

CHAPTER 10

Christianization, Hinduization and Indigenous Revivalism among the Tribals of Gujarat

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INTRODUCTION

The chapter discusses the 'de-tribalization' or 'assimilation' of the tribes of Gujarat—either by incorporation into Christianity or absorption into Hinduism—against the backdrop of the increasing politicization of the whole issue of conversion. Tribals of Gujarat have the following faith-based typologies: those holding on to traditional belief systems, those converted to Christian denominations and those Hinduized and following a number of sects both classical and modern. The tribals in Gujarat are not only on the margins of faith, but are also marginalized in terms of their identity and in terms of the economy and the polity. This chapter explores the margins of faith without ignoring the economy, politics and identity as they are part of the tribal dynamics.

What the chapter brings out is that all the three streams of faith are present today among the tribals of Gujarat. For reasons that shall be explored through the chapter, Hinduization is on the rise at present. Christianization too has come to stay, though the space for mainline denominations is contracting and perhaps only the evangelical form will persist. One has to watch how far the attempts at the revival of indigenous tradition will gain strength. The margins of faith turn out to be the centre of contestation: on this terrain, conflicts among faiths and between denominations are also bitter battles about development, the identity of the nation and the nature of the state.

In the anthropological literature, the big question related to the tribes has been: Are they backward Hindus or are they aborigines and are they distinctive in their religion, culture and identity? The term 'tribe' began to be used towards the end of the 18th century. European administrators and missionaries used the terms 'tribe' and 'aborigine', which were translated into the Indian words, '*janjati*' (forest-dwellers) and '*adivasi*' (original inhabitants). There was no specific pre-colonial Indian word for 'tribe'. According to Shah (2003), the available evidence suggested that tribal groups had existed as part of the Indian civilization for centuries, but there was no way of deciding that they were the aborigines of India. G. S. Ghurye, referred to the tribes in the title of his well-known book on the subject in 1943 as the '*aborigines, so-called*'. Even if tribes cannot be proven to be aboriginal, their culture, rituals and belief systems may not be 'Hindu'.

TRIBALS OF GUJARAT

The Adivasis are spread in the eastern districts of the state of Gujarat and this Adivasi belt ranges from southern Rajasthan in the north to Madhya Pradesh in the east and to Maharashtra in the south. The Adivasis of Gujarat account for 15 per cent of the total population. They are spread in the eastern parts of the districts of Sabarkantha, Panchmahal, Vadodara, Bharuch, Narmada, Surat, Navsari, Valsad and Dangs. Thirty-two talukas of these districts have an Adivasi population of over 50 per cent. The government has classified them as Adivasi talukas for the sake of developmental programmes.

About a hundred years ago the Bhils of Gujarat were called the tribals of the hills. Gujarat had two major substratum of population known as Bhils and Kolis. The Kolis (today classified among Other Backward Classes or the OBCs) were 20 per cent of the population. The Kolis were known as the tribals of the plains. Even today Kolis in Kutch are classified as tribals. Most of the Kolis claim to be Kshatriyas. They have named groups in different sub-regions of Gujarat. The Bhils too have been differentiated into numerous (29) named tribes. Some of the major names are Gamit, Chaudhari, Vasava, Kokna, Warli, and a few have retained the name of Bhil, for example, in Dangs or use the suffix 'Bhil' like Dungri Bhil. Many of these tribes are endogamous. A few tribes like those with the title Kotwalia or Kolgas have been given the status of 'Primitive Tribes'. Primitive Tribes are tribes who are very backward and get more assistance from the state for their development.

In the post-independence period, the Bhil physical and social geography has been decimated by the linguistic division of the states. Some Bhils were parcelled off as part of Rajasthan, some merged with Gujarat and others became a part of Madhya Pradesh. In Gujarat, the state ignores the Adivasis' own language and dialects and they have to do their schooling in the state language, Gujarati. They are at a disadvantage in speaking and writing in Gujarati in comparison with the mainstream non-Adivasis. They may be easily identified as Adivasis from their accents and pronunciation.

The Adivasis are now stratified, partly on account of the numerous interventions of the government, non-government agencies, missionaries and Adivasi organizations. Divisions like *Mota* (big) Chaudharis and *Nana* (small) Chaudharis; Bhagats and non-Bhagats have emerged within a tribe. There are differences of language among them. There is little horizontal solidarity within a tribe let alone across tribes.

CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY INTERVENTION IN GUJARAT

The First Phase (1880–1950)

Of the two major streams of Christianity, it was the Protestant that came first to the Adivasis of Gujarat. The Christianization process among the

Bhils of Gujarat is about 120 years old. The Church Missionary Society (CMS), an Anglican body based in London, was the first to begin such work, starting in 1880 at Kherwara in Mewar. In the following years, mission stations were opened at Lusadia and Biladia in Idar State, and Kotra in Mewar. In 1887, it was Charles Stewart Thompson of the CMS who pioneered the Christianization process in Sabarkantha district in Lusadia, Biladia, Ghoradar, Sarasu, Kotra and Baulia. Thompson provided medical services to the Bhils, supervised schools and published a simple catechism and prayer book in Bhil dialect.

