

# Shadow Armies



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Fringe Organizations and  
Foot Soldiers of Hindutva

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 juggernaut

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# Introduction

India has seen astonishing growth in the politics of Hindutva over the last three decades. Several strands of this brand of politics – not just the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) but also those working for it in the shadows – have shot into prominence. They are all fuelled by a single motive: to ensure that one particular community, the Hindus, has the exclusive right to define our national identity. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a pan-Indian organization comprising chauvinistic Hindu men, is the vanguard of this politics. Formed in 1925, the RSS is not yet a legal entity in so far as it is not registered under any law of the land. Though it claims to be a cultural organization, political motivation has always remained its core concern.

Modelled on the British colonial army, with a similar uniform and training in armed and unarmed combat, and drawing heavily from Benito Mussolini's fascist outfits in Italy, the RSS experienced several ups and downs

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after Independence. It was banned thrice – first for over a year after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, then for nearly two years during the Emergency in the 1970s, and lastly for a few months in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 – but its membership has kept growing.

The RSS network, too, has multiplied steadily. At present, the Sangh has roughly three dozen affiliates across the country. Some of the prominent affiliates are its trade union wing, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh; its students union, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP); its flamboyant cultural outfit, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP); and the VHP's youth wing, the Bajrang Dal. The RSS and its various offshoots, collectively known as the Sangh Parivar (the Sangh family), run more than 1,50,000 known projects across India, including tribal welfare, educational and Hindu religious programmes apart from innumerable other projects about which we know little or nothing.

Officially, the BJP is the sole RSS outfit given to politics, but in practice most of its affiliates work as political instruments to turn India into a Hindu Rashtra. They do this in the garb of protecting Hinduism. One could argue that the RSS and the VHP are the biggest shadow organizations of the BJP. Except for contesting elections, they do almost everything a political party would do: mobilize masses, develop issues for political polarization, and play a role in identifying electoral



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candidates and managing booth-level campaigns. Throughout the research for this book, I was struck by the omnipresence of these pan-Indian outfits. The direct or indirect influence of their members was visible in each of the organizations I chose to study.

Though the RSS publicly eschews politics, as the parent body it not only supplies much of the strategic and ideological direction as well as cadres and leaders to the BJP and other associates, but also has its hand – directly or through its affiliates – in several communal conflagrations. It is these attacks on minorities that lead to the kind of polarization necessary for the growth of Hindutva politics.

All this is done in a highly equivocal manner. This equivocation can be found everywhere in the Sangh Parivar: in the relationship between the RSS and the BJP, the BJP and the VHP, the VHP and the Bajrang Dal, the BJP and the Hindu Aikya Vedi (HAV), the BJP and the Rashtriya Sikh Sangat, the RSS and the Bhonsala Military School, etc., etc.

Whenever these other bodies create a controversy, the RSS and the BJP promptly label them ‘fringe organizations’. The fact, however, is that they are active parts of the Sangh Parivar, working as buffer organizations for doing the dirty work the BJP and the RSS were once obliged to do themselves. The brazen acts required to create polarization in our society are often carried out by these very establishments.

Some of the ‘fringe organizations’ seem to exist outside the purview of the Sangh Parivar in so far as they are not technically created and controlled by the RSS. Prominent among them are the Sanatan Sanstha, the Hindu Yuva Vahini, the Sri Ram Sene and the Abhinav Bharat. Yet they are not entirely autonomous. Most of them have an umbilical cord attached to the Sangh Parivar, and all of them are ideologically on the same page. Like the RSS and its affiliates, they claim to derive their ideological *raison d’être* from V.D. Savarkar’s *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*

Published in 1923, this tract argues that it is Hindutva (Hindu-ness), rather than Hinduism, that constitutes Hindu identity. According to Savarkar, a Hindu is someone who considers Bharat his holy land, carries the ‘blood of the great race’ of Vedic people, and claims as his own ‘the Hindu Sanskriti’. In practical terms, despite their play of words with regard to their ideology, these organizations – again like the RSS and its offshoots – have interlocked ‘Hindutva’ and ‘Hinduism’, becoming in the end a manifestation of hatred towards minority religious groups, especially Muslims, Christians and Sikhs.

