

OPINION

Questioning RSS' exceptionalism

The refusal of the Sangh to register or disclose finances raises vital questions about its public accountability and institutional privilege



Jagdish Rattanani

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is a large and well spread-out organisation by its own admission. It has today glamorous buildings and well-appointed offices across the country. It has marked its 100th anniversary with a host of celebrations, and a commemorative stamp and a coin released by Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the occasion. The RSS is the ideological parent of the BJP, the party that has ruled the nation with an iron fist since it took power in 2014. Should such an organisation operate without adequate transparency, governance structures and public visibility into its ways of organising and influencing people on almost every aspect of civic life in the nation?

These are the kind of questions Karnataka Home Minister Priyank Kharge has repeatedly posed to the RSS. They go to the heart of the organisation's structure, its existence and its journey. The Prime Minister has referred to the RSS as the "biggest NGO in the world". Kharge has asked how and why such a large organisation refuses to register itself or publish its accounts when it works in the public sphere, uses public spaces and mobilises on a large scale. These are simple questions, but more significantly, they are good questions.

In an "open letter" sent out earlier this year, Kharge wrote that the RSS' "regular public mobilisation ... raises legitimate questions about legal status, accountability, financial stability, public order, permissions, sources of funding, and compliance with the Constitution and laws of

India". The RSS has countered that registration is mandatory only when an organisation seeks government funds, and that Hindu dharma itself is not registered. But the smallest non-profit or labour union that has never used public funds is pushed to keep records and publish accounts. If the RSS is not registered, how does it apply for permissions, engage with the administration and get a Z+ security detail for its chief, each of which also draws on public funds. It is surprising that the RSS equates the entire Hindu faith it says it stands for to the organisation. Collapsing the two into one means any question raised about the RSS gets the colour of a challenge to the faith - and no questions get asked. This is disingenuous and does not present the RSS in good light.

Chief of RSS Mohan Bhagwat has pointed out that the RSS "is recognised as a body of individuals" under law and is under no legal compulsion to register. This is traced to Article 19(1)(c), which guarantees the freedom to associate, subject to reasonable restrictions. The RSS also claims a tax-exempt status, traced to a 1994 case in which the Patna High Court ruled on the limited point that gurdakshina received by an RSS unit from its members was not taxable, on the principle of mutuality.

The income computed by the tax department over nine years from 1967-68 to 1975-76, was shown as ranging between Rs 15,000 and Rs 71,000 a year, giving it the colour of a smaller unit with limited influence. Registration was not before the court in that case and has not come up since. Nor has the tax status.

Yet, well accepted concepts of flexibility and proportionality would suggest that governance must tighten as size grows and structure becomes complex.

Charitable trusts above an income threshold must have their accounts audited, political parties must disclose donations above a limit, companies above a threshold must re-



port their CSR spending. A local area group working with mutual contributions can work with internal self-checks, but if it grows its footprint into a wider movement with offices across the nation, then the public is entitled to ask how funds are raised, spent and governed.

Who, for example, owns the RSS buildings and offices? Compare this with the scrutiny ordinary citizens face: domestic workers are asked to submit to police verification, tenant agreements must similarly be recorded with police in certain areas, and housing societies must place their accounts before members every year - a tight prescription of governance for everyday citizens. But the RSS as the largest voluntary organisation in the country has said it will not register or file accounts. No other body of this size, and certainly none with this degree of access to a sitting government, operates outside norms that apply to the rest of the country. This is RSS exceptionalism, and there is no reason why it should be allowed to stand. Issues of law or public trust apart, Kharge's questions are politically significant. For the RSS, everything is better than it ever was. Activities are growing, circles of power listen and act on RSS concerns, the RSS is seen by many as the éminence grise shaping many government decisions. Its annual report gives an account of the wide nature and num-

ber of its activities (but no accounts). It has opened new areas of influence.

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh-linked candidates swept the elections at Mumbai's iconic 222-year-old Asiatic Society of Mumbai library; others have embedded themselves in the Ganeshutsav mandals of Maharashtra. Yet, the influence, the glamour, even the commandos that move around to protect the RSS chief, come because the RSS is tied to the BJP. Needless to say, each has benefited the other, the RSS in mobilising for the BJP and the BJP offering material comfort and the fulfilment of long-held wishes of the RSS. Both can be expected to hit back at Kharge.

But equally, the RSS is vulnerable like never before. It cannot escape the opprobrium directed at the BJP, particularly after the Jantar Mantar protests, and to that extent, will have to face some hard questions itself. Despite its huge influence and even control, the RSS has largely been a mute spectator, if not an active participant, in what is widely perceived to be a precipitous decline in democratic institutions, governance standards and service delivery. That is the political window of opportunity that Kharge has picked as he mounts a challenge to the RSS.

The Billion Press

(Jagdish Rattanani is a journalist and faculty member at SPJIMR. Views are personal)

DNA reveals deadly plague 5,500 yrs ago

For many people, plague brings to mind rats, crowded medieval towns and the devastating epidemics that spread across Europe during and after the Middle Ages. New research suggests the disease's deadly history stretches back much further. A study published in *Nature* found that plague was already killing people

5,500 years ago in small hunter-gatherer groups, thousands of years before farming communities and cities emerged. An international team of scientists examined ancient DNA from human remains recovered at four hunter-gatherer cemeteries near Lake Baikal in East Siberia. By sequencing genetic material preserved inside ancient teeth, the

researchers reconstructed bacterial genomes and identified previously unknown early strains of plague. "Whether the earliest forms of plague were mild or virulent has been a matter of debate, but our findings demonstrate that these ancient strains were already highly lethal," says senior author Eske Willerslev, Professor at the University of Copenhagen.

The Navhind Times this day in 1965



Defence at any cost —Chavan

Lok Sabha votes out no-trust motion

NEW DELHI, August 26 (PTI)—The Lok Sabha today rejected the Opposition motion of no-confidence in the Government by an overwhelming majority after Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri replied to his Government's critics. The motion, which had been moved by Mr. M. R. Mazani (Basantnagar), received support from 66 members while 318 voted against. There were two abstentions.