The Chappania Famine (1899–1900) hit the Bhils very hard. ‘The loss of life from starvation and disease was terrible, and was made worse by looting, for many were killed in defending their homes, and the survivors were left without food or the means wherewith to buy it.’ The commanding officer of the Bhil Corps wrote, ‘Every palm tree has been cut down, pounded between stones, and eaten and now only the black rocks and sun-baked mud are left. All cattle are dead or eaten, and water is dried up in nearly all the wells.’ Thompson who threw himself into relief works for the Bhils died of the cholera that followed. The successors of Thompson continued the work and reaped fruits in the form of conversion of a number of Bhagats (cited by Lobo 1991: 43).

The Jungle Tribes Mission of the Irish Presbyterian (IP) Church began work in the eastern Panchmahals in 1892, and had its chief bases at Dahod, Jhalod and Sunth. The Church of the Brethren (CB), an American Mission, established its first base in south Gujarat at Valsad in 1895, and moved inland to the Adivasi areas over the next decade, with bases at places such as Rajpipla, Jhagadia, Sagbara, Vuli and Umalla (Rajpipla State), Vyara (Baroda State), Dahanu and Vada (Thana district) and Ahwa (the Dangs). A church came into existence in Dangs in 1904, which later became part of the Church of North India. The missionaries established a network of schools. There were secondary schools at their mission centres, often with boarding facilities for pupils who came from a distance. Primary schools were set up in villages, which were staffed by Indian Christians from outside the area. For example, by 1925, the CB mission had organized 114 such schools in southern Gujarat and adjoining areas of Maharashtra. The schools provided a focal point for mission activities in an area, as described by a missionary writing in 1920 (Hardiman 2002: 179).

These missionaries thought they had a civilizing mission in regard to the 'primitive' Adivasis. By the process of Christianization, the Adivasis would be changed and transformed (Dube 1992). The Christianization process can be defined as

A socio-religious process by which a large number of people from backward tribes first reject, at least in theory their traditional supernatural system, ritual practices, way of life and ethic, and then accept Jesus Christ and other supernatural beings, a system of symbols, a complex of rituals and sacraments performed by specially trained leaders, a new ethic and way of life which in turn, create a new sense of community or church. (Kanjamala 1981: 333)

In general, as Kanjamala (1981) points out, this process is made more effective through education and other socio-economic advantages, which enhance the appeal of Christianity.

The first phase of Christian mission could be termed as the colonial and racial encounter. Missionaries, mostly white, were moved by '[a] belief that their own path to salvation through dedicated social work would pave the way for the saving of "heathen" souls' (Hardiman 2002: 178). They did a lot of saving lives during drought and famine, from death and disease. They saved more lives than perhaps souls! It was largely children from orphanages, the destitute or the dying that accepted Christianity. These orphans eventually formed small Christian communities. The missionaries mostly did relief work and charity, not without an attitude of paternalism.

The Second Phase (1950–80)

This phase could be termed as the developmental phase. The second phase (post-independence) is largely a story of the activities of the Catholic missionaries among the Adivasis of Gujarat. The Catholic mission in Sabarkantha began working with Garasia Bhils. 1965 to 1969 were years of scarcity and drought, threatening Bhils with starvation and death. In Bhiloda, Meghraj and Vijayanagar massive relief works were undertaken with the help of CRS, OXFAM, Misereor, USAID and Campana. Food for Work programmes under the United States Agency for International

Development (USAID) alone included the construction of 2,750 wells, 1,896 houses and bunding work of 279 miles for soil and water conservation. These relief activities have given periodic employment to 79,203 people and were a bulwark against famine in the years 1965–69 (Garriz 1984).

The drought of 1965 also gave the Catholic missionaries an opening in south Gujarat, which brought in food-for-work projects from CRS, OXFAM, Misereor and Caritas. Struck by people's misery, the missionaries plunged themselves into relief and developmental activities. There were glowing examples of missionaries who disregarded their own health for the sake of the Adivasis. Adivasi missions also spread in other districts of south and central Gujarat, started by different congregations of Catholic missionaries, male as well as female. The main activities were limited to education, health and welfare.

At this time,

[...] different Congregations of Sisters were working among the adivasis. Almost each mission station had a contingent of Sisters. Some Congregations busied themselves with traditional activities such as dispensing medicine, education and religious instruction, especially to women. The role of the Sisters in teaching the adivasi women came about because they were culturally more accessible to female than to male missionaries. Some Congregations of Sisters have undertaken non-traditional activities such as developmental works, conscientization, bringing about social awareness and mobilization of women, adult literacy for women, teaching adivasi women alternative means of earning a livelihood and so on. (Lobo 1991: 47)

The second phase is distinctly marked by a shift from charities and relief to transmitting skills to Adivasis for income generation. The emphasis was more on service delivery. Stress on education and health delivery marked this phase. From a relief mode the missionaries were making a shift to service/welfare mode, and a few even looking for the rights mode, namely, raising social awareness, fighting for justice the liberation theology style. The Catholic missionaries took a gradualist approach to religious conversion. Contrary to the view that they were conversion oriented, most missionaries were development oriented. Conversions if any were a matter of a slow process after due reflection and deliberation by the Adivasi. Conversion was by and large not tied

to or linked to development, relief or material interests. Developmental projects, education, health were open to all Adivasis. Certainly there were some conversions but one cannot speak of mass conversions. The language of conversion changed to that of development.

