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The RSS Was Also a Reaction to Early Dalit Mobilisation
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An illustration with an image of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) volunteers participate in a programme to mark the organisation's centenary year, in Bengaluru, Karnataka, Sunday, Oct. 12, 2025. Photo: PTI.

invention of new enemies – first Muslims, then Christians, now "urban Naxals." The denial of caste remains the hidden foundation of its politics. Recovering this suppressed genealogy is, therefore, not merely an act of historical correction but a political necessity: it reminds us that the true revolutionary challenge to the Indian social order has always come from within – from those who refused to remain untouchable.

The conventional narrative presents the RSS as formed primarily in response to Hindu-Muslim riots and the perceived threat of Muslim domination. While this communal dimension is real and well-documented, it obscures an equally – if not more – important motivation: the Brahminical elite's response to the rising tide of anti-caste movements threatening their social, economic, and political dominance. Understanding RSS formation requires examining both threats simultaneously: the external threat of Muslim political assertion and the internal threat of lower-caste liberation movements challenging Brahminical supremacy.

The founding of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925 in Nagpur – today celebrated as the ideological capital of Hindu nationalism – carries a deep historical irony. Nagpur in the early 20th century was not merely a provincial town in Central India; it was a site of intense social transformation. The region had witnessed the spread of Jotiba Phule's *Satyashodhak Samaj*, the rise of non-Brahmin movements, and the emergence of early Dalit political activity. Far from being a tabula rasa for Hindu unity, it was a crucible of caste contestation and anti-Brahmin ferment. Against this backdrop, the RSS's rhetoric of *Hindu ekata* (Hindu unity) can be read less as an inclusive reformulation of Hindu identity and more as a strategic counter-revolution – a project to neutralise the twin challenges posed by Muslim assertion and Dalit/non-Brahmin mobilisation.

Dalit mobilisation in Vidarbha

During the colonial times many people from Mahar community attained prosperity in Vidarbha region and they naturally extended themselves towards social uplift. History of Dalit movement in the region as documented by M.L. Kosare testifies to these activities from 1884.

He writes that there was a functional network of Mahars all over Vidarbha that was active in welfare and reform activities. Apart from this, it also aimed to sensitise others about the plight and the human rights of the Untouchables in a lawful manner and within the framework of the Hindu society. There emerged many remarkable local leaders like Kisan Fagoji Bansode but there were parallel networks influenced by the Mahatma Phule, Gopal Baba Walangkar, and Shiv-

ram Janba Kamble from Western Maharashtra. There was also a significant following of Vitthal Ramji Shinde among the Mahar leaders.

From the late 19th century, Vidarbha had been a vital node in the spread of the *Satyashodhak* movement, which rejected Brahminical authority and proclaimed the equality of all human beings. Phule's radical critique of caste hierarchy found resonance among the Shudra and Dalit communities of the region. His followers established branches of the *Satyashodhak Samaj* across the Marathi-speaking districts of Nagpur, Amravati, and Wardha, carrying forward his programme of education, rationalism, and social equality.

In 1908 Vitthal Raoji Moon Pande, an old styled community reformer, founded Mahar Sabha, which became a very important organisation in pre-Ambedkar Dalit movement. It organised a milestone conference in Town Hall, Nagpur from 13-15 April 1913, which was attended by community leaders from the entire Marathi speaking area. The Sabha not only comprised malgujars, moneylenders, contractors, brokers, traders in timber, patwaris, clerks, teachers, saints, priests, shetyes and other well-to-do Mahars, but also people like Shivram Janba Kamble of Pune, Dhondiba Narayan Gaikwad of Mumbai, Dharmadas sant of Nashik, and Bapuji Pande of Pandharpur.

By the 1910s and 1920s, Vidarbha had become a centre of anti-caste activism. There was a palpable movement for mobilising for access to education, temple entry, and civic rights – decades before Ambedkar's emergence as a national leader. Shinde's Depressed Classes Mission and Bansode's social reform work among Mahars and Mangs in Nagpur reflected a growing consciousness that sought social equality through both moral reform and political action. In this same period, vernacular pamphlets and local meetings openly attacked Brahmin dominance in administration and education, echoing the broader Non-Brahmin Movement in western Maharashtra.

This ferment unsettled the traditional Brahmin order. The growing assertion of lower castes threatened to erode the social legitimacy of Brahmin leadership – both in the religious and nationalist domains. By the early 1920s, the anxiety among the upper-caste elite of Nagpur was palpable: their historical monopoly over education, ritual authority, and nationalist politics was being challenged simultaneously from below by Dalit and Shudra movements and from outside by Muslim political assertion.

against Muslims, this was not a political battle but a cultural and psychological one. It required social indoctrination rather than public debate, moral conditioning rather than persuasion, and an organisational form capable of permeating everyday life.

