

The Enigma Of Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

Dr. K.S. Hedgewar, who had originally worked with Mahatma Gandhi and was in the Congress, founded the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (R.S.S.) at Nagpur in 1925. When Mahatma Gandhi asked Dr. Hedgewar why he created a separate organisation instead of creating it within the Congress Party, Dr. Hedgewar is reported to have said that his vision was of volunteers coming together and working for the nation selflessly and with no personal interest. This would not be possible within the fold of a political party which had a political agenda and, therefore, had a prescribed set of interests. Dr. Hedgewar said, "I am convinced that it is only through such dedicated and committed workers that the nation could move forward in every sphere". It is on this account that R.S.S claims that it is a totally apolitical organisation whose sole purpose is service and nation building.

Therein lies the enigma. Undoubtedly it is under the sponsorship of R.S.S. that the Bhartiya Jan Sangh was created. Prior to the constitution of the Jan Sangh Hindu interests in India were represented by the Hindu Mahasabha of which Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee was the pre-eminent member. As Member of Parliament and an opposition leader he was respected by everyone, including Jawaharlal Nehru and his tragic death in Kashmir when heading an agitation there was a great loss to the country. However, Hindu Mahasabha was not a creation of R.S.S. and after Jan Sangh came into existence the Hindu Mahasabha faded away. According to leaders of R.S.S. the reason why they sponsored a political party was that after R.S.S. had been banned, not once but twice there was no one to defend the organisation in Parliament and it was subjected to calumny and worse. Therefore, purely in self-defence, the Sangh encouraged the formation of the Bhartiya Jan Sangh as a political party which owed its origin to R.S.S. but was not a part of it. Even today, after the Jan Sangh converted itself into the much larger Bhartiya Janata Party (B.J.P.) which has real political influence and power, R.S.S. continues to emphasise its non political character. The question arises whether this claim bears scrutiny or not. The R.S.S. headquarters are located in Nagpur and for senior BJP leaders that city is a pilgrim centre which, in political terms, is the equivalent of Varanasi or Ujjain. As BJP expanded it naturally brought into its fold many people, including senior leaders, who had no R.S.S. connection. For example, Sushma Swaraj herself had socialist leanings and as a minister of state in Haryana in 1975 was part of a non Jan Sangh government. This was inevitable as BJP moved towards capturing of power which it could not have done if it did not have a mass base. R.S.S. has always been an elite cadre and its entire structure is based on a hierarchy of Sanghchalaks, Pracharaks and Swayam Sevaks. Every cadre based party has a similar structure. For example, CPI (M) claims to be a party of the masses, but the number of card holding CPI (M) cadres is limited. This is true of R.S.S. also.

To add to the enigma, therefore, BJP itself consists of two absolutely different groups. The first group consists of people who have come through the R.S.S. rank and file who have been assigned a full time political role. They form the core of BJP. Then there are workers at field level and in party offices at different levels from Block to State and the Central office who have never been with R.S.S. For example, my batch-mates, N.N. Jha and R. Ramakrishnan have been members of the national executive of BJP without any R.S.S. exposure. Lt. Gen. J.R.F. Jacob spent his whole working life in the Army, by religion he is a Jew but he, too, was a member of the national executive of BJP. These people would never be comfortable with R.S.S. because their service background does not lend itself to a culture in

which Hindutva is the ruling cult. How can these two disparate elements, the R.S.S origin BJP leadership and the non R.S.S expanded Bhartiya Janata Party learn to live together and eat at the same table? That is both an enigma and a dilemma.