The Third Phase (1980–present): Evangelical Missions

A number of modern Pentecostal Protestant sects such as Friends Missionary Prayer Band (FMPB), Alleluias, Pavitra Atmas (Holy Spirit) and Gospel Church Unionists have been sweeping the Adivasi areas with their brand of evangelism. A large number of these new brands of missionaries were from south India. They did not believe in the gradualist approach of the Catholic missionaries but

[...] asked for a leap of faith, preaching that the poor could overcome their many problems through faith in Christ alone. They told the adivasis that their old deities could no longer protect them, and that only prayer to Jesus could. Some of these missionaries claimed even to be able to cure the deaf, the dumb and the crippled through prayer alone, and they discouraged adivasis from going to doctors. This struck a chord with many adivasis, leading to a series of mass baptisms in the Dangs and surrounding areas. (Joshi 1999: 2670)

These new Christian sects tapped a crucial vein in the corpus of popular ideas, namely, those that related to afflictions, sickness, misfortunes and calamities and a way to overcome them. Sectarianism supplied an oversimplified picture of a complex situation. For instance, it acknowledged that misfortune was brought about by a host of evil forces or agents who were employed by Satan and were to be conquered by the power of the Holy Spirit. The gift of healing involved the ability to diagnose the cause of affliction and to prescribe suitable remedies such as fasting, prayer, imbibing such substances as blessed oil, maintaining the Bible as a talisman, recitation of protective spells and so on. In their charismatic and prayer sessions, the Pentecostalists used the traditional Adivasi idiom of trembling as if in a trance, and whipping up frenzy. Some of these sects forbade their followers to consult a physician or doctor and encouraged them to rely solely on healing by the Holy Spirit.

Why did people join these churches? Meeting some Pentecostals in the field, such as Limjibhai Gamit of Chikalpada, one gets the following responses.

I joined the church because of calamities, difficulties in life ... pain in the stomach which no medicine could cure but the pastor prayed over and it was healed. Generally the women attend the church more or they go first and then men follow. Quite often the men drink alcohol and after attending the church they get weaned off from drinks. Enjoy freedom and peace in life and also prosperity. Once the drinks are given up then discipline came in, regular work in the fields began. The most inspiring word of God is that Jesus came down to earth and died for us all and saved us from our sins and liberated us and made us children of God. Those who believe in His words will be saved. Our old gods and deities did not give us hope or understanding or life. Once we heard the word of Jesus then we knew there was our hope and life. By and large for weddings and funerals Christians attend functions of non-Christian relatives, but not other religious festivals.

Thakorbbhai of Chikhalpada has this to say: 'I joined the church to free myself from drinking and the evils that followed: loss of time, no discipline, loss of earnings, poor cultivation.'

A member of the Church of North India who was earlier a member of FMPB, Kiran Gamit, has the following response:

[The] Bible says that we were lost, wandering but the Lord has selected us, forgiven us from our sins and has redeemed us. 25 years ago I was an idol worshipper and lost but today believing in Jesus I have given up gods of the past. One must worship only one Lord. Those who believe in Jesus are a new creation. Old is given up. New mentality is put on. If there is no change in my behaviour before and after conversion it is no use to become a Christian. If my behaviour is not a witness to good behaviour then it gives false impression to others. Only by believing in the Lord Jesus our behaviour will change for the better. Freedom from vices is good. But only freeing oneself from vices will not take us to Jesus, or there is no such guarantee that we will be having eternal life. There is some separation or distance building due to faith but socially we all belong to the same Gamit tribe. We attend life cycle events among the non-Christian Gamits too. There is no general feeling that Christians are superior to non-Christian tribals. If we do not sit with non-Christians we will not be following Jesus' teaching. Why some tribals have not become Christians? Well, according

to the Bible it is God choosing us and not us [choosing Him]. [He says] I have chosen you. It is God alone who can bring us to him. We can only preach. The change is wrought by God alone. God alone can and does work miracles. Economic upgradation is important but more important is the spiritual. Life (eternal) is very important. If economic development is the key thing then what is the difference between us and others?

The paths to the church are diverse. A moment of crisis may precipitate the search for divine intervention, but even in such cases, the initial contact still has to be established. This may be by word of mouth, by seeing the effects of joining the church in someone else's life (effects such as greater discipline, better earnings, regular work), or through members of one's own family. There may not be any 'dramatic' character to these forms of conversion, but clearly there are significant changes in lifestyle that follow. There does appear to be an impact on relations with non-Christian tribal fellows, with some degree of separation and distance entering.

Sectarian evangelism affects Catholic missions in a significant way. On the one hand, the former are gaining recruits and, on the other, they are 'stealing sheep' from the Catholic missionaries. The latter are not dramatic in their operations or liturgy but they also try to pay attention to the all-round development of the Adivasis, by introducing them to activities and modes of behaviour that are rational, with a more liberal interpretation of the scriptures. Catholic missionaries do show a respect for the indigenous culture. Their celebration, worship and places of worship show ample evidence of Adivasi-ized Catholicism. A shift has taken place from colonial Christianity to indigenous modes.

