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ARTICLE

Similarity Heuristics in the Indian Far Right

How the RSS Obscures Its Operational Scale

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Abstract: *To conceal their activities, far-right networks manipulate similarity heuristics that suggest their constituent organizations are discrete and coherent. When an organization crafts a public image indicating that only those who wear the same uniforms and march in the same marches are part of an organization, it implies that those who do not, are not. This use of cognitive shortcuts assists far-right organizations in crafting their organizational boundaries to obscure internal divisions of labor. That these disguised internal divisions of labor exist is strong evidence to support a renewed focus on the intra-organizational dynamics of far-right organizations—a focus that pivots from a discursive to a materialist understanding of the far right. I use the case of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), one of the world's largest far-right organizations, to argue that similarity heuristics disguise far-right connectivity. Paying granular attention to the organizational boundary-making practices of the RSS demonstrates that the true organizational focus of the RSS is its managerial manifestation, rather than its cadre division, which is just one organization the managerial RSS manages. This key finding suggests that scholars must focus on the mechanics of the managerial RSS over the aesthetic phenomenon of the cadre RSS. Such a focus inevitably leads to a network-centric approach to the Indian far right that better captures the mechanics of its mobilization.*

Keywords: far right, organizational networks, RSS, Indian politics, Hindu nationalism, covert networks

Far-right organizations often face pressure to conceal their activities.[1] Where they seek to challenge the status quo, they do so to avoid state scrutiny. Where they seek to reinforce the status quo (e.g., far-right militias tied to ruling parties), they do so to protect the collective legitimacy of their organizational network. Far-right organizations

1 I use far right to collectively refer to organizational ecosystems that include both categories in Cas Mudde's widely used distinction between radical and extreme right. Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

hide in diverse ways. Some submerge themselves and go underground to remove themselves from public view.[2] Others develop separate fronts to conduct activities that the original organization cannot.[3] Yet others disguise themselves as something they are not, such as a social club.[4]

I argue another option exists, and indeed that this option has been critical to the success of one of the world's largest far-right organizations: the Indian Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Corps, RSS). I argue that the RSS has built an exaggerated public image of unity, coherence, and discipline that suggests it is only *one* organization, that it does *one* thing in *one* way, and that it could not possibly do anything else. Through uniformed public rituals and a mythology of corporate discipline, organizations like the RSS cultivate a similarity heuristic through which *only* those who do *RSS things* belong to the RSS. Those who do not wear the uniform, march in the parades, sing the songs, or perform the salutes could not possibly be in the RSS, despite being embedded in other ways. This boundary making becomes a critical way that the RSS manages its relationships with the broader Hindu nationalist network that it leads.

Associating with a highly aesthetic public image allows the RSS to deny its connection to any activities that do not resemble this image. In this case, the RSS relies on a public similarity heuristic that declares that if it does not walk like the RSS or talk like the RSS, it is not the RSS. The RSS presents a useful entry point into the covert behavior of far-right organizations because it has a very clear, well-defined public image, but it is also visible in many apparently external activities like violence, political lobbying, and institutional penetration. How can we square the public image of the RSS with what appears to be its much more diffuse programs? The many activities of the RSS that exist outside its public mythology become deniable because they exist outside the public boundaries the RSS has drawn for itself. The RSS—the apex organization of the world's largest far-right network—pretends to be *only one thing* to conceal the many activities that it does not want people to pay attention to.

In this article, I argue that this view of the RSS and its affiliates is misleading and that the public mythology of RSS unity and singularity obscures the material patterns of Hindu nationalist organizing in India, which are actually far more diffuse. I propose an alternative view of the RSS, its internal organizing, and its organizational relationship to this broader network. Instead of understanding the RSS as a single, coherent organizational unit, I argue that the RSS is, in fact, two functionally separate

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2 For example, the Indonesian Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders' Front) operates clandestinely, particularly since the 2020 Indonesian government ban on the organization.

3 For example, the Turkish Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (Nationalist Movement Party,) outsources its violence to its youth wing, commonly known as the Grey Wolves.

4 For example, the Australian Lads Society is a far-right white nationalist organization that has variously masqueraded as a men's only social club, or a gym.

organizations: a cadre RSS and a managerial RSS. I suggest that this obfuscation is made possible by the strategic manipulation of similarity heuristics.

A similarity heuristic is a cognitive shortcut in which decision-makers decide that like causes like and that appearance is reality.[5] If, for example, a round red fruit and a knobbly green fruit were placed in front of someone, they would likely presume that the red fruit was the apple *because it looked like* apples they had eaten before. They would believe that the knobbly green fruit was not an apple *because it did not look like* any apple they had eaten before. If something resembles something we know, we categorize it as something that we know. If something does *not* look like something we know, we tend to assume that we do not know it. Such a shortcut, which draws on existing experience and knowledge, is a tool we use to maximize the efficiency of decision-making and minimize the risks of uncertainty.[6] A similarity heuristic conceals the way that sometimes things that look familiar are actually strange, and that things that look strange are actually familiar. The red fruit may actually be a hyper-realistic apple confection, and the green fruit actually just an apple grown from a peculiar orchard!

This reflexive cognitive behavior may be strategically used by far-right organizations to direct the gaze of its scrutineers, which is how, I argue, the RSS conceals much of its activity. By relying on a highly aestheticized core organizational membership that wears the same uniforms, performs the same rituals, and attends the same parades; by emphasizing an organizational commitment to coherence, discipline, and loyalty; and by loudly and repeatedly declaring its independence from other organizations, the RSS attempts to draw very sharp images of what the RSS *looks like*. What the RSS *looks like* is then supposed to become, in the public imagination, what the RSS *is*. In the production of this image of a coherent, unitary, and independent RSS, the organization successfully obscures its internal divisions of labor and the way these interact with the thousands of RSS appendage organizations.

My proposition in this article is not simply a repetition of the common organizational sociological truism that some organizations appear as one thing to outsiders and another thing to insiders. A discussion of strategic similarity heuristics goes beyond this in two ways. First, it provides a functional account of organizational secrecy. While we know that organizations can be covert, the precise mechanisms of how organizations conceal themselves often remain opaque. Secrecy is more substantial than simply *not telling* but rather consists of a series of behavioral and cognitive mechanisms that must be understood if we seek to move beyond simplistic descriptions of covert and overt. Discussing strategic similarity heuristics as a mechanism of *being covert* is a move in

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5 Paul Rozin and Carol Nemeroff, "Sympathetic Magical Thinking: The Contagion and Similarity 'Heuristics,'" in *Heuristics and Biases: The Psychology of Intuitive Judgement*, ed. Thomas Gilovich, Dale Griffin, and Daniel Kahneman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002), 201–16.

6 Daniel Read and Yael Grushka-Cockayne, "The Similarity Heuristic," *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 24 (2010): 23–46.

this direction. Second, the discussion of strategic similarity heuristics focuses on how covert organizations' boundaries produce covertness, rather than the obfuscation of their organizational content. Crudely, my discussion in this article is about how big we are led to believe the box is—and how we are led to believe it—rather than about simply what is in the box.

The cadre RSS that I propose, which consists of ordinary *swayamsevaks* (volunteers), whose main manifestation is the *shakha* (branch) system, is largely concerned with fundraising, occasional electoral or service provision mobilization, and symbolic leadership. Importantly, it also acts as a recruitment pool for the managerial RSS, for which the cadre RSS serves as a crucial test of commitment. However, the main work of the Hindu nationalist movement that the RSS leads is external to the cadre RSS, appearing instead in the hundreds of RSS-linked organizations.