The portrayal of Muslims in particular as threats to Hindus – thus justifying the constant attacks on them – has remained the single most important tool of all branches of Hindutva politics. Though the practitioners would never say this in public, the objective of these activities is always the same: to create a false fear among

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Hindus and stoke the polarization of their votes in favour of the party leading the forces of Hindutva.

In the case of the Sikhs, however, persuasion replaces confrontation. The motive of the Sangh Parivar is to kill Sikh identity and amalgamate Sikhism as part of Hinduism. Sikhs are not in the category of the ‘threatening other’; they face Hindutva wrath only when they stress on an identity separate from the Hindus.

At first glance, these fringe organizations – whether part of the Sangh Parivar or working independently – often seem to reflect the ups and downs of local or regional politics. A deeper look, however, would show them as communal eddies generated by the powerful currents of Hindutva politics. The BJP’s political evolution from two seats in the Lok Sabha in 1984 to 282 seats in 2014, constituting an absolute majority in the Lower House of Parliament, is not a journey of just one political party – it is also the journey of its myriad shadow armies.

Yet, there is little insight into the actual mechanisms that underlie the evolution of these fringe outfits. We do not have a systematic understanding of how they work and how they connect with licit politics. These shadow armies are not direct projections of their pan-Indian partner. Each of them possess a distinct identity. This book is an attempt to find out the when, the how and the why of these organizations.

For a long time, I thought they primarily act as

recruiting and training centres for their brethren who officially practise politics. This was because I looked at them through the prism of pan-Indian Hindutva organizations like the RSS, the BJP and the VHP. It struck me only when I began to travel for research and talk to people that these fringe organizations could have their own paths of evolution, beset by internal contradictions and driven by local anxieties and motivations.

Of the eight organizations I chose to research, four belong to the Sangh Parivar and four operate independently. While the former set includes the Bajrang Dal, the Rashtriya Sikh Sangat, the Bhonsala Military School and the Hindu Aikya Vedi, the latter group constitutes the Sanatan Sanstha, the Hindu Yuva Vahini, the Sri Ram Sene and the Abhinav Bharat.

From Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, regions which I knew well, I embarked on a journey through western, central, southern and eastern India in an attempt to trace the history of the growth of these outfits. In my travels, I met fascinating characters. Some were intelligent, some dumb, and a few even criminals looking for political cover, but they were all full of vitality and vigour and quite aware of what they were doing. Through their narratives they led me to the actual working of the ideology of their hydra-like network.

The term Hindutva – explained by Savarkar as ‘Hindu-ness’ and not ‘Hinduism’ – is almost always used to refer to the core idea at the heart of the members of the Sangh

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Parivar. But on the ground, it is easy to get misled if one does not reverse the meaning of this term. It is Hinduism that is invoked to ensure the mobilization of masses and the polarization of voters. Hindutva as an ideological construct simply vanishes the moment one leaves the national headquarters of the BJP and the RSS.

The irony is that the young men from backward or lower castes who constitute a significant portion of the foot soldiers of these shadow armies are rarely able to recognize that the Hindutva to which they have dedicated their energies is nothing but brahminism. And that it is the same brahminical Hinduism that has kept them oppressed for centuries and against which they have their own legacies of resistance. They are so blinded by their growing Hindu religiosity and hatred for the ‘threatening other’ that they simply cannot see how the Hindutva they are working for ultimately seeks to revive the historical hegemony of brahmins and other upper castes.

Occasionally, the truth becomes visible. For instance, when caste hierarchies affect the distribution of power even at the local level. Sometimes this leads to the revolt of backward caste leaders and cadres (as in the case of the Sri Ram Sene), but the rebels hardly ever look for an ideological alternative.

