Social Engineering Through Schools*

Preliminary draft — please do not share.

Anirvan Chowdhury†, Aaditya Dar‡, Varun K§ & Chinmaya Kumar¶

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Abstract

We study how schools embed themselves in communities and, in doing so, function as instruments of social engineering that influence political and cultural change. Our focus is on schools run by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist volunteer organization. We compile new data on the establishment years and locations of these schools and link it to constituency-level electoral outcomes for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India's dominant right-wing party. Using a staggered difference-in-differences design, we find that the presence of RSS schools leads to a persistent rise in BJP vote share and a higher probability of BJP victories in subsequent elections. These schools also lead to cultural change. Vegetarianism rises in nearby villages, especially among upper-caste households, the traditional supporters of the BJP. The share of children given Hindu deity names, particularly those of the *Vaishnavite* pantheon, increases in affected areas after the setting up of schools. Together, these patterns point to a process of gradual identity activation through sustained community engagement. To examine the mechanisms in greater detail, we survey a random subsample of RSS-run and non-RSS private schools across four districts in Bihar. The survey results indicate that, relative to close-by non-RSS private schools, RSS schools are substantially more likely to engage in Hindu religious programming as well as community engagement that involves not only students but also parents and local communities.

Keywords: Education, Right-Wing Politics, India.

JEL codes: D72, I25, P16

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†University of Louisville: anirvan.chowdhury@louisville.edu

‡Independent Researcher: aadityadar@gmail.com

§Harvard University: varun_kapoor@fas.harvard.edu (corresponding author)

¶Azim Premji University: chinmaya.kumar@apu.edu.in

1 Introduction

Between 1990 and 2020, almost half of all countries (88 out of 181) experienced a rightward shift in their party systems' ideological orientation, making this one of the most consequential transformations of recent decades (V-Dem Institute, 2024). Today, 3.2 billion of the 5.6 billion people living in democracies are governed by right-leaning parties. These political shifts reflect large-scale changes in cultural configurations: social equilibria in which political institutions, de facto power, and culturally anchored beliefs about nation, religion, and hierarchy move in tandem, and whose transformation typically requires sustained, community-embedded organizational work at the grassroots. Existing work explains support for right-wing politics through socio-cultural cleavages (Suryanarayan, 2019; Varshney, 2002a; Iyer and Shrivastava, 2018; Blakeslee, 2018), economic shocks and inequality (Autor et al., 2020; Dippel et al., 2022; Frey et al., 2018; Thachil, 2014), and persuasion or information channels (DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007; Strömberg, 2015; Zhuravskaya et al., 2020; Madestam et al., 2013; Ahmed et al., 2025). Much less attention has been paid to the organizational infrastructure, what we term 'community-embedded institutions,' through which political actors reshape local cultural configurations and entrench durable partisan alignments.

We conceptualize community-embedded institutions as organizations that help select and stabilize particular cultural configurations from a broader culture set (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2025). Community-embedded institutions are organizations rooted in a locality that sustain face-to-face engagement with residents through a range of actions, including but not limited to education, welfare provision, and cultural programming. They operate at the intersection of formal rules and informal norms: legally recognized yet deeply enmeshed in local social networks, rituals, and everyday cultural practices. This constant, non-electoral interaction allows them to cultivate trust, reinforce salient social identities, and normalize specific cultural norms. In doing so, they enable political actors to (i) privilege some attributes of the culture set (such as particular religious symbols, family roles, or notions of order), (ii) repeatedly wire these attributes together into coherent configurations, and (iii) link those configurations to concrete partisan projects.

Viewed this way, community-embedded institutions provide a common micro-foundation for the rise of the right across a range of settings. Case studies show how Catholic parish networks in Poland, veterans' associations in France, evangelical congregations in Brazil, and religious schools in Pakistan sustain identity-affirming engagement between elections and anchor political projects in everyday social life (Szelewa, 2021; Millington, 2012; Smith, 2019; Boas, 2023; Iqtidar, 2011). Across these cases, community-embedded institu-

tions reconfigure local cultural repertoires in ways that make particular ideological equilibria more enduring.

In this paper, we provide the first causal analysis of such institutions: the nationwide network of schools operated by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist volunteer organization, in India. By embedding themselves in local social life through education, cultural events, and civic engagement, these schools operate as community-embedded platforms for social engineering, cultivating a Hindu identity that can be mobilized politically. Emerging work highlights associational links between school presence and the propensity of majoritarian violence (Milliff and Read, 2024); we build upon this to provide causal evidence that RSS schools serve as community-embedded institutions with far-reaching implications for surrounding societies.

To understand how community-embedded institutions affect political and cultural outcomes, we compile new data on the establishment year and location of RSS-affiliated schools. We link this data to constituency-level electoral outcomes for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and to indicators of local cultural norms. These norms include survey-based measures of vegetarianism and administrative records on naming practices, particularly the adoption of Hindu deity names for children. As the political arm of the RSS, the BJP is India's dominant right-wing party. Its electoral rise—from just two parliamentary seats in 1984 to an absolute majority with 303 seats in 2019—was preceded by the expansion of RSS schools. Our study period (1980–2007) therefore precedes the BJP's ascent to national political dominance in 2014. Vegetarianism and deity-based naming are salient markers of Hindu identity, particularly among upper-caste groups that form a core part of the BJP's electoral base. Our main empirical strategy is a staggered difference-in-differences design (Cengiz et al., 2019) that exploits the staggered rollout of schools across time and space, allowing us to compare changes in political and cultural outcomes between treated areas (where the schools were opened) and untreated areas (where schools were either not opened or were below a threshold). The identifying assumption is that, absent the openings, treated and comparison areas would have followed similar trends in these outcomes—and that impending openings do not affect outcomes prior to treatment (no anticipation).

Our analysis has three main findings. First, constituencies where RSS-affiliated schools cross the threshold of 1 percent of all schools experience a statistically significant increase in BJP electoral performance. In our preferred specification, BJP vote share rises by 0.7 percentage points and the probability of a BJP victory increases by 4.44 percentage points. The vote share effects are modest in size but electorally consequential and robust to alternate definitions of treatment assignment, and apply to the BJP's coalition partners too.

The effects emerge in the second election cycle after a constituency becomes treated and persist across multiple subsequent elections, indicating a durable influence of school presence. We show that the results are not driven by reverse causality: a close-election regression discontinuity design shows no evidence that BJP victories lead to the establishment of RSS schools. Including controls for the Bharatiya Jana Sangh's historical electoral presence does not alter the results. The results are robust to exposure to religious mass media (Ahmed et al. (2025)) and alternate thresholds and definitions of treatment.

Second, exposure to RSS schools is associated with shifts in local cultural practices that heighten the salience of Hindu identity. We examine two markers of such activation: vegetarianism and naming practices. Because the RSS promotes a form of Hinduism that places strong emphasis on vegetarianism as part of its broader cultural project, we test whether the establishment of an RSS school alters local diets using the ARIS/REDS data (National Council of Applied Economic Research (2006)). Following a school opening, villages within 2 km experience a roughly 10 percentage-point increase in vegetarianism relative to pre-treatment differences in comparable areas beyond 10 km. The effect declines with distance; the estimate for villages 5–10 km away is close to zero. These effects are concentrated among upper-caste households, the traditional social base of the RSS and are close to zero for non-Hindu households.

Turning to naming practices, we find modest but meaningful increases in the share of children given Hindu deity names, consistent with the activation of Hindu identity in communities exposed to RSS schools. The increases are concentrated among names of major deities, and especially those associated with *Vishnu*, while names linked to minor or peripheral deities show no change. This pattern indicates that the cultural influence of RSS schools was not to broaden the diversity of Hindu practices, but rather to channel them toward a narrower and more uniform set of religious symbols. This pattern aligns with the RSS' effort to construct a cohesive Hindu identity by emphasizing figures that resonate across caste and regional lines.

The significance of this finding lies in its historical and political context. Hinduism has long been divided between Vaishnavite and Shaivite traditions, with conflicts over sectarian allegiances stretching back centuries. Against this backdrop, the RSS's emphasis on *Ram* (an incarnation of *Vishnu*)—through rituals, festivals, and campaigns such as the *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement—represents a deliberate strategy to consolidate Hindu identity. By centering the pantheon on a single, emotionally resonant figure, the RSS simplified and sharpened the symbolic repertoire available for political mobilization, turning schools into vehicles for ideological consolidation that reinforced the BJP's broader political project.

Finally, the timing and persistence of these effects are difficult to reconcile with channels such as curriculum content (Cantoni et al., 2017) or short-term clientelism (Finan and Schechter, 2012). The political gains within a period of five years, coupled with gradual cultural change, are more consistent with a mechanism of organizational activation and gradual socialization rooted in the schools' role as sustained community anchors. Evidence from a primary survey supports this view. We collected data on the activities and community engagements of a random sample of RSS and close-by non-RSS schools in four districts of Bihar. RSS schools are much more likely to regularly host cultural programs tied to religious festivals than nearby private schools. Importantly, these programs are held not only for students but also involve parents of students and members of local communities indicating that schools serve as important institutions in the community. The teachers in RSS schools are much more likely to organize social outreach activities in the local neighborhoods. These activities embed the schools in local networks year-round, turning them into informal arenas where Hindu identity is cultivated, normalized, and ultimately politicized—deepening the spread and durability of Hindu nationalism in everyday social life.

Our findings relate to experimental evidence that structured youth camps can increase intergroup cohesion (Ghosh et al., 2024). Evidence from our school survey, together with (Iwanek, 2022a), documents that RSS schools organize comparable routines—daily rituals, group events, and civic activities—in surrounding communities, which motivates the design of the camp program in Ghosh et al. (2024). Their results thus speak directly to the mechanism—collective rituals and structured group activities that foster cohesion—that may drive the effects that we observe. The key difference is temporal and institutional: whereas camps deliver short, intensive exposure, RSS schools are permanent, community-embedded institutions, enabling us to trace long-run cultural change and associated electoral consequences. While the RSS schools serve the purpose of creating cohesion between different Hindu communities, which serves the Hindu nationalist agenda, the youth camps in Ghosh et al. (2024) create Hindu-Muslim cohesion.

Taken together, these results highlight the distinctive role of community-embedded institutions in shaping politics. RSS schools embed themselves in local social life and gradually transform everyday practices (dietary choices, devotional naming, participation in cultural events) that reinforce Hindu identity, especially among upper-caste groups. In doing so, they convert diffuse cultural sympathies into durable partisan alignments, deepening both the social reach of Hindutva and the long-run electoral advantage of the BJP.

This paper makes four main contributions. First, we extend the literature on edu-

cation and political behavior by moving beyond the focus on curriculum content to examine the organizational role of schools as community-embedded platforms for partisan mobilization. While prior work has shown that what is taught in schools can shift political attitudes and identity formation (Cantoni et al., 2017), much less attention has been paid to how the physical and social presence of schools established by partisan non-state actors can serve as long-term infrastructure for recruitment, coordination, and network-building. Our setting highlights this channel by showing how RSS schools operate as durable social hubs that persist well beyond individual election cycles. Evidence from Benin shows schools can raise electoral participation (Wantchekon et al., 2015); our focus instead is on modern, partisan RSS schools whose local presence provides long-run recruitment and coordination capacity.

Second, our findings add a new dimension to the growing body of empirical work on the rise of the BJP and right-wing politics in India. Existing empirical research has emphasized the role of ethnic polarization and communal conflict in reshaping political alignments (Varshney, 2002a; Iyer and Shrivastava, 2018), the mobilization of caste identities and status inequalities (Suryanarayan, 2019; Jensenius, 2017), and the importance of direct religious mobilization in shaping voter behavior (Blakeslee, 2018). Scholars have also documented the importance of mass media exposure to religious content, such as the televised broadcast of the Ramayana in the 1980s (Ahmed et al., 2025), and more recently, the use of digital media (Udupa, 2021) in normalizing Hindu nationalist discourse. Our results complement these accounts by showing that organizational infrastructure at the community level provides an additional, durable mechanism linking cultural change to partisan consolidation.

In this sense, the expansion of RSS schools can be seen as part of the broader institutional foundation that underpins the BJP's electoral ascendancy. While prior studies have traced the BJP's rise to shifts in identity politics, the party's organizational strength, and its ability to leverage polarization, we show that the slow, patient embedding of Hindu nationalist institutions into everyday social life is equally consequential. This perspective helps explain how the BJP has been able to translate short-term moments of mobilization into long-term dominance: by anchoring politics in local cultural practices, RSS schools transform diffuse sympathies into organized and enduring partisan support.

Third, our study examines the direct effects of expanding religious education in a democratic context. Unlike prior work such as Bazzi et al. (2024), which emphasizes how the expansion of public schools can have unintended consequences through competition with religious schools, we focus on the community-engagement role of religiously affiliated schools and how this shapes adults' preferences and behaviors. In this sense, our

work complements Bazzi et al. (2024) on Indonesia, which highlights the long-run, indirect consequences of schooling for religiosity. By contrast, we show that the establishment of RSS schools has more immediate political and cultural effects because of their embeddedness in local social life.

Fourth, we add to research on the cultural transmission of norms and identity-based preferences by documenting how embedded institutions can shift everyday social practices in ways that align with partisan support. While the literature has emphasized the role of local conflict, families, peer groups, and marriage networks in transmitting values (Atkin et al. (2021), Bisin and Verdier (2001), Giuliano and Nunn (2020), Ahmed et al. (2025)), we show that schools can play a parallel role by shaping local cultural calendars, reinforcing identity-linked behaviors such as vegetarianism and devotional naming, and creating visible community norms. These changes emerge gradually, persist over time, and are concentrated among upper-caste households, a core electoral base of the BJP—illustrating how identity activation and political alignment can be mutually reinforcing.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides historical background on the RSS and the evolution of its school network. Section 3 describes the data used in the empirical analysis, and Section 4 outlines the empirical strategy. Section 5 presents the electoral effects of RSS schools, while Section 6 examines their cultural effects. Section 7 concludes.

2 Historical Background

2.1 Roots of RSS and its Education Project in India

The RSS was founded in 1925 in Nagpur, Maharashtra, amid rising communal tensions and sharpening religious competition in late colonial India. Conceived as a cultural organization rather than a political party, it sought to unite Hindus under a shared national identity and promote a vision of India as a culturally homogeneous Hindu nation. The primary instrument for this work was the *shakha*—a daily neighborhood gathering, modeled on a gymnasium, where volunteers (*swayamsevaks*) engaged in physical drills, games, prayers, and discussions under the guidance of trained instructors (Andersen and Damle, 1987).[1]

[1]The model was likely adapted from the Italian Fascist youth organization, the *Opera Nazionale Balilla*. The founders of the RSS were influenced by the fascists in Germany and Italy. B. S. Moonje—an ideological mentor to K. B. Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS—visited Italy in 1931 to study the functioning of Italian military schools and educational institutions (Casolari (2000)).

Shakhas served as training grounds, and recruitment hubs: they were designed to instill ideological narratives and identify promising individuals for advancement into broader organizational roles. Simultaneously, they served as community-embedded institutions. By convening participants daily in local neighborhoods, they cultivated durable bonds of fraternity, discipline, and trust. Their routine presence in public spaces helped build associational links across and within right-wing activists and members, and naturalize organizational practice into community interaction. For the most part, initial recruitment drew heavily from upper-caste, urban, middle-class Hindus, producing a socially cohesive and committed volunteer base.

In 1926, the RSS's first public activity was to maintain public order during *Ram Navami*, a festival commemorating the Hindu god *Ram* (Andersen and Damle, 1987, 35). This role soon expanded into broader forms of community policing, with cadres patrolling Hindu neighborhoods during episodes of communal unrest and overseeing religious fairs and processions, often with the explicit aim of countering perceived Muslim assertion in the wake of the Khilafat movement (Beckerlegge, 2004). Such suspicion of Muslims deepened its ideological divide with the Congress, especially Gandhi's commitment to nonviolence and religious pluralism, and culminated in his assassination in 1948 by Nathuram Godse, a former RSS member. Although the organization was not legally implicated in the murder, the government imposed a ban that forced it to operate with greater caution in public life. Lifted in 1949, the ban nonetheless left the RSS politically isolated, reinforcing its strategy of investing in long-term social and cultural work as a means of regaining legitimacy and extending its influence without direct electoral participation.