The managerial RSS that I propose is entirely devoted to managing this network. This work is almost entirely separate from the activities and rituals of the cadre RSS. To retain control over this network, the RSS developed a sophisticated system of deputation and executive diffusion to manage the hundreds of organizations that orbit the RSS. This system, at whose core is a network of *pracharaks* (preachers) that I explain below, is functionally separate from the cadre RSS, which becomes simply one among many organizations that the managerial RSS manages.

This conceptual reconfiguration is not merely semantic. Dissecting the RSS into its constituent pieces has implications for those who seek to challenge far-right organizing. If we accept that the cadre RSS is just one organization among many that the managerial RSS directs, then focusing political and organizational energy on the baton-wielding, khaki trouser–wearing, goose-stepping RSS is misleading. Instead, the attention should be on the sprawling managerial RSS. This implies that rather than studying organizational nodes like the cadre RSS, we should be focusing on far-right linkages visible through organizations like the managerial RSS. These material linkages, more than far-right network nodes, reveal patterns of power, authority, and communication. This focus in turn demands that we begin to build a picture of which organizations, *exactly*, does the managerial RSS exert control over? What *exactly* are the organizational capacities of the RSS? We can only answer these questions if we pick apart the RSS into its constituent units.

There are a number of key points that emerge from such a reconfiguration. First, the idea that far-right organizations have internal divisions of labor that are disguised by similarity heuristics supports scholarly calls for a research agenda on the *intra-organizational* dynamics of far-right organizations.[7] Second, this research focus inevitably directs us away from a discursive understanding of the far right and toward

7 See, for example, Pietro Castelli Gattinara, "The Study of the Far Right and Its Three E's: Why Scholarship Must Go Beyond Eurocentrism, Electoralism and Externalism," *French Politics* 18 (2020): 314–33.

a more materialist, operational one that seeks to discover how far-right organizations *function*.[8] Third, regarding the RSS more precisely, this article's findings suggest that analytically we must disassociate the work of the cadre RSS—which I argue primarily revolves around producing the social bonds necessary for occasional mobilization—from that of the managerial RSS, where the most impactful work of the RSS lies.

Understanding the success of the RSS should be one of the core research agendas in the study of the global far right. The RSS manages a transnational network of thousands of organizations, including a political party that governs roughly 18 percent of the world's population. The organizational network that the RSS sits atop is the world's oldest extant, richest, and largest far-right mobilization. It therefore becomes, in many ways, the *key* global case for understanding far-right success. While the strategic similarity heuristics that I argue are at the heart of the RSS's success are not universal within, or exclusive to, the far right, I suggest that they may be useful in understanding networked far-right behavior—especially where far-right organizations are both covert and make public claims. The tension between having to hide activities like violence and extreme bigotry while maintaining an external claims-making engagement strategy means that boundary making becomes crucial for such organizations. For far-right organizations seeking public influence without public scrutiny this means clearly delineating the public image of what an organization *is* and *is not*. Certainly, this is not unique to the far right, but the case of the RSS is a useful way of understanding how far-right organizations navigate the contradictions between being covert and publicly claims-making at the same time.

To substantiate these points, I undertake an organizational charting of the RSS's internal bureaucratic structure. I begin by outlining the contours of the current public image of the RSS, focusing on its operational bureaucracy and its reputation as a machine for forging model Hindu men. Next, I offer an alternative vision of the RSS, one in which it is organizationally divisible into a cadre and managerial RSS. I argue that this division is concealed in order to use the public spectacle of the cadre RSS to distract from the importance of the managerial RSS's other extensive work. I conclude by tying this obfuscation into the central argument of this article, which is that far-right organizations can strategically use similarity heuristics to obfuscate those of their activities that do not resemble the organizational image they project.

A Public RSS

Since its foundation in 1925, the RSS, the apex organization of the broader Hindu nationalist movement, has sought to reshape India into a Hindu ethnostate through

8 See Antonis Ellinas, *Organizing against Democracy: The Local Organizational Development of Far Right Parties in Greece and Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2020), for such a discussion in the context of far-right parties in Europe.

violence, lobbying, electoral mobilization, service provision, and proselytization.[9] In its pursuit of this goal, the RSS has been quite successful. Since at least the 1980s, thanks largely to the RSS's maneuvering, political parties of all stripes have made Hindu nationalist appeals in order to win conservative votes, mainstreaming a set of ideological positions that decades ago were considered fringe extremism. The RSS's political appendage, the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party, BJP) has held national power since 2014; Prime Minister Narendra Modi is an ex-RSS official; and RSS veterans lead state governments across the country. Never before has the RSS had access to this kind of hegemony-building power.

Study of the RSS has overwhelmingly focused on its Hindu nationalist ideology rather than on its material operational mechanics. In many ways, this is a reflection of a disciplinary focus on ideology as the key measure of *far rightness*, as well as a reliance on a traditional Weberian understanding of the formal organization that highlights formal written procedures, a rigid boundedness, a clear and explicit bureaucratic division of labor, and systems of formal record keeping. This focus on the formal organization in the study of the RSS has largely failed to integrate the findings of scholars who question these hard formal organizational borders and instead emphasize the porosity and flexibility of these borders in any social organization.[10] It is this porosity and malleability that I argue here acts as a great reservoir of strategic strength for the RSS.

In the context of the Indian far right, while the focus on far-right ideology is an inevitable result of studying organizations that conceal their operational processes, what little we know about the RSS's materiality we already broadly knew in 1951,[11] with only a handful of substantive additions in the following seventy years.[12] This dearth of material analysis of the RSS's operations means that we do not have a good idea of how power and authority move through the RSS and its extended organizational network,

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9 Des Raj Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan, 2000); Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

10 For example, Göran Ahrne, "Organization outside Organization: The Significance of Partial Organization," *Organization* 18 (2011): 83–104; Donatella della Porta, Joseba Fernández, Hara Kouki, and Lorenzo Mosca, *Movement Parties against Austerity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

11 J. A. Curran Jr., *Militant Hinduism in Indian Politics: A Study of the RSS* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1951). This book served as key source material for most subsequent studies of the RSS.

12 For example, Walter Andersen and Shridhar Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987); Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and India Politics, 1925 to the 1990s* (London: Hurst & Company, 1996); Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Des Raj Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (New Delhi: Radha Krishna Prakashan, 2000); Pralay Kanungo, *RSS Tryst with Politics: From Hedgewar to Sudarshan* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2002).

let alone money and information. Before we can ascertain how these pieces all *move*, we must first revisit and clarify what the organizational mechanics of the RSS actually are.

If we are to believe the RSS,[13] its sympathizers,[14] and indeed many of its critics,[15] the roots of its success lie in the RSS's commitment to discipline, organicism, and a coherent organizational structure through which *swayamsevaks* (volunteers) move upwardly through the RSS's bureaucratic hierarchy. The mythology of the RSS emphasizes the socialization and conditioning of *swayamsevaks* into uniquely ideologically devoted workers of the RSS who can carry out its sole task: the making of model Hindu men. Early RSS leaders saw the RSS as a machine, embodied in the *shakha* (branch) system that transforms divided, weak Hindus into martial nationalist men in ways that mirror other far-right commitments to bodily purity and masculinity.[16] Within the branch, the performance of Hindu-coded games, the recitation of Sanskrit prayers, and the focus on the physical development of the body collectively attempt to rescue Hindu men from an alleged degeneracy, effeminacy, and passivity that early Hindu nationalists saw as the root of India's problems. Sangh leader H. V. Seshadri wrote:

> [T]he Swayamsevak is the sole medium through which the Sangh seeks to translate its vision into a reality. This view of the Sangh, in turn, stems from its conviction that it is man who makes or mars society. It is the level of the character, the calibre of the average man, that ultimately decides the level of the nation's progress.[17]

These *swayamsevaks*—which the RSS *makes*—have supposedly crafted the RSS into a uniquely coherent and unified organization through shared commitment to a common ideology and through the performance of shared rituals like the RSS *prarthna* (prayer), its organizational festivals, its common uniform, or the notorious *path sanchalan* (route march). The success of this highly formalized and coherent organizational system, the narrative goes, dovetails into a broader network of Hindu nationalist organizations that the RSS claims it remains loosely affiliated with and sympathetic to, but from which it is functionally independent. I seek to challenge the understanding that the RSS is a uniquely disciplined and coherent activist organization, whose *swayamsevaks*

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13 Sunil Ambekar, *The RSS: Roadmaps for the 21st Century* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications India, 2019).

