

M. S. Golwalkar: Architect of Hindutva Ideology and Its Evolution in Modern India

Dr. Ravi Kant Singh^{1*}, Prof. Sanjeev Kumar²

¹Post-Doctoral Fellow I.C.S.R, Mob- 9454040047, ORCID- 0009-0002-8539-3650,

Email: Ravikantsingh3220@gmail.com

²Department of History, Vasanta College for Women Rajghat Varanasi, Email: Sanjeev_kumar68@hotmail.com,

Mob- 9415986243, ORCID- 0009-0004-1870-3940

***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Ravi Kant Singh

* Email: Ravikantsingh3220@gmail.com

Abstract

Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, revered as Guruji, stands as one of the most influential figures in the consolidation and expansion of Hindutva, a doctrine that has profoundly shaped India's socio-political fabric. As the second Sarsanghchalak (chief) of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (1940-1973), Golwalkar's ideological contributions, primarily through his seminal works *Bunch of Thoughts* and *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, articulated a distinct vision of Indian nationhood, deeply rooted in the primacy of Hindu cultural supremacy. This paper delves into Golwalkar's pivotal role in not only shaping the intellectual and organizational contours of Hindutva but also in embedding it within the national discourse on identity, nationalism, and religious majoritarianism. By dissecting his philosophical tenets, this study critically examines the evolution of Hindutva from a culturally oriented ideology to an expansive political doctrine, tracing its trajectory from Golwalkar's leadership of the RSS to its modern-day expression in India's contemporary politics. In doing so, the paper illuminates the enduring influence of Golwalkar's thoughts on the Hindutva movement and their profound implications for India's pluralistic democracy.

Introduction

Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, born in 1906, emerged as a crucial architect of Hindutva, a political and cultural force that has significantly reshaped the ideological landscape of postcolonial India. Serving as the ideological helm of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) from 1940 to 1973, Golwalkar spearheaded the institutionalization of Hindutva as not merely a reactionary doctrine but as a comprehensive worldview that envisioned India as a *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu Nation). His conception of nationhood, intricately tied to a distinct form of cultural nationalism, Culture nationalism, meant attachment to Indian civilization, conduct, behavior e.t.c, asserted that the essence of Indian identity was inextricably bound to Hindu civilizational values and spiritual traditions. In Golwalkar's view, India's societal cohesion and survival hinged on the unity of the Hindu community, a unity he believed was threatened by external adversaries, such as colonial powers, and internal challenges posed by religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians.

This paper seeks to analyze Golwalkar's enduring contributions to the formulation and propagation of Hindutva ideology, exploring how his ideas laid the foundation for a transformative socio-political movement that continues to reverberate through India's contemporary polity. By positioning Golwalkar as a central figure in the evolution of Hindutva, the study examines the ideological nuances and strategic approaches he employed to translate cultural nationalism into a dynamic force capable of shaping national identity, societal structures, and political discourse in India.

Golwalkar's Early Influences and Ideological Foundations

Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar's ideological framework was deeply rooted in the intellectual and philosophical tenets established by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, whose concept of *Hindutva* sharply distinguished between Hindus as the true cultural nationals of India and other communities as peripheral inhabitants. However, where Savarkar approached Hindu identity from a primarily historical and political lens, Golwalkar expanded this notion, infusing it with spiritual, metaphysical, and cultural dimensions drawn from India's rich tapestry of Hindu scriptures, Vedic traditions, and spiritual practices. This amalgamation of religious philosophy with nationalist ideology provided Golwalkar's vision with a depth that resonated profoundly within the socio-religious fabric of India.