The triumph of Hindutva, following the BJP’s striking victory in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections and in many of the state polls thereafter, has resulted in brahminism trying to recolonize the spaces it had been forced to vacate

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due to social reform movements and anti-brahminical ideological struggles. In the chapters that follow I only offer vignettes illustrating how the shadow world of Hindutva, with its reliance on violence, hate speech and even terror, has contributed to these electoral triumphs as well as to the brahminical agenda underpinning the overall Hindu nationalist project.

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*Note:* A large part of the argument of this book is based on field work done in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka and Kerala. The archival material dug out from Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, Thiruvananthapuram, Lucknow, Gorakhpur and Amritsar helped in understanding the historical contexts within which these Hindutva organizations assume form.

1

Sanatan Sanstha





## I

Picture a palatial china-white mansion with a massive porch amidst the lush green of a Goan village. Guards in slick blue uniform stand in patrol at its entrance. This is the Sanatan Sanstha's ashram at Ramnathi, where the organization's self-styled 'God', Dr Jayant Balaji Athavale, lives. The three-storey building appears to have been designed to strike awe among the villagers, but it is resentment and revulsion that one sees in their eyes every time you mention the ashram.

Every morning over a hundred visitors stream in – mostly young men and women in the Sanstha's saffron attire with a vermilion mark on their foreheads. Disciples of Athavale, they stay inside the ashram for the whole day with the permanent residents – who also number around a hundred – and go back to their accommodations outside the village late in the evening.

Across the road, opposite the mansion, a wide open field slopes down to a rivulet that forms the northern boundary of the village. Until recently, the land had yielded bountiful crops every agricultural season. But one day, early in the monsoon of 2008, a powerful stink arose as the

logged water receded from the field. ‘The smell was so foul that it soon became unbearable. The villagers came out of their houses to an appalling sight – the receded water had left behind hundreds and thousands of used condoms that covered almost the entire field, making it stink like hell,’ says Basant Bhatt, the priest of the illustrious Ramnath Temple at the heart of the village. ‘No tiller has ever sought to clean the field and cultivate it again.’<sup>1</sup> The locals found it disgusting. Though the source of the condoms remains a mystery, the blame is firmly placed on the ashram.

The villagers probably arrived at that conclusion because Athavale and his saffron-clad followers had been marked by controversy ever since they arrived in 2002. The Sanstha had tried to construct its ashram in the neighbouring village of Parvatiwada two years before their entry into Ramnathi but the locals there were able to mount a successful resistance. ‘It was only after their failure in Parvatiwada that they moved on to Ramnathi, where they succeeded in setting up their ashram,’ says Sheker Naik, a senior resident of Parvatiwada and a former sarpanch (2002–04) of the Bandora Panchayat to which both villages belong.<sup>2</sup>

Many people in Ramnathi suspected the Sanatan Sanstha of being some kind of sex cult though there was no evidence of that. The condoms in the field, however, confirmed their misgivings even as the Sanstha refuted the allegations. There was, thus, already a good deal of ill-feeling when on the evening of 16 October 2009, a

few hours after a bomb blast at Madgaon, the Goa police swooped in on the Sanstha's ashram at Ramnathi.

As per police records, the Sanstha had opposed the Narkasura effigy contest, a hugely popular festive activity in Goa which takes place on the eve of Diwali. On this day in 2009, 16 October, two Sanstha members – Malgonda Patil and Yogesh Naik – were allegedly carrying a bomb on their scooter to plant near the venue of the contest in Madgaon. However, the bomb went off prematurely and the duo died.<sup>3</sup>

'We were shocked,' recounts Saurabh Lotlikar, a social worker and a resident of Ramnathi. 'That very day some of the villagers got together and formed a public interest group, Jan Jagruti Manch, with Basant Bhatt as the president and Sheker Naik the secretary. Its sole objective was to fight for the removal of the Sanatan Sanstha from the village.'<sup>4</sup>

The new group called a meeting the very next day. Only a handful of locals participated. 'But we persisted, and day after day the knot of people around us grew bigger. Then we called a public meeting on 20 October. That meeting was massive. People not just from Ramnathi but from the entire Ponda subdivision turned up in large numbers,' says Basant Bhatt. 'We did not expect more than three or four hundred people, but nearly two thousand participated. Later we also organized a march against the Sanatan Sanstha and that, too, was attended by a large number of people.'