14 Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*.

15 Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist Movement.*

16 See Lalit Vachani, "The *Shakha*, the Home and the World: Going Beyond the *Shakha* and the RSS Family," in *Women, Gender and Religious Nationalism*, ed. Amrita Basu and Tanika Sarkar (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 77–124; see also Ian McDonald, "Political Somatics: Fascism, Physical Culture and the Sporting Body," in *Physical Culture, Power and the Body*, ed. Patricia Vertinsky and Jennifer Hargreaves (London: Routledge, 2007), 52–73.

17 H. V. Seshadri, *RSS: A Vision in Action* (Bangalore: Jagarana Prakashana, 1988), 16.

work hard through service provision and community work to advocate for an India in which Hinduism plays a central role and Hindus receive privileges above non-Hindus. In this imagining of the RSS's public life, the RSS purportedly inspires and leads a constellation of independent allied organizations seeking the same goal through religious mobilization, publishing, health care provision, and proselytization.

Both sympathetic and critical accounts describe an RSS with a neat, streamlined organizational structure, which transforms young men with a vague, inchoate Hindu nationalist disposition into disciplined *swayamsevaks* devoting their lives to the Hindu nation.[18] This funneling happens through the famed *shakha* system, where *swayamsevaks* regularly meet in neighborhood parks, playgrounds, or fields to conduct both sporting and martial physical exercises and to receive ideological training.

Swayamsevaks advance through a formal bureaucracy if they demonstrate ideological commitment and aptitude. A *swayamsevak* may become an area coordinator (*gatnayak*), rousing local *swayamsevaks* to attend *shakhas*. Following this, he may become a *gan shikshak* or *mukhya shikshak*, both different levels of *shakha* instructor, after which he may become a convenor (*karyavah)*. Convenors graduate to convene larger geographic areas: in rural areas *khand* and *tehsil* (small land units), in urban areas *nagar* (city), and then both rural and urban offices merge into district, divisional, subregional, regional, and zone units (*zila*, *vibhag*, *sambhag*, *prant*, and *kshetra*, respectively).

Parallel to this lies the *pracharak* (preacher) trajectory. *Pracharaks* are full-time officials whose official job is to spread the RSS gospel, recruit *swayamsevaks*, and found *shakhas*. Like convenors, *pracharaks* are embedded in geographically coded bureaucratic hierarchies. Thus, the *zila pracharak* is responsible to the *vibhag pracharak*, who is, in turn, responsible to the *kshetra pracharak*. Within the RSS mythology *pracharaks* stand as singularly devoted to the RSS, and as unique embodiments of the values that ordinary *swayamsevaks* should aspire to.

A third stream exists within the RSS but does not require membership as a *swayamsevak*. The office of *sanghchalak*, organized in progressive geographic hierarchies like *karyavaha* and *pracharak*, is offered to sympathetic local notable figures who lend their social and financial capital to the *shakha* or regional division. These *sanghchalaks* tend to be largely symbolic and are primarily intended to co-opt local notables.[19]

As *swayamsevaks* move through the RSS bureaucracy, whether through the convenor or *pracharak* stream, they are expected to attend a series of training camps (*sangh shiksha varg*) that, depending on which level, are held locally, at a state level, or at the RSS headquarters in Nagpur. Only those who have completed all three training camps are recommended for senior *pracharak* or convenor positions.

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18 Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*; Tapan Basu, Pradip Datta, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, and Sambuddha Sen, *Khaki Shorts, Saffron Flags* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1993); Seshadri, *RSS*.

19 Kanungo, *RSS Tryst*, 74.

Convenors, *pracharaks,* and *sanghchalaks* in the RSS's vision are all ultimately accountable to the national RSS executive. This executive has three main dimensions. First, there are the six *pramukhs*, or division chiefs, and their deputies, who are responsible for the intellectual, physical, publicity, outreach, organizational, and service-provision activities of the RSS. These *pramukhs* work under the guidance of the joint general secretaries, each responsible for a separate dimension of RSS activity.

The joint general secretaries act under the guidance and direction of the *sarkaryavah* or general secretary. This position, while not the formal head of the RSS, is sometimes considered the most powerful office in the RSS because it is through this office that RSS operational decisions are channeled. The joint general secretaries are informed by the proceedings of the Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha (All India Representative Assembly, ABPS), composed of representatives from regional RSS divisions and RSS-linked organizations. The ABPS meets once a year and passes a number of resolutions, and is also responsible for electing the *sarkaryavaha*. However, generally, the ABPS acts as a rubber stamp body that carries out the advice of the Akhil Bharatiya Karykari Mandal (All India Executive Council, ABKM), a much smaller executive deliberative body comprising senior *pracharaks*, joint secretaries, and other invited officials. The ABKM is the most directly identifiable executive body in the RSS. Finally, above this entire organizational pyramid sits the *sarsanghchalak*, or supreme chief. This position, held for life, is granted only by the wishes of the previous *sarsanghchalak* and is considered to be the philosopher-guide of the entire RSS apparatus.

I outline this entire organizational structure in such detail to make clear one central point: in the RSS's self-presentation, and indeed among many of its critics, the RSS is a cohesive organizational unit with clear bureaucratic links between its multiple divisions that encourage the upward mobility of *swayamsevaks* through the managerial ranks of the RSS. The similarity heuristic embedded in this hierarchy resides in the fact that the *swayamsevak* wears the same uniform as the *sarsanghchalak*, says the same prayers as the *sarkaryavah*, and performs the same rituals as they do at the ABPS. This similarity heuristic produces the image of a direct link between a *swayamsevak* in a rural *shakha* and the *sarsanghchalak* in Nagpur. In this understanding the actions of the RSS executive bodies are inseparable from the actions of volunteers in the branch; and the main focus of the RSS is the integrity of the core branch system. The implications of this are clear: if the entire organization is integrated through the similarity heuristics of formal hierarchies, and the RSS declares the *shakha* system is the heart of this, we must assume that the core business of the RSS is making Hindu men. The similarity heuristic behind this assumption is produced by the same uniform worn by RSS workers at all levels, the same prayers, the same routines, and the same ideals. However, this sameness, designed to produce an image of clear organizational boundedness, in which RSS workers wear uniforms and go to *shakhas*, and non-RSS workers do not, elides the fact that separate levels of the RSS do very different work while remaining in the same organizational framework.

Like many organizations, the RSS is fundamentally invested in self-aggrandizement and artificially inflating its power and reach in order to present the most capable and intimidating public-facing image. Like other far-right organizations, the RSS conceals its operational details. There are no public membership records,[20] executive meetings are held privately, and financial donations are concealed; broadly speaking, the internal workings of the RSS are characterized by a general atmosphere of secrecy and hermeticism.[21] Our knowledge of RSS operational structure is entirely predicated on the fragments of information the RSS makes publicly available. Our image of the RSS is built on what the RSS wants us to see. Given that the RSS has a demonstrated penchant for obscurantism, we may assume that its public image is partial, and produced for a reason.

