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To cite this article: Felix Pal (2020): Why Muslims join the Muslim wing of the RSS, Contemporary South Asia, DOI: [10.1080/09584935.2020.1776219](https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2020.1776219)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2020.1776219>



Published online: 07 Jun 2020.



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Why Muslims join the Muslim wing of the RSS

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ABSTRACT

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) – the paramilitary corps that animates the contemporary Indian Hindu nationalist movement – increasingly relies on its Muslim wing to bolster its denials of extremism. The RSS claims hold that crowds of Muslims join its Muslim wing, the Muslim Rashtriya Manch, through organic nationalist awakenings that imply tacit acceptance of the RSS' Hindu nationalist agenda. Based on a year of interview-based research in North and West India with more than 80 Manch members, defectors, critics and leaders, I provide empirical evidence that challenges the claim that the RSS is winning over Muslim minds. Instead, I suggest that Muslims join for largely instrumental reasons; for material reward and security, but also to rebuke traditional Muslim centres of power and to draw close to the charismatic leadership of Manch leader Indresh Kumar. While discussions of motivations are famously fraught, I rely on interviews not to conclusively list membership motivations, but to assess the claims made by the RSS. As Hindu nationalists consolidate and intensify their activities after the 2019 general election, understanding how the RSS does or does not 'win over' India's Muslim communities is necessary groundwork to address the position of minorities in a Hindu nationalist future.

KEYWORDS

Hindu nationalism; Indian Muslims; ethnic conflict; ethnic nationalism

Muslims in India do not generally join the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) Muslim wing because they ascribe to the paramilitary corps' famously visceral, vitriolic and violent brand of Hindu nationalism. Considering Hindu nationalist animosity towards India's Muslims, this ideological reluctance is relatively intuitive (see Vanaik 2017; Jaffrelot 1993; Mathur 2008). Those who join the Muslim wing, the Muslim Rashtriya Manch, however, do so rebuking the failings of traditional centres of North Indian Muslim power, anticipating material reward, gravitating towards the charisma of RSS *pracharak* (preacher) Indresh Kumar, or hoping that membership will soothe the chafing of exclusion.

By detailing these motivations, I provide empirical evidence challenging the ideological claims of the Hindu right; that they are *winning over* Indian Muslims.¹ Despite limited discussions of the Manch (Reyaz 2019; Andersen and Damle 2018), explanations of motivations for Muslims in the Hindu right remain reliant on intuition rather than evidence. Based on extensive interview-based fieldwork, in this paper I present a non-exhaustive typology of reasons Muslims join the Muslim Rashtriya Manch, the Muslim wing of the RSS. Manch members join for a wide variety of mutually constitutive, malleable, contradictory and deniable reasons. Rather than attempt to conclusively chart these, I provide non-exhaustive descriptions of some motivations, suggesting that it is rarely for the reasons claimed by the Hindu right.

In this article, I set aside the larger questions of why the Manch exists or, why the RSS needs Muslim friends. I am also less interested in detailing the many reasons why we would not expect to see Muslims join the RSS, as these have been extensively covered elsewhere (for example

Noorani 2019; Afzal 2014; Sirnate 2007). Rather, my aim here is tightly limited; to provide evidentiary clout to the widely (see Anwar 2014; Raza 2014) and intuitively held view that the Manch is not what it says it is. How can Muslims join the RSS, an organisation famously predicated on violence against Muslim communities? To suggest that Muslims are unlikely to join the RSS is not to fall for a groupist fallacy, nor to assume the homogeneity of Indian Muslim political behaviour. It is merely to suggest that with striking consistency, diverse Muslim communities have rejected the Hindu right electorally, religiously and politically (Susewind and Dhattiwala 2014; Afzal 2014).

Understanding diverse motivations for Manch membership is crucial to assess the truth claims of the Hindu right; that Muslims are joining the RSS because they believe in its ideological positions. To grasp the importance of challenging these claims we should consider what it would mean to accept them. Accepting claims that more and more Muslims join the RSS because they agree with its ideological positions is to accept that the Hindu right is harvesting support and consent from the very people it is defined against. When we agree that this is plausible we bolster the logic of Hindu nationalist hegemony. We become part of a creeping cultural consensus that declares that the problem with Hindu nationalism is not that it excludes, occupies, and kills Muslim communities, but that it hasn't 'won them over' yet. By accepting that Muslims believe in Hindu nationalism in any meaningful way, we lose ground to the aspirational cultural hegemony of the Hindu right that turns their foundational violence into a public relations exercise.

If the goal is to understand this violence in order to mitigate it, we must deeply question the public claims presented by its perpetrators. Discussing alternate motivations for Manch membership is crucial because their omission from the public transcript of the RSS suggests these claims are, at best incomplete, at worst, fabricated. The RSS' claims of organic Muslim conversion to the ideologies of the Hindu right are inconsistent with my research, during which I found little reason to believe that this was the case. Rather, during my interviews, I encountered a wide range of evidence that directly contradicted the claim that the RSS was *winning over* Muslim minds. The existence of clear material incentives, charismatic leadership, security concerns and status quo frustration, and a marked lack of my participants' ideological affinity with the RSS is reason enough to question these claims.

