

# The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)

Its Presence and Network in Malaysia

Shalini Muniapan



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The emergence of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in Malaysia should not be viewed as an anomaly but rather as a predictable extension of transnational ideological networks, amplified by digital connectivity and localised sociopolitical vulnerabilities. In recent years, the global reach of Hindutva-aligned movements has expanded beyond India's borders, facilitated by diaspora linkages and online ecosystems that enable rapid dissemination of identity-based narratives.

This evolving landscape has prompted concern among domestic actors, most notably the Perlis Mufti<sup>1</sup>, whose recent remarks about the potential encroachment of Hindutva ideology sparked significant backlash among segments of the Malaysian Indian community on social media (Threads and X)<sup>2</sup>. The reaction itself underscores the sensitivity and complexity of identity, representation, and external ideological influence within Malaysia's plural society.

In subsequent sections of this brief, we examine RSS as an organisation, tracing its origins, mechanisms of expansion, its presence in Malaysia, and the possible implications of association with the RSS.

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<sup>1</sup> Osman, M.A. (2026) Dr. Maza bimbang ancaman Hindutva menyusup ke Malaysia. Malaysia Gazette, 10 March. Available at: <https://malaysiagazette.com/2026/03/10/dr-maza-bimbang-ancaman-hindutva-menyusup-ke-malaysia/>

<sup>2</sup> Loretta (@lorettabagg) (2026) ) Post on X, 5 June. Available at <https://x.com/lorettabagg/status/2031324646092714206>

## What is Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)?

Not many in Malaysia would know about the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) or the extent of its operations. Awareness of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) remains limited in Malaysia, in part due to its organisational model, which emphasises decentralised, community-based engagement rather than overt political visibility. The RSS is a major Indian right-wing, Hindu nationalist, volunteer paramilitary organisation founded on September 27, 1925, in Nagpur. The all-male Indian right-wing organisation is the most powerful Hindu nationalist group in India. The organisation played a major role in propelling Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to power back in 2013.

It started off with their displeasure that India wasn't exclusively labelled as for Hindus, as it was the case with Muslims in Pakistan, during the post-Independence separation in 1947.<sup>3</sup> The idea that India should be a Hindu State is paramount, and the basis of RSS's establishment, to form a Hindu Rashtra. That led Nathuram Godse, a Hindu Nationalist who had documented associations with RSS, to assassinate Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, though courts did not establish institutional responsibility on the part of the RSS for the killing.<sup>4</sup> In the aftermath of the assassination, the Indian Government imposed a temporary ban on the RSS that same year, citing concerns over its role in fostering a climate of communal hostility.

During its first ban in 1948, then Home Minister Sardar Vallabhai Patel noted that the organisation was being barred *"to root out the forces of hate and violence that are at work in our country and imperil the freedom of the nation and darken her fair name"*.<sup>5</sup>

The RSS emerged as an organisation aimed at reviving Hindu identity and pride in the context of India's history of Muslim rule and colonial domination. In its early years, some of its leaders drew ideological inspiration from European nationalist movements, including Fascist parties of the 1930s and 1940s.

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<sup>3</sup> Mashal, M. and Kumar, H. (2025) From the shadows to power: How the Hindu right reshaped India. The New York Times, 26 December. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/26/world/asia/india-hindu-right-rss-modi.html>

<sup>4</sup> Khalid, S. (2022) *India: Gandhi's killer Godse never left RSS, claims new book*. Al Jazeera, 30 January. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/30/india-gandhis-killer-godse-never-left-rss-claims-new-book>

<sup>5</sup> DH Web Desk (2022) *Why RSS was banned three times in the past*. Deccan Herald, 29 September. Available at: <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/why-rss-was-banned-three-times-in-the-past-1149307.html>

In its early years, the RSS was subjected to bans and officially treated as a security concern and 'unlawful' organisation. The organisation was banned yet again during Indira Gandhi's regime in 1975 due to fears of political mobilisation, and thousands were jailed until the ban was lifted. However, RSS subsequently reframed this episode as an assault on democratic freedoms and sought to portray itself as the pillar upholding democracy.

This narrative aligned with broader public concerns that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had undermined India's democratic institutions by suspending civil liberties following the disqualification of her election victory. In 1992, RSS faced another ban by the Indian Government, shortly after the demolition of the Babri Masjid.



Image 1: After Mahatma Gandhi's assassination by RSS's Nathuram Godse in 1948, the organisation was banned in 1949, as reported by the Indian Express<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Singh, A. (2025) *The RSS does not exist: Mapping the hidden structure of an unaccountable organisation*. The Caravan Magazine, 1 July. Available at: <https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/rss-unaccountable-organisation-keshav-kunji>

From this, one thing is clear: RSS always associates itself with chaos and extremist stances. It has fed on communal violence and public disturbances throughout history. However, how have they been so successful in mobilising people, managed to regain lost credibility over time, and now be regarded as one of the most successful volunteer organisations in the world?

## RSS's Organisational Structure

Last year, RSS celebrated its 100-year journey since its founding in 1925. 100 years of growing its influence in India despite being banned by the Government of India thrice.<sup>7</sup> The organisation went from being accused of being a terrorist organisation post Gandhi's assassination to the Prime Minister's rise to power in 2013 (*Till date, RSS provides the grassroots support and acts as an election machinery for the Bharathiya Janata Party (BJP)*).