Is R.S.S. really apolitical? It unashamedly accepts that it is the progenitor of the Bhartiya Jan Sangh and, therefore, of BJP. It is alleged that the person who heads BJP must have the clearance of R.S.S. headquarters and that Nitin Gadkari, the present head of BJP, is there with the blessings of Shri Mohan Bhagwat, R.S.S. Sarsanghchalak. Am I really looking for the word 'blessings' or do I mean approval? R.S.S. bigwigs claim that the Sangh only lays down the criteria for selection of the BJP chief, but does not give any direction in this behalf. I may please be pardoned for skepticism about this statement. As evidence I offer the case of Shri L.K. Advani who, on a visit to Pakistan, stated that Jinnah was a much misunderstood man in India and Pakistan, his agenda was not communal and his very first speech on Pakistan attaining independence was to tell the people of Pakistan that they were all part of one nation in which there was total freedom and equality for all religions. Advani was severely attacked by R.S.S. and virtually hounded out of leadership of BJP. If R.S.S. is apolitical why does it have anything to do with how a political party is structured and run? There are other strong indicators of the political agenda of R.S.S. In every State BJP party headquarters the organising secretary is a functionary from R.S.S placed there by R.S.S. headquarters. He is more than a moral policeman – he is the R.S.S. watchdog on how BJP functions in the State. In all matters of policy he is consulted and if he disapproves the policy is abandoned. Paradoxically the only State in which the Chief Minister and, therefore, the political party which he heads, takes the final decisions and ignores R.S.S. and its organisations such as the Bhartiya Kisan Sangh (BKS) is Gujarat, whose Chief Minister has a background of the R.S.S. That is because Narendra Modi is prepared to take an independent stand even against R.S.S. in the matter of running government.

I have not mentioned the political role of R.S.S. in any derogatory or deprecating manner, nor am I judgemental about R.S.S. politics. My submission is that however much it may deny it, R.S.S. has a strong political role and though it may be a service organisation it has a political agenda. Then why is R.S.S. shy of admitting this? It would be in the interest of the country, of BJP and R.S.S. if it openly states that it is interested in the political situation in the country and has a definite political programme. It would then openly advocate its political agenda and either directly or through BJP make it a part of the total Indian political scene. In a democracy in the matter of government we need political pronouncements, political programmes and political organisations and R.S.S. should not be shy to join the political process openly instead of dictating its political agenda from behind purdah. Of course this would mean that R.S.S. would have to accept the discipline of the Indian Constitution in which secularism is the guiding principle, the freedom to preach, profess and propagate one's religion is a fundamental right and there is freedom of speech and expression. This discipline would have to apply to other creations of R.S.S. also, such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal. It would also mean that narrow parochialism would have to be abandoned.

Is R.S.S. the representative of narrow Hindutva interests or is it a communal organisation in which non Hindus are excluded and non Hindu ideas are shunned? In this behalf one would have to look at the record of R.S.S, especially from the time when partition became inevitable. I am personally witness to the heroic role of R.S.S. in pre partition Punjab, especially in 1946 and 1947 when the Hindu-Muslim divide had become an unbridgeable chasm and as partition approached West Punjab was soaked in blood. To be fair this was equally true of East Punjab, with Hindus and Sikhs being the victims in the West and Muslims in the East. This is a shameful period in our history in which the heirs to Mughal culture became savages and so-called tolerant Hindus became barbarians. It is R.S.S. volunteers who in

West Punjab did much to save people and to organise columns of migrants from West Punjab to the East. In the refugee camps in East Punjab it was R.S.S volunteers who came forward in large numbers to succour, house and feed refugees. In times of calamity -- natural or manmade, R.S.S volunteers have been at the forefront. One remembers how at the time of the Bhopal gas tragedy it was R.S.S volunteers who came forward in large numbers to bury and cremate the dead and help the gas affected. Their role in the Gujarat earthquake of 2000 and the tsunami is well recognised and this undoubtedly is the positive side of R.S.S. To this extent it is an organisation of volunteers who come together for selfless service.

The main objective of R.S.S has been nation building through *shakhas* in which the Swayamsevaks come forward and are trained. Undoubtedly discipline is taught and patriotism towards the nation is inculcated. So far so good. However, the entire training programme has a very strong element of Hindu ritual, with great emphasis on Hindutva and on a Bharat which is a Hindu nation. What about the fact that it is also the second largest Islamic country in the world, next only to Indonesia in terms of the Muslim population? What about the fact that in A.D. 52, that is just 52 years after the birth of Christ, the first Christian church was established in India by St. Thomas? What about the fact that predominantly Hindu India has a Sikh majority State, the Punjab, three Christian majority States, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram, two Buddhist majority States, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh and one Muslim majority State, Jammu & Kashmir? Is Bharat not their country also? R.S.S has no answer to this except to say that Hindutva does not amount to Hinduism and that it is a way of life of a country called Hindustan. Incidentally, even here there is a dilemma. The name that the Muslim invaders gave to India was Hindustan. The name that R.S.S wants to give it is Hindusthan. That one letter 'h' makes all the difference because it makes India the land of Hindus only whereas Hindustan is a geographical entity whose origin is the land of the Sindhu, or the Indus River. Even the Mughals never called South India Hindustan. To them it was the Dakhan or Deccan, again a geographical entity meaning the south.