In 2018–2019, I conducted 85 semi-structured interviews with 70 participants, of which 57 were Manch members; the remainder being defectors, public critics of the Manch, or RSS volunteers. Interviews, conducted in Hindi, Urdu and English, ranged from half an hour to three hours, with a slim majority of these being conducted in Delhi; the rest being split between Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat, often in large urban centres like Lucknow, Mumbai and Ahmedabad. When granted permission to do so, I recorded interviews that were then transcribed. For those participants uncomfortable with recording, I was granted permission to take notes concurrently with the interview. The names of all participants cited in this paper have been changed consensually. For those whose biographical details identify them, the name of their location has been switched with that of a similarly sized town or city within 200 km.

I attended 12 major Manch events, which is a reflection on the infrequency of these programmes, rather than my disinclination to attend more. Field notes from participant observation at rallies, marches, prayer meets, intellectual gatherings and organisational meetings form a large part of my account. I was specifically invited to most of these events by Manch leaders eager for me to see their activities. Accordingly, my field notes on these occasions reflect the public transcript of the Manch more than anything else. Given the small, disparate nature of the Manch, snowball sampling was the only feasible method to sample participants. Although this sampling method only allowed access to one extended network, those interviews included members at every organisational rank and office, covering a wide cross-section of Manch membership. Themes selected for coding arose from inductive iterative analyses of transcripts and field notes.

In the sections that follow, I begin with a short description of the Manch, its relationship to the RSS and the claims it makes about Muslim participation. Next I turn to who is joining and then proceed to describe the patronage systems, charismatic leadership, emancipatory hopes and reactionary affiliations that make up the bulk of membership motivations.

The Manch

The Manch's official origin story claims that, prompted by RSS ex-*sarsanghchalak* (supreme leader) K S Sudarshan in 2002, a group of 'nationalist' Muslims formed what is variously described by members as a cultural reform movement, a social service organisation or a cultural platform (Muslim Rashtriya Manch 2016, see also Indresh Kumar in Pachpore et al. 2006, 98–100). While members have variable understandings of what the Manch *is*, they are linked by the conviction that its main purpose is to broach the *duri* (distance) between Hindus and Muslims.

Morphologically, the Manch resembles the RSS, retaining many of the same titles, tradition of unrecorded, ambiguous membership and deputed labour and authority.² The Manch's Muslim leadership is directly subordinate to that of the RSS as expressed through the will of Indresh Kumar, the RSS *pracharak* (preacher) that heads the Manch. The Manch is conceptualised by both leaders and members as a project of RSS outreach to Muslims, inviting them to join the national *mukhya dhaara* (mainstream). The Manch's goals are mostly clearly articulated in their written work, printed by an RSS-affiliated publishing house located in Pahadganj, close to the RSS' headquarters in New Delhi. Below is an excerpt from one such publication, *gay aur islam* (The Cow and Islam).³

[It is] the duty of the Muslim Rashtriya Manch to awaken high thoughts amongst the public, and to awaken the love of the nation and the necessity of its promotion amongst Muslim society... The Muslim Rashtriya Manch's efforts promote love, and the idea that service should be part of each person's life. We will not leave any hard done by, ill, sad, illiterate or needy people behind. The kind of India where happiness and peace resides in every direction, that is the aim of the Muslim Rashtriya Manch. (Juyal 2015, 63–64)

The service provision claims of the Manch are overstated. It boasts for example of grain banks across North India. Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that these are often run by other RSS-affiliated organisations like the Vishal Bharat Sansthan in Varanasi. The Manch was not directly involved in the coordination of grain distribution. The Manch proudly claims a pension scheme for *talaaqshude* (instantly divorced) Muslim women which, monthly, gives only five hundred rupees to a few dozen women. Considering that the Manch declares it has a membership of up to three million donating members, a few grain distribution points and a paltry pension scheme seem insufficient. So what does the Manch actually do?

Most of the Manch's organisational energy is spent in the assembly of highly publicised, symbolic events that seemed designed to mark the RSS as *not really that communal*. Releasing pigeons, and planting trees swiftly melt into marches against triple *talaaq* (instant divorce), which merge into Manch-run *gaushalas* (cow refuges) and Manch Muslims congregating to pray for the construction of *ramjanmabhumi mandir* (temple to the birthplace of Ram). These symbolic performances, invoking *bhaichaara* (brotherhood) and *samrasta* (harmony), are designed to be seen, consumed, and proffered as evidence of the catholicity of the Hindu right.

Manch claims of organisational independence from the RSS are untenable. The Manch was founded by the RSS and retains direct RSS leadership through the post of *margdarshak* (advisor), Indresh Kumar. While Kumar is officially only an advisor to the Manch, in practice, he makes all major organisational decisions. He appears in all Manch publications and advertisements, is responsible for promoting/demoting Manch officials, and on its official website is described as the organisation's 'messiah.' As in most Sangh affiliates (Kanungo 2006, 55), the post of Manch Organisational Secretary (*sangathan mantri*) is also filled by a Hindu RSS official. Contrary to instructions from senior Manch leaders, many members explicitly referred to the Manch as the RSS' Muslim wing, with one senior organiser in Delhi grimly remarking that 'when the RSS speaks, we must listen.'