The RSS itself has never contested elections. But in 1951, some RSS members helped establish the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), a political party meant to espouse Hindu nationalist interests (Andersen and Damle, 1987). The BJS had poor electoral success, for example, winning only 5 (of 494) seats in the 1957 Lok Sabha elections. Even at its peak in 1967 it won only 35 (of 520) seats, remaining a minor player compared to the dominant Congress party. In 1977, the BJS merged with other opposition groups to form the Janata Party, which briefly ousted Congress from power following the Emergency. However, internal disputes ultimately led to a split, resulting in the formation of the BJP in 1980.

The BJP's early electoral fortunes were modest: it secured only 2 Lok Sabha seats in the 1984 election, following Indira Gandhi's assassination. However, its popularity surged through religio-cultural mobilization, particularly related to spousal maintenance under religious personal laws and the *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement, centered around a contested religious site in *Ayodhya* considered by Hindus to be the birthplace of Lord Ram. This issue escalated when the mosque there was demolished in 1992, sparking

nationwide Hindu–Muslim violence and politically energizing the BJP (Blakeslee, 2018). These events propelled the BJP into coalition governance under Prime Minister Vajpayee in 1998 and 1999, following a fragmented election in 1996. Although defeated in 2004, the party made a comeback under current Prime Minister Narendra Modi, winning a single majority in 2014, expanding further in 2019, and, despite a decline in 2024, returning to power with coalition allies.

Beyond the BJP, the RSS operates through a dense ecosystem of formally autonomous but interconnected affiliates known collectively as the *Sangh Parivar*. These include the *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad* (ABVP, founded 1949), which mobilizes students; the *Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh* (BMS, founded 1955), a labor union; and the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP, founded 1964), which engages Hindu religious leaders and institutions. While each affiliate has its own leadership and different governing structures, all draw on RSS-trained cadres and share a common ideological orientation, enabling coordinated mobilization across multiple social domains. Representatives from these affiliates convene annually at the *Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha* (ABPS), the RSS's highest policy-making body, to chart the organization's strategic priorities and align the Sangh Parivar's collective agenda.

Within this panoply of affiliate organizations engaged in direct mobilization, a subset pursued a more indirect strategy through public service provision, with education emerging as a particularly central arena. Schools provided a long-term means of ideological socialization while simultaneously generating goodwill and forging durable community linkages. The RSS first experimented with schools in the 1930s in Maharashtra, but the post-ban period marked a turning point. As Sarkar (1994) notes, "Founding a school was one of the ways [the RSS] used to overcome the impasse and to stretch out in untried directions." The aim was not only to cultivate public support through service provision, but also to shape nationalistic thinking among youth whom the organization believed were being led away from "traditional Hindu values" by colonial and, later, post-independence secular education systems (Sundar, 2004; Nair, 2009). In 1952, the RSS established a flagship school in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh, and in 1958 created a coordinating body, the *Shishu Shiksha Prabandh Samiti*. The institutional push gained real momentum only with the founding of the *Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan* (henceforth, Vidya Bharati or VB) in 1977–78. Before VB, school openings averaged about 60 per year; by contrast, during the 1980s and 1990s this figure rose steadily, peaking in the early 2000s at nearly 2,000 new institutions annually (see Figure 1).

Today, Vidya Bharati is the largest non-governmental school network in India, operating 12,754 formal schools (36 percent primary, 37 percent middle, 19 percent secondary,

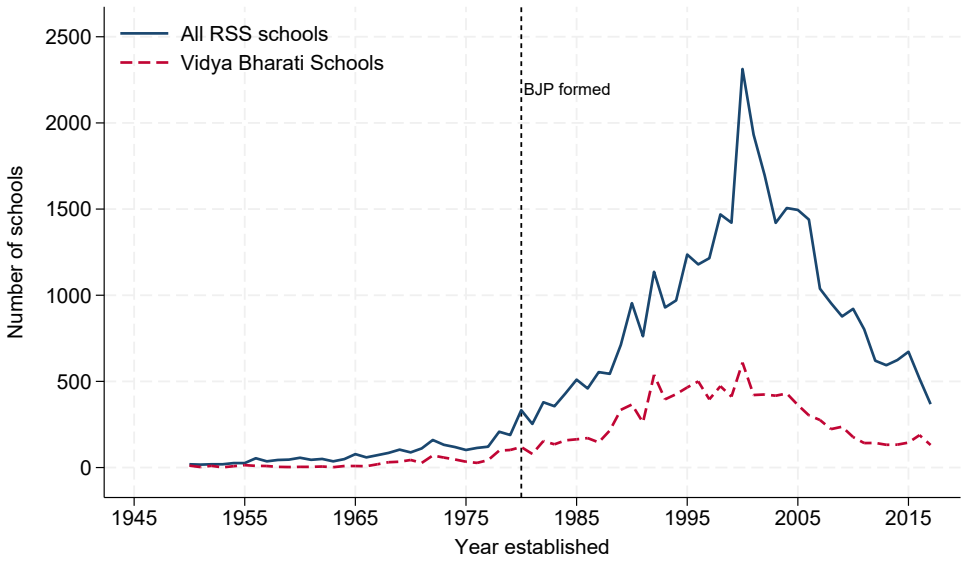


Figure 1: Establishment of RSS schools over time, 1947–2020.

and 8 percent senior secondary), serving over 3.3 million students with a teaching force of roughly 150,000.[2] The average school has about 258 students and 12 teachers. In addition to its formal schools, VB manages a similar number of informal schools, pre-schools, and cultural training centers. The Ekal Vidyalaya Foundation supplements this reach with tens of thousands of flexible, single-teacher schools in rural and tribal areas, often operating outside formal state recognition. Together, these systems give the RSS a footprint in roughly 90 percent of India's districts, with particularly dense coverage in the Hindi heartland, parts of eastern India, and tribal belts.

Adjacent Sangh bodies also run education interventions, some of which, but not all, are managed by VB, making it difficult to precisely estimate the extent of the RSS's educational infrastructure. For instance the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), while set up for tribal outreach, directly operates formal primary centers and a hostel network; its national dashboard lists 181 primary formal education centers, 230 hostels, and 3,816 non-formal centers including 1,933 Ekal Vidyalayas under its aegis. Seva Bharati, that provides basic health and education services, likewise runs residential schools and hostels alongside state-level hostel networks. Sangh Parivar organizations administer numerous education-adjacent initiatives such as moral and cultural education through "*sanskar-shalas*" or schools of culture, play schools for young children to compete with Montessori education, student hostels, and vocational training and skill development programs.We go into details of identifying the different kinds of RSS schools in Section 3.

[2]These numbers are taken from Vidya Bharati website.

2.2 How RSS schools further Hindu nationalism

RSS-affiliated schools function not only as educational institutions but also as multi-functional organisational hubs. Site selection often targets underserved areas with weak state provision, where land is typically secured through donations or concessional transfers from local elites (Iwanek, 2022a; Ashfaque and Chandran, 2024). This physical presence provides a strong fillip to Hindu nationalism, with both immediate and long-term political effects, achieved through a combination of direct electoral mobilization and indirect persuasion via norm change.

In terms of direct effects, once operational, these campuses host *shakhas*, strategy meetings, cadre trainings, and leadership camps for RSS and BJP workers, as well as community events (Narayan (2021)). During elections, they become neighborhood-level logistics hubs integrated into BJP's campaign structure. Facilities are used for coordination meetings, training programs, and booth-level outreach operations, including targeted canvassing of Dalit and Adivasi communities.

Teachers—often recruited locally and ideologically aligned with the RSS—are mobilized for booth surveys, beneficiary identification, and door-to-door canvassing. In Rampur, Uttar Pradesh, for example, teachers from RSS school were deployed across 21 villages to campaign for the BJP (Jha, 2021). Similar efforts are reported across states, where RSS networks conduct "silent campaigns" that complement formal party activities, mirroring the BJP's broader precinct-style micro-targeting infrastructure. RSS school grounds have hosted large joint RSS–BJP events, including a four-hour coordination meeting in Ghaziabad in 2025 (Khandelwal, 2025), a 15-day leadership camp for women cadres and training sessions for over 700 full-time RSS workers (The Pioneer, 2025). Senior BJP figures have addressed local workers from RSS school campuses (BJP, 2019) underscoring their strategic value as political infrastructure.

Beyond their campaign functions, RSS schools consolidate influence through indirect mechanisms that combine service provision and identity formation. By operating schools, hostels, clinics, and disaster relief programs, they embed cadres in local networks and build reputations as problem-solvers. This strategy exemplifies what Thachil (2011) terms embedded mobilization: non-party organizations provide valued goods and services, which over time are converted into political recognition for the BJP without overt partisan activity.

At the level of everyday practice, these institutions, as we note in our primary survey of RSS schools in Section 6.3, socialize Hindu nationalist identities through daily rituals, assemblies, patriotic songs, and extracurricular activities. Parent–teacher associations and cultural outreach programs extend this influence beyond students to families, ensur-

ing that ideological messaging permeates community life. RSS schools, in this sense, are not simply educational facilities but community-embedded institutions—rooted in local social life, cultivating goodwill, and leveraging that embeddedness for political and cultural transformation.

RSS schools also function as organizational hubs. Once established, campuses host shakhas (neighborhood drills and meetings), provide offices for affiliate groups, operate student hostels, and offer venues for public gatherings and festivals (Iwanek, 2015). Many schools even rent out facilities for community use, strengthening social ties and embedding themselves more deeply in local networks. These multifunctional roles ensure that schools remain integral to everyday social life and serve as visible anchors of organizational presence.

The indirect effects extends beyond children. Internal publications and curricular content frequently highlight BJP policies and the figure of Narendra Modi (Iwanek, 2022a), while parallel initiatives like Ekal Vidyalaya's *Saptahik Pathshalas* (weekly adult classes) sustain political socialization among parents and broader communities. By targeting multiple generations simultaneously, these programs embed Hindu nationalist frames within both household and neighborhood life.

A final source of legitimacy derives from the RSS's ability to substitute for state functions in areas of weak governance. As the RSS fills these governance gaps—whether through service delivery, local dispute mediation, or protection of group interests—it normalizes their role as indispensable community intermediaries. The state, constrained by limited administrative reach, often tacitly accommodates this authority. Taken together, these mechanisms—service provision, identity cultivation, substitution for state authority, organizational embeddedness, and intergenerational outreach—constitute the indirect effects of RSS schools. They legitimate the Sangh's presence, weave organizational influence into the fabric of community life, and, over time, channel these reservoirs of social and cultural capital into electoral advantage for the BJP.

3 Data

3.1 Data on school presence

We use data from the District Information System for Education (DISE) in India (National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA)). The DISE dataset provides a comprehensive list of all schools registered with the government of India, including details such as school names, year of establishment, and district, block of location.

This dataset is further enriched by matching it with a GIS database of schools, allowing us to extract the latitude and longitude of each school. Finally, we integrate the school dataset with the electoral boundaries of assembly constituencies in India, enabling the creation of an assembly-level dataset that combines information on schools and electoral outcomes. Our analysis on naming patterns is conducted at the pincode level and for that we combine the DISE dataset with the boundaries of pincodes.

Identifying schools run by the RSS Throughout its long history, the RSS has simultaneously operated on the margins of Indian society while also being deeply integrated within its various strata. Although technically functioning as an NGO, it has never registered as one. Consequently, its activities have been extremely difficult to trace, leading to the common refrain that the RSS "does not exist". This organizational opacity makes identifying RSS-affiliated schools especially challenging.

We address this challenge by exploiting the organization's standardized, state-specific naming conventions. Our approach draws on two sources: (i) names and nomenclature reported in Organizer, an RSS magazine; and (ii) the documentation of these naming patterns in Iwanek (2022a). We then match school names in the DISE database to the relevant state-level patterns (see Appendix Table **??**). To validate the algorithm, we compile a list of schools from Vidya Bharati—the RSS's educational arm, known to run a large network—and apply our procedure to that list, successfully matching 97% of schools. While Vidya Bharati directly manages about 12,000 schools, the broader network of RSS-affiliated institutions is substantially larger. Using the combined approach above, our algorithm identifies approximately 38,000 schools by the end of 2017. This magnitude is broadly consistent with *Organizer*'s report of roughly 30,000 schools (see here).

Our algorithm may misclassify some non-RSS schools as RSS. If this misclassification is unrelated to the outcomes, it adds noise that pushes our estimates toward zero—true positive effects look smaller, and true zeros stay near zero. To address this concern, we re-estimate using the Vidya Bharati directory to define treatment, which provides a higher-certainty set of RSS schools.

3.2 Outcome variables

Electoral Outcomes Our election outcomes and voting data come from Agarwal et al. (2021), which provides comprehensive information on both Lok Sabha (national) and Vidhan Sabha (state) elections in India since 1962, compiled from the official Statistical Reports of the Election Commission of India. Our analysis focuses on state elections only.

To ensure consistency in geographic units, we restrict our analysis to the period between 1977 and 2008, during which no delimitation of constituencies took place. This restriction is important because delimitation alters the boundaries and sometimes even the number of constituencies, breaking the comparability of electoral outcomes over time. By focusing on the pre-2008 period, we ensure that our measures of vote shares and electoral performance can be meaningfully compared within the same geographic constituencies across multiple elections, avoiding biases that could arise from boundary changes. It is worth noting that the BJP's period of strongest electoral expansion occurred after 2008; as a result, our estimates are likely to be a conservative assessment of the overall influence of RSS schools on the party's subsequent rise

Vegetarianism We study vegetarianism using household consumption data from the 1982 and 1999 waves of the Rural Economic & Demographic Survey (REDS). For our analysis, we focus on $N = 3,211$ Hindu households located in 225 villages. In each wave, the data record the total annual quantity and value of meat, fish, and egg products consumed by the household. We define our main outcome, *vegetarianism*, as complete abstinence from these foods. A binary indicator takes the value 1 if annual household consumption contains no expenditure or valuation of non-vegetarian items.

Household identifiers allow us to follow the same household units across the two survey years and implement household fixed effects. Where household had split into multiple households by 1999, we aggregate consumption across all resulting units to maintain a consistent household-level panel. Using village coordinates from REDS, we compute the distance to the nearest RSS-affiliated school. Villages with an RSS school already within the treatment radius in 1982 are excluded, and treatment status is assigned to those where a school was established within the threshold distance by 1999. This procedure yields a balanced panel of Hindu households observed in both survey years.

Data on Names We use electoral roll data from Sood and Dhingra (2023) to construct, for each state, a pincode-by-year panel that records the distribution of first names. Each first name is classified as either a Hindu deity name or a non-deity name based on a reference list of deity names and epithets compiled from Goldman et al. (2005) and subsequently expanded based on Chandra (1998). This classification allows us to track, over time and across locations, changes in the prevalence of deity names.

We restrict our analysis to male names as nearly all women are married by their mid-twenties, and marriage typically involves moving to the husband's residence, often outside the natal village. This mobility introduces substantial location-based selection un-

related to the factors we study. Since our goal is to examine the cultural effects of RSS schools on local naming patterns, it is important that the sample reflects the stable resident population in the area where schools operate. By focusing on men who are far less likely to migrate, we ensure that changes in name usage can be more plausibly attributed to local cultural influences of RSS schools rather than to in- or out-migration driven by marriage. Our current sample for this exercise includes the states of Bihar, UP, MP, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana.

3.3 Survey of Schools

To study how RSS schools embed themselves in local communities, we conducted a primary survey in Bihar. This survey was carried out in both RSS-run schools and other private schools, allowing us to compare their modes of community engagement. The sampling followed a stratified design to ensure equal representation of districts from the state's two major regions—North and South Bihar. Within each selected district, we randomly sampled blocks that had at least one functional RSS-run school.

In each block, we surveyed two schools: one RSS-run and one private school of comparable size, allowing for within-block comparisons that help control for local socioeconomic and institutional factors. The primary respondents were school principals. When principals were unavailable, we interviewed teachers or other staff.

The survey gathered systematic information on multiple dimensions of school–community engagement: the types of events involving community participation, distribution of literature or other outreach materials, use of school premises for community activities, and the extent to which teachers directly engage with the community on social, political, and cultural issues. This design allows us to assess not only differences in the level of engagement but also variations in its nature and underlying motivations. To ensure that our results were not driven by experiment demand effect the questions were embedded within a larger set of questions aimed at understanding the functioning of the school. We report the results of the survey in Section 6.

4 Empirical Strategy

The central argument of this paper is that RSS-run schools operate as community-embedded institutions that build local legitimacy and durable networks of influence. Over time, these networks can be mobilized to benefit the BJP electorally and to sustain cultural changes aligned with the Hindu nationalist project.