The demonstrations in Ramnathi put the Sanstha on the back foot for a while. The local press covered the agitation comprehensively, with two to three pieces on the subject appearing almost every day for many weeks. But these stories put together yield little information about the nature of the Sanatan Sanstha or the substance of Athavale's preaching.

## II

Until the Madgaon blast, despite viewing the Sanstha with hostility, the villagers did not see it as a powerful and dangerous group that would stop at nothing to achieve its own, possibly sinister, ends. They were not aware, for example, that the blast was not the first such act it had effected or that the Sanstha's members had also been involved in previous blasts.

In mid 2008, the Maharashtra police had arrested several Sanstha members for setting off bombs in Thane and Vashi. On 4 June, a bomb had exploded in the parking area of the Gadkari Rangayatan Auditorium in Thane, injuring seven people. The Sanstha members were ostensibly protesting the Marathi play *Ambhi Pachpute*, which they claimed showed Hindu gods and goddesses in a poor light. A few days earlier, on 31 May, a low intensity bomb had gone off at the Vishnudas Bhave Auditorium in Vashi. In August 2011, a Mumbai court sentenced two members of the Sanstha – Vikram Bhave and Ramesh

Gadkari – to ten years' rigorous imprisonment for the Thane and Vashi blasts.<sup>5</sup>

The Sanstha's response in all these cases was to disown its members as soon as they were arrested and simply refuse to take any responsibility for their activities. It followed this strategy despite the Goa police unravelling the true story of the Sanstha within a few months of the Madgaon explosion. 'At present the institution [Sanatan Sanstha] appears to be developing into a stage of terror activities,' says a Goa police report prepared in 2010, 'and if allowed to grow up in a peaceful state, there is eminent danger to the life, property, communal harmony of the state and the nation.'<sup>6</sup> This report formed the basis of a thousand-page dossier seeking a ban on the Sanstha submitted by the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) to the Union Home Ministry in 2011. The entire exercise, however, was futile as a difference of opinion developed between the state and central governments, and no action was taken against the Sanstha.

It is not clear whether Prithviraj Chavan, who was the chief minister of Maharashtra, did not pursue the matter seriously or Union Home Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde developed cold feet about banning the Sanstha. Four years later, in 2015, when the BJP had replaced the Congress both at the centre and in the state, and a chorus seeking a ban erupted once again, Shinde blamed Chavan for showing a 'lack of seriousness' on the matter. To this the latter retorted, 'I'm hurt by what my senior

party colleague has said. I should not be commenting on it, but it [Shinde's comment] is laughable.'

On paper, the Sanatan Sanstha was originally registered as a charitable trust under the name 'Sanatan Bharatiya Sanskruti Sanstha' at Mumbai in 1991. It claimed to be established 'to educate people about the science of spiritualism' by organizing discourses, seminars, workshops, etc. 'to encourage people to be seekers' and 'to guide seekers until they meet their Guru'.<sup>7</sup> Dr Jayant Balaji Athavale, the Guru, signed the deed as one of the four trustees. The others who signed with him were his wife, Dr Kunda Jayant Athavale, and his followers Vijay Neelkantha Bhavé and Vinay Neelkantha Bhavé.

The nebulosity of the whole enterprise is further emphasized by the fact that several other outfits sprang up in course of time – all owing allegiance to Athavale yet presenting themselves as independent entities and not the Sanstha's affiliates. The Sanatan Sanstha, for instance, was registered much later in Goa with its office at 'Sanatan Ashram, Ramnathi, Ponda, Goa'. Other ashrams of the Sanstha, like those at Panvel and Meraj in Maharashtra, were registered as separate trusts; so were organizations like the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti and the Dharmashakti Sena as well as the newspaper *Sanatan Prabhat*.

