

# HINDU SWAYAMSEWAK SANGH (HSS)

**IMPACT:** Hindu Swayamsewak Sangh (HSS) is a right-wing Hindu non-profit organization registered in New Jersey. On its website, the group states its mission is “to organize a diverse and vibrant Hindu American society that can collectively address its challenges and contribute to the welfare of the world.” As of November 2023, HSS claims it has 220 Shakhas (branches) nationwide. HSS’s website venerates the early ideologues of Hindu nationalism, including those who praised Nazi Germany. Additionally, HSS has hosted prominent figures from the RSS, an Indian right-wing, Hindu nationalist, paramilitary volunteer organization.

- The early origin of HSS in the US can be traced back to the 1960s, but **the group officially registered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization in 1989**. The group describes itself as a “social, educational, and cultural organization.”
- A 2023 piece in The Nation noted that **“according to literature from Suruchi Prakashan, the main publishing house of the RSS, the HSS operates as an RSS affiliate in more than 40 countries, including in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada.”** The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is an India-based Hindu paramilitary organization spearheading the Hindu nationalist movement in India and around the world. When RSS was founded, HSS was among the proposed names considered for the organization, a topic discussed at its founder, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar’s residence in April 1926.
- **RSS operates through dozens of direct affiliates, which in turn run an intricate web of organizations both in India and abroad that are rooted in the Hindu nationalist ideology.** This collective web is commonly referred to as the Sangh Parivar. Representing RSS’s global interests, the network of Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh administers its overseas branches, with the first HSS established in Kenya in 1947. **As of 2023, HSS operates in over 40 countries, including the United States and Canada.**
- The **Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India’s ruling party, is one of RSS’s direct affiliates and serves as its political wing.** Additionally, RSS’s militant arms encompass groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal. Since its inception in 1925, RSS leaders, members, and affiliated groups have faced allegations of orchestrating and participating in violence against religious minorities, particularly targeting Muslims and Christians. In 2022, a former RSS worker filed a petition in a Maharashtra court, accusing senior RSS members of manufacturing explosives and targeting Muslims and their places of worship between 2000 and 2010.
- **Ved Nanda, the Distinguished University Professor and Thompson G. Marsh Professor of Law at the University of Denver, is the co-founder and current president of the HSS.** Previously, Nanda held the position of president in the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the RSS, and received personal guidance from MS Golwalkar, the second chief of the RSS.
- Amid scrutiny from academics, journalists, and activists, the HSS has consistently attempted to downplay accusations regarding its direct ties to the RSS. While the HSS website only mentions inspiration drawn from the RSS, an in-depth examination of HSS’s history and operations suggests a more direct and intimate relationship with the RSS than disclosed on its website.
- In **2016, Ravi Kumar Iyer, the international joint coordinator of HSS told the *Indian Express* newspaper, “Our soul is connected with the RSS. We take inspiration from it.** The RSS is our role model. We seek its guidance on crucial issues.” **US-based RSS leader Saumitra Gokhale serves as the global coordinator for HSS. Another Hindu nationalist leader, Manmohan Vaidya, the current joint general secretary of RSS, has claimed that he has been overlooking the work of HSS in the US since 1983.**
- The **1999 archive of the HSS World website, created by HSS USA, notably listed HSS USA alongside the website of RSS under the name “RSS Bharat,” explicitly stating RSS as the parent body of HSS.** “RSS is the

parent organization of the Hindu Swayamsewak Sangh in the Bharat (India),” mentions the 2001 archive of the [HSS New Jersey website](#). Additionally, **the group’s website tagline, “HINDU JAGE VISHWA JAGE” (If Hindus awaken, the world will awaken), bears resemblance to songs commonly sung at RSS training camps.**