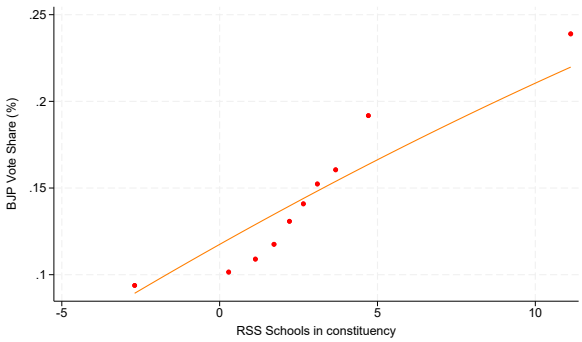
Our treatment measures exposure to RSS schools, which varies continuously across units and over time as schools open at different dates. In small geographies (e.g., villages), the opening of a single school is sufficient to mark exposure, but in larger geographies (e.g., assembly constituencies or PIN codes) intensity matters. We therefore convert the continuous exposure measure into a binary indicator using a threshold rule: a unit is coded as treated in the first year that a function of exposure crosses a cutoff. The function can be (i) the share of all schools in the geographic area that are RSS-run, (ii) the number of RSS schools in the geographic area, or (iii) the number of RSS schools in the geographic area scaled by electorate size. Thresholds and the choice among these functions are selected using a data-driven procedure.

For electoral and naming outcomes, we define treatment at a 1% share of RSS schools. Results are robust to alternative exposure functions and cutoffs.

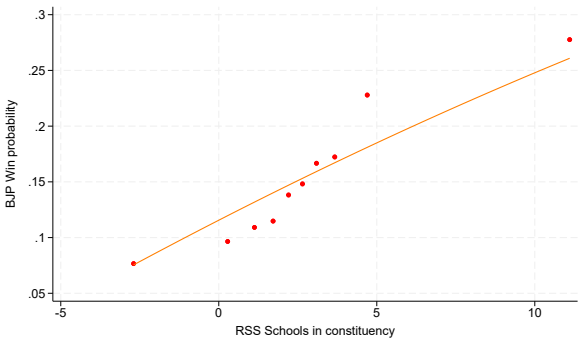
In Figure 2 we show that there is a strong correlation between different measures of presence of RSS Schools in a constituency and the electoral performance of the BJP after accounting for time trends and presence of other schools.

We define treatment at the constituency level, coding a constituency as treated once the share of RSS-run schools reaches at least one percent of all schools. Figure 3 illustrates the geographic spread of treatment at the assembly constituency level since the 1980s. A large share of treated constituencies are concentrated in northern states, which have also served as the BJP's core electoral base in the last three parliamentary elections. To ensure that our estimates are not confounded by this regional concentration, our empirical analysis relies on within-state comparisons that net out systematic cross-state differences in political support. Figure 4 shows the evolution of treatment over time: by 2007, nearly half of all constituencies have 1% RSS Schools.

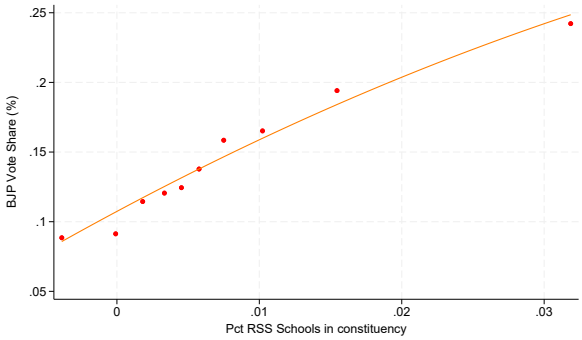
First, we examine the raw relationship between treatment status and BJP's electoral performance. Figure 5 plots the BJP's vote share and winning probability for constituencies that are never treated by 2007 and for those that eventually receive treatment, with outcomes demeaned by state averages. Prior to 1988, the two groups follow nearly identical trends in both outcomes, suggesting strong pre-treatment comparability. Beginning in the late 1980s, however, a clear divergence emerges: ever-treated constituencies experience a pronounced rise in both vote share and winning probability, coinciding with the median year of treatment in this group. This descriptive evidence is consistent with the idea that the spread of RSS schools contributed to BJP's electoral gains, though it does not yet account for other confounding factors—a point addressed in our empirical strategy below.



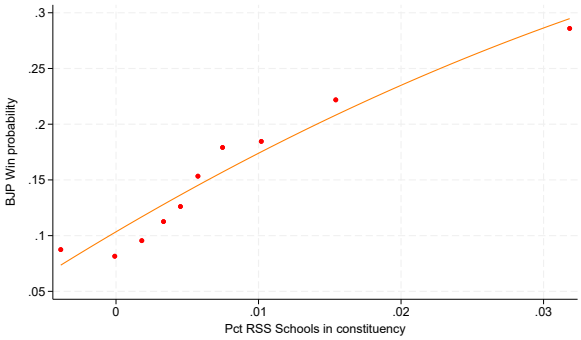
(a) Vote share vs. No. RSS schools



(b) Win prob. vs. No. RSS schools



(c) Vote share vs. % RSS schools



(d) Win prob. vs. % RSS schools

Figure 2: BJP Electoral Performance and RSS School Presence

Notes:The Figure shows relationship between BJP electoral performance and RSS school presence across constituencies. Each panel shows a binned scatter (10 quantile bins) with quadratic fit, controlling for previous election turnout, number of electors in constituency, counts of government, private, and total schools in the year of the election, and including half-decade fixed effects.

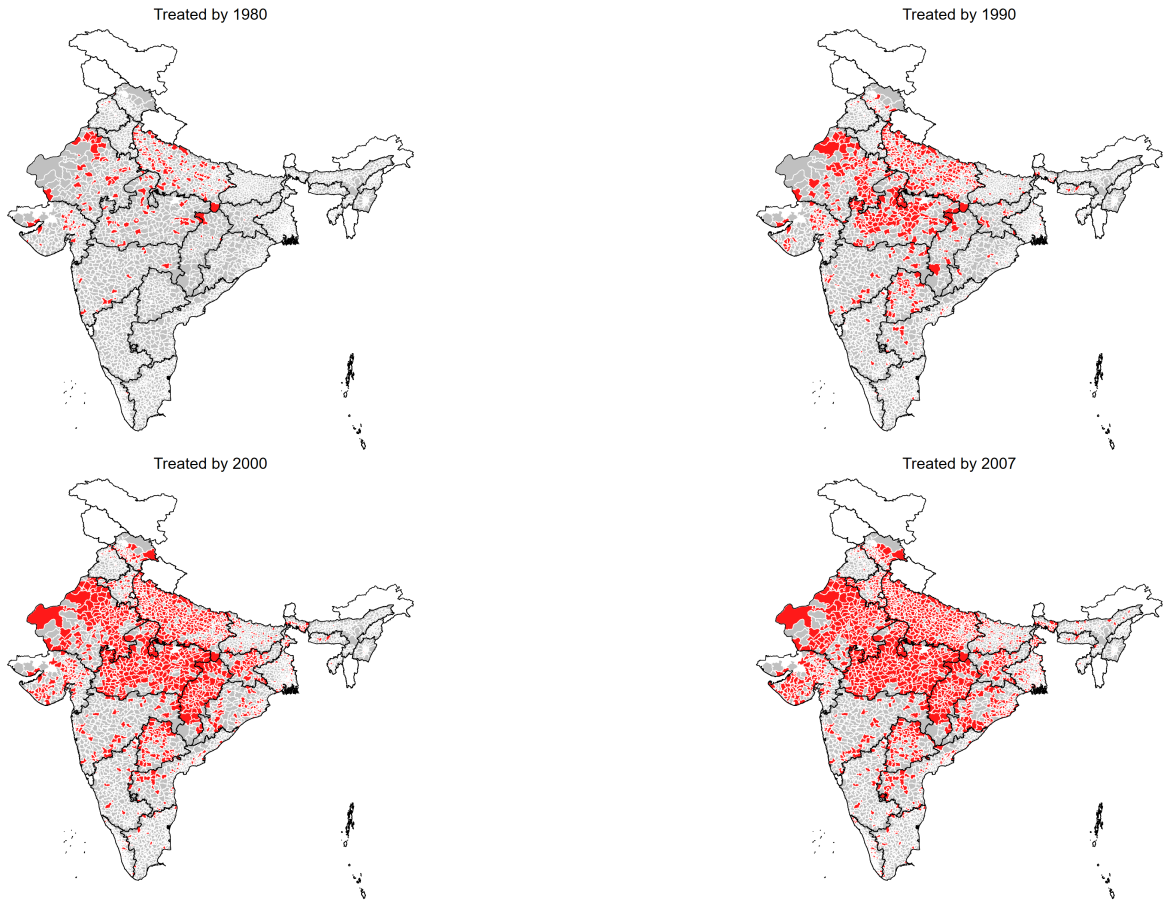


Figure 3: Treatment status by decade

Note: Each panel shows areas treated (in red) and not treated (in grey) by the indicated year. State boundaries are overlaid in black.

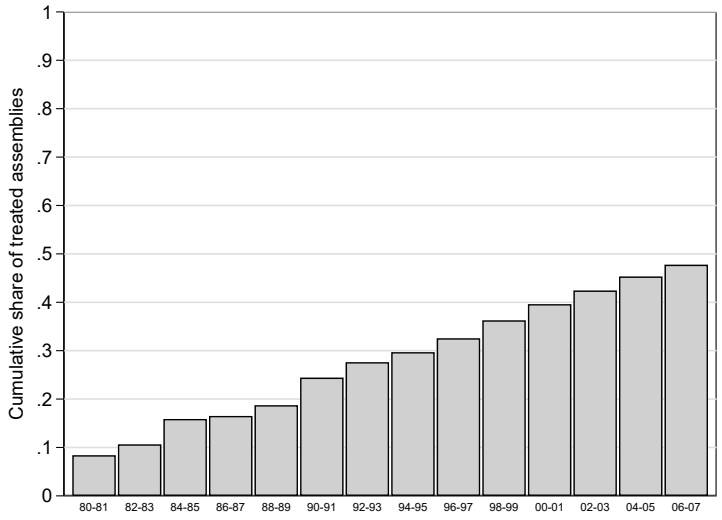
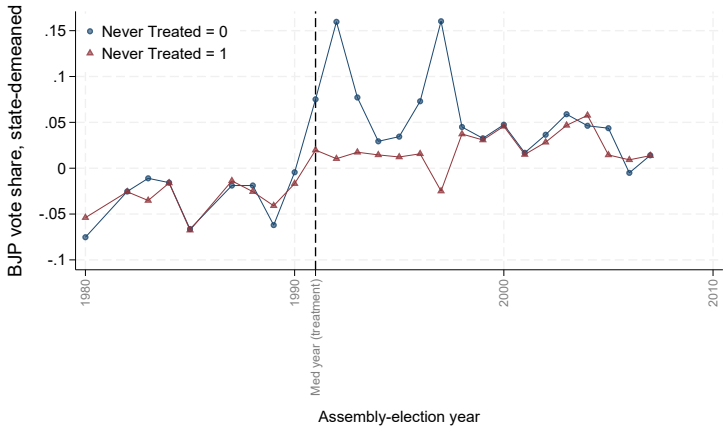
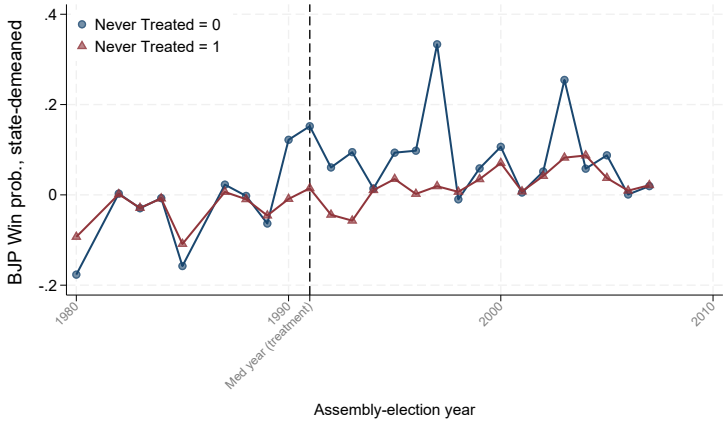


Figure 4: Share of assemblies treated by year



(a) BJP vote share by year



(b) BJP win rate by year

Figure 5: Raw trends in BJP electoral performance

Our identification strategy uses the stacked differences in difference approach of Cengiz et al. (2019), Aneja and Xu (2024) and others. We estimate the following specification:

$$Y_{gj\tau} = \alpha + \beta * \textit{treat}_{jg} * \textit{post}_{\tau} + Z_{j\tau} + \nu_{g\tau} + \gamma_{gj} + \epsilon_{jg\tau} \tag{4.1}$$

where $Y_{gj\tau}$ indicates the vote share of BJP in assembly j which is part of event group g. Event group g (the stack) is defined at the state (s) $*$ election year (t) level and contains the set of assemblies within a state which were treated by the election t and a set of never treated control assemblies. τ captures the number of years since the election year e. $\nu_{g\tau}$ and γ_{gj} are event group$*$election cycle and event group$*$ assembly fixed effects. treat$_{jg}$ takes the value of 1 if assembly j gets treated in event group g and post$_{\tau} = 1$ if $\tau >= 0$. This empirical strategy implies that all our comparisons are within the state.

$treat$ is a binary measure which captures whether the percent of RSS Schools is either equal to or greater than 1. We show robustness to alternate measures which include: 1) binary measure of percent of RSS Schools $>= 0.75$; 2) Number of RSS Schools per 100000 voters ≥ 1. We also use time-varying controls for each assembly-time unit, and this is denoted by $Z_{j\tau}$.

5 Political Impacts

We estimate Equation 4.1 on the subset of treated assembly constituencies that have at least one observation before treatment and at least one after. This restriction yields an unbalanced panel, reflecting the fact that the available election data do not provide full coverage in both periods for all constituencies. In the stacked difference-in-differences framework, such unbalancedness does not mechanically bias the estimated treatment effects, since identification relies on within-event-group comparisons between treated and never-treated constituencies observed in the same relative period. It may, however, reduce precision and limit the support available for coefficients at event times with fewer observations. Restricting the data to constituencies with one pre-period implies that we automatically remove constituencies which had a high presence of RSS schools before 1981.

Table 1 reports the estimated effects of RSS school presence on BJP electoral outcomes. Panel A focuses on the BJP's own vote share and winning probability. Across specifications, treatment—defined as having at least one percent of schools in the assembly constituency affiliated with the RSS—is associated with a statistically significant increase of about [0.0069–0.0070] in BJP vote share and [0.044–0.045] in the probability of a BJP vic-

tory. To ensure these results are not being driven by systematic differences in voting patterns in a constituency where the RSS schools open we control for 1 period lag of turnout percentage, effective number of candidates, male turnout, as well as for number of electors, interaction of treatment with number of RSS schools, and whether a coalition partner contested the election (for Panel A). These effects remain robust to the inclusion of additional constituency-level controls for total number of government schools, number of private schools, total schools in the constituency, and the number of independent candidates.

Panel B extends the analysis to BJP coalition outcomes, where the dependent variable is either the combined vote share of the BJP and its coalition partners or a binary indicator for a coalition win. The estimated coefficients are similar in magnitude to those in Panel A, with treatment increasing coalition vote share by approximately 0.0086 and coalition winning probability by about 0.047. These results indicate that the presence of RSS schools is positively associated not only with the BJP's individual performance but also with the performance of its broader electoral coalition.

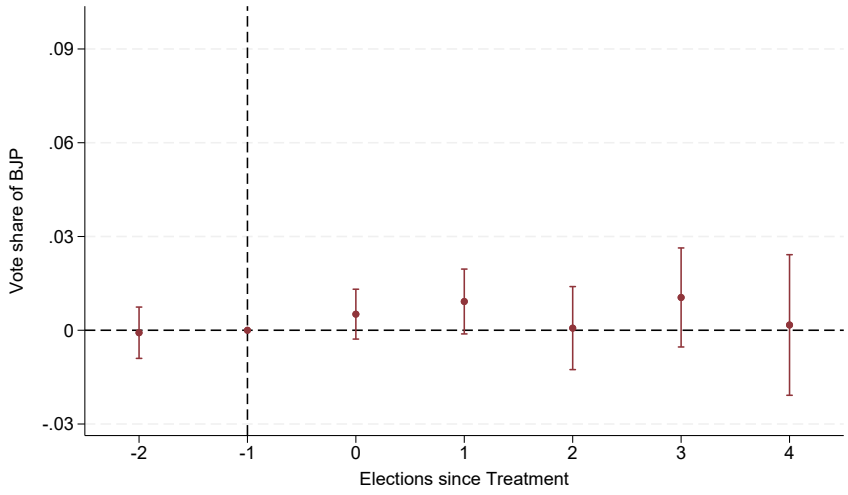
Figure 6a presents the event-study estimates of the effect of RSS school presence on BJP's electoral performance. Panel (a) plots the dynamic treatment effects for BJP's vote share, while Panel (b) shows the corresponding effects for BJP's probability of winning. In both outcomes, the estimated coefficients in the pre-treatment period are close to zero and statistically indistinguishable from it.