R.S.S has always averred that Hindutva is not Hinduism. In fact the word Hindu itself is something which has come to us from the Arabs because no ancient scriptures refer to the word 'Hindu'. The Vedas, if they can be called scriptures, are both the genesis of Sanatan Dharma and originate from it. In other words, the word 'Hindu' itself comes to us from a foreign source which, ironically, is Muslim. In Sanskrit there is no word for religion because dharma transcends religion and is applicable to both believer and nonbeliever, with an atheist being dharmic if his thoughts relate to truth and his actions are selfless. The true strength of Hinduism is this catholicity, this eclecticism, this total inclusiveness in which no one is the 'other'. The Semitic religions have the concept of exclusivity, but the Sanatan Dharma is totally inclusive. Therefore, for R.S.S to rise to the heights which Dr. Hedgewar had in his mind while creating R.S.S, it will have to transcend its narrow interpretation of Hindutva and become an organisation which is truly inclusive and all embracing.

In order to become the R.S.S of Hedgewar and not the R.S.S of Golwalkar R.S.S will have to shed its narrow Hindu image and rise above narrow Hindutva. That does not mean that the vast majority of India's population will not be Hindu. To that extent it is a Hindu nation and it is about time that Hindus begin to take pride in this fact. R.S.S is more than welcome to generate such pride. At the same time India must realize that its Muslim population is more than the total population of over ninety countries and the Muslims have as much right to pride in their Indianness and in their Islamic faith as Hindus have in their faith. It is also a country with a huge Christian population and Christians, too, have a right to pride in their religion and the nation, as do the Parsees. R.S.S. has no problems with the followers of Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism because it considers these to be religious whose origins lie in Sanatan Dharma. Actually because Sanatan Dharma is applicable to the whole of mankind every religion is connected with it and this is the true meaning of Hindutva.

One last point. Accepting that R.S.S. is not a political organisation I addressed letters to two successive Sarsanghchalaks, Shri R. Sudarshan and Shri Mohan Bhagwat. In my letters I suggested that because R.S.S. is nonpolitical and is committed to nation building it should set up teams of experts in various fields, such as Education, Health, Agriculture, Industry, Forest and Environment, Water Management, Energy, Employment Generation, Social and Cultural Infrastructure, etc., and each of these groups should come out with a series of policy papers which could be guidelines for planning our future. Because they would be realistically written, keeping in my mind our human, physical and financial resources, they would be equally relevant to all political parties, regardless of different ideologies. Every party wants India to progress. By generating these policy documents R.S.S. would do a great service to the country and give shape to Dr. Hedgewar's dreams. The fate of my letters was that both when Sudarshan was Sarsanghchalaak and thereafter when Mohan Bhagwat became Sarsanghchalaak I received postcards from Nagpur, the gist of which was that my letters had been received and would be submitted to the Sarsanghchalaak at the appropriate time. I bow my head in salute to the R.S.S. headquarters office for fine-tuning red tape beyond anything of which a government office could even dream. Never have I received such a reply from any government office. What is the appropriate time? Are astrologers to be consulted? I would happily accept that my letters were not worth reading and had been thrown into the nearest wastepaper basket. I can live with being told that my ideas were impractical or that did not fit within the mandate of R.S.S. But to be told that my letters had not even been read by the Sarsanghchalaak because they were not shown to him indicates a high degree of bureaucratic insensitivity and, if I may submit, an act of discourtesy by a person who heads India's most powerful group of volunteers. Perhaps I blame the Sarsanghchalaak unnecessarily because I am sure that had he known about the existence of my letters he would have responded. Certainly the Prime Minister of India does. For R.S.S. to be widely acknowledged, taken at face value and trusted it must move away from its present state of introversion, become more open, initiate dialogue with those who disagree with its philosophy and open its windows to the fresh breeze of ideas which will make it a truly vibrant organisation committed to the service of India.