Golwalkar's early philosophical grounding was heavily shaped by his religious upbringing, his rigorous engagement with Indian spiritual traditions, and his formative association with Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS. Hedgewar's focus on disciplined organization and the revival of a collective Hindu consciousness laid the foundation for Golwalkar to develop and expand the RSS into a mass movement centered on Hindutva's ideological tenets. Through his interpretation of Hindu scriptures, Golwalkar sought to reframe Hinduism not merely as a religion but as the bedrock of Indian civilization, encompassing the cultural, ethical, and spiritual essence of the nation. In his pivotal work *We or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939), Golwalkar set forth a comprehensive vision of India as an inherently Hindu nation, wherein the cultural and religious ethos of the majority community should define the nation's identity and destiny. His

conceptualization of Indian nationhood was not a pluralistic or inclusive vision but one that advocated for the assimilation of religious minorities—particularly Muslims and Christians—into the dominant Hindu culture. Those unwilling to integrate, according to Golwalkar's framework, would be relegated to the status of second-class citizens, a position that reflected his exclusionary and homogenizing approach to national identity. In his view, the survival and flourishing of the Indian nation were contingent upon the hegemony of Hindu values, which he saw as under siege from both external aggressors and internal dissidents.

Hindutva and Nationalism: Golwalkar's Vision

Golwalkar's conceptualization of Hindutva was deeply anchored in the principles of cultural nationalism, wherein the essence of Indian identity was viewed as inextricably linked to the spiritual and civilizational continuity of Hinduism. For Golwalkar, the nation could not be understood merely as a geographical or political entity but rather as a manifestation of a millennia-old cultural ethos that was exclusively Hindu in character. His vision of India as a *Hindu Rashtra* derived from the belief that the soul of the nation was intrinsically embedded in the religious, ethical, and cultural values of Sanatan civilization, which he saw as the bedrock of Indian identity. Consequently, any attempt to define India outside the parameters of this Hindu cultural heritage was, in Golwalkar's view, an existential threat to the nation itself. In his writings, Golwalkar repeatedly emphasised the destructive impact of foreign powers, particularly pointing to Islamic and Western colonial invasions as forces that disrupted the natural unity and integrity of India's cultural and religious landscape. These external invaders, he argued, not only imposed foreign rule but also sought to undermine the nation's spiritual foundations by introducing foreign ideologies, such as Christianity, Marxism, colonialism, religious systems and divisive political structures. In Golwalkar's framework, these invasions represented not only military conquests but also cultural assaults that fragmented the cohesive Hindu identity that had historically unified the Indian subcontinent.

A central element of Golwalkar's ideological vision was his unwavering emphasis on the imperative of Hindu unity. He saw the disunity among Hindus, particularly their fragmentation along caste, regional, and sectarian lines, as a vulnerability that foreign powers had historically exploited to weaken the nation. In his view, only a unified Hindu society, transcending internal divisions and bound together by a shared cultural consciousness, could resist external threats and reclaim India's lost grandeur. Golwalkar's notion of unity was not merely organizational or political but deeply spiritual, rooted in a collective reawakening of Hindu values and traditions that had been eroded over centuries of foreign domination. Golwalkar's interpretation of Hindutva transcended the boundaries of mere political ideology, elevating it to a civilizational mission aimed at restoring India's rightful place in the world as a global spiritual leader. He believed that the Hindu community, once unified and revitalized, had the potential to lead not only India but also the entire world toward a higher moral and spiritual order. In this sense, Golwalkar's Hindutva was a call for a cultural renaissance, an awakening of Hindu dharma that would not only heal the fractures within Indian society but also establish a universal framework for human progress rooted in the ancient wisdom of Hindu civilization. This reawakening, he argued, was the key to overcoming the historical injustices of foreign rule and reclaiming India's destiny as a beacon of spiritual and cultural leadership.

Golwalkar's Legacy in the Evolution of Hindutva

Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar's tenure as the Sarsanghchalak of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) from 1940 to 1973 marked a transformative period in the consolidation and expansion of Hindutva as a mass socio-political force. Under his strategic leadership, the RSS evolved from a relatively small cadre-based organization into a vast, disciplined movement, penetrating the socio-political fabric of India and deeply influencing its cultural and ideological discourse. Golwalkar's vision for the RSS extended far beyond its initial organizational structure, reimagining it as a mass movement with a national reach, equipped to channel the principles of Hindutva into the broader society. His focus on ideological purity and organizational discipline ensured that the RSS became the principal vehicle for disseminating the tenets of Hindutva throughout India.