Who is listening? Manch membership claims vary wildly, largely because the idea of membership (unrecorded, deniable, casual, sessional) is so amorphous. Nevertheless, mass membership claims are an important part of the Manch's search for a representative legitimacy. During my time with the Manch I was told that membership was as high as three million, and as low as 10,000. The latter is much more likely than the former, and it became increasingly clear as I spent more time with the Manch that their membership claims were significantly exaggerated and in some cases simply

fabricated. In Delhi and Uttar Pradesh, the areas the Manch claims its most concentrated support, event turnout rarely topped 50 and often barely scraped 10. At a Delhi meeting of the Manch's *gauraksha* (cow protection) cell, three people attended. At the Manch's biggest events, like its Eid function at Parliament, or an iftar party at Mumbai's Sahyadri House, 200 or 300 might attend. But, attendees were often not from the Manch.

In Lucknow, one of the Manch's major centres, I spoke to a disaffected Manch organiser who resented the Manch's subservience to the RSS, who conspiratorially whispered, '*jo manch hai, usme kuch nahi hai*' (that Manch, there is nothing to it). She then pulled up an image on her phone of a handwritten list that she claimed was the extent of Manch membership in Lucknow. There were less than 40 names, '*isme bas panch-das log jo koi asli kaam karte hain*' (of this, only 5 or 10 do any actual work). Branch officials in Jhansi, Vadodara and Ahmedabad told me that in their branches there were 11, 5 and 15 active members, respectively.

Despite the exaggerated membership, clearly there are still some, albeit very few, Muslims signing up. Who are they? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the bulk of Manch membership consists of relatively well-off, high caste Muslim men. In this way the Manch resembles the very centres of traditional North Indian Muslim power that it protests.⁴ Perhaps the most striking difference between these centres and Manch membership is its relatively cross confessional nature. While the common belief that the Manch is predominantly Shi'a is mistaken,⁵ Shi'a and other religious minority groups are over-represented within the Manch. Within the Manch there were both Shi'as and Sunnis, Deobandis and Barelvis, Tablighis and Ahl-e-Hadith Muslims etc. However, despite this relative diversity, there is very limited *pasmanda* (oppressed caste, lit. backwards) representation in the organisation.

If the purpose of this essay is to challenge the truth claims of the Hindu right about why Muslims join the RSS, we need to be clear on what these claims are. Across many of my interviews with senior leadership and RSS organisers within the Manch, there was a remarkable uniformity in claims of how people come to the Manch. Broadly, their public transcript holds that Muslims have been deceived by their traditional leaders, most notably the Congress and, to a lesser extent, religious leadership like the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB). The delusions fed to Muslims by these powers obscured the continued impoverishment of Muslim communities as detailed in the Sachar Committee report. Exhaustion with the failures of traditional leadership has led select 'nationally minded' and 'enlightened' Muslims to open their 'previously locked' minds to the good work of alternative leadership in the form of the RSS. A senior Muslim organiser in the Manch's Delhi *baudhik prakosht* (intellectual cell) explained how this attraction develops:

In the RSS there is no membership form. There is no active recruitment. There is no real need for recruitment because every man that holds the same ideology is already an RSS man. Every man that helps people in society is an RSS man ... Whichever man has always been loving, has always adored his own culture, that man is an RSS man. It is like this with the Muslim Rashtriya Manch. Whoever is of our thought, who thinks of this land as his only home, who, without any reason, seeks to end hatred, he is a member.

These kind of platitudes (*adored his own culture, seeks to end hatred*) promote the Manch as some natural conclusion to Indian Muslim political wanderings. The latent nationalism of 'enlightened' Muslims inevitably and irrevocably pulls them into the Manch's magnetic orbit. An alternate claim, made by both Manch publications and members, is that it is the *good work* of the Manch that attracts members. Positioning itself as an organisation of service provision, the idea of *good work* was critical to Manch public narratives. In my interviews members claimed that the Manch was only organisation working for intercommunal harmony and providing for the needy. As discussed above, the Manch does very little service provision, so the extent of this *good work* is limited, but its existence is less important than its use as a justification for joining.

In a Delhi basement distribution centre, Amina, a member of the Manch's women's cell, brusquely dismissed the relevance of the RSS' political agenda, instead emphasising her commitment to *good work*, 'I will do work for anyone who does good work. I am devoted to social service.'⁶

We cannot completely dismiss the claims of *good work*. While Manch service provision is minimal, it does exist, and Manch branches with the most recruiting power among non-elite Muslims, like Varanasi, existed around these service provision operations. This is perhaps unsurprising considering that the RSS famously expands through filling the service provision gaps left by weak patronage systems and government provision (Thachil 2014; Chidambaram 2012). Claims of Muslims joining because of the Manch's *good work*, while perhaps applicable in very limited circumstances, are however, not tenable considering the paucity of very much *good work*.

These claims, of nationalist awakening and the draw of *good work*, were present in most of my interviews. Particularly in those with senior leadership, it was sometimes difficult to achieve any other insights other than word for word repetitions of Manch doctrine as declared by Indresh Kumar. Certainly, it would be churlish to dismiss these claims entirely. Undoubtedly, for some Manch members the peacebuilding claims of the Manch were deeply attractive. A representative from the Delhi Media Cell told me that he had joined because,

[The Manch] is for national progression, it speaks in the language of goodwill and harmony ... We think that from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, from Guwahati to Kashmir, India should be bound in one thread. We want a peaceful India. For India we want brotherhood, unity, and kindness.

