

Inside the swayamsevak's mind

The *swayamsevak*, Malini Bhattacharjee's timely and illuminating book suggests, is the spine that holds the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's exoskeleton in place. The RSS, which celebrated its centenary in 2025, has seen exponential growth with the political ascendancy of the Bharatiya Janata Party: today, estimates suggest, it runs over 80,000 *shakhas* every day across India's vast geographical swathes. Yet, the inner workings of the organisation as well as the inner worlds of its members have been explored by works, scholarly or journalistic, only episodically, at least in English. Through her interviews of 10 RSS members, old school and relatively young, Bhattacharjee attempts to unveil the worlds of those who soldier on under the *Bhagwa Dhvaj*. This she does by turning the perspective, as it were — in these pages, it is the *swayamsevak* who throws light on life in the *sangh*.

Those looking for a confrontational engagement between the author and the respondents would be disappointed. Bhattacharjee makes it clear in the Introduction

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that her work is not to be read as an ideological contestation but an unbiased exploration of the lives of her RSS respondents through conversations. This dispassionate position is perhaps a deliberate choice to distinguish her work from, say, other scholarly explorations of the RSS: Dinesh Narayanan's *The RSS and the Making of the Deep Nation* or, say, *The Brotherhood in Saffron* by Walter K. Andersen and Sridhar D. Damle were far more ambitious in scope and polemical in tone.

The lives that Bhattacharjee portrays have varied hues and include, among others, the almost ascetic Sridhar Sagar, a *pracharak* with over five decades of experience; Pankajavalli, the only woman volunteer here; the energetic Devendra Kumar, one of the younger *swayamsevak*s. Their reasons for embracing the RSS vary. Their work and experiences — adventures — differ too. But two convergences are discernible.



Most of the interviewees admit to finding a sense — an enriching sense — of community within the RSS. This is a striking revelation, given the RSS's endorsement of hierarchy. Second — this is even more illuminating — the inner worlds of the *swayamsevak*s mirror a remarkable, disquieting degree of homogeneity. For instance, their ideas of *seva*, their views on the nation, or their combative — divisive — traits peculiar to the RSS seldom diverge. This, certainly, has nothing to do with a paucity in intellectual depth. These men and the woman also possess

remarkable fortitude: the manner in which they resolve the challenges faced in the course of *seva* bear testimony to that. So the homogeneity in thought can only be attributed to the RSS's formidable powers of indoctrination.

Bhattacharjee, in keeping with the fine tradition of reportage, does not choose to spell out — impose — her own views and judgments on the RSS's footsoldiers she converses with. That choice, as it should be, is left to the reader.

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