Some of the evangelical sects who believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible have a strong tendency to dub any other religion or culture as idolatrous, pagan, evil and satanic. A group that is going through a period of confusion, material, social and cognitive, might be open to accepting a packaged system of beliefs that is simple, clear and absolute. Sects could appear to them as an answer to confusion and anxiety as they reinforce fellowship, belonging and spontaneity in worship. The continuous social, political and economic marginalization of the Adivasis is not dissociated from their availability for the religious packages of instant hope offered by different sects. The state and its agencies have failed to reach out to Adivasis and they have been left out of any programmes for the betterment of their living conditions.

The policies of the state have made the Adivasis, who have lived for generations in the Dangs, aliens to their own habitat. They have been labelled as encroachers on the forestland. Their lands have been appropriated for wildlife sanctuaries (Purna Game Sanctuary in Dangs and another one near Dediapada of Narmada district). They have to migrate for most of the year to the plains and cities in search of employment as casual labour. In such miserable conditions evangelical sects come and preach a kind of short-cut to resolving miseries. 'Pray to Jesus, He will solve your problems.' These sects, by and large, do not attend to key issues of the Adivasis like rights to land and forest or to unemployment, but preach salvation.

SANSKRITIZATION OR HINDUIZATION OF TRIBALS

Hinduization, or what may also be called Sanskritization, as a process has been prevalent among the tribals over a very long period of time (Srinivas 1956). It involved the lower castes and tribes emulating the behaviour and lifestyle of those above them. This emulation may be understood as 'imitation' or a form of resistance from below; it must certainly have emerged as tribals and non-tribals came in touch with each other. Diffusion of Hindu cultural traits among the tribals began with traders, businessmen, moneylenders and priests. It may also be regarded as a strategy to enable some minimal level of communication among these different and socially graded groups, through the process of, at least, surface similarity.

At different points of time, there have also been more deliberate attempts by individuals and groups to promote the process of the assimilation of the Adivasis to Hindu culture and religion. Gandhians, such as A.V. Thakkar and Jugat Ram Dave, and organizations like Bhil Seva Mandal, Rani Paraj Seva Mandal, Sad Guru Seva Sangh and Adivasi Seva Samiti worked among the Adivasis. The Hinduization process gained momentum after independence with the coming of roads, transport and better communication facilities. The penetration of the market into tribal areas, the transfer of resources from tribal areas, the developmental projects of the government and the influence of modern institutions all contributed to the increasing spread of cultural traits.

Part of the argument is that the Hinduization of Adivasis may not be understood as a completely benign and apolitical process. Certainly, it was enabled by particular practices of the state. In each of the decennial censuses, the column for religion was increasingly filled up as Hindu. For instance, Gamits were prefixed—as Hindu Gamits or Chaudhris as Hindu Chaudhris. During admission to schools, a Hindu identity was reinforced by being noted in the school records.

Different Hindu sects have contributed to the Hinduization of the Adivasis. The Bhagat or the Bhakti movement and later a host of other movements quickened the process of Hinduization. The upwardly mobile Adivasis took to Hindu sects more than the others. A large number of Hindu sects are operating among the tribals of Gujarat today. Table 10.1 gives an idea of sects prevalent in south Gujarat in the first half of the 20th century. The Hindu Right has its primary enemy in the Muslims of India, but has also now identified Christians as foreigners and anti-national. They pose a threat to the Hindu majority, and are also castigated for coercing the ‘backward’ and innocent Adivasis into converting. While cultural supremacy and the desire for a Hindu nation are part of this agenda, Froerer (in this volume) also suggests that there are electoral motives behind the sudden interest of Hindu Right-wing organizations in the welfare of the Adivasis. Further, I have argued elsewhere (Lobo 1991: 46) that the work of the missionaries among the deprived Adivasis was ‘an eyesore for the non-advansi vested interests such as shopkeepers, moneylenders and landlords’. Adivasis were being empowered and might no longer submit to the exploitation of these groups. Hindu groups have the power of the various levels of the Gujarat state behind them: they are able to harass the missionaries or register false cases against them. The Hindu Rightist organizations are able to mobilize the police, the government bureaucracy and politicians against the missionaries (Lobo 1991: 46).

COMMUNALIZATION AND HINDUTVIZATION OF TRIBALS

Hinduization has been speeded up by Hindutvization, which specifically targets Muslims and Christians as the ‘Other’, the enemy. The Sangh Parivar surveyed, selected and targeted villages, planted its men, recruited local people and began its anti-missionary campaigns. They also built