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<sup>7</sup> Prime Minister's Office (India) (2025) *PM to participate in RSS Centenary Celebrations on 1st October*. Government of India, 30 September. Available at: [https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news\\_updates/pm-to-participate-in-rss-centenary-celebrations-on-1st-october/](https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pm-to-participate-in-rss-centenary-celebrations-on-1st-october/)

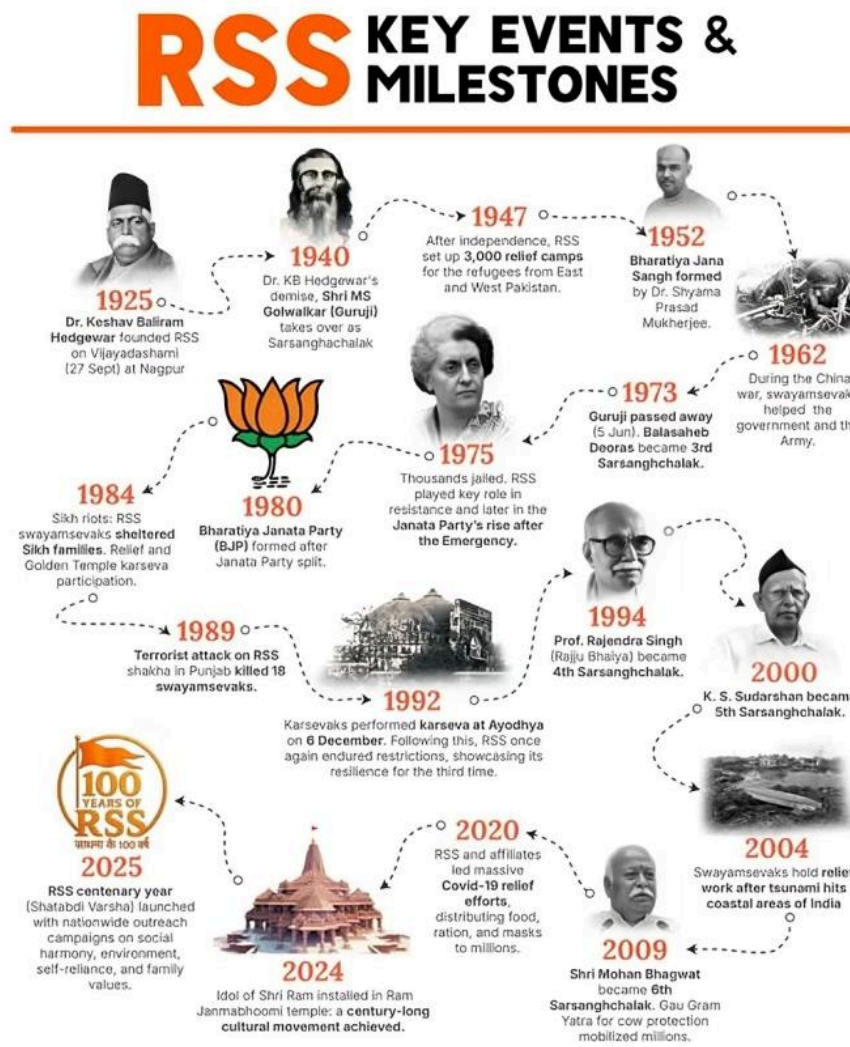
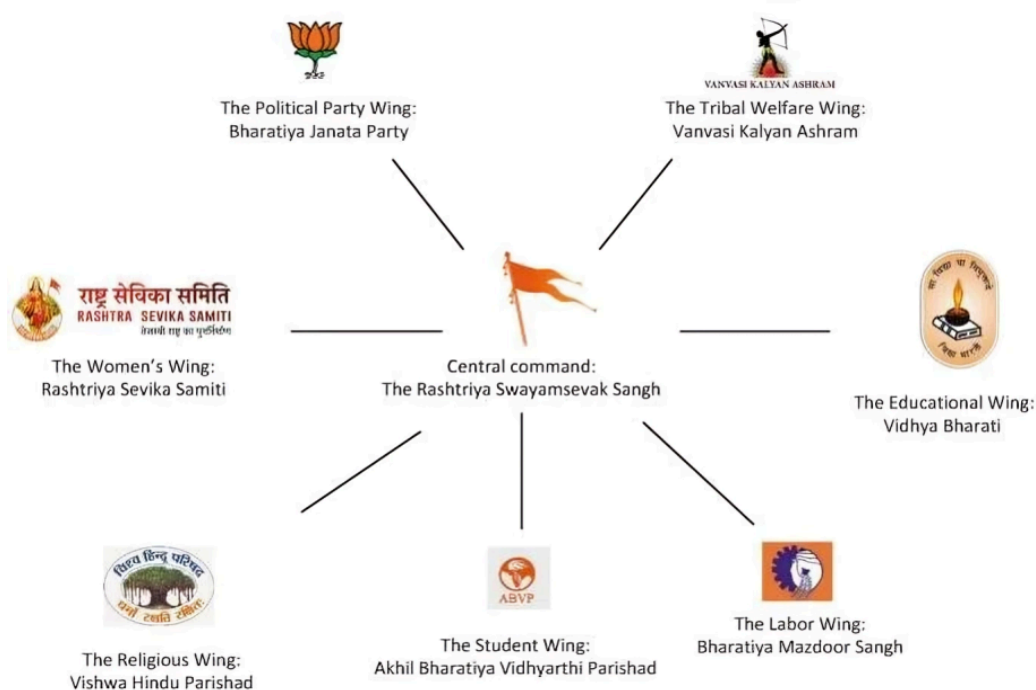


Image 2: BJP's Facebook Page shared image highlighting the RSS's Key Events and Milestones over the years.<sup>8</sup>

Many assume that Mr Narendra Modi is the sole reason for the RSS's survival and success in India. But the reality is quite the opposite: RSS is the reason behind Mr Modi's success and existence thus far. The RSS has entrenched itself so deeply within India's institutional fabric that its influence will likely continue well beyond Mr Modi's tenure. Its extensive network of affiliated organisations extends into every sphere of public life: government, the judiciary, law enforcement, media and academia, successfully embedding committed members across these institutions.

