



A nationalism that's anti-national

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Highlights

- The recent outreach by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) at Vigyan Bhavan in Delhi seems to have succeeded in its principal objective: an image makeover for a niche audience.
- Sadly, the critics limited themselves to questions that the RSS anticipated, indeed wanted: Does the RSS exercise influence on this government? Is the RSS anti-Muslim?
- It is time we asked a harder and deeper question: Is the RSS anti-national?

Theory and practice

- Nationalism, Indian-ness and Hindutva are very much the calling card of the RSS.
- If anything, its critics accuse it of being ultra-nationalist.
- Thus, to question its nationalist credentials might appear outrageous.
- Yet this question needs to be debated in all seriousness and all fairness, given the salience of the RSS in our national public life today, this is a pressing question.
- We worry, rightly so, about the impact of Islamic fundamentalist groups and Maoist insurgents on our nation.
- But we no longer debate with any seriousness the challenge posed by the RSS and its associates to the project of nation-building the Indian nation.
- The question is about the theory and practice of the RSS as an organisation and its relation to the Indian nation, its past, present and future.

The nation and the past

- Right from its inception in 1925, the RSS was not in any way active during the national movement.
- In fact, its associates such as the Hindu Mahasabha actively opposed the national movement.
- It is also a well-documented fact that V.D. Savarkar, whose ideology inspired the RSS's founders and who remains its icon, was released from Cellular Jail in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands after he wrote four mercy petitions to the Viceroy pledging loyalty to the British empire.
- Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, another Hindu Mahasabha leader, actively collaborated with the British during the Quit India movement while the RSS kept aloof from this biggest anti-colonial uprising.
- The two-nation theory was propagated by Hindu nationalists, much before the Muslim League.
- Bluntly put, the RSS made zero, if not negative, contribution to the national struggle.
- But that is not sufficient to dub it anti-national today.

- How did the RSS contribute to the project of nation-building?
- Sadly, the answer is again in the negative.
- The RSS was among the few organisations in independent India that refused to honour some of the key symbols of the Indian republic: the national flag, the national anthem and, of course, the Constitution of India which speaks volumes that the head of the RSS has to clarify, nearly seven decades after the promulgation of the Constitution, that his organisation believes in it, something explicitly contradicted by his predecessor.
- Notwithstanding its recent claims to the contrary, the RSS does not quite subscribe to any of the key tenets of the Constitution: socialism, secularism, federalism and, indeed, democracy.
- In practice, far from being a part of the solution, the RSS was always a part of the problem that India faced in its difficult journey of nation-building.
- The RSS was at best an irresponsible denominational pressure group for the Hinduisation of the Indian state, opposing any and every concession to minorities and advocating a hawkish foreign policy.
- At worst the RSS became a fulcrum of organised subversion of the constitutional order, as in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992.
- If constitutional patriotism is the heart of national political life, the RSS has repeatedly stood in opposition to the nation.

Paradox of its workings

- Today, as a rapidly diversifying world seeks to learn from the Indian model, the RSS clings on to an alien, borrowed and fractious understanding of nationalism.
- Worse, its model of separatism of the majority is clearly the biggest obstacle for Indian nationalism.
- The RSS version of nationalism comes into play only when there is a religious angle to any issue. It is not that they care for Hinduism either.
- The RSS ideologues have little knowledge of or interest in Hindu traditions.
- In fact, the version of Hinduism that it seeks to impose is itself a parody of orthodox Islam and orthodox Christianity and against the basic spirit of Hinduism, let alone the spirit of humanism that informs all religions.
- Unfortunately, the principal focus of the RSS has been to foment Hindu-Muslim differences, division and hatred.
- Since Hindu-Muslim violence poses the biggest single threat to national unity today, those who work for the exacerbation of Hindu-Muslim tension must be seen as anti-national, and guilty of treason.
- The secessionists challenge the territorial integrity of India.
- The left-wing extremists challenge the writ of the Indian state.
- The challenge posed by the RSS is much deeper: it challenges the very idea of India, the swadharma of the Republic of India. If this is not anti-national, what is anti-national?
- This might sound odd, but what the RSS needs is exposure to Indian culture and its multiple traditions, greater appreciation of culturally more confident Indians such as Tagore and Gandhi and a deeper understanding of Hinduism itself.