A key aspect of Golwalkar's leadership was his development of a rigorous ideological training program for RSS pracharaks (full-time workers), which played a pivotal role in embedding the Hindutva worldview within the organization's rank and file. Through systematic training, Golwalkar ensured that RSS members internalized a worldview that framed Hindu cultural dominance as essential to India's national identity. He emphasized the role of the RSS not just as a social organization but as the custodian of Hindu culture, morality, and spirituality, tasked with defending and promoting these values in the face of perceived external and internal threats. This institutionalized ideological framework ensured the longevity and coherence of the Hindutva ideology, enabling the RSS to sustain its influence over generations of pracharaks and the wider community. Golwalkar's intellectual legacy extended beyond the RSS into the political sphere as well, laying the foundation for the emergence of the Jana Sangh as the political arm of the larger Sangh Parivar (the family of organisations affiliated with the RSS). While Golwalkar himself stayed away from direct electoral politics, his writings and philosophical outlook became fundamental to the ideological foundations of the BJP. The BJP's political strategies and rhetoric, particularly under the leadership of people like Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Narendra Modi, reflect key elements of Golwalkar's thought, particularly the emphasis on Hindu unity, cultural nationalism, and India's identity as inherently linked to Hindu heritage. Golwalkar's legacy in shaping the evolution of Hindutva is most evident in the

way his ideas continue to resonate within India's contemporary political landscape. His influence on the BJP, the RSS, and other Sangh Parivar affiliates has ensured that Hindutva remains a dominant force in Indian politics, particularly through its emphasis on Hindu cultural primacy, the marginalization of religious minorities, and the pursuit of a homogenized national identity. Golwalkar's vision of Hindutva, which once operated on the fringes of Indian political discourse, has now become a central pillar of mainstream politics, with profound implications for the trajectory of India's democracy, governance, and societal cohesion.

The Evolution of Hindutva in Contemporary Indian Politics

Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar's vision of Hindutva has undergone a profound transformation over the decades, evolving from a primarily cultural and social ideology into a dominant political force that has reshaped the contours of modern Indian politics. Initially conceived as a framework for fostering Hindu cultural revival and unity, Golwalkar's Hindutva has, over time, permeated the political mainstream, particularly through the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has emerged as the political embodiment of the ideological goals of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Since the 1990s, the BJP has been instrumental in translating the core tenets of Hindutva into political action, positioning itself as a champion of Hindu identity and cultural nationalism, thus transforming the ideological foundations laid by Golwalkar into tangible political power.

Under the leadership of Narendra Modi, a former RSS pracharak whose political and ideological training was steeped in the doctrines advanced by Golwalkar, the BJP has aggressively pursued a political agenda that mirrors many aspects of Golwalkar's vision. Modi's tenure as both Chief Minister of Gujarat and later as Prime Minister of India has seen a marked emphasis on Hindutva's core principles, including the assertion of a Hindu-centric national identity, the promotion of cultural nationalism, and the marginalization of minority communities, particularly Muslims. This evolution from a socio-cultural movement to a powerful political force represents the culmination of Golwalkar's long-term strategy of embedding Hindutva into the fabric of Indian society, ensuring that it would not merely be a peripheral ideology but a central narrative in the national discourse.

