, is not an Indian language, which is so hard to accept. Urdu was not born in the Middle East.**

Yes.

**Another important issue ought to be discussed. If, after Deoras, Muslims were accepted as Indians in principle and they were then welcomed in the RSS and BJP, how is it that in the 2014 elections in UP, a state nearly 19 per cent Muslim, the BJP did not select even one Muslim candidate to run on a BJP ticket? They might be welcome in the organisation, but it seems they were not deemed worthy of representing even one constituency.**

Winnability is the primary criterion in candidate selection. I have repeatedly asked BJP leaders, shouldn't you nominate more Muslims for political seats? The response invariably is that they cannot win. But, in my opinion, if they believe in their own ideological evolution, they must represent Muslim

interests better.

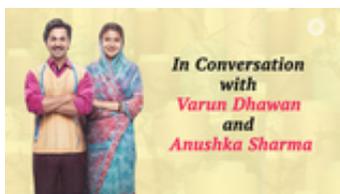
**Let us now turn to the recent lynchings. Your book says that the higher echelons of the RSS and BJP don't approve of lynchings. But how does one align your claim with the following: ministers in Modi government have expressed sympathy for lynchers, even garlanded those convicted of lynching (though out on bail), but the Prime Minister has not taken them to task. Indeed, though the Prime Minister has spoken against lynchings, his most forceful denunciations came when Dalits were hit. When Muslims are attacked by lynch mobs, he, at best, makes perfunctory remarks, if at all.**

I haven't thought clearly about the Muslim-Dalit distinction you are drawing, nor does the book talk about it. I will think more systematically about it.

**Let me ask a final question. What are the major challenges that the RSS and/or the BJP face, moving forward?**

I think they face three major challenges. The likely battle between Hindutva and Hinduism is the first one. The second is how to handle vigilantism. A final challenge is how to deal with the urban-rural split in India's political economy. The countryside is really suffering.

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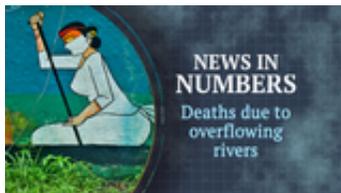
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