<sup>8</sup> Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (2025) 'Let's walk you through key events and milestones of RSS over the last century', Facebook post, 15 May. Available at

<https://www.facebook.com/BJP4India/posts/lets-walk-you-through-key-events-and-milestones-of-rss-over-the-last-centuryrss/1/265612218946395/>



*Image 3: Illustrates the organisational structure of the Sang Parivar. At the centre, the RSS itself serves as the central command, surrounded by several affiliated wings, including those focused on politics, religion, students, labour, women, education, and tribal welfare. (This structure is only the primary wings of the Sang Parivar)<sup>9</sup>*

The Sangh Parivar is often described as an ecosystem, but it is also a dense web of people, relationships and everyday practices that touch the lives of millions of Indians in very different ways. At its centre is the RSS, an organisation that works less like a party and more like a lifelong fraternity, shaping how its members see society, power and their own role within it. Around it sit a series of specialised bodies that carry the same worldview into politics, campuses, courtrooms, neighbourhoods and diaspora communities.

<sup>9</sup> Upadhyay, S. (2022). "(Hindu) Workers of India, Unite!": How Class Politics Shape the Consolidation of Right-Wing Hegemony in India. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97030-7\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97030-7_4)

The **Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)** is where this world intersects most visibly with the organisation. For many RSS cadres, moving into the BJP is less a career shift than a change of arena: the discipline and ideological training of daily shakhas translates into booth management, legislative priorities and how power is used once in office. This is why a change of government does not necessarily mean a change in the deeper networks and habits of governance. The people who rose together through the Sangh's structures bring their shared assumptions into ministries, legislatures and bureaucracies.

On the ground, groups like the **Vishva Hindu Parishad** and **Bajrang Dal** sit much closer to everyday anxieties and resentments. They are the ones who show up at temples, in mohallas and on the street when questions of faith, gender, love or "hurt sentiments" are framed as tests of loyalty to the community. For young men in particular, these organisations offer a sense of belonging and purpose. There is a uniform of sorts, a cause to defend, and a ladder of recognition that can turn local "leaders" into regional players. The same energy that binds a neighbourhood together can be turned against those marked as outsiders.

In universities, the **Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad** plays a similar role at an earlier stage. It is often the first political home for students who want to be active on campus but also see themselves as patriotic and rooted. Through hostel meetings, protests and student elections, ABVP doesn't just contest issues; it socialises a generation into a particular idea of nation and dissent, deciding which forms of questioning are acceptable and which are branded "anti-national." Some of these students will later turn up as lawyers, journalists, bureaucrats or MPs, carrying those early lessons with them.

Beyond India's borders, outfits such as the **Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh** and NGOs like **Sewa International** reach people who might never attend a shakha but want their children to stay connected to "Indian culture" or feel proud of their heritage. Through cultural classes, summer camps and charity work, they translate a majoritarian project into the language of identity, service and philanthropy. The result is that money, moral support and a certain narrative about India flow back into the ecosystem, reinforcing the confidence of those working within it at home.

Taken together, these organisations make the Sangh Parivar feel less like a single structure and more like a parallel social world: one in which politics, faith, service and career are braided together, and in which the line between private conviction and public power is constantly blurred. Within that world, individuals find community, purpose and mobility, even as those outside it experience its rise as a shrinking space, heightened vulnerability and a steady normalisation of exclusion.