The Sanstha and all of Athavale's 'independent' entities do everything to show they are a rarefied group given essentially to spiritualism. Athavale's disciples (known as sadhaks and sadhikas) start their day at 6 a.m.

with meditation and prayers that go on for two hours, followed by a vegetarian breakfast. Then they read the *Sanatan Prabhat*, through which Athavale – who has been bedridden since 2013 and meets with only a small group of close aides – is known to communicate with them. Thereafter, they perform seva in various sections of the ashram. This includes working on the publication of holy texts in Marathi, English, Hindi, Kannada and a few other languages; designing idols and pictures of deities; preparing almanacs which are published annually in eight languages; making short films on how to impart education on Dharma and how to celebrate festivals; writing for and editing the *Sanatan Prabhat*; managing various Sanstha-related websites; and training priests to impart the knowledge of Dharma to society.

The branding of the other outfits as ‘independent’ is probably meant to protect Athavale in case any of them is caught red-handed and charged with illegal activity. It is not inconceivable that Athavale has considered the legal advantage of creating a network of outfits instead of setting up branches under the aegis of a parent body. In any case, ‘Athavaleism’ appears to be a construct that runs straight into the face of the Indian Constitution. His spiritual teachings may often appear harmless but his political teachings are far from benign. Many editions of the *Sanatan Prabhat* have proclaimed that the organization aims to establish a ‘Hindu Rashtra’ by 2023. Its articles and headlines attack Muslims, Christians,

rationalists and communists on a regular basis and dub them as evil-doers. In 2007, the *Sanatan Prabhat* quoted Athavale: 'You feel so victorious after killing a mosquito, imagine how you would feel after killing an evil person?'<sup>8</sup> On 29 February 2008 the paper asked Athavale's followers not to damage buses and private vehicles, and act instead like Maoists against the arrogant police force. It also published a mobile number as a contact point to organize training for the purpose.<sup>9</sup>

### III

If Athavale's views have shocked and repelled many people, they have also attracted others, principally groups of upper-caste young Hindus in western Maharashtra who are ostensibly driven by their desire to turn India into a Hindu Rashtra.

Athavale began his career as a clinical hypnotherapist, practising in Britain during the 1970s. In the late 1980s, he set up a hypnosis clinic in Mumbai's Sion (West) locality where he began organizing workshops on spirituality. During this period he and his wife Kunda Athavale forged relations with various spiritual gurus and groups and began delivering lectures on the 'science of spiritualism'.

After registering the Sanatan Bharatiya Sanskruti Sanstha in 1991, he began to hold meditation camps for lay followers of the spiritual gurus and groups with



whom he had formed ties. He also published a number of books in several languages. In these books and his preachings, he stressed that the most important task for a sadhak was to find and reach God and His truth. In order to achieve that a sadhak must completely surrender to the Guru whose will had to be followed strictly and unquestioningly. Athavale publicly announced that the objective of his movement was to establish 'Ishwary Rajya' (the Kingdom of God) on earth by destroying 'durjans' (evil forces), who indulged in 'bad habits', 'bad politics, economy and culture', and 'misinterpreted religious beliefs', so on and so forth.

The Sanstha's 'self-defence training' manuals teach its members how to fire a gun. They also say that while shooting 'the gaze should be towards durjans'. A survey of the Sanstha's literature and illustrations makes it obvious that 'durjan' implies rationalists, Muslims, Christians and anyone perceived as anti-Hindu.

According to *Kshatradharma Sadhana*, one of the manuals compiled by Athavale, 'Five per cent of seekers will need to undergo training with weapons. The Lord will provide the weapons at the opportune moment through some medium.' The manual also says, 'It does not matter if one is not used to shooting. When he shoots along with chanting the Lord's name the bullet certainly strikes the target due to the inherent power in the Lord's name.'