We must accept the possibility that it is for reasons like this that some Muslims join the Manch. However, I do not centre these in my research for a number of reasons. First, the RSS is famously secretive and relies on its public claims of pluralism (*the RSS is not against Muslims because Hindu is a civilisational not religious term*) in an attempt to obscure its well known anti-Muslim activism. There is no reason to believe that the RSS is not employing similar tactics here. By using the public story of the Manch's organic nationalism, the RSS can attempt to disguise its continued commitment to Muslim exclusion. Speaking in Mumbai to a Manch organiser, I probed him on why a supposedly apolitical organisation was canvassing for the BJP in the 2019 general election given that the BJP traditionally does not need Muslim votes (Jha 2017, 158). With a chuckle and a smile, he replied '*bhai* (brother), I can't tell you that. It's a secret!' Other members were less circumspect. After some probing, many members would deviate from the script. These deviations made clear that the Manch's official line is incomplete and in many cases factually misleading.

Accordingly, instead of centring those interviews that confirm the Manch's official position, I focus on interviews with members who had defected from the Manch, and those within the Manch who were openly critical. In the first case, defectors are not bound by organisational loyalty or censure to toe the line, and in the second, internal critics face disincentives to contradict the public transcript. That they do so anyway lends critical weight to their testimony. Additionally, I draw on interviews with family of Manch members and non-Manch community leaders. Accumulatively, these interviews constitute more than half of those I conducted, suggesting that the public claims of the RSS and the Manch must be questioned. From these interviews, as well as attendance at more than a dozen Manch events, four major families of motivations became clear.

Rebuke

The first, and perhaps most intelligible, is the deep frustration with the perceived inability, or disinclination, of traditional leadership like the Congress or *ulema* (clergy) to materially improve the conditions of Indian Muslims. This backlash effect is echoed in the literature on cross-ethnic political support, particularly in contexts of conflict where the transgressions of co-ethnics motivate cross-ethnic coalitions (Staniland 2012). During my fieldwork many participants pointed specifically to the failure of the Congress-led UPA government to implement the recommendations of the Sachar Committee report. In a fast food restaurant in Delhi's Turkman gate, a Muslim ex-Congress party official who had defected to the BJP and later joined the RSS, told me that

Muslims feel incredibly betrayed by the Congress ... The honeymoon with the Congress ended with the Sachar report ... In the last week of the Singh government in 2014, they were supposed to introduce the Prevention of

Communal Violence ACT 2014, but it was withdrawn at the last moment because they were scared of alienating a Hindu vote bank. A message was delivered to Muslims that not alienating Hindus is more important to Congress than us being beaten in the streets ... We want to end the honeymoon for good. For all these years the Congress has been bluffing, bluffing, bluffing, bluffing and finally, we are fed up.

For some Manch members, this frustration has older roots, going back to the Emergency. Sitting in his Nagpur office, a Hindu RSS representative on the Manch's National Committee explained how, while sharing jail cells during the Emergency, RSS and Jamaat-e-Islami activists engaged in friendly dialogues,⁷ reflecting joint opposition to the Congress government and resulting in support in 1977 for the Janata Party coalition. Some of the older Manch members I spoke to, traced their affiliation to the Hindu right to this time, citing Indira and Sanjay Gandhi's targeting of Muslim communities in Old Delhi. Certainly, during this time Muslim opposition to Congress was common, particularly in Delhi (Wright 1977), which renders such accounts, at the very least, as plausible.

Frustration with traditional Muslim loyalties goes beyond Congress. In a Bulandshehr interview, one Manch women's cell activist explained her complaints with traditional centres of Muslim religious leadership. Nahid joined the Manch in 2016 because of its opposition to the practice of triple *talaq*. She felt comfortable joining the Manch because she had been working against the local clergy since the 1990s when an abortive attempt to run for a Lok Sabha seat was blocked by local religious leadership. Nahid's resentment at what she described as the *maulvi's* 'oppression' was directed particularly at the AIMPLB,

Muslims don't have a brain, they are all slaves to the maulvis. But the maulvis are the ones who threw the key to Muslim minds into the sea! I cannot wait until the day I bury the corpse of the [All India Muslim Personal] Law Board and smack its grave with my sandals.

Rejecting Congress and the AIMPLB for the non-delivery of community development and security initially suggests instrumentalist reasons motivating Manch membership. However, this instrumentality does not explain those Muslims who founded the Manch, that had already joined the BJP in the 1970s or later, long before the Manch's offer of rewards became apparent. There appears then to be some affective benefit gained from *teaching a lesson* to traditional leadership. These responses to the shortcomings of Congress and religious leadership are intelligible and widely held, even outside the Hindu right, speaking to the deep diversity of Indian Muslim political preferences (see Ahmed 2015). The question then becomes, if these political articulations are available outside the RSS, why don't these Muslims join another organisation that expresses these views, rather than one deeply implicated in the violent marginalisation of Muslim communities? Why do many Muslims share these frustrations but so few join the RSS? To answer this we have to turn to alternative motivations. Below I offer three visible during my time with the Manch.