Golwalkar's legacy can be clearly seen in contemporary political debates involving issues such as cow protection, the preservation of Hindu religious symbols, and the reconstruction of temples, most notably in the Ram Janma-bhoomi movement. The Ram Janma-bhoomi–Babri-Masjid dispute, which stirred Hindu nationalist sentiment in the late 20th century, became an issue central to Hindutva politics, representing a direct expression of Golwalkar's ideas about reclaiming India's cultural heritage from the perceived encroachments of alien religious communities. The final demolition of the Babri Masjid (6 December 1992) and the political momentum generated by the temple reconstruction (22 January 2024) movement can be traced to Golwalkar's emphasis on Hindu unity and the centrality of Hindu symbols in the nation's cultural and political identity. Moreover, the growing influence of majoritarian politics in India, characterized by policies that prioritize the interests of the Hindu majority and attempts to establish Hindu cultural dominance, echoes Golwalkar's vision of a homogenous national identity. The BJP's pursuit of policies reflecting a Hindu-centric worldview—whether through legislative measures such as the cow protection law, the promotion of Sanskrit and Hindu rituals in public institutions (Saraswati Shishu Vidya Mandir), or efforts to more closely align state governance with Hindu religious norms (Kumbh events, mass celebration of Hindu festivals, etc.)—reflects the lasting influence of Golwalkar's ideas on contemporary Indian politics. The blurring of boundaries between state and religion, as well as the increasing marginalization of religious minorities, have become hallmarks of this majoritarian turn, reflecting Golwalkar's belief that India's national identity should be rooted in its Hindu civilizational heritage.

In this light, the evolution of Hindutva from a cultural ideology to a major political force is not just a result of the BJP's electoral success, but a reflection of Golwalkar's lasting influence on the trajectory of Indian society and governance. His vision of India as a Hindu nation (Hindu Rashtra implies a cultural-geographical entity) has found expression in the policies, rhetoric and political strategies of the contemporary BJP, ensuring that Hindutva remains not only a potent political ideology but also a driving force behind the reshaping of India's pluralistic democracy.

Criticism and Controversies Surrounding Golwalkar's Ideology

Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar's ideology has been the subject of intense criticism and controversy, primarily due to its promotion of an exclusionary and monolithic vision of Indian nationhood, wherein the cultural and religious identity of the Hindu majority is elevated above the pluralistic and diverse fabric that has historically defined Indian society. Golwalkar's emphasis on cultural nationalism, rooted in Hindu civilizational supremacy, has been critiqued for fostering a narrow and sectarian interpretation of Indian identity, which, in the eyes of many, undermines the rich tapestry of religious, linguistic, and ethnic diversity that constitutes the Indian nation. His vision of India as a *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu Nation) has often been interpreted as fundamentally incompatible with the secular and inclusive ideals that are enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

One of the most contentious aspects of Golwalkar's ideology is his treatment of religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians, whom he regarded as outsiders and historical aggressors against the unity of the Hindu nation. His writings, especially in works like *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, have been labeled as xenophobic and deeply communal, as they propagate the idea that these religious communities represent an existential threat to the cultural and religious unity of

India. Golwalkar's advocacy for the assimilation of minorities into the Hindu fold—or their relegation to second-class citizenship if unwilling to conform—has been widely condemned for promoting a divisive and majoritarian vision of society. Critics argue that his views foster religious intolerance and deepen communal fault lines, contributing to the rise of sectarian violence and tensions in contemporary India. Furthermore, Golwalkar's vision of a Hindu nation is often seen as fundamentally incompatible with the secular democratic framework outlined in the Constitution of India, which guarantees equal rights and protections to all citizens regardless of their religious or cultural background, as explained by current RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat in many of his lectures. His emphasis on Hindu cultural supremacy, with its marginalisation of non-Hindu communities, is seen by many as an affront to the constitutional principles of secularism, pluralism and equality. Critics argue that Golwalkar's Hindutva ideology, in seeking to establish India's identity solely in terms of its Hindu heritage, threatens to erode the fundamental values of Indian democracy and promote a politics of exclusion. This tension between Golwalkar's vision and the constitutional framework has led to intense debate about the role of religion in public life and the boundaries between cultural identity and political governance.