A Dual RSS

I am proposing an alternative understanding of the RSS, in which it is constituted by two functionally separate organizations (figure 1). The first, which I refer to as the cadre RSS, is the RSS that most closely resembles the public image of the RSS—one that revolves around branches, volunteers, uniforms, and route marches. The second, which I refer to as the managerial RSS, is constituted by the RSS executive, which I define as including the *pracharak* system. The managerial RSS is chiefly responsible for the coordination and direction of the vast network of nominally independent RSS organizational appendages. Both the cadre RSS and the managerial RSS share deference to the same leaders—RSS *sarsanghchalaks* and *sarkaryvahs*—but because many RSS-linked organizations also engage in this, shared deference is not compelling evidence of a bounded organizational unity. Below, I define each organizational unit and describe its role and the implications of this division before detailing why this distinction is clear.

20 The occasionally published numbers of *pracharaks* and service provision organizations, and the announcement of *shakha* and *sangh shiksha varg* numbers in the ABPS annual reports, seem to suggest that there are actually significant internal documentation and tabulation efforts, even if the RSS denies it.

21 Abdul Ghafoor Noorani, *The RSS: A Menace to India* (New Delhi: Left Word Books, 2019).

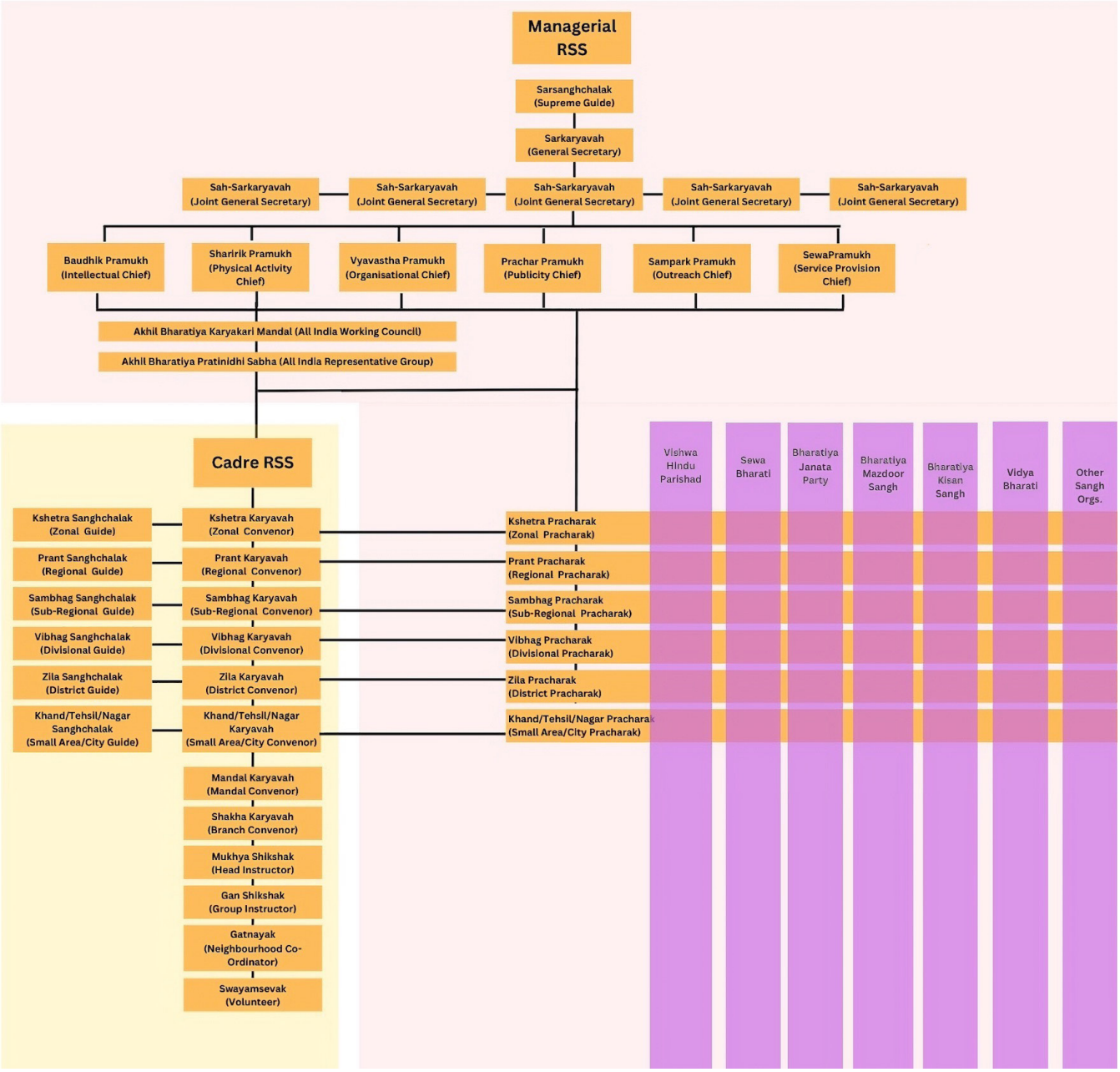

Figure 1. Organizational Chart of the RSS. Source: author's construction.

That the RSS exists in a network of organizations is not a novel observation. Scholars have, for decades, observed that despite the RSS's protestations of independence, the RSS has close networked relationships with its appendage organizations and that these relationships are often negotiated through *pracharaks*.[22] Indeed, the ubiquity of the term *sangh parivar* (organizational family of the RSS) indicates that the knowledge of how the RSS exists in a networked relationship with other organizations is widespread.[23] However, in this term there is no real sense of who *exactly* is in the family, what the mechanisms of family growth and coordination actually are (beyond simply *pracharaks*), and what keeps the family together. The term *sangh parivar* then is most useful as a folk moniker that gestures toward some knowledge of RSS networking but requires much more substantiation to be analytically productive.

Importantly, the literature on RSS organizational networks overwhelmingly focuses on a narrow group of organizations—usually just the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP),[24] the BJP, and the RSS's student wing, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (All India Students' Council)—for which there are acknowledged relationships.[25] With a few significant exceptions,[26] dissections of the precise mechanics by which the RSS exerts itself in these organizations are rare. Indeed, debates on the precise balance of power between the BJP and RSS remain common, despite the fact that, as of 2020, 48 percent of BJP MPs are from the RSS (and 71 percent of BJP cabinet members), contradicting any meaningful sense of organizational division.[27] It is much more common in the scholarship to find descriptions of these central organizations as coalitions of actors rather than organizational appendages of the RSS. Crucially, while there is a common acknowledgment of a vast network of organizations associated with the RSS beyond the BJP and VHP, the mechanisms of RSS authority and control remain almost unexplored. So, while we have some sense of how large central RSS appendages (notably the VHP and the BJP) relate to the RSS, and we have some sense that there is a large shadowy network of more organizations than we care to identify, the mechanics, boundaries,

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22 For example, Curran, *Militant Hinduism*, 61; Bruce Graham, *Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics: The Origins and Development of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1990).

23 For example, Hansen, *Saffron Wave.*

24 This is a religious activist organization that the RSS founded in 1964 and which has been associated with repeated and frequent mass antiminority violence. See Manjari Katju, *Vishva Hindu Parishad and Indian Politics* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2010).

25 See Amrita Basu, *Violent Conjunctures in Democratic India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

26 For example, Hansen, *Saffron Wave*; Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist Movement*.

27 Neelam Pandey and Shanker Arnimesh, "RSS in Modi Govt in Numbers—3 of 4 Ministers Are Rooted in the Sangh," *The Print*, January 27, 2020, https://theprint.in/politics/rss-in-modi-govt-in-numbers-3-of-4-ministers-are-rooted-in-the-sangh/353942/.

and movements of this kind of organization beyond the central network are poorly understood. This article offers a path forward in making covert RSS organizing visible.