Reward

The RSS' proximity to the incumbent BJP government, and its expansive institutional penetration (Anderson and Jaffrelot 2018, 475; Anderson and Longkumer 2018, 372–373) make it a prime candidate for incentivising Manch membership and support. While relatively few openly admitted to joining for direct benefits, it was made clear in many interviews that a large number of Manch members associate with the organisation in the pursuit of reward in a manner consistent with general assumptions about cross-ethnic political affiliation in India (Devasher 2019; Dhattiwala 2014; Froerer 2006). This patronage network centres around the figure of the Indresh Kumar who manages the distribution or withdrawal of Manch rewards. Maryam, and her husband Sameer, a National Convenor and founding member of the Manch, described the impulses behind this system to me.

Maryam: The BJP is in power now, and the BJP is backed by RSS, and in the RSS Indreshji is a big name. So when people associate with [the Manch], many people, frankly it is many people, do it for selfish motives. Because they feel that if they are associated then they will get some political post ...

Everyone knows it. It's not the only reason [people join], but some people are [joining for this reason]. They are meeting [Kumar] regularly, only for this reason.

Interviewer: After Modiji became Prime Minister in 2014, was there a change in membership?

Sameer: Yes definitely ...

Maryam: The number [of members] increased! But that number only increased because of people's selfish motives ... Since Indreshji is very close to the party, and party is in power, he can get work done. And people are willing to pay for work. He does the work. So people come to him, and ask him to please help. So they will give him money.

Despite a public transcript claiming Muslims join the Manch out of some primal nationalist urge, senior leadership was surprisingly candid about the realities of instrumental membership. In admonishing the motives of these *lalchi* (greedy) members, Faruq, a National Convenor, revealed the influence the Manch has in securing government positions for members.

Faruq: Inside the Manch there are of course a few weaknesses. These days, people who join think that it is a shortcut to working in the government. They think that they are going to end up on top. Because of this there is a bit of tussle [inside the Manch] sometimes ...

Interviewer: Are you suggesting people join the Manch in return for government positions?

Faruq: Yes. Our organisation provides people for the government, as advisors, as [committee] chairmen, as members. We send our members to positions like these. So new members think, for this reason, that they will quickly get sent [into government] and advance in that way.

Sameer was even more specific about exactly where the Manch is sending its officials

Sameer: In the ministries we have got connections. [Name retracted] serve[s] in the Ministry of Minority Affairs ... [Name retracted] is a member of the National Monitoring Committee for Minority Education. So these type of responsibilities are given to the people that deserve them.

Interviewer: By the Manch?

Sameer: Yes, by the Manch. When the Ministries ask for people, then Indreshji, as I told you he is the head ... takes care [of candidate selection]. He selects them from a list the Ministry gives to Indreshji.

Interviewer: So the government will ask Indreshji, and Indreshji will supply the names [of candidates]?

Sameer: Yes, like that the names [of candidates] will go.

During my time with the Manch I met members with positions in a multitude of government (both central and state) committees, usually within the Ministries of Human Resource Development and Minority Affairs (or the state government equivalents). Positions on *wakf* boards and *haj* committees were also commonplace.

Neither the Ministry of Human Resource Development nor Minority Affairs is big enough to provide positions to every Manch aspirant. For many, a loosely defined 'access' or proximity to government and the RSS through Kumar determined their desire to join the Manch. According to Fahima,

I only go to events because the RSS can help me get positions that would otherwise not be available to me. I want to be an MLC [Member of the Legislative Council] but I know that in the current national atmosphere, I am only going to get that if I appear close to the ruling power.

It was certainly not just high level government positions that motivated members. Lower level positions in universities, schools, neighbourhood councils were all cited as incentives. The same processes were also visible at a micro level. One Manch defector alleged that the event attendees were paid to attend meetings and events, and an associated imam scoffed,

Two thousand people going to an event?! I don't know what kind of sham that is. They are not Manch members. Maybe they are the friends of someone who made them come. In the view of some leaders, to make a name for themselves they will bring a bus full of people to an event saying 'give me a bus and I'll bring one hundred people.' But they are not necessarily from the Manch. Someone would have given them a lunch packet, or maybe one hundred rupees.

As if to confirm the imam's accusation, the next month I attended an event in Ayodhya where the Manch claimed that up to 10,000 Muslims would come and pray for the construction of *ramjanmab-humi mandir*. Less than two hundred arrived on the day, many of whom were journalists, VHP activists

and curious locals. However there was – for the Manch – an unusually large contingent of *kurta*-clad teenage boys. Upon speaking to them, few knew what the Manch even was, and fewer knew why they were there. Pointing to a couple of older men, they explained that their teachers from madrasas in the areas surrounding Ayodhya had told them they had to come. And, walking around the building which we were assembled in front of, a long line of buses and minivans that had just deposited their passengers came into sight.

Perhaps more powerful than actual job delivery or goods is the perception that they are forthcoming. While many members I met had visibly instrumentalist reasons for joining, for most these hopes remained unfulfilled. However, rather than leave the organisation, they stayed in the anticipation of some future reward. There was the professor hoping for a senior academic position after the next election, the anti triple *talaaq* activist hoping for pre-selection as a candidate for the Uttar Pradesh Vidhan Parishad and the Manch activist hoping for a position in the BJP's Minority Front. For long-term members, these unfulfilled aspirations were a considerable source of resentment, which may explain the large amount of Manch members willing to openly and fiercely criticise, on tape, the hypocrisy of the RSS. But, in a way that resembles organisational patterns in other Sangh Parivar branches (Kanungo 2006, 54), the Manch gives out low-cost piecemeal rewards to temporarily satiate member's desire for recognition. Usually these took the shape of titular office.