TABLE 10.1: Sectarian Movements in the South Gujarat Tribal Belt During 1920–50

| Year | Name of the movement | Leader/s | Centre of origin | Recruited groups | Area of spread | Prescriptions | External marks |
|------|--|---|-------------------------|-------------------------|--|--|-------------------------------|
| 1921 | Devi | | Khandesh | Chodra | Surat, Valsad | Stop drinking wine, toddy tapping | |
| 1929 | Sarkaival | Kuberswami (a) Tapossi Raghu Ram (b) Tentisbhai | Kheda | | Vyara, Valod, Mandvi, Bardoli | Stop wine and toddy, regular bath | Guru mantra |
| 1925 | Moksha Margis or Vallabh Ram, Syrya Vallabha Swami | Son Ramuji | Ahmedabad | Dhodia, Chaudhry, Gamit | Surat—Mahuva, Valod; Valsad—Dharampur, Chikhli, Pardi, Bansda, Navsari | Sex only with legal partners, no meat and wine | Satsang, Tilak Guru Mantra |
| 1940 | Sati Pati | Gulia Maharaj Ramdas, Keshri Singh | Dhulia | Many tribal peoples | Songadh, Vyara, Mandvi-Surat district, Dangs-Bharuch district | Greeting <i>Aap ki jai</i> , no wine or meat | Amas— Poonam gatherings |
| 1950 | Sanatan | Vidyanand Akhandnad | Nasik, Chandod, Narmada | Dhodia | Pardi, Valsad | No meat or wine | Satsang |
| | Kaladia Panth | Fakirbhai Vallabhabhai | Valsad taluka | | Valsad taluka | | Bhajan |
| | Swaminarayan | Narayan Swaroopdasji | | Dhodia | Vyara, Valod, Mahuva | 206 rules | Satsang |
| 1930 | Viswanath Movement | Viswanath | Padekola | Tadvis | Gomdeshwar Nandod | Orthodox Hindu customs, no wine, meat | Guru Kanthis |

Source: Lal (1977).

their institutions for children. With a view to speedy Hindutvization the Hindu Nationalists¹ used Advani's '*rathiyatra*',² and collection of bricks from Adivasis for the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya.

Communal conflicts were first recorded in Dediapada and Sagbara talukas of Bharuch district in 1990 as a result of Hindutvization (Lobo 2000: 40–42). The Hindutvization process in Dediapada and Sagbara was initiated in the following manner. Events such as mini '*rathiyatras*' and *Ramjyoth* (Ram flame) were organized, spaced out over a year and a half, in these areas. A collection of Rs 125 per household was made from houses along the highway by saying, 'If you do not contribute you prove that you are from the Muslim womb!' Provocative speeches were made en route of the mini *rathiyatras*. Organizers of these *yatras* were non-tribals. In Devmogra, a pilgrim centre for Adivasis, a Muslim *dargah* was vandalized.

In November 1990 some villages were singled out and Muslim traders and shopkeepers were told to quit the village. The Muslims sent their women and children to a big village called Akkalkuva, which had a large population of Muslims. Subsequently some houses of Muslims in nearly fifteen villages of Sagbara taluka were destroyed. The sitting Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) of the area and members of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and RSS were identified as being a part of this violence. The complicity of the Mamlatdar and police was well-established. The fall-out of the disturbances was that the Adivasis found they acquired 'loot' from the raided houses and experienced anti-normative behaviour such as stopping passing vehicles or breaking their windscreens as powerful. '*Ame shakti Batavi*' (we showed our strength).

ATTACKS ON ADIVASI CHRISTIANS IN SOUTH GUJARAT 1997–99

During 1997–99 the organizations of the Sangh Parivar perpetrated a series of attacks on Adivasi Christians of south Gujarat. A list of these crimes, such as burning of churches, prayer halls, beating up Adivasi Christians, performing forcible *shuddhikaran* (purification) ceremony and other forms of harassments have been documented (Lobo 2002b: 182 ff). Of the fifty-one documented attacks, forty-one took place in

the Dangs, nine in Surat and one in Valsad district of south Gujarat. In the Dangs, there were twenty-four instances of the burning of churches and prayer halls, eight instances of beatings and four of various other kinds of harassment. Of nine instances in Surat district, four had to do with burning churches, two with beatings and three with other forms of harassments. At this time of great conflict and spreading violence, Atal Behari Vajpayee, the then prime minister and leader of the BJP came out to say that a 'national debate on conversions' was the need of the hour.

The south Gujarat Adivasi area had rarely seen such levels of disturbance and violence. According to people in the area, '*Baharathi loko aveene dhamal kare chhe. ame to shantithi raheta hat*' (outsiders have come and created disturbances when we were living in peace). It must be noted that these atrocities were preceded by the increasing activities of the Sangh Parivar in the Adivasi areas. The Parivar began by propagating Hindutva through various existing Hindu sects in the area. It established branches of the Bajrang Dal (BD) and VHP. Attempts were made to visit each village and make non-Christian Adivasis members of the BD. *Deeksha* (ordination) was given to persons joining the BD in which '*trishuls*' (tridents) and saffron headbands were distributed. Non-Christian sarpanchs of the villages, economically better-off persons and unemployed youth of villages were enrolled as members.

The organizations published and widely distributed a calendar depicting the Hindu god Hanuman. Idols of Hindu gods and goddesses were distributed by the BD and VHP during Navaratri and Ganapati festivals. The Dangs alone saw the construction of forty-one Hindu shrines during that period, most of which were dedicated to Hanuman. The Hindu organizations distributed anti-Christian pamphlets and spread their anti-Christian rhetoric through local newspapers. The Sangh Parivar showed open hostility against Christians after the instatement of a BJP government at the centre. Anti-Christian meetings were organized. Personal and local conflicts in the villages were converted into Hindu-Christian communal conflicts by these outfits. Meetings of the Hindus were held specifically on the days of Christian festivals. Hindus were persuaded to vote for the BJP during the state elections (Lobo 1999).

