

RSS at 100: The messaging in Bhagwat's address

Its recent lecture series reiterates its strategy: ideological alignment with BJP on ends, and organisational distance on means

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At the lecture series titled '100 Years of Sangh Yatra – New Horizons', held from August 26 to August 28 in New Delhi to mark the centenary of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Sarsangchalak Mohan Bhagwat described the organisation's place vis-à-vis the government with unusual clarity.

Bhagwat's remarks restated a long-running design for India's most consequential movement-party dyad: ideological alignment with the BJP on ends, organisational distance on means.

He stated that "the RSS can only give suggestions"; governance, he said, rests with the party. He denied having direct authority over the BJP leadership, saying, "If we elected the BJP president, would it have taken so long?"

This tone was evident in his other remarks—calling for "three children" as a minimum ideal, endorsing trade policy as "voluntary, not under pressure", allowing reservations to continue "till required" and assuring "no quarrel" with the party.

These assertions warrant reflection.

The RSS, founded in 1925 by K B Hedgewar in Nagpur, aimed for discipline and social unity. It evolved into a federated network of students, labour groups, and religious organisations, culminating in the Bharatiya Jana Sangh in 1951.

Following a brief interlude, the Bharatiya Janata Party took its place in 1980. The organisation faced two national bans—first from 1948 to 1949 after Mahatma Gandhi's assassination and again during the Emergency, from 1975 to 1977—and highlighted its focus on being 'cultural' while pursuing political goals.

In the late 20th and early 21st century, the RSS grew its shakhas and service initiatives, solidifying its influence. Thus, the centenary marks not just achievement but a formalisation of methodology.

Practice of modularity: "We can only give suggestions" is not a throwaway line; it crisped up what this article calls movement-party modularity—a deliberate coupling of a social movement (RSS) and a party (BJP) through shared cadre, narratives and goals without a formal command chain. The advantages are straightforward. The movement can define horizons; the party can negotiate trade-offs inside parliamentary arithmetic and international constraints. The risks are equally clear: accountability

blurs when rhetoric and policy travel together but responsibility is split.

Looking at it in this way, all major themes of the centennial address constitute expressions of concord between intentions and the allotment of means.

Reservations: Pledging to stand for quotas "till the time it is required", RSS rationalises legitimacy of the instrument but would not dialogue about the sunset test. The government owes parameters and timing; the movement offers normative cover for prolongation of the order of the moment that dominates. And that is modularity in its operation—convergence on the end of uplift, divergence on implementation.



Demography: The "three-children policy" fosters a natalist spirit without legal mandate, aiming for a larger majority in civic discourse, allowing political leaders to impose incentives or protections. It addresses "demographic imbalance" from illegal conversions and immigration while promoting community confidence.

This dual approach sets the discourse limits that could enhance civil society networks, like discouraging undocumented worker employment, as the state considers enforceable actions aligned with legal norms.

Commerce and self-sufficiency: Bhagwat's elucidation that swadeshi can go with foreign commerce—"voluntary, not under duress"—is a sovereignty-first openness. It allows room for rhetorical spin to negotiate tariffs, standards, screening inward investment, and supply-chain hedging to go to the government, while abandoning autarky. The movement provides room for principle again, Cabinet oversees policy mix.

Organisation and the BJP: The quip, "If we chose the BJP president, would it have taken so long?" is a public statement of design. Influence is channelled through culture, networks and long-horizon messaging, not formal appointment powers. In practice, it means that you should expect cadre circulation (shared training, shared idioms) rather than a visible instruction pipeline. It also means the movement can keep maximal goals in

view even when the party trims sails.

Significance now

The 2024 verdict produced an NDA government in which the BJP governs without a solo majority. In a coalition moment, modularity functions as a shock absorber. The party must bargain with partners on legislation and appointments; the movement keeps the ideological horizon vivid and cadre morale high, without owning day-to-day compromises.

It has two immediate implications: one, policy echo without edict becomes key. If "voluntary, not under pressure" appears in trade statements or "till it is required" influences government briefs, it shows diffusion through shared frames, not directives. Likewise, if ministries take measured approaches to migration enforcement, reflecting security and trust, modularity not command is likely at play.

Second, socialisation appointments need to be preserved. Administrators and advisers with coverage for movement can emerge in roles that are of importance to curriculum, skilling, welfare targeting, standards policy, or technology ethics. That does not establish a chain of command; it reveals how collective education and ritual produce policy gravity.

A normative tension exists in the centenary lines. Appeals for trust, a "no-quarrel" policy embracing "Hindu" as a civilisational identity clash with concerns over conversion and migration. One alleviates societal tensions; the other fosters vigilantism.

The next two years will reveal if the approach will be inclusive, marked by devotion to constitutional reservations, equitable policing of migration, and outreach to minorities, or if it will lead to polarisation that determines the dominant dimension of the tension.

In short, the centenary did not proclaim a structural break. It reaffirmed a methodology: keep movement close to power but not the same; let the party bear governing responsibility; let frames move ahead of policy; and keep the system crowded enough that ideas endure electoral climate.

Quoted phrases—"can only give suggestions," "three children", "voluntary, not under pressure," "till the time it is required," "no quarrel", and "if we elected the BJP president, would it have taken so long?"—are signposts of that operating system.

The analytic challenge for the media and scholars is not to seek edicts, but to detect echoes: where Cabinet-speak, bargains of coalitional accommodation and bureaucratic routine start to reflect those lines without ever asserting they were instructed to do it that way.

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