Almost every Manch member I spoke to was some kind of office bearer. National Convenors, Co-Convenors, Pradesh Convenors, Cell Convenors and Co-Convenors, Organisational Convenors both central and state etc. While originally I was concerned that I was only meeting office-bearers and ignoring rank and file members, it became clear that there were next to no rank and file members to actually meet! Instead, what would have, in another organisation, constituted rank and file membership, was supplied by scores of purely ceremonial titles. These titles were multiple, expandable and changeable, so there could be dozens of National Convenors and State Convenors, and a constantly expanding administrative structure (e.g., a new women's cell, a new *gauraksha cell*) that allowed all members the physical space for ceremonial upward mobility.

Indresh Kumar

At a Manch event in Lucknow agitating in favour of *ramjanmabhumi mandir*, the mostly Muslim audience was sitting, quietly listening to an elderly imam begin the proceedings, as is common within Muslim organisations, with a recitation of the Qur'anic *al-fatihah*. Mid way through the recitation, there was a commotion to the left of the stage and a tardy Indresh Kumar emerged flanked by a saffron-clad coterie. Upon seeing Kumar, a Manch official snatched the microphone from the elderly imam, halting the recitation of the Qur'an's most sacred verse, and intoned 'please be upstanding for the honourable Indresh Kumar, join me in wishing him well.' As the imam shuffled back to his seat, the Manch official led the now upstanding crowd, who had been seated for the Qur'an, in a rousing chant of *Indresh Kumar zindabad!* (long live Indresh Kumar). The chanting intensified as scores of *kurta*-clad Manch members and Islamic clergy thronged around Kumar trying to touch his feet. At one stage a number of women began to throw their gold jewellery at Kumar, yelling '*bharat mata ki jai!*'

The figure of Indresh Kumar clearly inspires considerable personal devotion, centred around the image of him as a cross-faith intermediary and peacekeeper, motivating much Manch membership. While secondary, and of course related, to the provision of material incentives, for many, the 'saint-like' qualities of Kumar provided powerful affective benefits. Sameer and Maryam had the following to say,

Sameer: He has sacrificed his life for the country. He is really a true saint in my eyes. I don't know how others are thinking, but that's why I always call him my guru. I am following him. Whatever he says, I have to do it. Whatever it will be. Even if my father will say 'don't do it,' I will not listen to my father. But I will listen to Indreshji ...

Interviewer: Do other RSS leaders have this same kind of ...

Maryam: [Interrupting] No! None of them have that kind of aura. Modiji is in front but frankly speaking Indreshji should be in front. He is the backbone behind this thing ... He should take Modi's place, frankly speaking ... He is like Gandhiji.

Kumar is one of the most senior and public RSS figures in India. Hailing from a wealthy Haryanvi industrialist family, his tenure as *prant* pracharak in Jammu and Kashmir during the 1990s won him accolades within the Hindu right as an expert on religious minorities, propelling him to a coveted seat on the Akhil Bharatiya Karyakari Mandal, the chief executive body of the RSS.

Members often told me how they used to despise the RSS, how they had been convinced it was a violent, divisive communal machine, but then, prodded by a friend or acquaintance, they had attended a Manch event and heard Kumar speak. Over and over again, members attributed their Manch affiliation to the transformative power of Kumar's speech. After listening to many, many of his public addresses, I remain baffled at their apparent emotional power. Usually they were turgid, monotone, non-sequential stream of consciousnesses whose most significant attribute was their unobjectionable character. Repeatedly hitting the buzzwords of *bhaichaara*, *samrasta*, *milli-juli sanskriti* (composite culture) etc. there was not very much of the RSS' notoriety in Kumar's speeches.⁸ Kumar's platitudes, and the novelty of an RSS official speaking in this way to Muslims, provides the conceptual bedrock for Kumar's charisma and reputation as an exceptional public figure.

For this exact reason, these speeches were often received rapturously. For some, Manch membership was less about affiliation to the RSS, than it was about affiliation to Kumar. His personal charisma, recitation of intercommunal platitudes and ability to distribute beneficence makes him, for many members, the centre of their organisational focus. This coupled with frequent criticism of the RSS or an ignorance of its ideological agenda suggests that there is a significant portion of members who join specifically for Kumar, through which the RSS and its ideological agenda is only tangentially considered. Again, this is consistent with a 'big man' view of Indian political affiliation, where charisma the charisma of leaders, enmeshed with their ability to provide benefits, pulls large numbers of followers loyal to a leader, rather than a party or group (Price and Ruud 2010; Mines 1990).

Kumar's anodyne platitudes seem unconvincing when we take into account his alleged involvement in the mid-2000s wave of 'Saffron Terror.' Though acquitted, there are enough inconsistencies to at the very least cast doubt over the objectivity of the judgement. Despite confessions from multiple players as to Kumar's involvement, of all the named suspects, only Kumar's home and office *were not* raided. As the case proceeded, key witnesses like Sunil Joshi died violent deaths and Kumar was only cursorily interrogated. When the investigation into Kumar was suddenly stopped, the National Investigation Agency would only cite 'internal matters' (Reghunath 2014). When Kumar's case was heard in 2018, the state prosecutor was a functionary of the RSS-controlled Akhil Bharatiya Vidhyarthi Parishad (Tripathi 2018) and, ominously, the judge who dismissed Kumar's charges retired hours after delivering the verdict (Times of India 2018).