The Indian National Congress (INC) party had had a stronghold among the Adivasis for decades. Under the Congress, however, the Adivasis only experienced further economic marginalization. This opened

up the political space to be exploited by the BJP, and enabled them to get a foothold among the Adivasis. The Hindutva mobilization of the tribals in the late 1980s through modes and means explained earlier and the violence afflicted on Adivasi Christians helped the BJP wrest a few seats in Adivasi areas of south Gujarat in the elections of 1997.

POST-GODHRA RIOTS (2002)

Post-Godhra riots had an echo in the Adivasi belt of north-eastern Gujarat. A chronology of events (27 February–5 May 2002) in the tribal areas is gathered from the headlines from the *Times of India* and the *Indian Express*. The chronology shows that it took a few days for things to flare up in tribal areas. The rioting limited itself to arson and loot and the rape, murder and burning of people alive that one saw in other parts of Gujarat largely did not occur here. In non-tribal areas both aspects of the community, namely, production and reproduction, were made the target of attack while in tribal areas only the former, that is, economic interests. Devy referring to Baroda district tribals concludes, 'The tribals were made to fight a proxy war on behalf of the baniyas' (2002: 41). But then Hindutvization has also contributed to creating a mind-set that Muslims are dispensable. The tribal, in many ways, feels closer today to Hindus than to Muslims.

After succeeding in creating a divide between tribals and Christians in parts of south Gujarat, Hindu Right organizations began to engage themselves in doing the same with the Adivasis and Muslims in the Adivasi belt of Vadodara, Panchmahals, Dahod and Sabarkantha for political gains. These areas of the state, which had until recently remained devoid of any major communal tension, suddenly seem to have been caught in an inferno. Adivasis moved around with bows and arrows and bill hooks ('*dharias*') on the streets. People went on a looting spree of houses, shops and vehicles moving in the area. They went screaming in large numbers to loot a premise and then set it on fire. Having accomplished this mission they would disappear into the surrounding forests or fields. Trees were cut and placed as road-blocks on the road: the intention in most cases seemed to have been that of looting. That a free hand was given to the armed tribal mobs indulging in arson and

looting in the very presence of the police lends credence to the belief that the Hindu nationalist dispensation in Gujarat had launched a well-planned operation.

The tribals were incited by outsiders. It is said that liquor was freely distributed among the Adivasis and in an inebriated state of mind they were warned of an impending attack by Muslims and how they should prepare for retaliation. The miscreants also highlighted the adverse economic prospects they would face once the Muslims returned. In many places tribal people were instigated to loot. The people in this area are extremely poor. This district had also suffered drought conditions. In the tribal areas of Panchmahal and Sabarkantha, there has been a history of economic exploitation between Bohra Muslim traders and tribal people. This has been further exploited by the Hindutva brigade, who linked it to contemporary communal issues. Evidence suggests that the politicians and Hindutva ideologues had the implicit backing of the state and government bureaucracy. The local-level leadership were either complicit with the attackers or, in some cases, even active in the attacks. For the most part, they did nothing to prevent the violence. Further, the tribals were given assurances that the BJP government would see to it that no harm would ever visit them.

REVIVAL OF INDIGENOUS IDENTITY

After fifty years of independence a small creamy layer has surfaced among tribals that dabbles in politics and corners reservations and developmental schemes. The leaders from this creamy layer have been co-opted by non-tribals and are highly Hinduized; they have, by and large, ignored their own people. Adivasi self-assertion is not new in Gujarat. There have been leaders from among the masses who have risen from time to time during the last fifteen years (Lobo 1994: 82–83). This kind of leadership was feared by non-tribals and by leaders from the tribal creamy layer. A series of such leaders have been murdered, it appears by vested interests. Chhotubhai Vasava was one such leader who continued the line of indigenous assertion for tribal identity and nationalism. He was anti-Congress and opposed outside exploiters. He was an MLA of the Janata Party for a long time. However, even a leader of Chhotubhai Vasava's stature was co-opted by the BJP a few years ago. After withstanding

all manner of harassment and atrocities on him by the state, he finally succumbed to the wiles of the BJP and thereby lost his credibility.

After a lull of two years, Amarsingh Vasava has picked up from where Chhotubhai left off. Amarsingh, with his Jai Adivasi Samiti, has yet again resurrected hope for the ailing indigenous leadership and for a movement that they may call their own. Today, the *Jai Adivasi* slogan can be heard in many places and people utter it with pride when they meet each other, in many districts.

The erasing of an ethnic identity through forcible assimilation has nearly always resulted in a backlash or revival or reassertion of identity by different groups. For some two decades now the tribals of Gujarat have begun to assert their tribalness in some parts of Gujarat. In many places the greeting *Jai Adivasi* (Hail Adivasi) has become popular. Revival of cultural traits, artifacts and aesthetics has been on the rise. I attended a rally of thousands of tribals gathered at their holiest shrine of Dev Mogra in Narmada district where the following content analysis of the speeches gives an idea of this revival (Lobo 2000).