Following treatment, the estimated coefficients become positive and remain so across subsequent elections. For vote share, the effects are modest in size, amounting to a few percentage points, but consistently positive. By contrast, the effects on BJP's winning probability are much larger and steadily increase over time, reaching as high as 7 percentage points by the fourth election after treatment. This divergence between the two outcomes indicates that while RSS schools were associated with only modest gains in raw vote share, these gains translated into disproportionately larger improvements in the likelihood of winning. In other words, even small increases in support in constituencies with RSS schools appear to have been decisive in closely contested races, giving the BJP a sustained competitive advantage in treated areas.

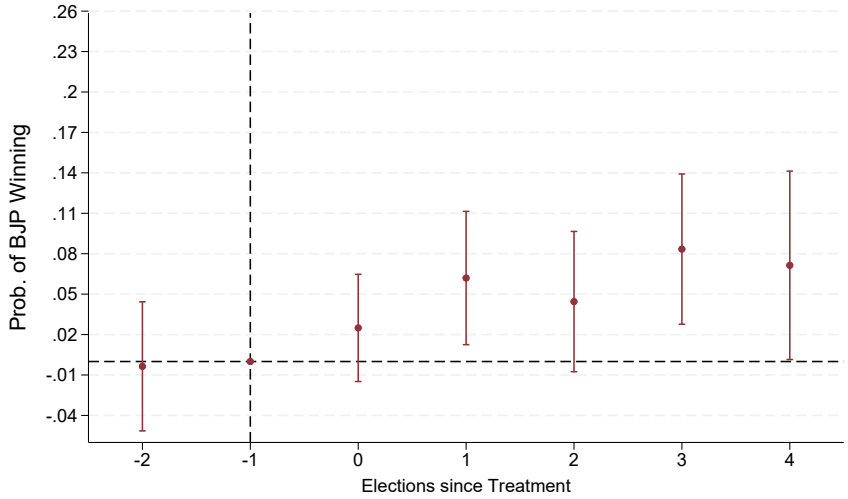
Table 1: Estimates of Schools on BJP Vote Share and Victory

Panel A: BJP Outcomes	BJP Vote Share		BJP Wins	
% of RSS Schools >= 1	0.0070*	0.0069*	0.0441***	0.0449***
	(0.0038)	(0.0039)	(0.0110)	(0.0110)
Observations	66,251	66,251	66,262	66,262
Mean dep. Variable	0.15	0.15	0.14	0.14
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Add. Control	No	Yes	No	Yes
Panel B: BJP Coalition Outcomes	BJP Coalition Vote Share		BJP Coalition Wins	
% of RSS Schools >= 1	0.0086**	0.0083**	0.0476***	0.0471***
	(0.0040)	(0.0040)	(0.0120)	(0.0121)
Observations	66,251	66,251	66,262	66,262
Mean dep. Variable	0.19	0.19	0.19	0.19
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Add. Control	No	Yes	No	Yes

Note: Each panel reports coefficients from a stacked DiD regression estimated on assembly-constituency-by-year observations from 1980 onward. **Panel A** uses the BJP's vote share in the relevant state-assembly race and a binary indicator for whether the BJP wins as dependent variables. **Panel B** uses the BJP plus coalition partners' combined vote share and a binary indicator for whether the BJP or a coalition partner wins. In both panels, treatment is defined as whether the percent of RSS schools in the assembly is greater than or equal to 1. Constituencies are grouped into cohorts by the first year in which this variable becomes positive, with constituencies never treated in the sample serving as the control cohort. All specifications include event group×relative time, event group×constituency fixed effects, and a vector of time-varying controls: lagged measures of turnout percentage, effective number of candidates, number of electors and male turnout; whether a coalition partner contested and number of rss schools interacted with treatment status. Additional controls include the total number of government schools, number of private schools, total schools in the constituency. Standard errors (in parentheses) are heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered at the constituency*stack level. Statistical significance: $p < 0.10$ (*), $p < 0.05$ (**), $p < 0.01$ (***).



(a) BJP Vote Share



(b) BJP Win

Figure 6: Dynamic effects of RSS Schools on electoral outcomes of BJP

Note: The figure presents coefficients from a stacked DiD regression estimated on assembly-constituency-by-year observations from 1980 onward. The dependent variable is (a) the BJP's vote share in the relevant state-assembly race and (b) whether the BJP wins the election. Treatment is defined as whether the percent of RSS schools in the assembly is greater than or equal to 1 for (a) and (b), respectively. Constituencies are grouped into cohorts by the first year in which this variable becomes positive, while those that never experience treatment within the sample serve as the control cohort. All specifications include event group×relative time, event group×constituency fixed effects, and a vector of time-varying controls: lagged measures of turnout percentage, effective number of candidates, number of electors and male turnout; whether a coalition partner contested and number of rss schools interacted with treatment status. Additional controls include the total number of government schools, number of private schools, total schools in the constituency. Standard errors (in parentheses) are heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered at the constituency*stack level.

5.1 Robustness

Placebo Checks To make sure that our staggered difference in difference specification is not picking up a trend in vote share which is not related to the BJP but is instead in favor of large parties, we run specification in equation 4.1 on the vote share and winning probability of Indian National Congress (INC). The Indian National Congress (INC) remained the largest political party in India for the first five decades following the country's independence.

Table 2: Estimates of Schools on INC Vote share and victory

	INC Vote Share		INC Wins	
% of RSS Schools >= 1	0.0008	0.0011	-0.0081	-0.0066
	(0.0042)	(0.0042)	(0.0128)	(0.0128)
Observations	66,251	66,251	66,262	66,262
Mean dep. Variable	0.27	0.27	0.28	0.28
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Add. Control	No	Yes	No	Yes

Note: The table presents coefficients from a Stacked DiD regression estimated on assembly-constituency-by-year observations from 1980 onward. The dependent variable is the INC's vote-share in the relevant state-assembly race and whether INC wins the election. Treatment is captured by whether the percent of rss schools in the assembly is greater than or equal to 1. Constituencies are grouped into cohorts by the first year in which this variable becomes positive, while those that never experience treatment within the sample serve as the control cohort. All specifications include event group×relative time, event group×constituency fixed effects, and a vector of time-varying controls: lagged measures of turnout percentage, effective number of candidates, number of electors and male turnout; whether a coalition partner contested and number of rss schools interacted with treatment status. Additional controls include the total number of government schools, number of private schools, total schools in the constituency. Standard errors (in parentheses) are heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered at the constituency*stack level. Statistical significance is denoted by $p < 0.10$ (*), $p < 0.05$ (**), and $p < 0.01$ (***).

Results shown in Table 2 indicate that opening of RSS Schools didn't affect the vote share or the winning chances of the Congress.

Robustness to pre-existing Right Wing Institutions The BJP traces its lineage to the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), founded in 1951 as the RSS's political arm. The BJP emerged in 1980 from the BJS after the Janata Party's collapse. Our analysis covers 1980–2007 and excludes the BJS electoral era (1952–1977). If RSS schools after 1981 were opened in constituencies with prior BJS presence, or if the BJP leveraged BJS infrastructure, our estimates in Table 1 may capture legacy BJS strength rather than the effect of schools. We address this concern by including *stack-interacted controls* for pre-1980 Jana Sangh (BJS) presence at the constituency's historical unit: mean BJS vote share, the number of BJS wins, and an indicator for any BJS contest between 1960 and 1980.[3] These controls absorb legacy variation potentially correlated with RSS school placement. Appendix Table A-1 shows the results. Our estimates become slightly smaller but remain statistically significant for all specifications except one. This pattern is consistent with some positive correlation between RSS school placement and historical BJS strength, but the main results are not driven by BJS legacy presence.

Robustness to religious programming through mass media. A well-documented channel for religious identity activation is exposure to broadcast content—most notably the nationally televised *Ramayana* in the late 1980s (Ahmed et al., 2025). If constituencies with greater exposure to such programming were also more likely to host RSS schools, our estimates could conflate mass-media effects with school effects. To address this concern, we re-estimate our main specification controlling for television coverage at the assembly constituency–year level—an indicator for the presence of a transmitter, its effective power, as well as time trend for transmitter power and heterogeneity in effect of transmitter power. As shown in Appendix Table A-2, the coefficients are essentially unchanged, indicating that the results are not driven by mass-media religious programming.

Robustness to alternative treatment definitions In Table A-3, treatment is defined using a lower threshold—constituencies where the percentage of RSS schools is at least 0.75 percent. The estimated effects remain positive across outcomes, though somewhat smaller in magnitude compared to the baseline specification. Under this definition, treatment is associated with an increase in BJP vote share of 0.003 points and an increase in the probability of BJP victory of about 0.030–0.032 points, with the latter estimates statistically significant at the 1 percent level.

[3] Assembly boundaries were altered due to delimitation prior to 1980. To maintain consistent geography, we map all post-1961 assemblies to their 1961 district and assign each assembly in our analysis sample the district-level BJS variables from 1962-1980.

Figure A-1 redefines treatment based on the number of RSS schools per 100000 voters: constituencies are considered treated if they have at least 1 RSS schools per 100000 voters in 1979. The results are very similar to those in the main specification. The consistency of the sign, magnitude, and significance of these coefficients across alternative treatment definitions reinforces the robustness of the main findings.

Checks for reverse causality In Appendix Table A-4 we check for reverse causality, that is, whether BJP victory leads to the opening of RSS schools. To examine this, we estimate a local–linear regression discontinuity (RD) design around the threshold where the BJP barely wins or loses an election. The running variable is the vote-share margin between the first- and second-place candidates, and the treatment indicator equals one when the BJP narrowly wins. The outcome is the number of RSS schools built (or an indicator for any RSS school opened) between two consecutive elections. We restrict the sample to constituencies within bandwidths of 0.03, 0.05, and 0.10 around the cutoff, apply triangular kernel weights, and include side-specific slopes in the running variable. Across all bandwidths and both outcome measures, the estimated discontinuities are small and statistically insignificant. This suggests that narrowly winning an election does not lead to an increase in the subsequent establishment of RSS schools. In other words, BJP electoral victories do not appear to drive RSS school expansion, supporting the interpretation that the observed effects in the main analysis reflect the influence of RSS schools on political outcomes rather than the other way around.

5.2 Effect on Conflict

From a political-economy perspective, an extensive school network can enlarge a movement's local organizational capacity (cadre supply, venues, and ties to parents and neighborhood associations), lowering the marginal cost of coordinated protest and strategic confrontation. Ethnographic work on Vidya Bharati—the RSS's school wing—documents how schools embed ritual practice and community outreach in routine operations, building durable parent–school–community linkages that are plausibly redeployable for political mobilization (Iwanek, 2022b). Historical evidence further indicates that Sangh affiliates have, at times, mobilized disciplined cadres in episodes of communal violence (Human Rights Watch, 2002; J. and Chandran, 2024). In India, the risk that identity-centered mobilization spills into conflict is conditioned by political incentives and local civic structure: electoral competition has historically predicted communal violence (Wilkinson, 2004), whereas cross-cutting civic ties mitigate it (Varshney, 2002b). Taken

together, these mechanisms motivate the hypothesis that the expansion of RSS schools can raise the local propensity for political conflict by intensifying identity salience and by providing ready-made platforms for collective action.

To test this hypothesis, we study whether the opening of RSS schools led to an increase in riots between Hindus and Muslims. We use data from the India Violence Archive (Dar et al., 2025), which allow us to construct an assembly-level panel of riots from 1950–2008. Our outcome is the number of riots in a year. Because even a few schools could be leveraged for political violence, we use an absolute measure of schools as our independent variable and define an assembly as treated if it has greater than or equal to two schools. This threshold reduces exposure misclassification from isolated or transient single schools and yields a clean event definition for our stacked DiD. Results are robust to using a threshold of 1 school. We estimate the following specification:

$$Y_{gj\tau} = \alpha + \beta \cdot \mathit{treat}_{jg} \cdot \mathit{post}_{\tau} + Z_{j\tau} + \nu_{g\tau} + \gamma_{gj} + \epsilon_{jg\tau}. \tag{5.1}$$

Here, $Y_{gj\tau}$ denotes the dependent variable in constituency j, which belongs to event group g. An event group g (the "stack") is defined as a *state–cohort* (s, t): it includes all constituencies within state s that *first* receive treatment in calendar year t, together with *never-treated* constituencies from the same state. The variable τ indexes event time (years relative to t). We include event-group–time fixed effects $(\nu_{g\tau})$ and event-group–constituency fixed effects (γ_{gj}). The indicator $\mathit{treat}_{jg} = 1$ for constituencies that belong to the treated cohort within group g, and $\mathit{post}_{\tau} = 1$ for $\tau \geq 0$. $Z_{j\tau}$ captures additional constituency-level, time-varying controls. Because stacks are defined within states, identification comes from within-state comparisons. Standard errors are clustered at the event-group-by-constituency $(j \times g)$ level.

Our sample is created in the following manner. All units must be present in a window of $\tau \in [-5, 10]$ relative to the year of treatment. Treated constituencies and their controls must be observed in every year of this window. Estimation then uses a wider *extended* window, $\tau \in [-9, 18]$. The extended window permits analysis of medium- and longer-run effects (beyond $+10$ years) without discarding constituencies that miss a few very early or very late years. Requiring balance over the extended window would mechanically exclude newer cohorts (which lack long post-periods) and older cohorts (which lack long pre-periods). Balancing on the core while estimating over the extended window keeps the sample fixed across τ and uses all available data in the tails, yielding clearer dynamics and more precise estimates.

Table 3 shows that once a constituency crosses the threshold of at least two RSS schools,

the number of Hindu–Muslim riots rises by about 0.0088 per constituency–year. Given a pre-treatment mean of 0.014, these coefficients imply a $\sim 61\%$ increase relative to baseline. The point estimate implies roughly 0.88 additional riots per 100 constituency–years—that is, about one extra riot for every 115–120 constituency–years of exposure. Over a decade, this amounts to ~ 8.8 additional riots per 100 treated constituencies.

For the event study we collapse event time into three-year intervals $(\ldots, [-9, -7], [-6, -4], [-3, -1], [$ For each interval we create an indicator that turns on only for treated constituencies whose relative year falls in that bin; the last pre-treatment bin [-3,-1] is omitted as the reference. Estimating the event study with these bin dummies traces out average effects for each 3-year period relative to the pre-period, smoothing noisy year-to-year fluctuations, preserving power when cells are thin, and keeping the tails more stable. Bin endpoints are truncated to the observed minimum and maximum event time in the data. In Figure 7, we find no detectable pre-trends and a persistent post-treatment increase of roughly 0.01–0.02 riots per constituency-year.

Table 3: Effects of RSS Schools on Hindu-Muslim riots

	Number of Riots	
Num of RSS Schools >=2 * Post	0.0090***	0.0088***
	(0.0028)	(0.0028)
Observations	702,390	702,390
Mean dep. variable	0.014	0.014
Controls	Yes	Yes
Additional Controls	No	Yes

Note: Each column reports coefficients from regressions of the listed outcome on the treatment indicator (treated $\times$ post), estimated on constituency–year data. A constituency is coded as treated from the first year in which the number of RSS schools in the constituency is at least two. All specifications include fixed effects for constituency $\times$ stack and calendar year $\times$ stack. Standard errors are heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered at the constituency $\times$ stack level. Controls indicates inclusion of counts of government, private, and total schools in the constituency. Additional controls further add interactions of constituency reservation status and constituency size with year fixed effects. The mean of the dependent variable is the pre-treatment mean among constituencies in treated stacks. $p < 0.10$ (*), $p < 0.05$ (**), $p < 0.01$ (***).