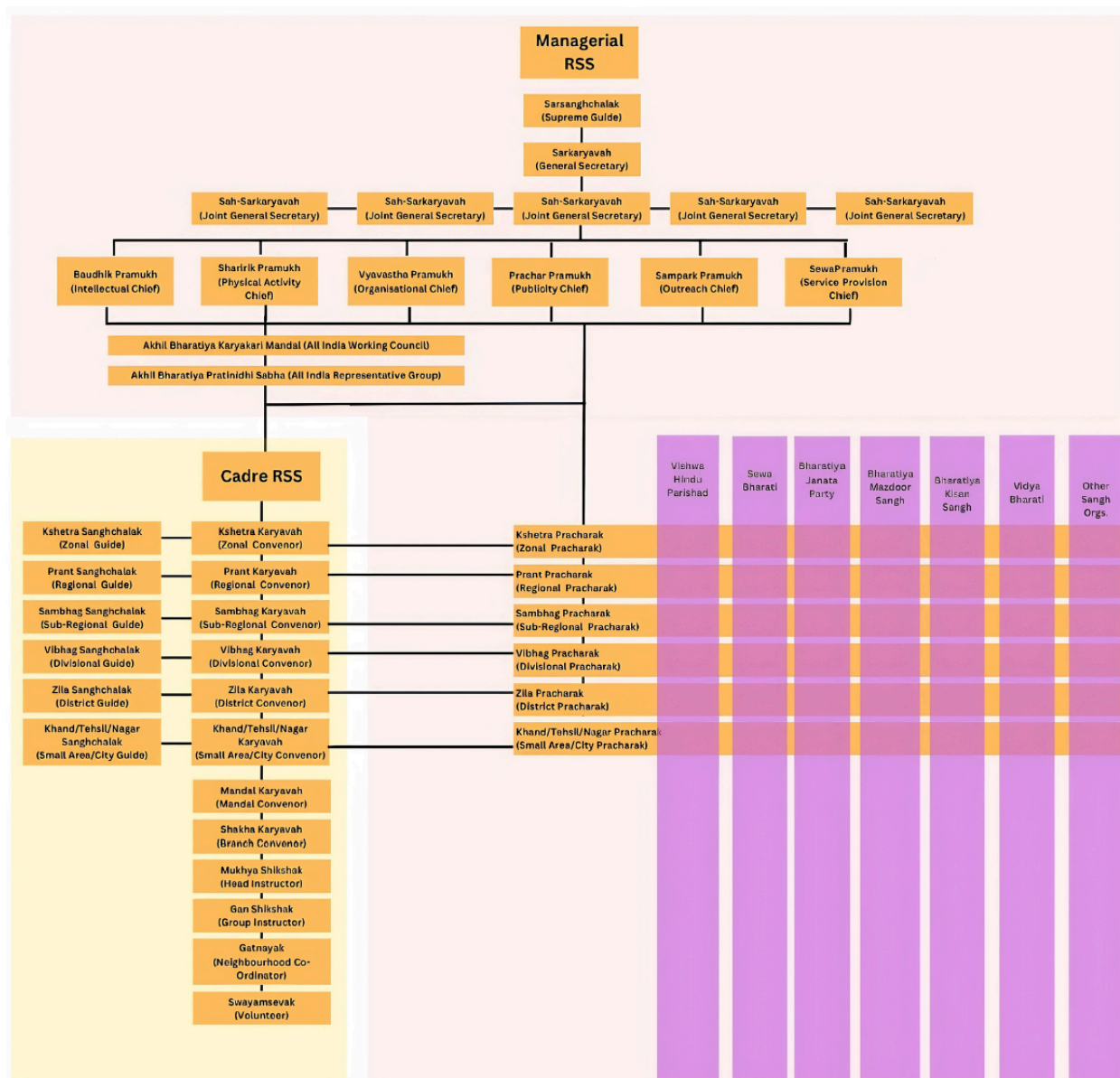


Image 4: Felix Pal's reconstruction of RSS's Organisational Structure<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Pal, F. (2025) *Similarity heuristics in the Indian far right: How the RSS obscures its operational scale*. *Journal of Right-Wing Studies*, 3(1), pp. 79–102. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/382936010\\_Similarity\\_Heuristics\\_in\\_the\\_Indian\\_Far\\_Right\\_How\\_the\\_RSS\\_Obscures\\_Its\\_Operational\\_Scale](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/382936010_Similarity_Heuristics_in_the_Indian_Far_Right_How_the_RSS_Obscures_Its_Operational_Scale)

Interestingly, RSS does not exist on paper despite being claimed as one of the largest volunteer organisations in the world by the Prime Minister.<sup>11</sup><sup>12</sup> The RSS is not a registered entity, not as an NGO, not as a religious entity and does not have any other legal presence. This fluidity of the organisational landscape that RSS possesses has enabled it to extend its tentacles and achieve significant global reach, even in Malaysia.

## How RSS was successful in building its presence in India

Their focus is on a ground-up approach; their first goal is to build a strong grassroots movement. They begin recruiting members as young as 7 years old, and training starts at the local shakhas (training centres). Even the current Prime Minister Narendra Modi started his involvement in a local shakha when he was eight years old.<sup>13</sup> The organisation also runs summer camps where volunteers train with rifles.<sup>14</sup>

The ground-up and localised approach has enabled them to indoctrinate the Hindu Nationalist ideology deep in every tenet of the society, and the fact that they start during the young and formative years of one's life helps to intensify the reach. They are in for the long game; in fact, they waited 100 years to achieve significant growth and recognition in India.

The secularism enshrined in the Indian Constitution has begun to dissipate. The RSS's strong presence in India has also significantly contributed to the increase in violence against the minorities, beef-related violence (*the view that cows are sacred and not for consumption is propagated by the RSS, and, as such, normalised violence against the Dalit community in India, the community consumes beef too*).

As an organisation historically founded and led predominantly by upper-caste Brahmins, the RSS has played a central role in normalising a Hindu majoritarian worldview that marginalises Dalits and other subordinated communities. This has fuelled recurrent Dalit resistance to RSS-aligned political projects, which are widely perceived by marginalised groups as entrenching caste hierarchies rather than advancing substantive equality.

<sup>11</sup> Pal, F. (2025) *Unveiling the RSS: Exposing the largest far-right network in history*. The Caravan Magazine, 11 December. Available at: <https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/unveiling-the-rss>

<sup>12</sup> Facebook (2025) PM Modi lauds Mohan Bhagwat, calls RSS world's biggest NGO [Video]. 12 September. Available at: [Business Today Facebook video](#)

<sup>13</sup> Gupta, A. (2024) *How Narendra Modi's cult of personality was formed by a powerful Hindu nationalist group with a dark history*. The Conversation, 23 May. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/how-narendra-modis-cult-of-personality-was-formed-by-a-powerful-hindu-nationalist-group-with-a-dark-history-225280>

<sup>14</sup> Frayer, L. and Khan, F.L. (2019) *The powerful group shaping the rise of Hindu nationalism in India*. NPR, 3 May. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2019/05/03/706808616/the-powerful-group-shaping-the-rise-of-hindu-nationalism-in-india>

Hence, the modus operandi is clear: RSS enters the system gradually and ensures that local communities subscribe deeply to the Hindu Nationalist ideology. This is the same approach they still use to expand their presence and ideology in new locations, including Malaysia.