The existence of divisions of labor within an organization does not necessarily preclude its singularity. A corporation for example has many internal divisions while remaining a corporation. The singularity of that corporation, and any organization, is usually reducible to its boundedness, its purposiveness, its internal collaboration, and shared deference to agreed-upon mechanisms of authority.[28] Certainly, both the cadre and managerial RSS that I propose have a shared purpose, collaborative relationships, and deference to executive RSS hierarchies. However, the problem emerges here when we recognize that so does a whole ecosystem of other organizations.

Other RSS appendages like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), BJP, Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (Indian Workers' Union), and Sewa Bharati (Indian Service) also share a purpose, extensive collaboration, and shared deference to the RSS executive.[29] In this context, are the cadre and managerial RSS any more unified than the managerial RSS is with, for example, the VHP? We might identify denser relations between the two RSSs because the cadre supplies the managerial with personnel, but the cadre RSS also supplies personnel to hundreds of other RSS appendage organizations. Within this network, the organizational boundaries are incredibly permeable. Either we must recognize that the RSS is functionally multiple organizations, or we understand the broader RSS organizational network as a single organization within which there are many internal divisions of labor.

There are strong arguments for both approaches, and the purpose of this article is not to arbitrate between them. My point is, simply, that the boundaries that the Hindu far right claim are firm are, instead, incredibly malleable, flexible, and often counterintuitive, and that these boundaries are intentionally obfuscated by the reliance on a similarity heuristic. As such, I am content here with pointing to the fact that within the RSS there are two separate operational entities with different roles, and the divisions between these entities are intentionally obscured in order to disguise the real work of the RSS.

Cadre RSS

The cadre RSS is not a mystery to us. It is the cadre RSS that scholars and analysts have been scrutinizing for decades and which represents the public face of the RSS. The cadre RSS consists of the *shakha* system and is constituted by *swayamsevaks* and RSS officials responsible for the management of the *shakha* system: for example, the area coordinators and convenors. Above this, there are the *sharirik* (physical) and *baudhik*

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28 Ahrne, "Organization outside Organization," 86; David Knoke, *Political Networks: The Structural Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 86.

29 The Indian Workers' Union is the RSS's labor union umbrella organization. The Indian Service is the RSS's largest service provider umbrella organization.

(intellectual) chiefs, responsible for the coordination of the physical and ideological activities of the branch system, as well as the *akhil bharatiya vyavastha pramukh* (all-India organizational chief) responsible for operational matters of the cadre RSS. Above these there are the two joint general secretaries responsible for the branch system—currently Suresh Soni and Mukund C. R.

At its core, the cadre RSS is the man-making machine promised by the founder of the RSS, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, in 1925. Its core function is the performance of *shakha* rituals. The importance of these rituals must be unpacked though. Despite the image that the RSS projects, *shakhas* do not usually seriously physically train *swayamsevaks*. While there are cases of the RSS training *swayamsevaks* in the use of weapons more dangerous than the ubiquitous *lathi* (rod), this training does not regularly happen in *shakhas*.[30] As violence is increasingly outsourced to network peripheries, *swayamsevak* violence becomes less and less necessary. Indeed, the day-to-day reality of most *shakhas* is that physical training is limited to a series of modest exercises and games that are embedded within an ideological component. The intense ideological training of the *shakha* is also likely overstated. While it is true that the *bauddhik* component in each branch meeting is a form of ideological conditioning, the content of this conditioning is familiar to all *swayamsevaks* from a very early stage. Its repetition each day, in often stultifying addresses, is not designed to impart new knowledge. Most *shakhas* are more likely a dozen or so men in a park in the early morning rather than an intense physical and ideological workout.

So, if the *shakha* is neither seriously physically nor intellectually training *swayamsevaks* on a day-to-day level, what is its purpose? Further, what is the purpose of the cadre RSS? The academic fixation on the transformative conditioning of the *shakha* system is largely drawn from the insights published by Walter Andersen and Shridhar Damle in *The Brotherhood in Saffron* (1987). It is from this text (and further texts relying on its insights) that we have concretized the transformative power of the *shakha*.[31] Here, I want to push back on this assessment of the *shakha* because it produces a vision of the cadre RSS as one of mindless automatons whipped into a blind nationalist fervor. We know that volunteers' membership is actually incredibly messy and mediated by a wide variety of personal, affective, and political factors.[32] Many accounts of *shakhas*

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30 Bhanwar Meghwanshi, *I Could Not Be a Hindu: The Story of a Dalit in the RSS* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2020), 147.

31 Importantly, these two authors, upon whose work much study of Hindu nationalism relies, have close ties to the RSS and write decidedly sympathetic accounts. Damle, for example, is a senior official in the Chicago branch of the RSS's overseas division, the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh. See Dhirendra Jha, "Instead of Offering Objective Analysis, Andersen-Damle Book Helps RSS Perpetuate Convenient Myths," *Scroll.in*, August 20, 2018, https://scroll.in/article/890987/instead-of-offering-objective-analysis-andersen-damle-book-helps-rss-perpetuate-convenient-myths.

32 Sudheesh Minni, *Cellars of the Inferno: Confessions of an RSS Pracharak* (Thiruvanathapuram: Chintha Publications, 2016); Meghwanshi, *Could Not Be*; Hemendra Nath Pandit, *The End of a Dream: An Inside View of the RSS Today* (Calcutta: Rabindra Nath Hore, 1950).

have tangentially highlighted the importance of the interpersonal ties they inculcate.[33] Volunteers check up on each other, ensure mutual attendance at the *shakha*, and often share close affectionate bonds of friendship. Drawing on the fragments that these accounts highlight, as well as the observation that the *shakha* is not serious about training, it seems that instead the primary purpose of the cadre RSS is to solidify the social bonds necessary to ensure that there is a permanent collective force able to be mobilized upon the instruction of the managerial RSS. However, this crucial function of the cadre RSS has been de-emphasized in the collective attention paid to the *shakha* system.

The RSS frequently carries the pejorative moniker of a paramilitary militia, a title based on its role in riots during the partition of India. However, since this period, the main function of militarist training in the branch is group bonding.[34] This is borne out by the fact that beyond attending a branch, *swayamsevaks* often do little in their capacity as *swayamsevaks* except for occasional mobilizations where they canvas electoral support for the BJP or assist in disaster relief or crisis management.[35] As Vinayak Damodar Savarkar famously quipped, "The epigraph for the RSS volunteer will be that he was born, he joined the RSS and he died without accomplishing anything."[36] The limited mobilizations of the RSS require coherent, tight groups of people able to be mobilized, and it is the maintenance of these relationships that is one of the primary purposes of the cadre RSS—keeping the cadre in a constant state of reserve readiness.

The second main role of the cadre RSS is to serve as a recruitment pool for the managerial RSS and other RSS-linked organizations. Ex-RSS volunteer and scholar of the Hindu far right, Des Raj Goyal, commented that

> the RSS is only a breeding ground for cadres who carry its ideas and attitudes in different fields of life through various specially set up front organizations. The RSS does not draw its cadres from fronts; it only provides cadres who act as conveyers of ideas and controllers of the fronts on behalf of the parent organization.[37]

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33 For example, Curran, *Militant Hinduism*; Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*.

34 Curran, *Militant Hinduism*, 46.

35 Walter Andersen and Shridhar Damle, *RSS: A View to the Inside* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2018); Malini Bhattacharjee, *Disaster Relief and the RSS: Resurrecting "Religion" through Humanitarianism* (New Delhi: Sage, 2019); Sagar, "How the RSS Co-opted Local Administrations for Its Relief Interventions During the COVID-19 Lockdown," *The Caravan*, July 10, 2020, https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/rss-coronavirus-lockdown-ngos-relief-work-sewa-hindu-rashtra.