Even the Manch's fiercest critics that I spent time with refrained from saying *anything* even remotely negative about Kumar. One Manch official I spoke to began our interview by speaking very reverentially about Kumar, indicating that despite an initial scepticism about the RSS, his speech had deeply influenced her. As the interview progressed, and as she relaxed, she started to become quite critical. When I asked a question about Kumar's conservative position of beef consumption, she angrily responded that he was certainly wrong and was just parroting the RSS line. When I asked about one of Indresh Kumar's speeches on *hindu rashtra*, she said that he was talking nonsense, 'There is no possible *hindu rashtra*! How can there be one in India? Where will he send Muslims? Where will Muslims go? He can't kill us all or make us leave so what *hindu rashtra* can there be?' After this relatively heated outburst it seemed as if she had realised she had overstepped by criticising Kumar. For the next 10 minutes she made a point of showering Kumar in obsequious praise, 'Indresh Kumar is the only person in India truly committed to *bhaichaara*,' 'Indresh Kumar would never pressure any Muslim to do something they didn't want to do.'

She ended the interview by grasping my hands and, with the utmost seriousness, asked me to tell Kumar myself how helpful she had been and how much work she does for the Manch. Clearly it is important within the Manch to be seen to be a Kumar devotee. After we had said our goodbyes and I had thanked her, I stood up to leave and she said quietly, 'I know how dangerous these people are, but I want to devote my life to social work and this is how I have to do it at the moment. I know that I must not get too close.'

Security

While it is relatively easy to dismiss incentivised membership as *lalchi*, or the magnetism of Indresh Kumar as cultish, it is harder to trivialise members motivated through security concerns. In a national environment increasingly hostile to Muslim communities for some Manch members, joining the RSS was strategic. 'If you can't beat them, join them,' said one reluctant Manch member (in English) after marching down Delhi's Chandni Chowk waving Indian flags at a *tiranga* (tricolour) march. A Kashmiri living in Uttar Pradesh told me how when he first arrived from Kashmir, no one would rent to him because he was a Kashmiri Muslim. A friend of an uncle knew someone in the Srinagar Manch branch who contacted Delhi and within a week he had found a place to live with the Manch's help.

In Uttar Pradesh a friend of mine had, for months, ridiculed the hypocrisies of the Manch, dismissing it as a sham full of greedy people. I was obviously shocked when, one day, he told me that he was thinking of joining.

Interviewer: But Adil, I'm confused, you remember that it is an RSS organisation right?

Adil: Yes of course I know. I've often heard of these RSS people coming and going having meetings with Muslims. As far as I believe, if Muslims want to prepare any political party then they have to take the help of Hindus.

Interviewer: I understand what you mean, but what has changed since last time we spoke? Why has your opinion changed?

Adil: The reason is that we have no power. No one is ready to listen to us Muslims. So if someone has the power, we should associate with them, and then maybe we will see the light. Maybe our stalled projects will become possible, our names will be recognised and we will be allowed to be a part of the conversation. Because, you see, India is only for the Hindus, Muslims have nothing ... I once went to a party where there were a few RSS people. Maybe they didn't know that I was a Muslim. But I knew that they were from the RSS, very powerful people. There was one really rich guy, who had had a bit to drink. He started abusing Muslims. He said that they survive off our crumbs and keep living in our country. I hated hearing this ...

Interviewer: You used to call the Manch a giant conspiracy, do you still feel like this?

Adil: Yes, of course I do. This Manch, why doesn't it show its face in public? If they are opening a new hospital, why don't they advertise it? At the moment the Manch does not show itself in front of anyone, they say they are integrated into society. But what are the public benefits? The common person knows nothing about them. Out of one hundred people, maybe three or four have even heard of them ...

Interviewer: Adil I'm still a bit confused, if you think that the Manch is a scam, and you think the RSS does bad things, so how can you join them? ...

Adil: The police arrested one of my students. They took him to the police station, when in his entire life he hadn't committed a single crime, hadn't even swatted a fly. In the police station they were so disrespectful. They called him a mullah, they abused him. They just made stuff up. Just because he had a beard and wore a topi ... They said that Hindu rule is coming soon and Muslims will only be seen at the bottom ...

Interviewer: So what are you hoping to get from joining?

Adil: Maybe if I take these problems directly to them, then things might be easier ... Maybe if a Muslim name comes up negatively like this again, maybe we can find a path forward. If there is ever a problem with the police, maybe the police will be more sympathetic if they know we are associated with the RSS. Otherwise, they will just keep abusing us.

For most Manch members, these immediate security concerns were not visible in their reasons for joining. These members were often shielded from over policing and harassment by their wealth and caste. Very few of my interviewees presented as visibly Muslim. Saffron *kurtas* outnumbered

white ones, jeans and expensive pressed shirts outnumbered *topis*. The social composition of the Manch means that the everyday violence committed against Indian Muslim communities was further from their relationship from the Manch than it was for others. For these others, it seems that joining the Manch was a way of negotiating a deeply (definitionally) hostile national environment which closes all the doors to security and advancement except for that one that leads to *hindu rashtra* (a Hindu state).