## The RSS, making advances in South India

To understand the grave impact that the RSS might have on the Malaysian Indian Community, one has to look at how they have successfully spread the Hindutva ideology in South India, where, for the most part, it was deemed impenetrable.

Tamil Nadu has long been seen as hostile terrain for the RSS, given the state's Dravidian politics, strong anti-Brahmin currents and entrenched social justice discourse.<sup>15</sup> In response, the Sangh has adopted a different toolkit: intensive door-to-door campaigns, online propaganda, and an aggressive attempt to reframe the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) as "anti-Hindu" rather than pro-social-justice.

The State's politics was dominated by a duopoly, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) for the longest time. Only recently, the BJP's candidate Annamalai has started gaining traction. This has largely to do with the RSS making strong inroads with their grassroots mobilisation.

The recent Indian state elections in West Bengal, Kerala, Assam, Tamil Nadu, and the Union Territory, Puducherry, paint a grim picture of the advances made by the BJP-led government, not only in terms of seats won but in the gradual erosion of meaningful opposition space.<sup>16</sup> Barring Tamil Nadu, the BJP has made advances in all the other States. State after state, the BJP has translated sustained organisational work, ideological consolidation and targeted welfare messaging into either outright dominance or strategically significant footholds, even in regions once considered inhospitable to Hindutva politics.

<sup>15</sup> Manoharan, K.R. (2024) *How the South endures: Why Dravidian ideology remains the perfect foil against Hindutva*. Frontline, 8 February. Available at: <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/how-the-south-endures-dmk-aiadmk-tamil-nadu-politics-why-dravidian-ideology-perfect-foil-against-hindutva/article67803978.ece>

<sup>16</sup> Mashal, M. and Schultz, K. (2026) *Modi's Hindu nationalist party breaks through in West Bengal*. The New York Times, 4 May. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/04/world/asia/india-modi-hindu-bjp-west-bengal.html>

Reports from Tamil Nadu describe coordinated media and social media efforts to circulate disinformation, amplify communal flashpoints and mobilise sentiment around temples and conversion.<sup>17</sup> So far, the Dravidian parties' ideological and organisational strength has prevented a breakthrough comparable to Karnataka or parts of North India, but the RSS has succeeded in building pockets of support and normalising Hindutva talking points in the state's digital public sphere.

For Malaysian Indians, these dynamics do not arrive primarily through party rallies or formal organisations, but through a dense stream of short-form digital content. While satellite television still anchors many households to general Tamil entertainment (But it is highly regulated by the Tamil Nadu Government), it is TikTok and YouTube that increasingly carry clipped speeches, film trailers and political "explainers" produced in India, including overt propaganda films promoted by BJP-aligned networks.

For instance, the movie INDHUDAA, released ahead of Tamil Nadu elections, wraps a hardline majoritarian message that Hindus are being tactically converted into Christianity by the DMK Government.<sup>18</sup> Other examples include films like Dhurandar, where critics argue that the film utilises patriotic emotion to naturalise a hard-line Hindutva-infected vision of India, presenting aggressive military action against Pakistan as the obvious and necessary course of action.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Radhakrishnan R. K. (2024) 'BJP propaganda blitz: Disinformation campaign to oust DMK in Tamil Nadu', Frontline, 5 February. Available at: <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/bjp-propaganda-blitz-disinformation-campaign-to-oust-dmk-in-tamil-nadu/article67807368.ece>

<sup>18</sup> Shree TV (2026), இந்துடா திரைப்படம் | INDHUDAA FULL MOVIE IN TAMIL, 16 April. Available at: <https://youtu.be/BfGED8CYw30?si=gO3aLNVt0b-F8Dlc>

<sup>19</sup> Mannathukkaren, N. (2025) How 'Dhurandhar' is a prime example of government-embedded filmmaking. The Hindu, 19 December. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/how-dhurandhar-is-a-prime-example-of-government-embedded-film-making/article70411374.ece>

## RSS's Presence in Malaysia

At the start of this brief, I noted that there is a visible RSS-linked presence in Malaysia, a claim that often meets with scepticism. A common response online is that the RSS is rooted in North India rather than in southern states such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala or Andhra Pradesh, and therefore has little relevance to a Malaysian Indian community that is overwhelmingly Tamil, with the implicit assumption that Tamils here would be insulated from RSS-driven propaganda.<sup>20</sup>

However, network-mapping work by Science Po's Centre de recherches internationales and The Caravan's RSS Project has identified at least five Malaysian organisations with concrete, traceable links to the Sangh ecosystem in India.<sup>21</sup> One example is the Hindu Sevai Sangam in Malaysia, which investigators connected to the RSS after documenting the use of core Sangh organisational titles such as karyavah and sah sanghchalak; terms that are unusual in a predominantly Tamil environment, and after finding Golwalkar quotations and photographs resembling RSS-style shakha gatherings in its publications and social-media output.

On this basis, the researchers concluded that Hindu Sevai Sangam effectively functions as the Malaysian avatar of the Hindu Swyamsevak Sangh, illustrating that RSS influence can be embedded in local religious and cultural organisations rather than operating under an explicit party label.