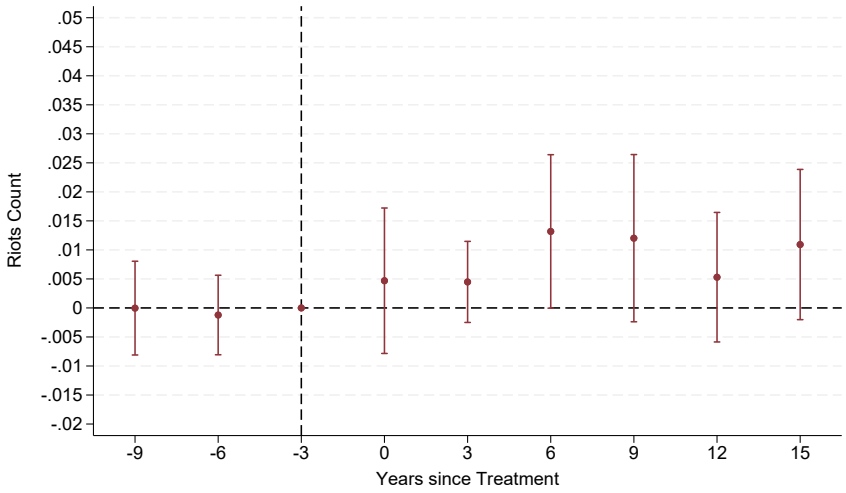


Figure 7: Effect of RSS Schools on Hindu-Muslim riots

6 Cultural Impacts

We hypothesize that the RSS has strategically deployed its schools as institutional platforms for embedding itself within local communities and mobilizing support for the BJP. The mechanisms of such mobilization can be understood along two principal channels: cultural transformation and direct political mobilization.

The first channel operates through the gradual shaping of ideological and socio-political orientations in surrounding communities. RSS schools provide repeated exposure to religious and nationalist narratives—whether through festivals, weekly assemblies emphasizing Hindutva and national identity, or lectures by leaders from the Hindu Right. Over time, this form of "soft" ideological dissemination may normalize specific political preferences and make the BJP appear as the natural political choice. At the very least, it creates a socio-political environment that the party can later exploit for electoral advantage.

The second channel is more direct: RSS schools may serve as operational hubs for explicit political mobilization. This includes organizing BJP-linked events, hosting campaign meetings, and coordinating rallies. In this way, the organizational infrastructure of the schools is integrated into the BJP's partisan machinery, transforming educational institutions into durable nodes of political mobilization.

We test these channels separately. To assess the cultural-transformation mechanism, we examine whether the establishment of RSS schools is associated with shifts in community practices and identities. Specifically, we measure changes in the prevalence of vegetarianism—an element emphasized in Hindu religious texts—and in the use of Hindu deity names, which serve as a salient marker of religious-cultural identity. Both outcomes

provide evidence on whether RSS schools foster broader socio-cultural transformations that may subsequently influence political preferences.

To assess the direct mobilization mechanism, we draw on original survey data from RSS and non-RSS schools. These data allow us to compare governance structures, curricula, extracurricular programming, and community embeddedness. Distinctive institutional features of RSS schools, relative to other private schools, help us identify whether they operate not only as educational institutions but also as organizational extensions of the BJP.

Having shown in the previous section that the presence of RSS schools is associated with sustained gains in BJP vote share and winning probability, our study of cultural impacts can also be viewed as an investigation of the channels through which these electoral effects emerge. Together, these analyses enable us to distinguish between cultural change and institutional differentiation as complementary pathways through which RSS schools, as community-embedded institutions, contribute to the consolidation of BJP support.

6.1 Vegetarianism

We start by looking at the effect of RSS Schools on adoption of vegetarian norms in surrounding communities. Vegetarianism occupies a prominent place in many Hindu traditions, rooted in the principle of ahimsa (non-violence) toward all living beings. This ethical ideal, articulated in ancient texts such as the Mahabharata (*ahimsa paramo dharmaḥ* – non-violence is the highest duty) and the Manusmṛiti, frames abstention from meat as both a moral and a spiritual discipline. Within Hinduism, vegetarianism is also associated with ritual purity and the cultivation of self-control, with certain upper-caste groups historically adopting it as a marker of social identity (Appadurai (1981)). However, not all Hindus are vegetarians—dietary practices vary widely by region, caste, and community, and large segments of the Hindu population regularly consume meat, fish, or eggs (Natrajan and Jacob (2018)). The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) promotes a form of Hinduism that places strong emphasis on vegetarianism as part of a broader cultural project, aligning dietary practices with its vision of a unified Hindu identity.[4] In this context, examining whether proximity to RSS-affiliated schools is associated with higher rates of vegetarianism provides a direct way to test for potential cultural changes consistent with the ideological orientation of these institutions.

We draw on household data from the Rural Economic and Demographic Survey (REDS)

[4]At a public event in Bengaluru on November 9, 2025, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat urged the government to 'project vegetarianism in its policies' and suggested Hindu society should 'treat' non-vegetarianism where possible (see here).

to examine cultural change. Since the survey provides only two waves of information—1982 as the baseline and 1999 as the endline—our analysis compares changes in vegetarianism across this period between two groups of villages: those in which an RSS school was established between 1982 and 1999, and those in which no RSS school was ever built. Importantly, the vast majority of RSS schools were established during this interval, making it an ideal period to study whether the introduction of schools is associated with shifts in dietary practices within surrounding communities.

Our identification strategy exploits variation in proximity to RSS schools in 1999 to estimate their impact on household vegetarianism over time. We estimate a difference-in-differences specification of the form:

$$\text{Vegetarian}_{it} = \beta \cdot \text{RSS_Proximity}_{i,1999} * \textit{post}_t + \gamma_{s\times t} + \alpha_i + \varepsilon_{it}, \tag{6.1}$$

where Vegetarian_{it} is an indicator equal to one if household i reports complete abstention from meat, fish, or eggs in year t. The key regressor, $\text{RSS_Proximity}_{i,1999}$, is measured either as an indicator for whether the household's village lies within 5 km (or 2 km) of an RSS school in 1999, or as a continuous measure of the average distance to the nearest RSS school in 1999. The term $\gamma_{s\times t}$ denotes state-by-year fixed effects, which absorb shocks common to all households in a given state-year, while α_i are household fixed effects controlling for time-invariant household characteristics.

Time-varying controls include the number of government, private, and total schools within 2 km of the village, as well as interactions of year dummies with baseline (1981) household characteristics—household size, landholdings, and education of the household head—and baseline village characteristics—number of households, distance to the nearest town, distance to the nearest *pucca* road, and year of electrification. Standard errors are heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered at the household level. Identification comes from changes in vegetarianism over time within the same household, relative to other households in the same state but further away from RSS schools in 1999.

Table 4 reports estimates linking proximity to an RSS school in 1999 with the likelihood a household reports vegetarianism. Across specifications, being within 5 km of an RSS school is associated with a 7.8 percentage point higher probability of vegetarianism, while being within 2 km is associated with a 9.5 percentage point increase. The fact that effect increases when we restrict the treated areas to a smaller unit is reassuring. The results are robust to measuring proximity as a continuous variable, specifically the average distance from each village to the nearest RSS-affiliated school, rather than as a binary treatment indicator. A one-kilometer reduction in distance is associated with a 0.2 percentage point

increase in vegetarianism. All specifications include state-by-year and household fixed effects, along with an extensive set of household and village controls.

Table 5 confirms these patterns using log distance to the nearest RSS school as the treatment variable. The estimated coefficients are negative, and statistically significant at conventional levels, indicating that households farther from an RSS school are less likely to report vegetarianism. Columns 3–4 and 5–6 demonstrate that the results remain robust when distance is measured using RSS schools established by 1995 and 1990, respectively. Figure 8 shows distance-graded difference-in-differences estimates of how proximity to an RSS school affects vegetarianism. We compare the 1999–1981 change in villages within 0–2 km, 2–5 km, and 5–10 km of the nearest RSS school to the change in villages located more than 10 km away (the omitted group), controlling for household and state$\times$ year fixed effects. The results display a clear, monotonic decay with distance: villages within 0–2 km saw roughly a 10–12 percentage-point larger increase in vegetarianism than the >10 km group; those 2–5 km away show a smaller ($\sim$ 5 pp) increase, and by 5–10 km the effect is near zero.

Table 6 examines heterogeneity in the estimated effects across caste groups. The increase in vegetarianism is most pronounced among households belonging to the upper castes, whereas the corresponding estimates for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households and for Other Backward Class households are smaller in magnitude. This pattern suggests that the overall association documented in Tables 4 and 5 is driven primarily by upper-caste households. In contemporary survey data, these groups are more likely to express support for the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Taken together, Tables 4, 5, and 6 point to a consistent association between setting up of RSS schools and shift to vegetarianism. The findings are robust across binary and continuous measures of proximity, and the effects are concentrated among upper castes, highlighting a potentially important cultural channel aligned with partisan support.

With only two survey waves, we cannot directly test for pre-trends. To probe the identification, we implement sanity checks designed to distinguish causal effects of RSS school openings from simple correlations. A key test examines non-Hindu households. Because the ideological messaging and social norms promoted by RSS schools primarily target Hindus, any treatment-induced change in vegetarianism should be concentrated among Hindu households and absent for non-Hindus. Consistent with this prediction, Appendix Table B-2 shows small and statistically insignificant coefficients for non-Hindus across all specifications, for both the 5 km and 2 km treatment definitions; the continuous (log) distance measure likewise yields estimates near zero. This placebo pattern supports the interpretation that the main vegetarianism effects are driven by changes among Hindu

households rather than by broader area-wide shocks or compositional trends. In addition to this check, we plot the relationship between baseline vegetarianism in 1981 and the probability that an RSS school was established in the village between 1982 and 1999 in Appendix Figure B-1. The slope is small and statistically indistinguishable from zero, indicating that RSS schools were not systematically opened in villages with higher baseline vegetarianism. This supports the assumption that subsequent differences in dietary change are unlikely to reflect pre-existing cultural differences.

Table 4: Estimates of RSS School presence in 1999 on Vegetarianism

	Vegetarianism								
*RSS * Post* (5 km)	0.0780***	0.0783***	0.0866***						
	(0.0221)	(0.0237)	(0.0240)						
*RSS * Post* (2 km)				0.0937**	0.0986**	0.1033**			
				(0.0402)	(0.0449)	(0.0450)			
*Distance from RSS * Post*							-0.0022**	-0.0020**	-0.0024***
							(0.0009)	(0.0009)	(0.0009)
Observations	6,422	6,420	6,312	6,422	6,420	6,312	6,422	6,420	6,312
Pre-Treatment mean	0.4503	0.4503	0.4503	0.4503	0.4503	0.4503	0.4503	0.4503	0.4503
Control	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Vil. Controls	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Cluster Lvl	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH

Note: The table presents coefficients from a Difference in Difference regression estimated on HH-by-year observations from the REDS dataset. The dependent variable is whether a household is vegetarian (completely abstains from meat, fish or egg eating). Treatment is captured by whether the village is within 5km or 2km of an RSS school in 1999. We also show results for a continuous measure of average distance from an RSS school in 1999. All specification include state-by-year fixed effects to absorb shocks common to all households in a given state-year, and HH fixed effects to net out time-invariant HH characteristics. Controls include total number of government schools, number of private schools, total schools within 2km of the village. Additionally we include time interacted controls of size of the household in 1981, land owned by household in 1981 and education of the household head in 1981. Village controls include time interacted controls for Number of HH in village (1981), distance from nearest town, distance to nearest pucca road, year of introduction of electricity. Standard errors, reported in parentheses, are heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered at the Household level. Statistical significance is denoted by $p < 0.10$ (*), $p < 0.05$ (**), and $p < 0.01$ (***).

Table 5: Estimates of Log Distance from RSS School on Vegetarianism

	Vegetarianism					
*Log Dist from RSS * Post*	-0.0458***	-0.0457***				
	(0.0131)	(0.0143)				
*Log Dist from RSS * Post* (1995)			-0.0296**	-0.0251*		
			(0.0127)	(0.0139)		
*Log Dist from RSS * Post* (1990)					-0.0300**	-0.0274**
					(0.0136)	(0.0136)
Observations	6,422	6,420	6,422	6,420	6,422	6,420
Pre-Treatment mean	0.4503	0.4503	0.4503	0.4503	0.4503	0.4503
Control	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Cluster Lvl	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH

Note: The table presents coefficients from a Difference in Difference regression estimated on HH-by-year observations from the REDS dataset. The dependent variable is whether a household is vegetarian (completely abstains from meat, fish or egg eating). Treatment is captured by log distance from the RSS School. All specification include state-by-year fixed effects to absorb shocks common to all households in a given state-year, and HH fixed effects to net out time-invariant HH characteristics. Controls include total number of government schools, number of private schools, total schools within 2km of the village. Additionally we include time interacted controls of size of the household in 1981, land owned by household in 1981 and education of the household head in 1981. Standard errors, reported in parentheses, are heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered at the HH level. Statistical significance is denoted by $p < 0.10$ (*), $p < 0.05$ (**), and $p < 0.01$ (***).

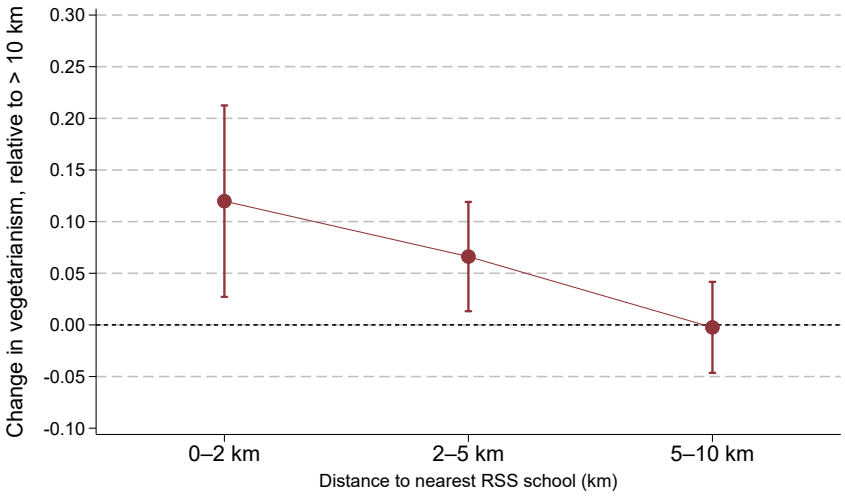


Figure 8: Effect of opening of RSS Schools on vegetarianism with distance

Notes: Points plot bin-specific difference-in-differences estimates of the change in vegetarianism between 1981 and 1999 for villages located within 0–2, 2–5km, and 5–10 km of the nearest RSS school, relative to villages located more than 10 km away. Coefficients are estimated with household fixed effects and state-by-year fixed effects. The displayed coefficients are interpreted as the additional 1999–1981 change for each distance ring relative to the >10 km group. Standard errors clustered at the household level. The sample is restricted to distance rings with non-missing observations in both years.

Table 6: Estimates of RSS School presence in 1999 on Vegetarianism (By Caste)

	Vegetarianism								
	UC			SC/ST			OBC		
*Log Dist from RSS * Post*	-0.0900***	-0.0985***	-0.1063***	-0.0002	-0.0052	-0.0224	-0.0315	-0.0321	-0.0357
	(0.0217)	(0.0252)	(0.0257)	(0.0305)	(0.0339)	(0.0343)	(0.0215)	(0.0222)	(0.0223)
Observations	2,420	2,418	2,374	1,370	1,370	1,356	2,380	2,380	2,348
Pre-Treatment mean	0.5264	0.5264	0.5264	0.3693	0.3693	0.3693	0.4252	0.4252	0.4252
Control	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Vill Control	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Cluster Lvl	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH

Note: The table presents coefficients from a Difference in Difference regression estimated on HH-by-year observations from the REDS dataset for different caste. The dependent variable is whether a household is vegetarian (completely abstains from meat, fish or egg eating). All specification include state-by-year fixed effects to absorb shocks common to all households in a given state-year, and HH fixed effects to net out time-invariant HH characteristics. Controls include total number of government schools, number of private schools, total schools within 2km of the village. Additionally we include time interacted controls of size of the household in 1981, land owned by household in 1981 and education of the household head in 1981. Village controls include time interacted controls for Number of HH in village (1981), distance from nearest town, distance to nearest pucca road, year of introduction of electricity. Standard errors, reported in parentheses, are heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered at the HH level. Statistical significance is denoted by $p < 0.10$ (*), $p < 0.05$ (**), and $p < 0.01$ (***).

Robustness Appendix Table B-1 presents a robustness check for the vegetarianism results, clustering standard errors at the village level instead of the household level. The estimated effects of RSS school presence remain positive and statistically significant across specifications.

6.2 Naming Patterns

Next, we examine the effect of the opening of RSS schools on local naming patterns. Names often carry deep cultural and religious meaning, and changes in naming practices can reflect shifts in identity norms, religious salience, or community mobilization. In this context, we ask whether households in areas where RSS schools open are more likely to name their children after Hindu deities.