- The archive of the RSS website from the late 1990s and early 2000s mentioned HSS as its affiliate and wrote that “VHP, along with the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, is working in 20 different countries.” In April 1999, HSS and Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (the US offshoot of VHP) had planned to jointly start Sarasvati Schools Inc, a non-profit that will run schools modeled off Chinese private schools with a focus on “the tenets of Hindu Dharma and Culture.
- Furthermore, the RSS website mentioned HSS US as a related website to their work and indicated that “swayamsevaks [RSS workers were] trying to build Bharateeya [Indian] lobbies in world centres such as Washington and London.” In another post, the RSS website states that the “mission of Sangh started by Doctorji has spread in every district of Bharat and 35 countries across the globe. The overseas functioning is known as the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS).”
- Over the years, HSS has quietly removed sections and articles praising RSS from its website. From a May 2005 archive of the HSS website, it lists RSS founder Hedgewar, second RSS chief Golwalkar, and Lakshmi Bai Kelkar, the founder of Rashtra Sevika Samiti, the women’s wing of RSS, as “great personalities” that “inspire us [HSS].”
- **While dedicating a whole picture gallery honoring Golwalkar, HSS considers him a top guiding figure who had an “uncompromising commitment to the good of the nation.”** Golwalkar held a deep-rooted disdain for India’s Muslim and Christian citizens, whom he considered the country’s top internal threats. **In a 2021 piece for Haaretz, journalist Samaan Lateef described Golwalkar as an antisemite, noting that he praised Adolf Hitler.** Additionally, Golwalkar called the holocaust “a good lesson for us in Hindusthan to learn and profit by” stating that “Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole.”
- To mark the birth centenary celebrations of Golwalkar, the HSS in September 2006, under its “Speaker on Campus” project, organized events at 12 midwestern universities, including Michigan State University and another public event in Cupertino, CA, which featured Mohan Bhagwat, then RSS General Secretary and now its current chief. Guest speakers included Cupertino Mayor Richard Lowenthal and Cindy Chavez, Vice-Mayor of San Jose. In September 2008, HSS organized an event with Bhagwat in New York to release a book praising Golwalkar.
- **HSS’s Thousand Oaks, CA branch, called Veer Savarkar Shakha, is named after Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a 20th-century Hindu militant leader often referred to as the father of Hindu nationalism.** Savarkar was one of the prime accused in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. **He advocated for treating India’s Muslims as ‘Negroes,’ referring to the treatment of black Americans during slavery, and supported the use of rape as a political weapon.**
- Over the decades, **HSS events have frequently hosted prominent figures from the RSS hierarchy, including Bhagwat and other leaders associated with Hindu nationalist groups.** Notable attendees have included K. S. Sudarshan, the former chief of the RSS; its general secretaries Suresh Joshi and V Bhagaiah; RSS current general secretary Dattatreya Hosabale; V. Shantha Kumari, current head of RSS’s women wing; Sadhvi Rithambara, the founder of VHP’s women wing Durga Vahini, and BJP politician Subramanian Swamy, who in 2020 told a VICE reporter that Muslims were not protected by Article 14 of the Indian Constitution which guarantees freedom of religion, arguing that Muslims cannot be given equal rights because “they are not in an equal category.”
- In August 2012, RSS leader Suresh Joshi participated in HSS Sangh Shiksha Varg, the RSS modeled training camps in Indiana, where he provided guidance and training to American-born Hindus. Moreover, HSS leaders regularly partake in the Vishwa Sangh Shivir, a conclave organized by the RSS every five years for its global affiliates.