36 Quoted in Curran, *Militant Hinduism*, 12.

37 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 7.

A key element of the RSS upward mobility structure—through which branch attendees can be funneled into appendage organizations—is the series of *sangh shiksha varg*, or training camps, through which the RSS upskills volunteers who have demonstrated exceptional commitment to the organization. To become a convenor or *pracharak* requires a relatively intense level of devotion to the RSS, and this level of devotion is one only properly assessed and honed through a thorough training process. These camps, which increase in difficulty and selectiveness depending on which level a *swayamsevak* is at, effectively weed out those less able, less committed, or less useful. There is no way to identify these officials without the bureaucratic structure offered by a dedicated organizational branch. Many of these officials go on to become *pracharaks*, officials whose work is not centered around the *shakha* but is rather devoted to coordinating the activities of RSS-linked organizations in a given area. *Pracharaks* constitute the iron frame,[38] or the nervous system,[39] of the RSS network. However, few of them work in a branch. Instead, they work in RSS-appendage organizations where, on behalf of the RSS, they "rule by proxy,"[40] often by utilizing the authority of the position of *sanghatan mantri*, or organizational secretary. Despite emerging from the branch system, the central work of *pracharaks* is not in the branch.[41] They move on to bigger work. Accordingly, the second main role of the cadre RSS is to act as a recruitment pool for the managerial RSS by testing the commitment and capabilities of volunteers.

The final main role of the branch is the collection of donations. On the Sangh festival of Guru Dakshina, volunteers and branch attendees make anonymous financial donations to the RSS. The RSS does not reveal the amount of money it receives through Guru Dakshina donations, and it is unclear how much of this money, if any, is retained in the branch. What is clear is that these tax-free donations are a significant source of income for the RSS, particularly considering that the RSS has a strong volunteer base in business, financial, and industrial communities across India. By one ex-*pracharak*'s estimate, the RSS in Gujarat alone delivers approximately $33 million yearly in Guru Dakshina donations.[42] Considering that the minimal costs of holding a branch meeting—almost always a short outdoor affair on public land—are borne by local volunteers, the vast amount of money collected by the branch system likely goes to other activities.

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38 Curran, *Militant Hinduism*, 55.

39 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 24.

40 Hansen, *Saffron Wave*, 113.

41 Indeed, the critical accounts of RSS defectors provide a glimpse into the RSS's internal dynamics that suggests *pracharaks* move in more rarefied circles that do not require any form of solidarity or social connection with ordinary *swayamsevaks*. See, for example, Meghwanshi, *Could Not Be*, 18.

42 Minni, *Cellars of the Inferno*, 107.

Managerial RSS

More mysterious than the cadre RSS is the managerial RSS. The managerial RSS is an organization that consists of what we might call the RSS executive, whose principal responsibility is the coordination and direction of the RSS's broader organizational network. Broadly, those members of the RSS whose main responsibilities do not lie in the branch system are within the managerial RSS. By this I mean the *pracharaks*, *pramukhs*, and *sah pramukhs* (with the exception of the *baudhik, sharirik*, and *vyavastha pramukhs*), the *sarkaryavah* and his five *sah sarkaryavahas*,[43] and the *sarsanghchalak*. The role of the managerial RSS only becomes apparent once the RSS's relationship with its appendage organizations is clear.

Recent work challenges the prevailing view that the RSS guides a loosely affiliated network of organizations.[44] Building on this, I suggest that the RSS retains the capacity for the exertion of authority without coercion through institutionalized communication channels that allow it the capacity to choreograph the activity of thousands of organizations. This is not to say that the RSS, on a day-to-day basis, inserts itself into the affairs of peripheral organizations within its network. It is instead to say that the RSS exerts large amounts of energy in building the institutional communication channels—deputed officials, formal and informal linkages, shared offices, provision of funds, and so forth—that allows the RSS, if the need arises, to mobilize organizations within the RSS organizational network. This proclivity to ensure and stabilize institutional communication channels is visible in large conclaves where RSS appendage organizations report their activities (like *sewa sangams*); in smaller private inter-organizational meetings (like *samanvaya baithaks*) where the RSS coordinates appendage activities; in official liaison positions like that between the RSS and the BJP (currently held by *pracharak* Arun Kumar); and in an RSS tendency to involve itself in appendage affairs to ensure loyalists remain at the helm (as it did with the manufactured removal of Pravin Togadia from the VHP).

The maintenance of this infrastructure of linkages is the glue that binds the broader Hindu nationalist movement and the Indian far right. It is what makes the funding of peripheral service provision organizations relevant to the RSS. It is why BJP policies cannot be understood separately from RSS influence. It is why small hostels for indigenous students in rural Assam send children to RSS schools in Uttar Pradesh. The maintenance of these linkages and the exercise of authority that flows through them—almost entirely separate from branch organizing—is the primary work of the managerial RSS.

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43 At the time of writing these were Krishna Gopal, Manmohan Vaidya, Mukunda C. R., Arun Kumar, and Ram Dutt Chakradhar.

44 Felix Pal, "The Shape of the Sangh: Rethinking Hindu Nationalist Organizational Ties," *Contemporary South Asia* 31 (2023): 133–43.

The core unit of the managerial RSS is the *pracharak*. *Pracharaks* are the base-level executive officials of the RSS, authorized through their training, ideological commitment, and conditioning to make decisions on behalf of the RSS in RSS appendage organizations. *Pracharaks* are those RSS members who have completed the entire training camp process and work as full-time volunteers for the RSS, eschewing marriage and family ties for the duration of their service. These *pracharaks* are trained through the central RSS, but upon becoming full-fledged *pracharaks*, they are deputed out to various RSS appendage organizations to maintain and consolidate RSS control over the network. *Pracharak* organizing work is centered on the network of RSS-linked organizations, rather than on the *shakha* system itself. The *pracharak* system acts as the nerve system of the Hindu right.[45] *Pracharaks* often take up the position of organizational secretary (*sanghatan mantri*) in the organizations to which they are deputed, allowing them to control the logistical and financial decisions of RSS appendage organizations. The *pracharak* is, at an appendage level, an RSS enforcer, making decisions as the RSS in the appendages and ensuring compliance. Accordingly, we might consider *pracharaks* not simply as particularly devoted officials but as the mobile executive centers of RSS authority throughout its organizational network, bringing central executive RSS authority into its organizational peripheries. When *pracharaks* are reconsidered as executive officials of the managerial RSS, then their presence in non-RSS organizations reflects the presence of the RSS far beyond the gates of Nagpur. What this means is that there are elements of the RSS that do not stop at the boundaries of the branch system, implying two separate organizational divisions and perhaps even two separate organizations: the cadre and the managerial RSS.[46] However, because the officials that constitute this mobile executive are embedded in, and emerged from, the same bureaucratic structure as cadre RSS volunteers, the fundamental division between the work of the *shakha* and that of *pracharaks* is obscured by a similarity heuristic.

The most impactful work of the organizational network that the RSS exerts authority over is not conducted by volunteers in the branch system. While the branch system still socializes and organizes volunteers, who mobilize in emergencies, the bread and butter of the Indian far right now lies outside the branch. The grind of the Indian far right, and its most significant victories and campaigns, happen among the RSS's appendages. More important than the branch is the development of Hindu nationalist policies by the BJP, the rewriting of textbooks by the Akhil Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Yojana (All India Scheme for History Collation),[47] the conditioning of Adivasi and Dalit youth

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45 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 24.

46 This is not to say that, in some circumstances, ordinary *swayamsevaks* do not function as managerial RSS representatives in organizations where there is no *pracharak* available. These *swayamsevaks* often serve as a conduit for RSS authority.