Our empirical analysis uses data from the Electoral Rolls of India, which enables us to construct a year–pincode level dataset measuring the number of individuals born in each year who were given deity names. The choice of the pincode as the unit of geography is driven by the structure and limitations of the electoral data, which do not consistently provide finer spatial identifiers over time. The sample spans 1970 to 1999, and we use a balanced panel with 5 years of pre-treatment and 10 years of post-treatment observations. We remove pincodes which were partially treated in 1970. This includes those schools which had an RSS school in 1970.

Our primary specification defines treatment at the pincode level, classifying a pincode as treated if RSS schools are greater than 1% of schools. We exclude pincodes where an RSS school opened but which was never treated during our sample period. This implies that our control group includes pincodes which had zero RSS Schools at the end of our sample period.

We estimate the following specification:

$$Y_{gj\tau} = \alpha + \beta \cdot \mathit{treat}_{jg} \cdot \mathit{post}_{\tau} + Z_{j\tau} + \nu_{g\tau} + \gamma_{gj} + \mu_{st} + \epsilon_{jg} \tag{6.2}$$

Here, $Y_{gj\tau}$ denotes the dependent variable in pincode j, which belongs to event group g. An event group g (the "stack") is defined at the year (t) level and contains all pincodes that were treated in year t, along with a set of never-treated control pincodes from the same state. The variable τ measures the number of years since treatment.

We include event group–time fixed effects ($\nu_{g\tau}$) and event group–pincode fixed effects (γ_{gj}). The indicator treat_{jg} equals 1 if pincode j is treated in event group g, and $\mathit{post}_{\tau} = 1$ if $\tau \geq 0$. $Z_{j\tau}$ captures any additional time-varying controls. To account for state specific time t rends we include fixed effects at the state-year level (μ_{st}). Standard errors are clustered at the stack*pincode level. We use weights for the number of births in each pincode-year cell.

The estimates in Table 7 indicate that treatment of a pincode is associated with modest but statistically significant increases in the share of children given names linked to major Hindu deities in the pincode. The coefficients for all deity names are small but statistically significant at the 5% level. The results are robust to including controls for number of government schools, private schools, aided schools and percent of children whose father had deity names. When we focus on names within the *Vishnu* pantheon, the effects are larger. The coefficient for non-Vishnu gods is close to zero.

The event-study patterns in Figure 9 show no evidence of differential pre-trends in naming prior to treatment. After the introduction of RSS schools, the coefficients shift upward and remain persistently positive over the subsequent decade, indicating a sustained—albeit modest—shift in cultural naming practices. These patterns suggest that the presence of RSS schools incrementally increases the salience of particular religious figures. Figure 10 Panel A presents the event study for children given *Vishnu*-deity names. The pre-treatment coefficients are near zero and show no discernible trend, indicating no systematic differences in naming patterns prior to the establishment of RSS schools. Following treatment, the coefficients rise and remain persistently positive for the next decade. Panel B shows that the coefficient for the fraction of children with non-Vishnu deity names is negative, suggesting that the results reflect both a reallocation from non-

Vishnu to Vishnu deity names and a shift from non-deity to Vishnu names.

These results are significant for two reasons. First, the historical division between *Vaishnavite* and *Shaivite* traditions within Hinduism has been longstanding and, at times, violently manifested.[5] For example, a violent confrontation in 1789 between Shaivite and Vaishnavite ascetics at the Nashik Kumbh Mela reportedly claimed thousands of lives, prompting authorities to segregate their bathing sites to avert further conflict (Burghart (1983). Pinch (2006) argues that confrontation between the two sects, particularly around bathing rites, became increasingly common in the 16^{th} and 17^{th} century.

Second, Scholarly work indicates that the RSS (as part of the Sangh Parivar) has actively adopted cultural strategies that emphasize a single, emotionally resonant deity—particularly Rama—to forge a unified Hindu identity (Rajagopal, 2001; Jaffrelot, 1996). In particular, public displays of devotion—such as Rama Shobha Yatras and the Rama Janmabhumi campaign—function as symbolic mobilization, elevating Rama (an avatar of Viṣhṇu) as the paradigmatic Hindu hero and consolidating mass messaging around a single figure (van der Veer, 1994; Jaffrelot, 1996; Lutgendorf, 1991). This narrowing of the pantheon aligns with a broader tactic of standardizing and homogenizing Hindu symbols and practice to enhance clarity and emotional resonance in political–religious communications (Thapar, 1997; Hansen, 1999).

The overall effect is small, and there are two reasons for that. Firstly, the median treated pincode in our sample spans about 323 km^2. A school's plausible catchment (radius 2.5 km) covers ≈ 19.6 km^2. The median schools in treated areas is two, and this amounts to ≈ 40 km^2, or roughly 12% of a typical pincode. Because our estimate is an intention-to-treat at the pincode level, only a fraction $f \approx 0.12$ of households is directly exposed. Scaling by $1/f$ implies a within-catchment effect roughly 8–9 times larger. An ITT of 0.21 percentage points corresponds to a local effect of about 1.8 percentage points in the probability that a child receives a major deity name.[6] The second reason for a small effect size is that a balanced panel with a window of [-5, 10] years during our sample period of 1970 to 1999 implies that only cohorts treated between 1975 and 1989 are eligible and any pincode treated after 1989 is not part of our sample. As the majority of RSS schools opened between 1990 and 1999 our analysis focuses on a small set of pincodes and not all pincodes which were eventually treated till contemporary times.

[5] Vaishnavites believe that *Vishnu* is the creator of the universe, and Shaivites believe that *Shiva* is the creator of the universe.

[6] This back-of-the-envelope rescaling assumes (i) uniform population density within pincodes and (ii) minimal overlap or spillovers across school catchments; violations of either would bias the estimate upward.

Table 7: Effects of RSS School Presence on Deity Names

	Deity Name		Vishnu Deity		Non Vishnu Deity	
% of RSS Schools >= 1* Post	0.0016***	0.0014**	0.0021***	0.0017***	-0.0005	-0.0003
	(0.0006)	(0.0006)	(0.0006)	(0.0005)	(0.0004)	(0.0003)
Observations	863,488	863,488	863,488	863,488	863,488	863,488
Mean dep. variable	0.154	0.154	0.102	0.102	0.052	0.052
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

Note: Each column reports coefficients from regressions of the indicated outcome on the treatment indicator estimated on pincode-by-year stacked panels. A pincode is considered treated once RSS schools are greater than 1% of schools. Fixed effects are at the pincode×stack level and rel_year×stack level. We also include fixed effects for state× year to account for state level variation in naming patterns across time. Standard errors are heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered at the pincode×stack× level. Controls indicates whether the specification additionally includes controls for government schools, private schools, and percent of father's with deity names in the pin code. Observations are weighted by births in pincode-year. The mean of the dependent variable is computed as the sample mean among pincodes within treated stacks prior to treatment. $p < 0.10$ (*), $p < 0.05$ (**), $p < 0.01$ (***).

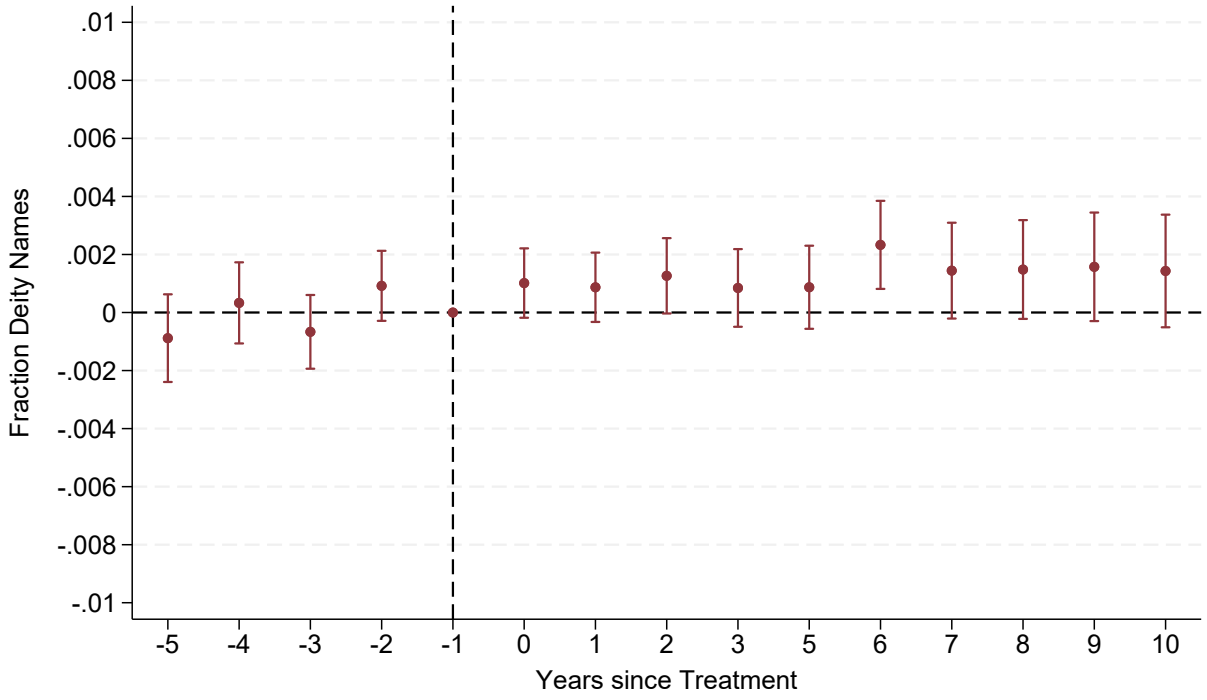
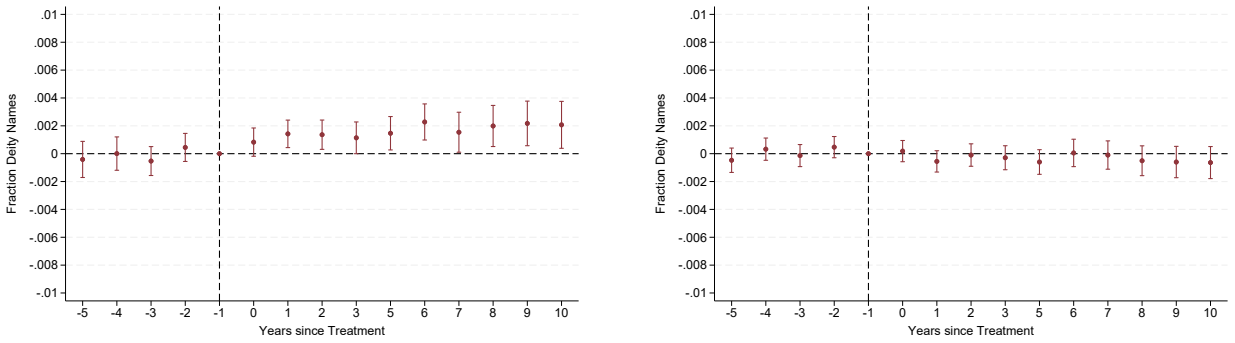


Figure 9: Event study when Treatment is RSS Schools >= 1%

Robustness to Alternate Treatment Definitions In Appendix Figures C-1 and C-2, we present results from the dynamic event-study specification using an alternative treatment definition in which a pincode is coded as treated once there are at least two RSS schools in the pincode. The patterns closely mirror our baseline estimates: pre-treatment coeffi-



(a) Fraction of Vishnu Deity Names

(b) Fraction of Non-Vishnu Deity Names

Figure 10: Event study when Treatment is RSS Schools >= 1%

cients are flat, post-treatment effects are positive and persistent, and the magnitudes are comparable, indicating that our findings are robust to this treatment definition.

6.3 Community Mobilization

Beyond cultural change, RSS schools may also influence politics by directly mobilizing local communities. To investigate this channel, we conducted a primary survey of schools in Bihar that compares RSS-affiliated institutions with other private schools. The survey focuses on dimensions such as governance, curricula, extracurricular activities, and community embeddedness, providing a window into how these schools function as organizational nodes within their localities.

The survey was conducted in 4 districts of Bihar. Blocks within the district were sampled if they had an RSS school in them. An RSS school was chosen randomly within each sampled block. Private schools were chosen within these blocks. The likelihood of choosing a private school was in proportion to their distance from a sampled RSS school. This was aimed at ensuring that the RSS and private schools we were surveying were similar to each other. Overall 67 RSS schools and 106 private schools were surveyed. The survey of school principals was conducted from August to October 2025. Before each interview, respondents were informed that the study aimed to document school operations, the backgrounds of enrolled students, and the school's role in the community. The questionnaire included modules on facilities, school events, and teachers' activities. To mitigate survey demand effects, the items of primary interest were embedded among neutral questions and phrased in non-leading language.

The results of our primary survey are presented in Table 8, 9, 10. Basic inputs are broadly comparable across the two schools—boundary walls, playgrounds, teachers per

Table 8: School survey - Facilities

Variable Name	RSS School	Private School	Coefficient
Facilities			
School boundary	0.582	0.642	-0.04
	(0.497)	(0.482)	
School Playground	0.642	0.623	0.03
	(0.483)	(0.487)	
No of students per room	20.472	20.750	-0.25
	(12.448)	(10.533)	
Only English Medium	0.299	0.453	-0.17**
	(0.461)	(0.500)	
Pct Low Income students	0.436	0.494	-0.06
	(0.285)	(0.285)	
Teachers per student	0.061	0.054	0.01
	(0.030)	(0.031)	
External Support for construction	0.212	0.087	0.14***
	(0.412)	(0.284)	
Teaching content			
Mythological Books in Coursework	0.448	0.217	0.25***
	(0.501)	(0.414)	
Religious Trips	0.522	0.538	0.00
	(0.503)	(0.501)	
School has a magazine	0.209	0.028	0.18***
	(0.410)	(0.167)	

Note: Means reported by school type. Coefficient shows the estimate of a regression of variable on *RSS school* dummy with block fixed effects.

Table 9: School survey - Events in School

Variable Name	RSS School	Private School	Coefficient
Events held			
Independence Day	0.985	1.000	-0.01
	(0.122)	(0.000)	
Independence Day: Parents	0.955	0.953	0.01
	(0.208)	(0.213)	
Independence Day: Community	0.806	0.821	-0.01
	(0.398)	(0.385)	
Christmas	0.119	0.236	-0.11**
	(0.327)	(0.427)	
Christmas: Parents	0.000	0.057	-0.05*
	(0.000)	(0.232)	
Christmas: Community	0.000	0.019	-0.02
	(0.000)	(0.137)	
Ram Navami	0.209	0.104	0.10*
	(0.410)	(0.306)	
Ram Navami: Parents	0.179	0.028	0.14***
	(0.386)	(0.167)	
Ram Navami: Community	0.179	0.019	0.15***
	(0.386)	(0.137)	
Saraswati	0.970	0.925	0.05
	(0.171)	(0.265)	
Saraswati: Parents	0.925	0.755	0.17***
	(0.265)	(0.432)	
Saraswati: Community	0.761	0.547	0.20***
	(0.430)	(0.500)	
Yoga Day	0.731	0.613	0.10
	(0.447)	(0.489)	
Yoga Day: Parents	0.418	0.217	0.16**
	(0.497)	(0.414)	
Yoga Day: Community	0.313	0.151	0.14**
	(0.467)	(0.360)	
Religious ceremony, Prayers	0.433	0.170	0.25***
	(0.499)	(0.377)	
Religious ceremony, Prayers: Parents	0.313	0.085	0.23***
	(0.467)	(0.280)	
Religious ceremony, Prayers: Community	0.224	0.028	0.21***
	(0.420)	(0.167)	

Note: Means reported by school type. Coefficient shows the estimate of a regression of variable on *RSS school* dummy with block fixed effects.

Table 10: School survey - Engagement with Community

Variable Name	RSS School	Private School	Coefficient
Distribute material on social issues in community	0.299	0.198	0.08
	(0.461)	(0.400)	
Organizes education activities in community	0.299	0.104	0.19***
	(0.461)	(0.306)	
Teacher contribute to local community	0.538	0.460	0.10
	(0.502)	(0.501)	
Engage with community through social org	0.269	0.094	0.18***
	(0.447)	(0.294)	

Note: Means reported by school type. Coefficient shows the estimate of a regression of variable on *RSS school* dummy with block fixed effects.

student—reducing concern that engagement differences are driven by resources. One modest difference emerge: RSS schools are less likely to be English medium, while more often reporting external support for construction.