The RSS was designed precisely to meet this need – to produce a disciplined, hierarchically ordered Hindu collectivity purged of caste conflict yet obedient to Brahminical leadership. Its genius lay in translating the defence of caste privilege into the idiom of national regeneration. Through daily drills, uniformed discipline, and mythic invocations of a glorious Hindu past, it sought to overwrite the politics of caste emancipation with the emotional unity of the "Hindu nation." In doing so, it provided the perfect response to the internal crisis of Brahminism: maintaining social control not through coercion alone, but through ideological consent.

Conclusion: Caste, communalism, and the counter-revolution

The dual-threat thesis offers a fuller explanation of the RSS's formation than the conventional communal narrative. Evidence suggests that the organisation arose not merely in reaction to Muslim political assertion but equally, if not more, as a response to the rising tide of anti-caste mobilisation. Its militarised cadre provided the means to manage both: outwardly confronting the "Muslim threat" while inwardly containing the caste question. Hindu communalism thus functioned as a respectable façade for caste consolidation.

The timing, geography, and leadership of the RSS – rooted in Brahmin-dominated Nagpur in the 1920s – align precisely with this interpretation. The organisation was, in essence, a Brahminical counter-revolutionary project: an attempt to neutralise the dual dangers of Muslim assertion and lower-caste emancipation through the unifying fiction of Hindu nationalism. Its ideological ingenuity lay in mobilising the oppressed against an external "other" while leaving internal hierarchies untouched.

To understand this origin is to see why the RSS has never genuinely opposed caste oppression despite its rhetoric of Hindu unity, and why its vision of national integration continually depends on the

discipline, and Hindu unity – values that sought to blunt the edge of subaltern political agency. The RSS thus emerged as an attempt to pre-empt a potential caste revolution by offering lower castes a Hindu identity to fight Muslims rather than upper-caste domination.

Viewed through this lens, the RSS's birth in 1925 was not merely a reaction to communal disturbances but the culmination of a dual anxiety: first, the communal threat of Muslim political ascendancy after the Lucknow Pact and Khilafat movement; and second, the caste threat posed by the growing mobilisation of the Depressed Classes demanding rights and representation. Hedgewar's innovation – if one may use that term for a deeply regressive enterprise – lay in fusing these two anxieties into a single ideological framework. Hindu nationalism was crafted to mobilise lower castes against Muslims while simultaneously deflecting their mobilisation against caste oppression. This dual function explains several otherwise puzzling features of the RSS's early trajectory: its abstention from the independence movement, rife as it was with social contradictions; its exclusive focus on Hindu unity without any challenge to caste hierarchy; and its secretive, tightly disciplined organisation that managed caste internally while projecting external solidarity.

For the Brahmin elites of early 20th-century India, the rising anti-caste movements represented a far more complex and insidious challenge than Muslim political mobilisation. The Muslim "threat" could be handled through familiar communal strategies – invoking religious identity, inflaming fears of external domination, and rallying Hindus under the pretext of defending the faith and the nation. The caste question, however, could not be managed this way. Here, the "enemy" was internal: the very people whose labour and exclusion sustained Brahminical privilege. Open defence of caste hierarchy had become untenable in an era influenced by modern, democratic, and egalitarian ideas. The upper castes were too few to maintain dominance through exclusion alone; they needed the participation – or at least the acquiescence – of the lower castes. Hence, the strategy shifted from confrontation to co-option.

To preserve Brahminical leadership while appearing inclusive, the notion of "Hindu unity" was redefined. Caste hierarchies would persist, but caste consciousness among the oppressed had to be subdued. Religious symbolism, moral discipline, and the language of patriotism became instruments of social cohesion. Unlike the communal front

Communal Consolidation as Counter-Mobilization

The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 marked a watershed in Indian political history. They not only granted *separate electorates* to Muslims but also accepted the Muslim League's contention that *the Untouchables and Tribal communities should not be counted as Hindus*. Consequently, the 1911 Census divided the Hindu population into three categories – Hindus, Depressed Classes, and Animist Hindus (Tribes) – thereby institutionalising internal divisions within the so-called Hindu fold.

This development profoundly unsettled the Brahminical leadership, which had long assumed that the reins of political power would naturally pass into its hands once the British left India. With the British promising further devolution of power through the forthcoming Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms (1919), the Congress and the Muslim League sought to present a united front through the Lucknow Pact of 1916.

> The Pact recognised communal electorates for Muslims and implicitly legitimised political representation based on community identity.