47 One of the RSS's organizations advocating for educational reform.

in hostels run by Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (Tribal Welfare Community),[48] the violence committed by militias like the Hindu Raksha Sena, or the service provision of Sewa Bharati's hundreds of affiliate organizations. The work conducted by these organizations need not see the presence of a single volunteer, but this does not mean that they do not exist within the ambit of RSS authority. This is one of the central points of this article: to disassociate the work of the RSS from the work of its rank and file *swayamsevaks*.

Executive authority extends past the RSS via deputed officials in the hundreds of RSS appendage organizations. The RSS executive consists of those officials who possess the authority to make organizational decisions on behalf of the RSS. Deference to these officials means deference to the managerial RSS. The managerial RSS exerts authority over its many appendages, of which the cadre RSS is only one. The most direct tool of this authority is undoubtedly the *pracharak* and *sanghatan mantri* system, whereby the managerial RSS commands by proxy.[49] However, the *pracharak* embedded in appendage organizations to which he is deputed is only one method of executive management. The managerial RSS also includes ordinary volunteers who are deputed to appendage organizations. These volunteers are sent out in a more ad hoc way, and with less executive autonomy than *pracharaks*. But within smaller appendage organizations they often serve the same function as the *pracharak*: they are the embodied presence of RSS authority and a conduit for communication and commands.[50] For example, the Shri Guruji Rugnalaya, a hospital in Nashik, was founded by *swayamsevaks* without a *pracharak* visible. This hospital clearly exists within the ambit of RSS authority: it is named after RSS leader Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar's affectionate title; it is run by the Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Vaidyakiya Pratishthan, a medical trust that describes itself as adhering to the philosophy of the RSS; it is funded by the RSS-linked India Development and Relief Fund (an international fundraising organization that directs money to service provision organizations linked to the Sangh in India); and it was inaugurated by RSS *sarsanghchalak* Mohan Bhagwat. Here we see that sometimes *swayamsevaks* may serve as vectors of the managerial RSS.

The managerial RSS also exerts executive authority over its hundreds of appendage organizations through elaborate hierarchies of bureaucratic organizational genealogy. By this, I mean that organizations linked to the RSS are rarely directly founded by the RSS. For example, Acharya Nagarjuna Awasam, an orphanage in Marregudem village in Telangana, is functionally run by Grama Bharati.[51] Grama Bharati in turn is the

48 An RSS organization for activism among indigenous communities.

49 Hansen, *Saffron Wave*, 113.

50 Arun Anand, *Know about RSS* (New Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan, 2016), 23.

51 Acharya Nagarjuna Awasam, "Join Hands, Serve the Society," Acharya Nagarjuna Residential Hostel for Boys (brochure, n.d.).

rural service wing of the Telangana branch of Sewa Bharati.[52] This branch is in turn responsible to the national Sewa Bharati, which is responsible in turn to the managerial RSS through the position of *akhil bharatiya sewa pramukh* (all India service chief), currently held by the functional head of Sewa Bharati, Parag Abhyankar. Alternatively, Panchavati is a yoga center in Bangalore. It was founded and is run by Yogashree, a yoga subsidiary of the Hindu Seva Pratishthana.[53] The Pratishthana is a service provision organization in Karnataka responsible to Sewa Bharati, which as we established above, is responsible to the RSS. A dynamic of accountability reflected in the fact that Yogashree refers to RSS *pracharak* Ajith Kumar as its guiding spirit.

By heavily linking the mythology of the RSS to the branch system, and manipulating a similarity heuristic that frames non-*shakha* or non-uniformed work as not RSS work, the RSS's work outside the branch becomes obscured. This has resulted in large-scale confusion about the precise nature of the RSS's influence and involvement outside the ranks of the branch. While there is widespread acknowledgment that the RSS does influence many organizations, and there is some acknowledgment of the way that the *pracharak* and organizational secretary (*sanghatan mantri*) systems are used to consolidate control, beyond this we do not really know what the role of the RSS is beyond the branch gates. This has produced an analytic climate where we resort to the language of shadowy, loosely linked organizational networks, despite the fact that RSS presence in hundreds of organizations is relatively easy to find. If the main work of the Hindu nationalist movement lies in activities external to the RSS, why do we focus so much on the RSS branch system? We focus on it because we know that there is some relationship, we just are not clear on what the relationship is, and the aesthetic similarity heuristics of a unitary organization complicate the image of what is actually a number of organizational units that move in very different ways.

One of the most compelling pieces of evidence about this organizational cleavage is how extraneous managerial RSS officials are to the branch system, despite a public image that represents them as one and the same. Branches are functionally self-governing systems that require minimal central RSS intervention. Anyone can start a branch provided they have a minimum number of attendees, and after demonstrating consistent branch activity, they receive the auspices of the RSS and a saffron flag to formalize their participation in the RSS. In this process, there is no specific need for the thousands of highly trained and conditioned officials produced through the training camps. Branches are low-cost ventures that can be started without central RSS support and do not need much centralized direction or management except perhaps in the

52 "About Us," Grama Bharati (website), November 18, 2009, https://gramabharathi.blogspot.com/2009/11/grama-bharati.html.

53 "About Yogashree," Yogashree (website), accessed October 12, 2023, https://yogashree.myfreesites.net/about-yogashree.

collection of funds. In this context, why is the RSS turning over such large numbers through their *sangh shiksha varg* system, in which senior RSS officials are trained?

If we accept the numbers offered by the RSS in their annual ABPS reports, since 2009 9,163 officials have graduated from the final year of these training camps.[54] The numbers involved in these systems, and their obsolescence in the *shakha* system, point to other managerial roles for these trainees, the most senior of which go on to become *pracharaks*. The system of RSS functionaries' deputation to RSS appendage organizations is well known. Not just *pracharaks* but other senior officials too are sent to other organizations within the network to "ensure that all the frontal organizations have synergy at a broad level."[55] It is curious that despite the presence of RSS officials outside the *shakha* being well established in academic and popular understandings of the RSS,[56] the organizational implications of this externality have not been fully explored.

Similarity Heuristics Disguise

There are three immediate implications that emerge from identifying this internal organizational cleavage. The first is that the role of the cadre RSS's volunteers becomes a symbolic aesthetic phenomenon before it is a material one. This is not to suggest that the cadre RSS does not have a material function, or that it does not mobilize; the 2014 election results are testament to their groundwork. It is merely to suggest that the most important hegemony-building work of the RSS lies outside the branch. Former RSS *sarsanghchalak* Madhukar Dattatreya Deoras accelerated the RSS's foundation of proxy organizations. While this had begun before Deoras, it was not until the late 1970s that this diffusion accelerated. What this acceleration meant was that different organizations now took responsibility for key Hindu nationalist activities. The VHP was tasked with mass mobilization during the *ramjanmabhumi* campaign (the mass mobilization for the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya on the site of a mosque that was subsequently demolished), the Bajrang Dal (the VHP's militant youth appendage) was in charge of strategic violence, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad was tasked with student mobilization, Sewa Bharati with service provision, and so forth. The result of all this was that much of the work originally done by the branch-based volunteers was now outsourced to the appendage organizations. The management of this outsourcing fell on the head of what I am referring to as the managerial RSS. But if all these tasks are being done by the appendage organizations, what is the role of the cadre RSS's volunteers?

54 "ABPS," Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (website), accessed May 11, 2022, https://www.rss.org/tagssearch.html?SearchText=ABPS.

55 Anand, *Know about RSS*, 23.

56 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh,* 23; Hansen, *Saffron Wave*, 97; Kanungo, *RSS Tryst*, 84.

The branch system is no longer the main material manifestation of Indian far-right agendas.