Relative to other private schools, RSS schools schedule substantially more Hindu observances—Ram Navami, Saraswati Puja, routine prayer, and Yoga Day—and, crucially, they organize these as parent- and community-facing events rather than limiting participation to students and staff. National days are celebrated at similar rates across groups, while Christmas observance is less common in RSS schools. The key margin is not only incidence but inclusiveness: RSS schools systematically involve parents and neighborhood participants in religious programming, a feature much less pronounced in other private schools.

Table 10 documents broader community linkage and the channels through which school symbolism circulates beyond the classroom. RSS schools more frequently run education activities in the community and engage via local social organizations. Curricular and co-curricular choices align with this engagement strategy: RSS schools are more likely to include mythological texts in coursework and to publish school magazines, mechanisms that extend the same symbolic repertoire into households. Together, these patterns indicate a deliberate outward orientation that builds dense parent–school–community ties.

Figure 11 summarizes estimated differences between RSS and non-RSS schools from separate regressions of each outcome index on an RSS-affiliation indicator, with 95% confidence intervals and block fixed effects; indices are scaled 0–100, so coefficients are in percentage points. Relative to non-RSS schools, RSS schools exhibit higher incidence

of Hindu-oriented events (for students, parents, and the community), greater religious content in the curriculum, and more engagement in local areas. Differences in school infrastructure are small and statistically modest, while non-Hindu religious events are less frequent in RSS schools (negative estimates). The coefficient for the comparison between only Vidya Bharati schools and non-RSS schools displays the same pattern with uniformly larger magnitudes. This indicates that VB schools have intensive outward engagement and religious programming compared to other RSS schools in our sample.

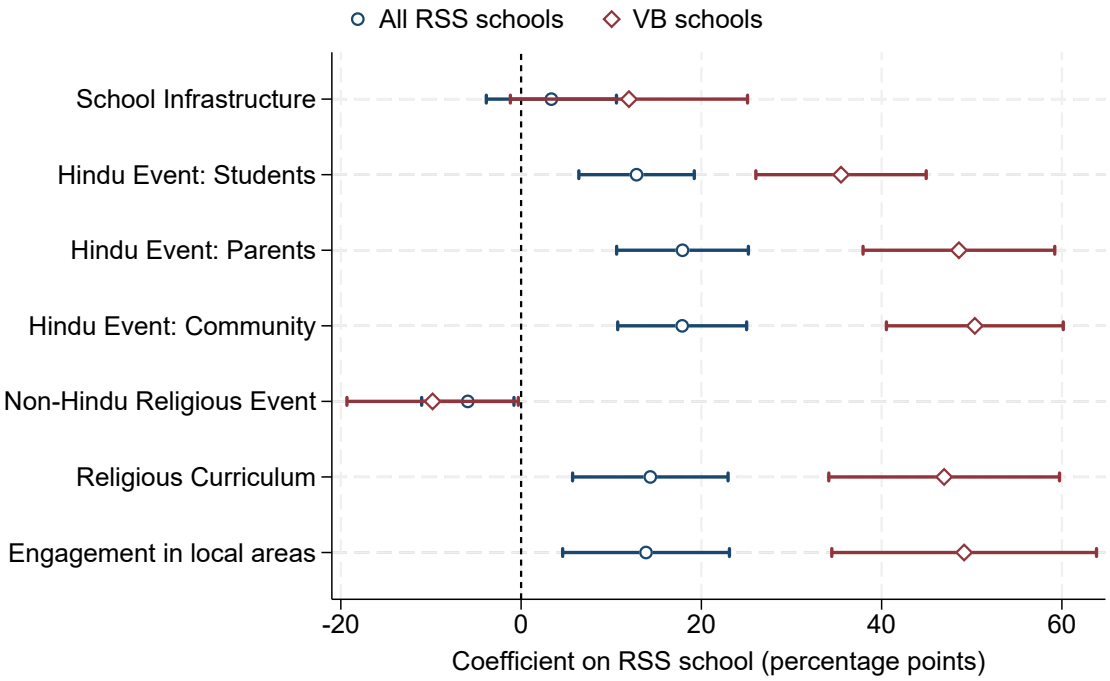


Figure 11: Difference between RSS and Non-RSS schools.

Notes. Each point is a coefficient from a separate regression of an outcome index on a school-affiliation indicator, estimated with block fixed effects. Bars show 95% confidence intervals. All indices are scaled to 0–100, so coefficients read as percentage points. *School Infrastructure* is the mean of: boundary wall and playground (coded 0/100), and rooms-per-student and teachers-per-student rescaled so the 95th percentile equals 100. *Hindu events (Students/Parents/Community)* are the shares of Ram Navami, Janmashtmi, Saraswati, Yoga Day, and religious-ceremony indicators recorded for the relevant group. *Non-Hindu religious events* is the mean across Christmas indicators for students, parents, and community. *Religious curriculum* averages binary indicators for: mythological books in coursework, religious trips, and presence of school magazine. *Engagement in local areas* averages binary indicators of: materials distributed for villager awareness, community educational activities, teacher contribution to the community, and engagement of teacher via social organisations. *All RSS schools* uses all RSS schools in our sample, whereas the *VB schools* coefficient compares Vidya Bharati–run schools with non-RSS schools.

Taken together, the evidence indicates that RSS schools act as community hubs. They hold many Hindu events and invite parents and neighbors to take part. This does two

things. First, it makes a Hindu civilizational identity more prominent in daily life around the school, so local norms shift toward that frame. Second, it builds networks and basic civic skills among families, which makes it easier to organize joint activities later. Because the two types of schools look similar on basic resources, these differences likely reflect how RSS schools are organized rather than what they can afford.

These patterns are descriptive, not causal. Still, given the sampling design and the balance on resources, the evidence fits a mechanism in which school-led community engagement—especially religious events with active parent and community participation—shapes local cultural beliefs and increases the capacity for collective political action.

7 Conclusion

This paper examines how community-embedded institutions shape both cultural practices and partisan politics by analyzing the nationwide network of RSS-affiliated schools in India. These schools—by embedding themselves in local life through education, festivals, and civic activities—play a dual role: they transmit cultural norms that reinforce Hindu identity and simultaneously serve as organizational nodes that mobilize communities on behalf of the BJP.

Our empirical analysis shows three consistent patterns. First, constituencies where RSS schools cross a modest threshold of local presence experience a sustained rise in BJP vote share and probability of victory. These effects persist across multiple election cycles and extend to BJP's coalition partners, indicating that the schools generate durable political dividends rather than short-term swings. We also find an increase in Hindu-Muslim riots in constituencies where schools open compared to where they don't. Second, school openings are associated with shifts in cultural practices—specifically, an increase in vegetarianism and a higher prevalence of Hindu deity names for children—that signal the activation of Hindu identity. These changes are concentrated among upper-caste households, a core constituency for the BJP. Third, cultural change is not diffuse but channeled: naming practices converge on major deities, especially those linked to Vishnu and Rama, aligning with the RSS's broader strategy of narrowing the symbolic repertoire of Hinduism to consolidate identity under a unifying figure.

Complementing these results, a primary survey in four Bihar districts shows that, relative to nearby private schools, RSS schools systematically involve parents and neighbors in Hindu observances, include mythological texts, publish school magazines, and more often run community-facing education activities, despite broadly similar material

resources. These micro-patterns are consistent with identity activation and lower coordination costs through denser parent–school–community ties.

Taken together, these findings highlight the distinctive power of community-embedded institutions. By sustaining face-to-face engagement outside electoral cycles, RSS schools create durable linkages that connect everyday cultural practices to partisan loyalties. This is visible in higher rates of community-facing religious events and teacher outreach in RSS schools relative to nearby private schools. In contrast to explanations of the BJP's rise that emphasize ethnic conflict, caste politics, or media exposure, our results show that organizational infrastructure rooted in community life is equally consequential. The patient embedding of Hindu nationalist institutions in villages and towns across India translates diffuse cultural sympathies into organized and enduring partisan support.

The broader contribution of this study is to demonstrate that education's political role extends well beyond curriculum content. Schools established by partisan non-state actors serve as long-term infrastructure for identity activation, mobilization, and network-building. In the Indian case, RSS schools reinforce Hindu identity in everyday life and convert that identity into durable electoral advantage for the BJP. More generally, the findings underscore how community-embedded institutions—whether schools, parishes, or civic associations—anchor political projects within local society, ensuring that their influence persists well beyond individual campaigns and elections.

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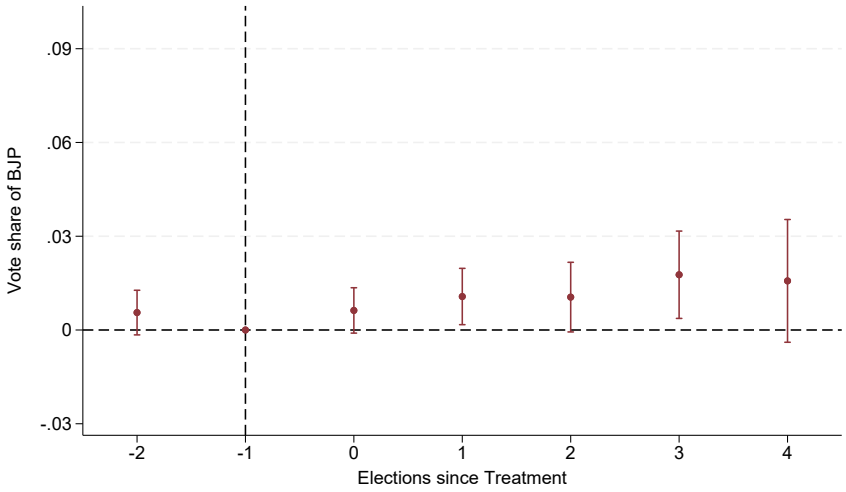
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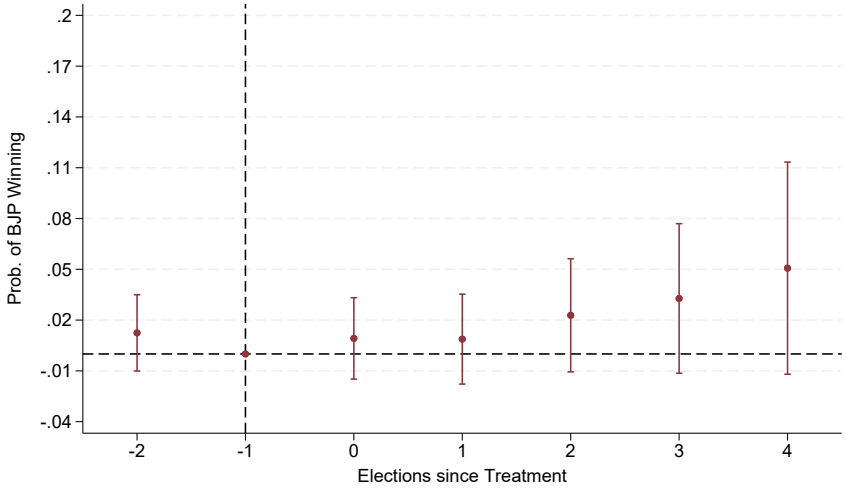
Part I

Appendix

A Robustness Checks: Electoral Outcomes



(a) BJP Vote Share



(b) BJP Win

Figure A-1: Dynamic effects of RSS Schools on electoral outcomes of BJP - Treatment= RSS Schools per 100000 voters >=1

Note: The figure presents coefficients from a stacked DiD regression estimated on assembly-constituency-by-year observations from 1980 onward. The dependent variable is (a) the BJP's vote share in the relevant state-assembly race and (b) whether the BJP wins the election. Treatment is defined as whether the No of RSS Schools per 100000 voters in the assembly is greater than or equal to 1 for (a) and (b), respectively. Constituencies are grouped into cohorts by the first year in which this variable becomes positive, while those that never experience treatment within the sample serve as the control cohort. All specifications include event group×relative time, event group×constituency fixed effects, and a vector of time-varying controls: lagged measures of turnout percentage, effective number of candidates, number of electors and male turnout; whether a coalition partner contested and number of rss schools interacted with treatment status. Additional controls include the total number of government schools, number of private schools, total schools in the constituency. Standard errors are heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered at the constituency*stack level.

Table A-1: Estimates of Schools on BJP Vote Share and Victory - controlling for BJS vote share and victories in pre-periods

Panel A: BJP Outcomes	BJP Vote Share		BJP Wins	
% of RSS Schools >= 1	0.0064*	0.0061	0.0428***	0.0435***
	(0.0037)	(0.0037)	(0.0109)	(0.0109)
Observations	66,251	66,251	66,262	66,262
Mean dep. Variable	0.15	0.15	0.14	0.14
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Add. Control	No	Yes	No	Yes
Panel B: BJP Coalition Outcomes	BJP Coalition Vote Share		BJP Coalition Wins	
% of RSS Schools >= 1	0.0083**	0.0079**	0.0469***	0.0465***
	(0.0039)	(0.0039)	(0.0120)	(0.0120)
Observations	66,251	66,251	66,262	66,262
Mean dep. Variable	0.19	0.19	0.19	0.19
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Add. Control	No	Yes	No	Yes

Note: Each panel reports coefficients from a stacked DiD regression estimated on assembly-constituency-by-year observations from 1980 onward. **Panel A** uses the BJP's vote share in the relevant state-assembly race and a binary indicator for whether the BJP wins as dependent variables. **Panel B** uses the BJP plus coalition partners' combined vote share and a binary indicator for whether the BJP or a coalition partner wins. In both panels, treatment is defined as whether the percent of RSS schools in the assembly is greater than or equal to 1. Constituencies are grouped into cohorts by the first year in which this variable becomes positive, with constituencies never treated in the sample serving as the control cohort. We control for average vote share, average victories and whether BJS ever fought the election in the constituency between 1962-1980. All specifications include event group×relative time, event group×constituency fixed effects, and a vector of time-varying controls: lagged measures of turnout percentage, effective number of candidates, number of electors and male turnout; whether a coalition partner contested and number of rss schools interacted with treatment status. Additional controls include the total number of government schools, number of private schools, total schools in the constituency. Standard errors (in parentheses) are heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered at the constituency*stack level. Statistical significance: $p < 0.10$ (*), $p < 0.05$ (**), $p < 0.01$ (***).

Table A-2: Robustness of electoral results to TV transmitters

Panel A: BJP Outcomes	Vote share of BJP		BJP Win	
% of RSS Schools >= 1	0.0067*	0.0065*	0.0441***	0.0438***
	(0.0039)	(0.0039)	(0.0110)	(0.0111)
Observations	66,251	66,251	66,262	66,262
Mean dep. Variable	0.15	0.15	0.14	0.14
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
transmitter Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Transmitter time Trend	No	Yes	No	Yes
Heterogeneous effect by TV signal	No	Yes	No	Yes
Panel B: BJP Coalition Outcomes	Vote share of BJP		BJP Win	
% of RSS Schools >= 1	0.0083**	0.0082**	0.0471***	0.0469***
	(0.0040)	(0.0041)	(0.0121)	(0.0122)
Observations	66,251	66,251	66,262	66,262
Mean dep. Variable	0.19	0.19	0.19	0.19
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
transmitter Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Transmitter time Trend	No	Yes	No	Yes
Heterogeneous effect by TV signal	No	Yes	No	Yes

Notes: Each panel reports coefficients from a stacked DiD regression estimated on assembly-constituency-by-year observations from 1980 onward. All specifications control for the presence of a TV transmitter in each assembly constituency–year and for its transmission power. **Panel A** uses the BJP's vote share in the relevant state-assembly race and a binary indicator for whether the BJP wins as dependent variables. **Panel B** uses the BJP plus coalition partners' combined vote share and a binary indicator for whether the BJP or a coalition partner wins. In both panels, treatment is defined as whether the percent of RSS schools in the assembly is greater than or equal to 1. Constituencies are grouped into cohorts by the first year in which this variable becomes positive, with constituencies never treated in the sample serving as the control cohort. All specifications include event group×relative time, event group×constituency fixed effects, and a vector of time-varying controls: lagged measures of turnout percentage, effective number of candidates, number of electors and male turnout; whether a coalition partner contested and number of rss schools interacted with treatment status. Additional controls include the total number of government schools, number of private schools, total schools in the constituency. *Transmitter time trend* additionally allows constituencies with higher transmitter power to follow different time paths by interacting transmitter power with year (event-time) indicators. *Heterogeneous effect by TV signal* allows the treatment effect to vary with TV exposure by interacting the treatment variable with transmitter power. Standard errors (in parentheses) are heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered at the constituency*stack level. Statistical significance: $p < 0.10$ (*), $p < 0.05$ (**), $p < 0.01$ (***).