Around the mid 1990s, once Athavale had a substantial number of sadhaks, he developed a proper curriculum for

the Sanstha's meditation camps and satsangs. Sadhaks who are trained thus travel to new areas to organize similar camps and satsangs. In these camps sadhaks are encouraged to narrate their 'anubhutis' (experiences), with the special ones being sent to Athavale, the Guru, for interpretation. These anubhutis are also published in the *Sanatan Prabhat* which every sadhak has to read as part of his daily routine. This, along with discussions on items on religion and nation published in the Sanstha's newspaper, is treated as part of the sadhana.

Athavale, as the Ishwary Avatar (divine incarnation) having taken birth to establish Ishwary Rajya, marks – in percentage points – the progress of a sadhak in his sadhana. It is believed in the Sanstha that once a sadhak's progress moves past the 80 per cent mark, he becomes a 'sant'. Athavale alone can decide whether this threshold has been crossed. Sainthood gives a sadhak an exalted position and brings him a lot of privileges in the community. 'His Holiness' (or simply 'HH') gets affixed to his name, and he is treated with veneration by Athavale's followers. His status is announced formally in the *Sanatan Prabhat*. Sainthood is the highest dream that every sadhak or sadhika is said to nurture in the Sanstha because it is with these saints acting as lieutenants that Athavale will establish the promised Ishwary Rajya.

Of late, Athavale himself seems to have undergone an exercise to elevate his own status in the commune – from that of a Guru to a God. This has been achieved by means

of the 'divine changes' that have taken place 'over the years' in his body. The miraculous transformation was declared on the Sanstha's various websites and blogs in 2015. 'Over the years, there have been many changes on HH Dr Athavale's body both due to negative energy attacks and due to a gross manifestation of His Divinity,' reports an article that appeared in the *Indian Express* in September 2015, referring to the Sanstha's websites.<sup>10</sup> Some of the specific changes listed on these websites were: Athavale's hair turning golden; divine particles falling from his body; the symbol of Om appearing on his fingernails, forehead and tongue; and various fragrances emanating from his body.<sup>11</sup> A post on one of the Sanstha's blogs referred to him as God.

'Guru (Dr) Athavale, who is striving day and night to achieve the lofty ideal of establishing Hindu Nation, is the personification of God. [...] Maharshis have recently declared that He is the Incarnation of Shri Vishnu. Even from the Divine changes in His body and the Divine auspicious signs appearing on his body, it is proved that He is not an ordinary human being, but God Himself.'<sup>12</sup>

What these beliefs and doctrines have meant as a matter of practice is difficult to tell as sadhaks have been making a deliberate effort to rebut charges by the administration and the critics that they are 'a sex commune' spreading 'extreme forms of superstition' and turning fast into 'an exceptionally dangerous cult'.

In Maharashtra, which has a rich tradition of

progressive movements, the Sanstha came into conflict with the rationalists early on. The latter questioned its beliefs and doctrines and criticized Athavale and his group of sadhaks – along with other obscurantist forces in the state – for spreading superstition through manipulative pseudo-spiritual practices. The hostility between the Sanstha and the rationalists initially took the shape of regular showdowns, with the former organizing attacks on programmes and workshops conducted by the rationalists and the latter openly challenging sadhaks to demonstrate their ‘miracles’ in full public view.

Then the hostilities took a dangerous turn.

#### IV

In 2013, a spate of brutal high-profile assassinations struck Maharashtra and Karnataka, leading to the arrest of the Sanstha’s sadhaks. The first to be killed was Dr Narendra Dabholkar, the leading face of Maharashtra’s rationalist movement. He had set up the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (MANS) in 1989, shortly before Athavale registered the Sanatan Bharatiya Sanskruti Sanstha, his first trust. As the two organizations grew, so did the conflicts between them. By the turn of the century, MANS and Dabholkar, a medical doctor by training, became the foremost champion of the anti-superstition bill, which the state government left hanging for more than a decade.