However, the arrangement had unintended consequences. It became imperative for the Congress to retain the Depressed Classes within the Hindu fold, lest its numerical and political strength vis-à-vis the Muslim League be weakened. The Pact thus inadvertently expanded the representational field beyond the Hindu-Muslim binary. Once the principle of communal representation had been conceded, the Depressed Classes could justifiably claim separate political recognition – something that threatened to upend the Congress's political calculus.

Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the Pact, Depressed Classes' organisations in the Bombay Presidency began articulating demands for separate representation, abolition of untouchability, and access to education and public employment. Between 1917 and 1920, at least four major conferences of the Depressed Classes were organised in Maharashtra, at the instance of the Congress and attended by prominent leaders including Lokmanya Tilak. Many

of the demands raised – such as reserved seats, temple entry, and the removal of caste-based disabilities – directly challenged the Hindu social order that Congress elites were otherwise reluctant to reform. These developments alarmed the Brahminical camp, which perceived them as a direct threat to its social hegemony and political authority.

A particularly significant moment came with the Depressed Classes Conference in Nagpur, convened by Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur in May 1920. The event reflected the growing political maturity of Dalit leadership in the region. It was here that a young B. R. Ambedkar, not yet a public figure, delivered a fiery speech declaring that the emancipation of the Untouchables must be achieved by the Untouchables themselves. His words marked a decisive break from upper-caste paternalism and signalled the emergence of an autonomous Dalit political consciousness that would soon transform the terrain of Indian politics.

The Brahminical anxiety in Nagpur

Nagpur, the future birthplace of the RSS, was by 1920 a crucible of caste contestation. The Nagpur elite – largely Chitpavan and Deshastha Brahmins – viewed these developments with alarm. Archival evidence from the *Central Provinces Intelligence Reports (1921–23)* reveals growing concern over "subversive activities" among Depressed Class associations, which were seen as "encouraged by missionary and non-Hindu elements". The anxiety was not only about religion but about loss of social control. Brahmin-led Hindu reform bodies like the Hindu Mahasabha and the Seva Samiti began organising counter-meetings to "reintegrate the untouchables into the Hindu fold".

In this context, K.B. Hedgewar, who founded the RSS in Nagpur in 1925, had already been active in the Hindu Mahasabha's local chapter. His speeches from 1922-23 reveal his conviction that Hindu society's strength lay in "discipline and unity" and that "caste divisions and foreign religions weaken the nation". While this has been read as an anti-Muslim sentiment, it equally reflects a response to alienation of Dalits.

The organisational form of the RSS – a militarised, hierarchical, and celibate cadre of Hindu men trained in physical discipline – was

not merely a reaction to communal violence but a deliberate strategy to regiment the Hindu social body. The *shakha* (branch) model was intended to bypass caste distinctions through symbolic fraternity, yet in practice it preserved Brahminical control of ideology and leadership.

This dual purpose is evident from Hedgewar's correspondence with B. S. Moonje, a senior leader of the Hindu Mahasabha and later president of the Central Hindu Military Education Society at Nashik. In a 1925 letter, Moonje praised the nascent RSS for "instilling discipline among Hindus" and noted that "even the lower orders are now joining the daily drill" (cited in Andersen & Damle, 1987: 30). The subtext is unmistakable: Dalit mobilisation was to be co-opted into the Hindu fold under upper-caste leadership, neutralising its potential for independent political assertion.

Thus, Hindu communalism served as a politically acceptable cover for caste consolidation. The public rhetoric of "Hindu unity" masked the deeper project of Brahminical social control. While the Congress appeared ambiguous on caste reform, the RSS sought to transform Hinduism's internal contradictions into an ideological resource – presenting caste hierarchy as "functional diversity" within a single civilisational organism.

Strategy to deal with dual threats

Mainstream historiography's silence on the caste dimension of the RSS's origin is itself revealing. Early chroniclers of the organisation – such as H. V. Seshadri (1988) and C. P. Bhishikar (1979) – depicted Hedgewar as a unifier of Hindus against "foreign threats," carefully omitting any mention of caste tensions in Nagpur. Later analysts, while more critical, often accepted the communal threat thesis without interrogating its sociological substratum. Yet the timing and geography of the RSS's emergence point unmistakably to a reaction against the surge of anti-caste assertion. Between 1919 and 1924, Nagpur had witnessed the rapid spread of Dalit literacy and missionary education, the formation of caste associations demanding political recognition in the Central Provinces Council, and the growing participation of non-Brahmins in local self-government. It was precisely in this milieu that Hedgewar's RSS took shape, emphasising obedience,