We are all *moolnivasis* (original inhabitants) of this land and that is why we are called adivasis. Indian civilization is the oldest in the world but ours is older still. We belong to Bharat not Hindustan. We should call ourselves *moolnivasis*, adivasi, Bharatvasis. We have been ousted from the fertile plains and pushed to the hills and today we are even chased out of these hills. Our land, forests, water and quarries are exploited and on our poverty the non-tribals stand tall. Our land is taken away for industry; dams are built mostly in tribal areas leading to submergence of hundreds of villages, thereby forcing us to migrate to hostile plains. Our forests are classified as reserved and protected and we can't touch even a branch for fuel without permission. We have no place to live peacefully. Fifty years have passed since Independence but we have not yet tasted the fruits of that Independence. We still do not have educational facilities. We have not had a revolution of intellect and thought. Not many of our adivasis have become doctors, lawyers, bureaucrats, businessmen. It is only because of missionaries that we have got some education. It is they who found diamonds in the dirt.

We are fragmented today by the different religious sects that seek our membership. We have our own religion. We are fragmented by different political parties. We need to become one. Religion is a private matter. We need to come together as adivasis and not as Hindu or Christian or Muslim

tribals. We should do away with the division between *Mota* Chaudhry and *Nana* Chaudhry, Dhanka Tadvī and Teteria Tadvī, Dungaria and Kathalia Vasava and re-establish our original identity as Bhils and remove the high and low differences that have crept among us of late. It is only through unity that we can break our shackles. If we stand united, those who exploit us will come begging to us. Otherwise we have to go to them as beggars as is now the case. We are still *gulām* (slaves). We are reduced to the status of casual labourers who have to migrate and look for work in far away plains or cities. We are still made to walk like goats, looking down all the time and have never been able to look up and stand tall. We have in us inner resources to stand up like lions and catch the snakes by their heads. We only need to get organised.

The BJP government in Gujarat has minimised our reservations and lifted the eight-kilometre regulation for purchase of land. This has facilitated the alienation of tribal land in Gujarat. The Hindutva forces have misled us. They have not just thrived on our poverty but also sought their own development on the destruction of our resources land, water and forests. The biggest conspiracy of Hindutva is to hide our real identity by calling us *vanvāsīs* (People of the jungle). Those who live in the jungle are *vanvāsīs*, they say. They have made us carry bricks for *Ramshilapujan*, taken contributions from us, asked us to put *tilak* (red mark on forehead), play the *garbhā* (folk dance) celebrate Diwali (festival of lights) and Ganesh festival which are not ours. But, most importantly, they do not pay attention to our real problems of education, unemployment, human rights, culture, transfer of resources, our very existence. Ayodhya is not our problem nor is Ram. The BJP has trapped us like fish in the net by misleading us on Ayodhya. We must greet each other not with 'Ram, Ram' or 'Good Morning' but with 'Jai Adivasi'. We have lived here for centuries before non-tribals came here. If non-tribals want to interact with us they should attend to our most important problems and not just sell us their religion.

We have our own religion. We worship nature, fields, grain, elders and ancestors and have our own deities. Ram is not ours, Sita is not ours. But our shrines are taken away and Hinduized. Ambaji and Shamalaji in the north were our shrines years ago but they are gone. Today we have only one shrine of Ya Mogi, which too is in the process of being taken over by Hindutvavaadis. We have symbolically gathered here at the feet of Ya Mogi, our mother, to begin our revolution: to assert our identity and our rights. This is not a political rally. This is a Jai adivasi rally. All, whatever be their political or religious affiliation, must come together

as adivasis. We have 75 lakh adivasis in nine districts making a total of 15 per cent of the 50 million population of Gujarat. We have 30 tribal MLAs. Whenever our interests are in danger we must fight as adivasis.

Referring to a tribe called Dubla, which word means weak/poor, the speaker continued:

We are not *Dubla* but *takatwala* (strong). The outsiders cannot keep us as bonded or casual labourers forever. We are not goats but lions. We can become doctors, lawyers, officers. We have among us people of courage who can stand up to anyone. It is time to stand up and unite. Anyone who attempts to fragment and divide the adivasis should be defeated. We should identify our enemies and friends. We adivasis have inner resources. But like rainwater, we have let it flow down the drain allowing non-tribals to dominate us. We need to build check-dams and conserve our resources.

The process of Sanskritization has been reversed in the case of Dev Mogra shrine and a *pucca* (permanent) shrine has been built by tribals in the last three years. Today, this shrine has become a symbol of tribal identity and nationalism.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have traced the different phases of change among the tribes of Gujarat in this chapter. What has prevailed in the case of Gujarat tribals is the assimilation paradigm. Through Sanskritization and later through the speedy assimilation of tribals through Hindutva, they have been assimilated more and more into Hinduism. The idea that they are 'backward Hindus' (Ghurye 1943) has been at work in the minds of those who sought to bring them into the fold of Hinduism. The process of Hindutvization created the conditions under which the tribals could be recruited to loot and attack Muslims during the post-Godhra phase of violence in Gujarat.