- Furthermore, on their website, **HSS features a biographical section on Golwalkar, lauding his views, including that "all Sikhs should register themselves as Hindus" and "today's Indian Muslims are descendants of Hindus."** It also quotes Golwalkar's views that target India's Christian community, accusing them of engaging in religious conversions and advocating for a stringent approach to handle this issue, suggesting that it should have been dealt with "an iron hand," claiming that the country is currently bearing a heavy price due to inaction.
- HSS and RSS follow a similar model of raising funds to finance their operations, primarily through contributions made by swayamsewaks (workers) to the Bhagwa Dhvaj (saffron flag), considered a "master" by Hindu nationalists on the festival of Guru Purnima. This fundraising method mirrors the one employed by the RSS and is integral to their financial support structure. Notably, both HSS and RSS officially commemorate six festivals across their branches as part of their organizational calendar.
- **HSS runs various projects and controls multiple organizations through its leadership and a broader network of swayamsewaks (workers).** These entities include the Hindu Education Foundation (HEF), Dharma Civilisation Foundation (DCF), Hindu YUVA, Sewa International, India Development and Relief Fund (IDRF), Friends of India Society International (FISI), Balagokulam, Uberoi Foundation for Religious Studies (Ved Nanda serves as its chair), United States Hindu Alliance (USHA) and Indic Dialogue.
- HEF, whose stated goal is to "enrich the understanding of Hindu culture in America," serves as the education wing of HSS. It is part of a broader coalition of American Hindu groups that have attempted to revise school textbooks over the decades, seeking edits such as removing references to the caste system's origin, expunging the word "Dalit," and portraying Islam as inherently violent.
- Dr. Vinod Ambastha, the national president of HSS serves as the Vice President of DCF. Manohar Shinde, Chairman of DCF is one of the co-founders of HSS. He is also the director of Sewa International. In 2016, the University of California at Irvine rejected DCF's multi-million dollar offer to establish multiple chairs to South Asian Studies over its RSS-HSS connections.
- Hindu YUVA, formerly called HSS Yuva is a student organization that claims its mission is "dedicated to uniting Hindu youth on college campuses." The student group has been accused of running targeted campaigns against academicians critical of Hindu nationalism.
- Sewa International is the "charity" wing of HSS and the US offshoot of Seva Bharti, the service wing of RSS. According to the HSS's description of Sewa on its 2003 archived website, the organization "will look after the interests of seva related issues not only in the respective countries where they have chapters but also take up "GLOBAL" level care of seva work carried out under the Sangh [RSS] ideology." Sewa is headed by Ramesh Bhutada, the joint president of HSS, while Saumitra Gokhale, HSS international coordinator and Shyam Parande, RSS's Vishwa Vibhag (foreign department) head, serve on its Board of advisors. Notably, Sewa International and RSS headquarters in New Delhi previously shared the same address. As per 2021 tax documents, Sewa raised \$47.2 million.
- **HSS leader Bhisma Kumar Agnihotri co-founded the India Development and Relief Fund (IDRF). In early 2000, the Campaign to Stop Funding Hate, a US-based group, released a report that accused IDRF of "funding RSS-initiated projects all over India."** Most of the recipients of IDRF funds in India were RSS-affiliated organizations. Tax documents indicate that IDRF raised over \$22 million in the last decade.
- Agnihotri, also a former ambassador at large for Non-Resident Indians at the Indian embassy in Washington DC, currently presides over Friends of India Society International (FISI), called as the "public relations arm of the HSS."
- HSS also runs weekly children's schools known as Balagokulam. Back in 2005, the archived version of the school's website stated, "It is incumbent on us to safeguard and promote the sense of Hindutwa [Hindutva or Hindu

nationalism] for our dignified existence.” A handbook for teachers published by HSS portrays Muslims in a negative manner, often labeling them as "invaders" and "raiders." This material also contains extensive praise for RSS and its women's wing, while heavily emphasizing Hindu nationalist rhetoric. Its handbook for children mentions RSS and ideas of Hindu nationalist ideologues like VD Savarkar, Hegdewar, Golwalkar, and HV Seshdhari.

- In an April 2023 piece for The Nation, a former participant from Boston, who attended Balagokulam in 2004 and 2005 when she was 11 years old, stated they left the program due to its Hindu nationalist curriculum.
- **Many former and current leaders of Overseas Friends of the BJP (OFBJP), the registered foreign agent of the BJP in the US, have strong ties with the HSS.** In 2019, former US Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard received backlash for receiving campaign donations from various members of the HSS. Moreover, HSS has also been accused of using Yoga and other religious events to gain political legitimacy by getting ceremonial proclamations lauding the group and its work by various state and federal elected officials, who are unaware of the HSS's Hindu supremacist connections.

Bridge Initiative Factsheet

*This factsheet was produced in collaboration with Raqib Hameed Naik, a US-based Kashmiri journalist who covers human rights, religious minorities, and Hindu nationalism. He is also the founder of India Hate Lab.*