In addition to these ideological critiques, Golwalkar's emphasis on Hindu unity and discipline has been seen by many as a form of authoritarianism, where unity is enforced through the exclusion or marginalization of those who do not conform to the Hindutva ideal. While Golwalkar envisioned a cohesive and disciplined Hindu society as the cornerstone of national strength, critics contend that this vision relies on the suppression of dissenting voices and the denial of space for alternative identities and worldviews. This homogenizing impulse, they argue, runs counter to the inclusive and democratic ethos that allows for the coexistence of diverse cultures, faiths, and opinions within the Indian state. The political mobilization of Hindutva-oriented parties, particularly the BJP, has often drawn on Golwalkar's ideas, further intensifying the controversies surrounding his legacy. His critics assert that Golwalkar's ideology has been instrumentalized to justify policies and political strategies that privilege the Hindu majority at the expense of minority rights and social cohesion. From cow protection laws to the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, many of the contemporary issues that have fueled religious polarization in India can be traced back to the ideological foundations laid by Golwalkar. His critics argue that the adoption of his ideas in the political arena has exacerbated communal tensions, contributing to the rise of majoritarianism and sectarian violence.

In this light, Golwalkar's legacy remains deeply polarised. While his supporters regard him as a visionary who sought to unify and strengthen Hindu society, he has been accused of being a follower of Bal Gangadhar Tilak. His critics see him as someone whose exclusivist ideology has led to divisions and undermined the pluralistic ideals central to India's democratic identity. The ongoing debate over Golwalkar's views reflects broader tensions within Indian society about the nature of national identity, the role of religion in public life, and the future of secularism in the world's largest democracy.

Conclusion

Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar occupies a paradoxical yet undeniably influential position in the historical trajectory of modern India. His contributions to the development and crystallization of Hindutva ideology have left an indelible mark on the nation's socio-political and cultural landscape, positioning him as both a key architect of Hindu nationalism and a deeply polarizing figure. Golwalkar's vision, which was centered on the principles of cultural nationalism and the unity of the Hindu community, aimed to restore what he saw as the ancient cultural and spiritual identity of India. His belief that the nation's integrity and strength could only be secured through the assertion of Hindu primacy shaped the ideological course of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliates, leaving a legacy that extends far beyond his lifetime. However, Golwalkar's ideological framework, while appealing to certain sections of Hindu society, has been sharply criticized for its exclusionary and majoritarian stance, particularly toward religious minorities. His portrayal of Muslims and Christians as external threats to the nation's cultural fabric and his advocacy for their assimilation into a Hindu-centric identity have made him a deeply contentious figure. While Golwalkar's emphasis on unity and national revival resonates with those who seek to affirm India's Hindu heritage, his marginalization of non-Hindu communities has sparked concerns about the erosion of secularism, pluralism, and democratic inclusivity in contemporary India. The evolution of Hindutva from a socio-cultural ideology into a dominant political force underscores Golwalkar's enduring influence on the course of Indian history. His ideological vision, carried forward by the RSS and its political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has redefined the contours of Indian politics, particularly in the post-1990s era. Under the leadership of figures like Narendra Modi, many of Golwalkar's ideas—especially the assertion of Hindu identity and the promotion of cultural nationalism—have become central to political rhetoric and policy-making in the 21st century. Golwalkar's legacy, therefore, is not confined to the past; it continues to actively shape India's political discourse, governance, and societal structures in ways that are both transformative and divisive. In conclusion, while Golwalkar's ideological contributions to Hindutva have made him a seminal figure in the history of modern India, the controversies surrounding his exclusionary views on minorities ensure that his legacy remains one of profound complexity. His influence on the rise of Hindutva as a political force is indisputable, yet the debates about the future of Indian democracy, secularism, and pluralism will continue to be shaped by both the support and criticism of the ideas he championed. Thus, Golwalkar's role in shaping India's national identity and political landscape remains an ongoing and contested chapter in the nation's history.

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