The attempted Hinduization of the Gujarati tribals is, thus, not merely a religious issue. It appears to have links with the changing political equations in the region. Traditionally, the tribal belt in Gujarat was associated with the Indian National Congress (INC); it was wrested away from the INC after anti-Christian violence and disturbances

initiated by organizations associated with the Hindu Right. The tribals *are* alienated and marginalized: in terms of livelihood sources, in terms of the degradation of their life-support systems (land, water and forests) and in terms of the resource transfer from tribal areas leading to large-scale migration for employment. At this particular juncture, both evangelical Christian missionaries and Hindu Right activists are seeking to co-opt the tribals.

What the chapter has shown is that though the tribals live at the margins of Gujarati society—in their own words, they have been pushed to the hills—acute battles are taking place to gain control over them, their resources and their cultural and political identity. The state authorities, political parties and a whole host of intermediaries—such as shopkeepers, tradesmen and the like—are part of this process. The missionaries, the rise of modern institutions in independent India and now the Hindu Right organizations (Hindu nationalists) have been prime movers of change among the tribals. Just as the resources of the tribal lands are crucial to feed the development and modernist projects of the capitalist state, so the religio-cultural identity of the tribals is decisive for shaping the latter's future political fortunes.

In the battle, the evangelical Christians are hardly distinguished by the Hindu Right and other outsiders from the mainline Christian churches, which have been working among the tribals since at least the 1950s. Catholic Christian tribals Sumanbhai, Gamanbhai and Avindrabhai Kokni from Bardipada said the following in a group discussion held recently (April 2008):

Hindutvavadis always quarrel with our missionaries accusing them that they destroy our culture and so on. Actually it is the Hindutvadis who destroy our culture and religion. Today the Catholic mission safeguards our culture much better. In belief we are Christians and in community we are adivasis. In Dangs there was trouble against the Christians. Yes, where there were few Christians in a village, the outsiders came and created trouble by co-opting a few non-Christian locals ... through money, alcohol, rumours, speeches and so on.

It is true that through the process of indigenization, the Catholic church seeks today to enmesh itself with the culture of its different communities of believers. It is possible to be Christian *and* Adivasi, in accordance with this new model. On the other hand, there are processes

at work within the Catholic church itself that might keep elite thinking and control effectively in place (see Mosse, in this volume).

Turning to the newer Christian cults, one finds a somewhat different stance. Pentecostal Kiran Gamit has this to say:

No culture is fixed or frozen. It keeps changing. So how can anyone blame us Christians alone for changing tribal culture as if it is a big sin? Culture is important for our children. In our business of protecting our culture we should not fall behind in worshipping the Lord Jesus. But by worshipping the Lord Jesus alone we shall be able to retain our culture. We must be equally careful to give the same attention to protecting our culture to worshipping the Lord Jesus. Old gods and deities are part of social baggage. But I do not feel bad for having given up such deities. Change is the law of life, culture and identity. We must change. (based on author's interview with Gamit)

The new Pentecostals are less equivocal about altering culture, and this attitude much more directly separates the Adivasis from the Christians. They are more visibly and vocally different. When, as Froerer also shows in her chapter in this volume, the community is attacked from outside, the fine distinctions between mainline Catholics and new Christians will not be marked. All become enemies for the Hindutva activists. Further, the work of education and health-provision by the Christians is also considered dangerous by the Hindu Right organizations, which see these as insidious ways whereby the Christians gain the loyalty of the 'innocent' and 'backward' tribes. Moreover, there are suggestions in the material that Christian education might be partly responsible for giving voice to Adivasi independence and indigenous revival movements. Such movements certainly do not have the backing either of elite Adivasis or of those who espouse the Hindutva ideology.

There is a great deal of jostling for ideological space occurring in tribal society. The trajectory of economic development in Gujarat has, however, left the tribals on the periphery; even association with the BJP—the ruling party in the state—does not assure them a better deal economically or a stronger voice politically. In the gap between the state and the tribes, various institutions and groups have stepped in, including missionaries of the mainline churches, evangelical missionaries and missionaries of Hinduism. This is not to suggest that religion is merely a panacea for deprived groups. Along with the more obvious provision of services,

religion offers a new worldview that can raise Adivasi self-esteem and be, in different ways, socially and culturally empowering. Perhaps the best example of this is when the Adivasi turns missionary and declares a new faith around the notion of the *moolnivasi*, coalescing in the one call the multiple but crucially integrated claims of identity, livelihood and political rights.

NOTES

1. The Hindu nationalist organizations are collectively known as the Sangh Parivar led by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, 'National Volunteer Corps') and include the Shiv Sena ('The Army of Shiva'), the Bajrang Dal and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP, 'World Hindu Council'). In national politics, they are led by the Bharatiya Janata Party. The Sangh Parivar claimed that Babri Mosque was built over a temple in Ayodhya (which supposedly marked the birthplace of the Hindu hero-god Rama, hence the name Ram Janmabhomi) destroyed by Babar and launched a campaign to tear down the mosque and build a temple in its place. Hindutva seeks to realize the goal of making India a Hindu nation: Muslims and other minorities are considered 'foreign' elements and become easy targets of attack.
2. L. K. Advani, leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party, went about on a chariot mobilizing Hindus and tribals towards Hinduness. The focal point was to rebuild the Ram temple by destroying the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya.

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