This impulse of self-preservation in the face of marginalisation has many parallels within research on collaborators in conflict zones (Be'er and 'Abdel-Jawad 1994; Kanaaneh 2009), or what is sometimes called 'ethnic defection' (Kalyvas 2008; Staniland 2012). Native soldiers serving in some colonial armies (Anderson 2005; Enjelvin 2006) and the *Judenräte* (Jewish councils) who, fearing Nazi reprisal, improbably facilitated the mechanics of genocide (Trunk 1996) both serve as powerful examples of similar motivational impulses.

Conclusion

My goal is to provide evidence that destabilises the claims of the Hindu right that they are ideologically attracting Muslim supporters through the Muslim Rashtriya Manch. During my work with the Manch, it was evident, as most RSS-watchers assumed, that most Muslims were *not* joining because they agreed with the RSS. Muslims join the Manch to punish traditional Muslim centres of authority, in the pursuit of reward, following Indresh Kumar or to guarantee their personal security in a Hindu nationalist India. While this neat typology does not cover other motivations like social network pressure and boredom, it does present those most visible in conversations with the Manch, and also those most able to destabilise the claims of the Hindu right. These motivations do not exist as discrete, linear objects, but rather move through dense networks where material incentives shape the charismatic magnetism of Indresh Kumar which shapes members' thoughts on traditional centres of Muslim power. Broadly, Manch membership is consistent with a classic incentives model of political affiliation. Both reward and security provide selective outcome benefits for participants, while rebukes to traditional leadership and personable loyalty to Indresh Kumar satisfies a model of affective benefits that motivate behaviour. What we see in the Manch confirms many of our expectations of cross-ethnic political support.

Understanding motivations for Manch membership is important both theoretically, and to frame political challenges to the dominance of the Hindu right. While the public transcript of the Manch and the RSS suggest some destabilisation of ethnic boundaries and affiliation, my account suggests that no such destabilisation has occurred. Rather Muslims join the Manch without shifting their views on Hindu nationalism very much at all. So while the Manch might force us to reassess the predictability of ethnic affiliation, it does not tell us very much about ethnic boundaries in the way the RSS hopes. The real importance of understanding Manch membership is political. The RSS is misrepresenting Manch membership, presumably to produce a species of cross-ethnic legitimacy. The non-ideological motivations for membership though, suggest that this legitimacy is undeserved.

After the 2019 general election, where the Hindu right greatly consolidated its parliamentary and institutional power, it is reasonable to assume that membership of the Manch will increase dramatically. The Manch's ability to distribute jobs, influence and money will increase. Similarly, the prestige, power and charisma of Indresh Kumar stands only to gain from such a ringing endorsement of the RSS' political agenda. This in turn perhaps will propel further membership seeking the affective benefits of close proximity to his charismatic leadership. Most ominously, as the violence, occupation and oppression of India's Muslim communities seems bound to intensify under a renewed BJP/RSS combine, more Muslims may flock to Manch to escape the persecution they face outside the organisation's limits.

Artificially untangling this network, as I have attempted to do here, is not productive if the goal is to create an exhaustive list. If the goal is instead to call into question the exaggerations and misrepresentations of the RSS, then perhaps this brief examination of why Muslims join the RSS can be helpful.

Notes

1. The RSS has floated a small number of minority outfits in the past; the Rashtriya Sikh Sangat, the Rashtriya Isai Mahasangh and the Sarvapanth Samadar Manch. The only one active is the Rashtriya Sikh Sangat which operates a tiny clandestine network. Comparison between these membership motivations in these groups would be a useful topic for further research but is beyond the scope of this paper, particularly considering the unique position Muslims hold in Hindu nationalist imaginaries (Vanaik 2017).
2. For a more detailed exploration of the Manch's organisational structure see Andersen and Damle (2018, 92–106).
3. All translations from Hindi to English are my own. Accordingly, so are any translation errors.
4. For more on male *ashraf* institutional domination see Alam (2009, 175–176).
5. For example, there is not one Shi'a in the Delhi *pradesh* convening committee, the Manch's strongest. The belief of Shi'a dominance in the Manch is drawn from the perception of generalised Shi'a support for the BJP, largely evidenced from the close relationship between Lucknow's Shi'a clergy and the BJP's A B Vajpayee and Rajnath Singh, who both contested from Lucknow. *Hindutva*-sympathetic Shi'a groups are not uncommon in North India. For example, the Indian Shia Awami League, Shia Gauraksha Dal, Hussaini Tigers and the Rashtriya Shia Samaj.
6. See additional accounts of members' attraction to the Manch in Agha and Munshi (2018).
7. This account was denied by a representative from the Jamaat e Islami in Delhi during an interview. At the very least, accounts of the interactions between RSS and Jamaat activists during shared internment are contested. A more detailed account of the RSS' account can be found in *The People Versus the Emergency: A Saga of Struggle* (Sahasrabudhe 1991) published through the RSS-run Suruchi Prakashan in Jhandewalan, New Delhi.
8. In his media comments though, Kumar is usually significantly more aggressive. See for example when he blamed beef lynchings on Muslim victims of lynching (Indian Express 2018), or when he said that the entirety of Pakistan would be a part of India by 2025 (Financial Express 2019).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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