The second implication of the internal RSS organizational cleavage is that the overwhelming focus on the cadre RSS at the expense of the managerial RSS by analysts and observers of Indian Hindu nationalism is misplaced. This misplaced focus distracts from the true center of gravity of the Indian far right. Highlighting the spectacle of the cadre RSS through events like large meetings of volunteers, such as the 2018 Meerut Rashtroday, pulls focus away from its managerial role. The work of the managerial RSS is conducted outside of the RSS itself—in orphanages, hospitals, militias, and publishing houses. It is through this work that the hegemonic aspirations of the RSS are realized, not through the cadre RSS, yet the cadre RSS dominates our collective imagination of the Indian far right's hegemonic aspirations.

The managerial RSS manages activities that are often violent and involve, among other things, corruption and forced proselytization. It also manages more benign activities like service provision. However, even here the RSS has an interest in concealing its external reach. It is imperative for the RSS to create the perception that there is a vast network of organizations aligning themselves with Hindu nationalism in a voluntary, grassroots, spontaneous process, rather than through RSS direction. It is in the RSS's interests to produce an image of a large, loosely linked group of organizations that organically and spontaneously are working for the same lofty goals. It is critical here for the RSS to appear to just be one organization among many, despite the fact that the RSS has its fingers in far more organizational pies than it cares to openly admit.

The final implication of this internal cleavage is that we must reorient our understanding of the RSS's organizational network away from an atomistic organization-by-organization approach and toward a network-centric approach to the Hindu far right that recognizes that the cadre RSS is just one organization that the managerial RSS manages. This change of focus takes into account that the managerial RSS is the center of the Hindu far right, which in turn means that the key question of the Hindu far right is how, exactly, does the RSS manage? How do power, authority, and information flow through this network, and to where? The study of the Indian far-right then becomes a study of organizational linkages, rather than organizational nodes. Understanding the Indian far right primarily as a networked collective opens up far more analytic doors than does a piecemeal approach that investigates it one organization at a time.

The careful RSS crafting of a public image that is tied to the aesthetic performance of organizational coherence has erased the ways in which it is organizationally divided. The presumption of singularity that a similarity heuristic produces for the RSS makes it easy to deny connections to aesthetically separate organizations and makes it difficult for challengers to establish connections between the diffuse organizational nodes of the RSS network.

The level to which similarity heuristics are consciously strategically used is difficult to measure definitively, largely because the internal conscious political strategy of covert organizations is, unsurprisingly, covert. In the case of the RSS, this is complicated by

the fact that the RSS is demonstrably committed to misrepresentations of its actions and beliefs in public.[57] However, there are a number of key pieces of evidence that suggest that the flexible expansion and contraction of organizational boundaries is used consciously and strategically. First, the RSS has, since its inception, given strategic directions to its volunteers about when and where they should wear its uniforms and declare that they are openly RSS volunteers.[58] Second, RSS volunteers are deputed to affiliate organizations through which they "rule by proxy,"[59] while RSS ideologues maintain claims that these affiliates remain autonomous.[60] Third, RSS volunteers have been shown to engage in criminal activity associated with Hindu nationalist political agendas,[61] but they do so without any identifying RSS paraphernalia, consistent with accusations that RSS volunteers conduct violence in secret.[62] This secrecy is tied intimately to the public boundary making of who is identifiable as an RSS member and who is not.

The case of the RSS is certainly exceptional in its size and strength but is by no means an isolated case. In much of the world, nativist authoritarians still rely primarily on boots on the ground as their primary mechanism of organizing. While of course contemporary mobilizations like the Taliban (Afghanistan), Ma Ba Tha (Myanmar), Bodu Bala Sena (Sri Lanka), and Kyrgyz Chorolor (Kyrgyzstan) use online technologies and social media, we must remain vigilant to those mobilizations in which the formal offline far-right organization remains crucial. Reappraisals of the RSS have implications for the historical study of other mass far-right mobilizations—whether they be of German National Socialism, the Rwandan National Republican Movement for Democracy and Development, or the civil society networks surrounding Brazilian Bolsonarismo.

There is some evidence that RSS reliance on a similarity heuristic is not unique but rather is a useful illustrative example to discuss the mechanics of far-right obfuscation across the world. For example, in Japan, the reliance of the far-right Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference) on a similarity heuristic allows its members to discreetly wield enormous influence in the government's legislative and executive branches.[63] By self-identifying as a conservative lobby group, Nippon Kaigi positions itself as an external entity to the Japanese Diet, rather than as an organization with a parliamentary division

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57 Kanungo, *RSS Tryst;* Noorani, *The RSS.*

58 Kanungo, *RSS Tryst*, 54.

59 Hansen, *Saffron Wave*, 113.

60 Anand, *Know about RSS,* 23.

61 Aishwarya Iyer, "Two Years after Delhi Violence, Riots Accused from RSS-BJP Aim to Be Elected Civic Leaders," *Scroll.in*, February 22, 2022, https://scroll.in/article/1017109/two-years-after-delhi-violence-riots-accused-from-rss-bjp-aim-to-be-elected-civic-leaders.

62 Subhadra Joshi, *RSS: A Secret Para Military Organization* (New Delhi: Indraprashta Press, 1975).

63 Thierry Guthmann and Aike Rots, "Nationalist Circles in Japan Today: The Impossibility of Secularization," *Japan Review* 30 (2017): 207–25.

with members holding 206 out of 710 Diet seats. In Turkey, the Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (Nationalist Movement Party, MHP) obscured its involvement in street violence and mass killings by outsourcing these activities to the Grey Wolves. The Grey Wolves continue to function as a paramilitary militia and a supposedly independent organization from the MHP even though they were founded by Alparslan Türkeş, the then leader of the MHP.[64] Since then the leader of the MHP has functioned as the leader of the Grey Wolves and there is substantial membership crossover between the two. However, a similarity heuristic disguises the mutual embeddedness of these organizations. In Thailand, the far-right paramilitary Red Gaurs operated functionally as a wing of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) of the Thai military and was led by Major General Sudsai Hasdin. However, the similarity heuristic that disguised the mutual constitution of the military and the Red Gaurs allowed the former, as well as the Thai monarchy, to distance themselves from the mass killings conducted by the Red Gaurs in the 1970s.[65] These examples point to the fact that the phenomenon I describe in the RSS is not simply limited to this network but may have broader resonance in other far-right networks required to navigate between being covert and being claims-making mobilizations.

The spectacle of the Indian far right, insofar as it is represented by the baton-wielding cadre RSS, effectively dazzles analysts at the expense of the more mundane hidden work of bureaucratic management of one of the world's largest far-right organizational networks. A focus on the cadre RSS is something of a red herring that stymies serious analysis of where the executive center of gravity lies in the Hindu nationalist network. I argue that it most certainly is not with the cadre RSS but instead with a more diffuse managerial RSS that extends far beyond the gates of Nagpur. Not all far-right organizations have the same lines of distinction between cadre and managerial operational divisions that the RSS does. However, many far-right organizations use similarity heuristics to promote a public image that obscures those connections and activities they believe to be detrimental to their public image. It is not news that far-right organizations are secretive, but the mechanisms of that secrecy merit greater attention. By pulling apart the precise tactics by which far-right organizational networks conceal themselves, in this case a strategic manipulation of a similarity heuristic, we are better able to grasp, precisely, the extent of these networks, their capabilities, and how best to challenge them.

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64 Diliman Abdulkader, "The Ultra-Nationalist Grey Wolves: A Turkish Government Tool to Persecute Kurdish People," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 23 (2022): 92–98.

65 Puangthong Pawakapan, *Infiltrating Society: The Thai Military's Internal Security Affairs* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2021).