Even some prominent Malaysian political leaders, such as Prof. Dr Ramasamy (Urumai Chairman), have voiced their concerns over the growing prevalence of the Hindutva Ideology in Malaysian society.<sup>22</sup> For instance, last year, a prominent politician from the ruling coalition expressed his support and endorsement of the BJP Candidate for Tamil Nadu's leadership, which was met with widespread criticism.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Krishna (@22KK\_krish) (2026) ) Post on X, 10 March. Available at [https://x.com/22KK\\_krish/status/2031344601232200133](https://x.com/22KK_krish/status/2031344601232200133)

<sup>21</sup> Pal, F. and Jaffrelot, C. (2025) *Seeing the Sangh: Mapping the largest far-right network in the world*. The RSS Project/The Caravan. Available at: <https://rssproject.caravanmagazine.in/map>

<sup>22</sup> Facebook (2025) 'Rising influence of Hindutva politics: Implications for Malaysia's Indian Community' Facebook post by Prof P. Ramasamy, 6 January. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/proframasamy/posts/rising-influence-of-hindutva-politics-implications-for-malaysias-indian-communit/1131561585001319/>

<sup>23</sup> Free Malaysia Today (2025) *Rayer denies backlash over endorsement of BJP leader at Penang conference*. Free Malaysia Today, 6 January. Available at: <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2025/01/06/rayer-denies-backlash-over-endorsement-of-bjp-leader-at-penang-conference>

Karunjattai Ilainyar Padai (Black Shirt Youth Movement) is a relatively new Periyarist coalition within the Malaysian Tamil diaspora that organises reading groups, forums and campaigns to promote anti-caste, rationalist Dravidian ideas among young Malaysian Indians. In 2025, a Tamil Rationalist Conference conducted by them was met with resentment by several right-wing Hindu Groups, as they mistook the conference for promoting atheism.

### Case Study: Temple Demolitions

The issue of Malaysian Hindu Temples without proper documentation and registration has existed since time immemorial. It's quite perplexing to see the issue blown out of proportion to fit certain narratives. The longstanding problem of undocumented and unregistered Hindu temples in Malaysia cannot be reduced to administrative neglect or "sheer ignorance".

It is rooted in a history of estate-based worship sites built under colonial conditions where Indian labourers were housed without secure land tenure, then pushed into rapidly urbanising spaces after independence with little state support for regularisation.<sup>24</sup> Temples that have anchored communities for decades can suddenly be classified as "illegal structures" when estates are redeveloped, land is sold, or zoning plans change, leaving worshippers perpetually vulnerable to demolition, relocation or legal disputes.

The conversation surrounding the legality only started taking centre stage after the 130-year-old Dewi Sri Pathrakaliamman Temple relocation request to make way for the Masjid Madani.<sup>25</sup> UMNO Youth Chief, Dr Akmal Saleh, claimed that the temple had encroached on privately owned land and questioned its authority to reject the relocation plan. What followed went beyond official enforcement.<sup>26</sup> Malay right-wing groups moved quickly to exploit the moment, launching their own "citizen" campaign to identify and act against so-called *illegal temples*.

<sup>24</sup> T Mariappan, A. S. (2018). Spatial and occupational mobility of plantation labour in Malaysia: Retrenchments, outmigration and closure of plantations, 1951-2012.

<sup>25</sup> Hassan, H. (2025) *KL temple relocation to make way for mosque to proceed following heated debate*. The Straits Times, 25 March. Available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/kl-temple-relocation-to-make-way-for-mosque-to-proceed-following-heated-debate>

<sup>26</sup> Kini TV (2025), Temple issue: Why must DBKL seek permission to sell their own land? - Akmal, 25 March. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdYInvj4jg>

Fast forward to 2026, we are still watching the same story repeat itself, only now, the stakes feel higher, and the language around these disputes is getting sharper.<sup>27</sup> The most recent wave of “*illegal temple*” campaigns came with a strong force, as the Prime Minister’s statement signalled that local councils are expected to act more firmly against unauthorised houses of worship, which gave them a strong premise to act. That eventually led to the *illegal places of worship* rally by Zamri Vinoth and co.<sup>28</sup>

In parallel, RSS-linked organisations appear to be watching closely. The rapid escalation from negotiations over one historic temple, to viral demolitions, to rallies and social media campaigns. It offers fertile ground for Hindutva-style narratives about Hindu victimhood and the need for strong, confrontational “defence” of temples. We can already hear hints of this in local rhetoric. In one recent TikTok clip, Rishikumar from Hindu Dharma Mamamandram insists that Hindus have the right to pray however they want and that respect must be reciprocal.<sup>29</sup>

During the same press conference, another speaker warned that they would not remain silent if no firm action was taken against Tamim Dahri (*the individual involved in the Rawang and Langkawi temple incident*).<sup>30</sup> He said they had “*kept quiet long enough*” and referred to an attack on their religion as akin to an attack on one’s mother. Before he could even finish that sentence, a voice from the back interrupted, shouting that “*they will slash them.*”

Individual TikTok clips by figures such as Rishikumar of Malaysia Hindu Dharma Mamandram are best understood not as isolated outbursts, but as part of a wider ecology of short-form “defence of Hinduism” content in which temple disputes, perceived insults and enforcement actions are repeatedly recorded as existential assaults on the faith and calls for vigilant retaliation.