Table A-3: Estimates of Schools on BJP Vote share and victory - Low Threshold

	Vote Share		BJP Wins	
% of RSS Schools $>= 0.75$	0.0049	0.0047	0.0333***	0.0333***
	(0.0035)	(0.0035)	(0.0101)	(0.0101)
Observations	57,622	57,622	57,636	57,636
Mean dep. Variable	0.14	0.14	0.13	0.13
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Add. Control	No	Yes	No	Yes

Note: The table presents coefficients from a Stacked DiD regression estimated on assembly-constituency-by-year observations from 1980 onward. The dependent variable is the BJP's vote-share in the relevant state-assembly race and whether BJP wins the election. Treatment is captured by whether the percent of rss schools in the assembly is greater than or equal to 0.75. Constituencies are grouped into cohorts by the first year in which this variable becomes positive, while those that never experience treatment within the sample serve as the control cohort. All specifications include event group×relative time, event group×constituency fixed effects, and a vector of time-varying controls: lagged measures of turnout percentage, effective number of candidates, number of electors and male turnout; whether a coalition partner contested and number of rss schools interacted with treatment status. Additional controls include the total number of government schools, number of private schools, total schools in the constituency. Standard errors (in parentheses) are heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered at the constituency*stack level. Statistical significance is denoted by $p < 0.10$ (*), $p < 0.05$ (**), and $p < 0.01$ (***).

Table A-4: Reverse Causality: How does narrow BJP victory effect opening of RSS Schools

	No of RSS Schools			Any RSS School opened		
BJP narrow win	0.2391	0.0337	-0.0698	0.0693	0.0437	0.0083
	(0.2803)	(0.2153)	(0.1621)	(0.0565)	(0.0430)	(0.0308)
Observations	1,213	1,958	3,488	1,213	1,958	3,488
Mean dep. Variable	1.785	1.768	1.808	0.533	0.530	0.532
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bandwidth	0.030	0.050	0.100	0.030	0.050	0.100

Note: The table examines whether narrow electoral victories by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led to the subsequent opening of RSS-affiliated schools, providing a test for potential reverse causality. The analysis implements a local–linear regression discontinuity (RD) design centered at the BJP's winning-margin cutoff, where the running variable measures the vote-share difference between the first- and second-place candidates in constituencies where the BJP finished either first or second. The treatment indicator equals one for BJP victories (margin ≥ 0) and zero otherwise, comparing constituencies that the BJP barely won to those it barely lost. Columns 1–3 use the number of RSS schools built between elections as the dependent variable, and columns 4–6 use a binary indicator for whether any RSS school opened. Each pair of columns corresponds to bandwidths of 0.03, 0.05, and 0.10 around the cutoff. All regressions include side-specific slopes in the running variable, triangular-kernel weights, and state fixed effects to ensure within-state comparisons. Control variables include the total number of registered electors (in the previous election) and pre-election counts of government, private, and non-RSS schools in the constituency. Standard errors are clustered at the assembly level. Significance levels: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

B Robustness Checks: Vegetarianism

Table B-1: Estimates of RSS School presence in 1999 on Vegetarianism (Village clustering)

	Vegetarianism								
*RSS * Post* (5 km)	0.0780**	0.0783*	0.0866***						
	(0.0383)	(0.0404)	(0.0240)						
*RSS * Post* (2 km)				0.0937	0.0986	0.1033**			
				(0.0788)	(0.0861)	(0.0450)			
*Distance from RSS * Post*							-0.0022	-0.0020	-0.0024***
							(0.0014)	(0.0014)	(0.0009)
Observations	6,422	6,420	6,312	6,422	6,420	6,312	6,422	6,420	6,312
Pre-Treatment mean	0.4503	0.4503	0.4503	0.4503	0.4503	0.4503	0.4503	0.4503	0.4503
Control	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Vil. Controls	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Cluster Lvl	Village	Village	Village	Village	Village	Village	Village	Village	Village

Note: The table presents coefficients from a Difference in Difference regression estimated on HH-by-year observations from the REDS dataset. The dependent variable is whether a household is vegetarian (completely abstains from meat, fish or egg eating). Treatment is captured by whether the village is within 5km or 2km of an RSS school in 1999. We also show results for a continuous measure of average distance from an RSS school in 1999. All specification include state-by-year fixed effects to absorb shocks common to all households in a given state-year, and HH fixed effects to net out time-invariant HH characteristics. Controls include total number of government schools, number of private schools, total schools within 2km of the village. Additionally we include time interacted controls of size of the household in 1981, land owned by household in 1981 and education of the household head in 1981. Village controls include time interacted controls for Number of HH in village (1981), distance from nearest town, distance to nearest pucca road, year of introduction of electricity. Standard errors, reported in parentheses, are heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered at the Village level. Statistical significance is denoted by $p < 0.10$ (*), $p < 0.05$ (**), and $p < 0.01$ (***).

Table B-2: Estimates of RSS School presence in 1999 on Vegetarianism for Non Hindus

	Vegetarianism								
*RSS * Post* (5 km)	0.0441	0.0143	0.0268						
	(0.0561)	(0.0559)	(0.0595)						
*RSS * Post* (2 km)				-0.0224	-0.0746	-0.1044			
				(0.0693)	(0.0724)	(0.0872)			
*Distance from RSS * Post*							-0.0020	0.0047	0.0051
							(0.0040)	(0.0045)	(0.0047)
Observations	848	848	844	848	848	844	848	848	844
Pre-Treatment mean	0.2807	0.2807	0.2807	0.2807	0.2807	0.2807	0.2807	0.2807	0.2807
Control	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Vil. Controls	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Cluster Lvl	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH

Note: The table presents coefficients from a Difference in Difference regression estimated on HH-by-year observations from the REDS dataset. The dependent variable is whether a household is vegetarian (completely abstains from meat, fish or egg eating). Treatment is captured by whether the village is within 5km or 2km of an RSS school in 1999. We also show results for a continuous measure of average distance from an RSS school in 1999. All specification include state-by-year fixed effects to absorb shocks common to all households in a given state-year, and HH fixed effects to net out time-invariant HH characteristics. Controls include total number of government schools, number of private schools, total schools within 2km of the village. Additionally we include time interacted controls of size of the household in 1981, land owned by household in 1981 and education of the household head in 1981. Village controls include time interacted controls for Number of HH in village (1981), distance from nearest town, distance to nearest pucca road, year of introduction of electricity. Standard errors, reported in parentheses, are heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered at the Household level. Statistical significance is denoted by $p < 0.10$ (*), $p < 0.05$ (**), and $p < 0.01$ (***).

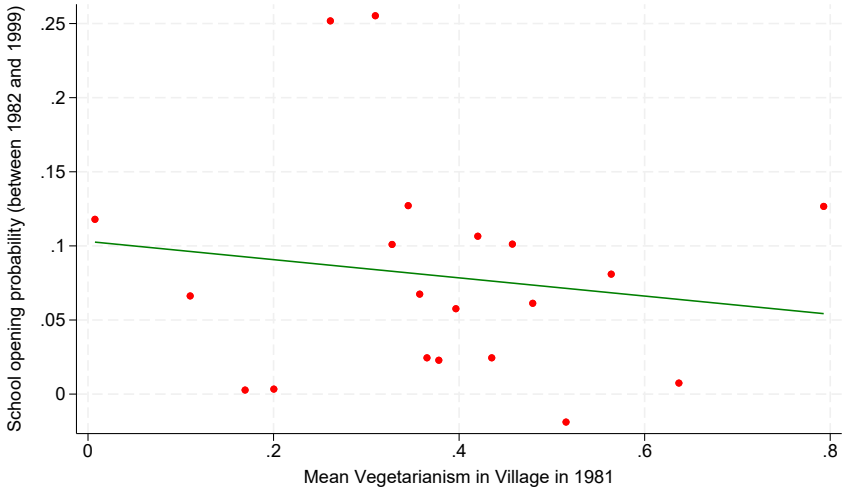


Figure B-1: School opening probability vs Baseline mean vegetarianism in village

Notes: Figure plots the relationship between baseline vegetarianism in 1981 and the probability that an RSS school was established in the village between 1982 and 1999.

C Robustness Checks: Naming Patterns

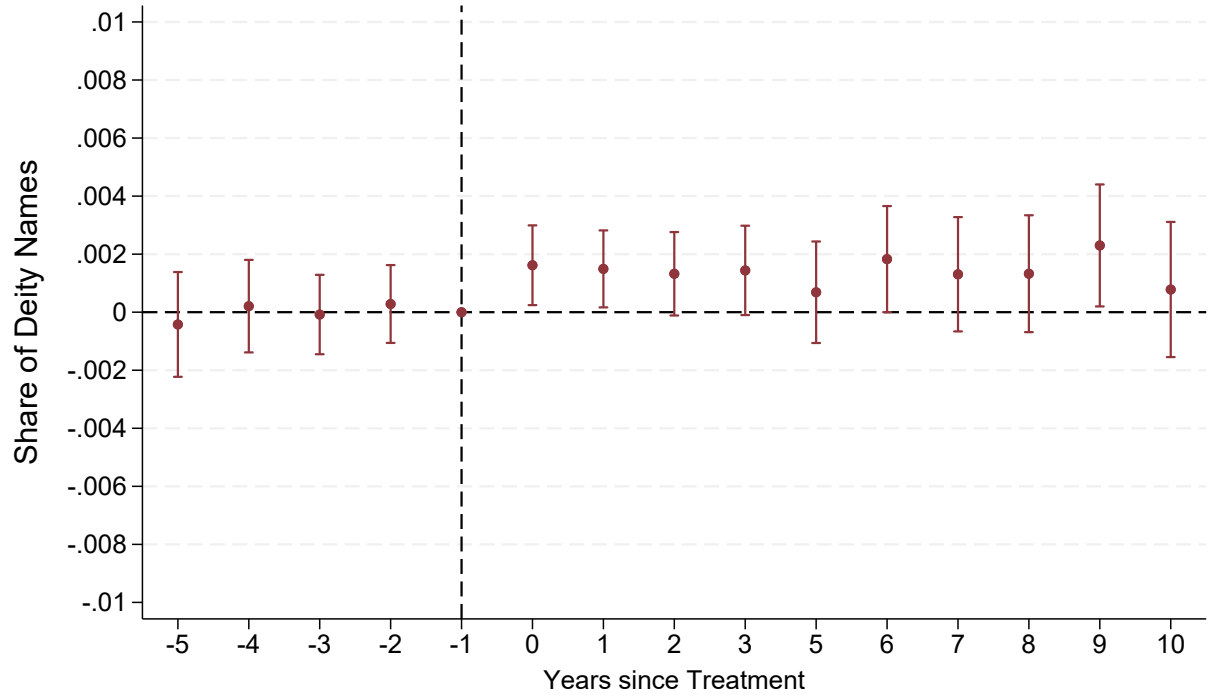
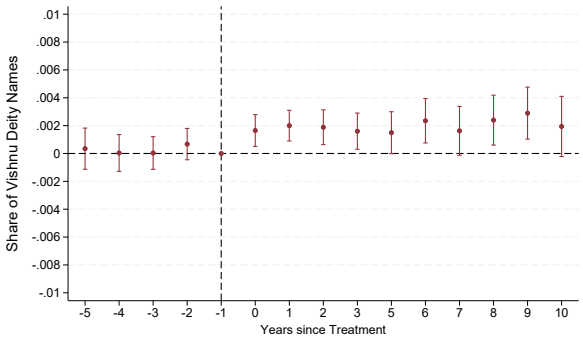
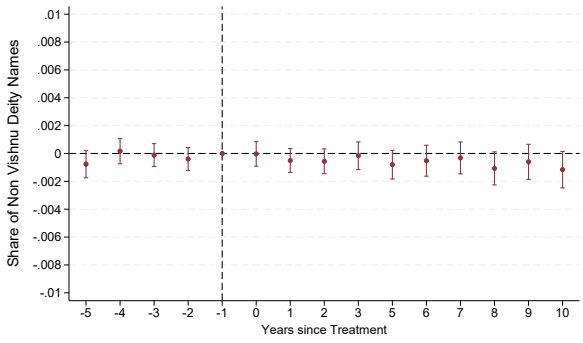


Figure C-1: Dynamic effects of RSS Schools on usage of deity names (# RSS Schools ≥ 2)



(a) Vishnu Deity Names



(b) Non Vishnu Deity Names

Figure C-2: Dynamic effects for Vishnu and Non-Vishnu Deity names (# RSS Schools ≥ 2)

D How BJP utilizes RSS schools

1. Iwanek (2022a) (Page 282): "Many of the Vidya Bharati schools have another, very practical advantage for the BJP and the RSS suborganizations: their space. Places such as courtyards or assembly halls can be easily arranged for various RSS/BJP functions, and presumably such an endeavour also comes cheap and without extensive work. During my visit to school X, I found, for instance, that a VHP workshop was taking place within its spacious precincts. The examples of using the Vidya Bharati schools for these purposes are otherwise easy to be found in the press. These instances are so numerous that I am putting some of them in a mammoth endnote at the end of this paragraph."

2. Iwanek (2022a) (Page 282): "The school space may also be used to host an RSS shakha. I found out that the shakha were being held in schools A and C3 (Dhaundiyal, personal communication), school E (Rajat, personal communication)—all three located in Uttarakhand, as well as school B2 in Himachal Pradesh (Bajpai, personal communication) and school Y in UP (Narayan, personal communication). In school A, it turned out that the shakha held there was actually managed by the principal of another Vidya Bharati school in the same city, school C3. Two more shakha were being held in the latter school (Bhardwaj, personal communication). School D houses an entire RSS office."

3. Jha (2021): "Away from the BJP, the Sangh also made a separate list of voters at the booth level. Then, the teachers who work across the schools under Vidya Bharati in Rampur were utilized to go among the voters in every booth and mobilize support for the party. In each of 21 villages, the Sangh employed three teachers from the SVM. In places such as the village Param, which is the biggest panchayat in the Milak sub-division, Sangh functionaries worked in parallel with the party organization. Each local administrative division was led by a sarkaryawah (General Secretary), who was then assisted by acharyas (teachers) from the SSM and SVM."

4. Ambikar (2008): "Although none of the teachers admitted to being part of a political party, several did attend the local shakha and helped organize community events like Hindu festivals and national celebrations. These events often served as informal meeting points for members of the wider Sangh Parivar... Their engagement in 'seva' or service activities was framed as apolitical, but in practice, it functioned to strengthen the ideological hold of Hindutva in the neighborhood."

5. Bhattacharya (2020): "I travelled to Habibpur, in the Malda district and Rampurhat, in the Birbhum district, to examine the functioning of the Ekal schools set up in these areas after 2011. Like the coaching centre at Jharbasti in Uttar Dinajpur, the Abhiyan's activities followed a similar pattern, with minor variations. The FTS would start a one-teacher free coaching centre or school. In a few weeks, a matri mandali, or mothers' group, would be formed. This group would meet every two to three months to discuss the progress of their children. Once the centre became popular enough that students of a nearby government-run school started attending the classes regularly, the SHSS would enter the scene. They would start a weekly moral-values centre, or Sanskar Kendra, for the adults, and in some cases, for the children, too. The SHSS would also set up a Bhajan Mandali, or Bhajan group, for weekly bhajan evenings to engage a larger population. The next step would be to form a village committee, called gram samiti, comprised completely of local residents. The committee would be entrusted with the wellbeing of the Ekal Vidyalaya and the all-round development of the village. A village where the programme has taken root would usually have three key persons—the acharya, or teacher, the gram pramukh, or village head, and the satsang pramukh, spiritual or religious head. The AFI would then enter the scene and organise health-awareness and check-up camps at regular intervals. These camps provide medicine for free, and critical cases would get help to get treated at urban hospitals."

6. Bhattacharya (2020): On cultural homogenization: "A short documentary, Introduction of Shreehari Satsang Samiti [an RSS-affiliated trust that set up a school in West Bengal], reveals that the Hari Katha Yojna is aimed at Sanskritik Jagran, or cultural awakening, to transform people into Ram Sadhaks, or worshippers of Ram, and develop villages into Sanskari Gaon—villages rooted in traditions. The documentary was made by the Vanvasi Raksha Parivar Foundation—a branch of the SHSS which aims to safeguard tribal people and their families. The SHSS would train village youth in the art of religious narration and develop them into dedicated, full-time kathakars for this project."

7. Basava (2024): "Most of the shakhas (one-hour RSS activity) are conducted in schools, colleges, temple grounds, or Vidya Bharathi schools. With some faculty members reportedly from an RSS background and the management being affiliated with the RSS, there was a free hand for the shakhas to be held on the Vidya Bharathi school grounds."