<sup>27</sup> Soo, K. (2026) *What’s fuelling Malaysia’s temple land disputes and does Anwar face ‘no-win scenario’?* CNA, 27 February. Available at:

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-temple-land-disputes-race-religion-politics-anwar-5954531>

<sup>28</sup> Lo, T.C. (2026) Rally against ‘illegal’ temples still on, says controversial preacher. The Star, 7 February. Available at:

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2026/02/07/rally-against-039illegal039-temples-still-on-says-controversial-preacher>

<sup>29</sup> Anegunnews (2026), ‘If Hinduism is insulted, we will unite against all differences’ - Rishikumar, 10 March. Available at: <https://www.tiktok.com/@anegunnews/video/7615263973901978900? r=1& t=ZS-94ZOs1pmlFD>

<sup>30</sup> Anegunnews (2026), ‘Strict action must be taken against Tamim Dahri, Protest Rally will be held otherwise’, 9 March. Available at:

<https://www.tiktok.com/@anegunnews/video/7615253715947212053? r=1& t=ZS-94ZPvxgRVNo>

These videos circulate through dense WhatsApp and TikTok networks within the Malaysian Indian community, where emotionally charged rhetoric about “keeping quiet long enough” or equating religious criticism with an attack on one’s mother resonates with pre-existing feelings of marginalisation and spatial insecurity, thereby normalising a more confrontational, Hindutva-style politics of grievance.

Taken together, this digital repertoire signals a broader transformation in how temple disputes are publicly narrated: what were once handled primarily through quiet negotiations, legal processes and local mediation are increasingly cast as high-stakes communal showdowns, saturated with wounded pride and implied menace.

As it was pointed out recently during Karunjattai Ilainyar Padai (Rationalist Youth Movement)’s Forum on Temple Demolitions, the situation escalated due to the battle against the Malay-Muslim Right-Wing groups and the Hindu Right-Wing groups, with very few voices focused on practical solutions and far too many invested in simply sensationalising the issue.

## Impact and repercussions of RSS on Malaysia

What is concerning is how neatly this environment can be exploited by an ideology like Hindutva. When a community is constantly told that its places of worship are illegal, temporary, or negotiable, it creates a deep sense of insecurity and humiliation. That is exactly the kind of wound that RSS-linked actors know how to tap into. They arrive as protectors of Hindu “dignity” and temple rights, but they also bring with them a worldview that is openly hostile towards Muslims and other minorities.

RSS making inroads into Malaysia would not just be an “India problem” imported here; it would reshape how communities see each other, how our politics is framed, and how safe minorities feel in their own country.

## Fraying our social fabric

Malaysia works imperfectly but meaningfully because we have a basic agreement: we will live peacefully and respect each other's cultures and beliefs. RSS's Hindutva ideology is built on the opposite instinct: Hindu supremacy, majoritarian entitlement, and a deep suspicion towards Muslims. If that worldview starts to embed itself in parts of our Hindu community here, it can harden how some Hindus view their Muslim neighbours, and in turn how Muslims view Hindus.

Once politics and identity are narrated as "us versus them", it doesn't take much, a temple issue, a court case, a viral clip, for ordinary disagreements to be read as civilisational battles. We have seen this movie play out in India in the form of hate speech, mob violence, and discriminatory laws. We cannot pretend that importing the same ideological software here will somehow produce different outcomes.

## Squeezing an already marginalised community

There is another cost that often gets missed. Malaysian Hindus are already a small, frequently marginalised minority grappling with poverty, displacement, and everyday discrimination. RSS-linked narratives risk functioning as a destructive third space for Malaysian Indian youths: instead of offering support and opportunity, they channel frustration and exclusion into grievances and, at the margins, a readiness to endorse or excuse violence.

If these narratives gain traction here, they will not only radicalise a fringe; they will also make an already small, frequently marginalised community appear suspect in the eyes of others, further shrinking the legitimate spaces in which Indian youths can safely belong.

We are already seeing this dynamic in the public back-and-forth between groups like the Malaysian Consultative Council of Islamic Organisation (MAPIM) and the Global Human Rights Federation (GHRF) over calls to "ban RSS" and to monitor Hindutva influence.<sup>31</sup> This kind of NGO-to-NGO confrontation leaves very little room for a calm, institutionally anchored conversation about real risks.

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<sup>31</sup> FocusM (2025) Human rights NGO slams MAPIM for unfounded fearmongering, perpetuating Hindu-phobia. Focus Malaysia, 17 May. Available at: <https://focusmalaysia.my/human-rights-ngo-slams-mapim-for-unfounded-fearmongering-perpetuating-hindu-phobia/>

On one hand, treating all “Hindutva influence” as a security threat can reinforce Hindu fears that any call for rights or sympathy with India will automatically be seen as extremism. At the same time, there are real concerns about an ideology linked to violence and exclusion in India that cannot be ignored.

On the other hand, blanket rejection of all concern as fearmongering makes it difficult to talk honestly about documented RSS-linked networks and polarising digital content without being accused of attacking Hindu religious life. There is a real fear that sloppy language and sweeping accusations will blur the line between a dangerous political project and ordinary Hindu religious life.

If we are not careful, Hindus in Malaysia could end up punished twice over: once by being targeted by an imported majoritarian ideology, and again by being treated as if they all support it. The result is a noisy binary: Hindutva as an existential civilisational threat versus Hindutva concerns as nothing more than bigotry against Hindus.

That vacuum created is precisely what Hindutva-aligned actors know how to work with. When Muslim NGOs and Hindu NGOs are locked in a public blame game, the ideological entrepreneurs in the middle can recast every criticism about RSS as proof that “Hindus are under siege,” while pointing to MAPIM’s rhetoric to validate a narrative of Muslim hostility.

The reality is that RSS does not arrive with a label. It comes dressed up as culture, charity, “values”, children’s classes, and leadership training. By the time people notice the ideology beneath the surface, networks are already embedded in temples, NGOs, and community spaces. The question for Malaysia is whether we are willing to wait until something breaks or act early with nuance. That means monitoring foreign ideological influence, but it also means defending our Hindu community from being caricatured, and insisting that spiritual life not be hijacked by political extremism dressed up as faith.

## Reflections of RSS in Malaysia

Legitimate Hindu grievances in Malaysia now sit uncomfortably close to a set of imported majoritarian narratives that are eager to speak in the community's name. If institutions do not move quickly and carefully, the same messages that are currently being tested on Malaysian Hindus will, over time, begin to claim to speak for them. When messages are wrapped in familiar language: Tamil pride, bhakti, "defend temples", culture and pride, it becomes much harder to tell where genuine concern for our community ends and imported majoritarian politics begins. Many will not have the cognitive distance to pause and ask: Is this actually about protecting Hindus in Malaysia, or about making us foot soldiers for someone else's project?

It is important to acknowledge why the anger is rising. When temples are demolished, when places of worship are repeatedly labelled 'illegal', and when politicians score points off these disputes, it is entirely predictable that many will feel a need to stand up and fight back. That instinct, in itself, is not the problem. The danger lies in how that very hurt becomes an entry point for RSS-aligned narratives that promise dignity and protection, while gradually normalising a harder, more aggressive Hindutva ideology as the only credible response.

The strategic risk is how easily the language of self-respect can slide into the language of supremacy. One day, the demand is: "Please respect our temples and our way of praying." The next applause is directed at rhetoric about "slashing" those who touch "our mother". Somewhere along that path, we stop seeing the human being on the other side, whether Muslim, Christian, or even another Hindu, who simply disagrees with us and start seeing them only as enemies.

The real test is this: can we fight for our rights, our temples, our children's future, without reproducing the very logic that has hurt us? Can we insist on secure places of worship, fair treatment, and meaningful consultation, while also drawing a hard line against calls for violence, dehumanising language, and blind loyalty to foreign political movements? If the answer is no, then RSS will not just change "Malaysia" in the abstract; it will change who we become as Malaysian Hindus.

This is precisely why the issue must be framed not only as an intra-community concern, but as a strategic warning for Malaysia's social cohesion. Legitimate Hindu grievances are at risk of being channelled and reshaped by foreign majoritarian narratives in ways that deepen mistrust, harden communal boundaries and erode the possibility of a shared civic future.

Messages wrapped in familiar narratives: Tamil pride, bhakti, 'defend temples', culture and pride will continue to circulate; however, the heavy task is on institutions and community leaders, as well as educators, to build the civic capacity to question each time: whose interests does this really serve, and what kind of Malaysia does it push us towards? If we can hold on to that question, then maybe we stand a chance of protecting both our community and the idea of a country where no one has to live in fear of someone else's God.

## Policy Recommendations

Protecting Malaysian Indian youths from "destructive third spaces" requires investing in safe, alternative environments where they can belong without being pulled towards gangs or hyper-politicised religious networks. This means prioritising schools, community centres and arts or sports programmes in high-risk localities.

Besides that, it is important to embed critical media literacy modules in schools and universities, in all languages. This would allow young people to recognise imported hate narratives, dehumanising language and disinformation. Additionally, ample support should be provided to community-led initiatives that seek to create constructive third spaces centred on mentorship, skills development, and civic engagement.

Strengthening information integrity on temple and identity issues will be crucial to preventing local disputes from being recast as communal issues that undermine social cohesion. One step is to establish a rapid, multilingual (BM, Tamil, English) clarification mechanism for temple land disputes and other sensitive incidents. This would enable local councils and State Excos to issue timely factual explanations before rumours harden communal narratives.

In parallel, authorities should work with platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and Meta to flag and down-rank content that explicitly calls for violence or dehumanises other faiths. The focus should be geared towards harmful behaviours such as calls to harm, doxxing and coordinated harassment.

Lastly, independent monitoring of Hindutva-linked content in Malaysia modelled on civil-society “hate and extremism” trackers in the US and Europe would give policymakers a clearer evidence base on trends, rather than leaving them dependent on anecdote or NGO-to-NGO accusations when assessing risk.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

RSS and Hindutva in Malaysia shouldn't trigger panic, but should prompt us to pay attention. It is important to notice how easily genuine hurt can be channelled into a script written somewhere else. How quickly our neighbours can start to look like our enemies, and how tempting it is to answer one form of extremism with another.


These concerns are grounded in observable patterns: the way Hindutva has reshaped politics and everyday life in India. The early echoes are already visible in Malaysia, on how the temple demolition issue is being framed, and how it is being weaponised across communal lines. There lies a real risk that Hindutva will further radicalise segments of the Malaysian Hindu Community and enlist them into an overseas project, similar to what has been done in the United States.

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<sup>32</sup> Anti-Defamation League (ADL) (n.d.) H.E.A.T. Map. Available at: <https://www.adl.org/resources/tools-to-track-hate/heat-map>

At the same time, if we overreact with sloppy accusations and blanket bans that blur the line between violent ideology and ordinary Hindu life, we will push more people into a defensive corner and make honest conversation even harder. Naming the problem early and carefully is the only way to avoid both of these traps.

We still have room to choose differently. We can demand better laws and better enforcement on temple issues without cheering on bulldozers. We can reject Hindutva without swallowing Hindu-phobia. We can listen to the fears of Muslims, Hindus and everyone else in this country without turning each other into enemies.

The fight is not between “Hindus and Muslims”, or “India and Malaysia”; it is between those who want to live together with dignity, and those who are invested in tearing that possibility apart. Which side we strengthen, in the end, is still up to us. 

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