

## TRIBALS AND CHRISTIANITY IN GUJARAT

The word tribe is a British construct. Tribals are called by various names in Gujarat: *adivasis*, *raniparaj*, *kaliparaj*, 'backward Hindus' (Ghurye 1959) and Sangh Parivar has baptized them with a new name, *Vanvasis*. Like the British, the Sangh Parivar has given a specific identity to tribals with specific ideas and interests in mind and those interested in ushering inclusive change among tribals have to select an appropriate name and identity and we shall argue that the term 'adivasis' may be the better term. Adivasis (aboriginals) or Mulnivasis (indigenous) or better still the term autochthonous may also be considered. This identity will help the tribals to reclaim their lost natural resources or arrest the transfer of such resources which have been taking place before and after independence. The identity of tribals is in question.

One can usefully keep in mind the following indicators while assessing the change impacted by any intervening agency: Real development of the tribals will preserve their cultural autonomy, and mobilize them to participate in their own development. This in turn must be both equitable and sustainable, promoting a cultural autonomy, which will allow them to redefine their identity without in any way further compromising their dignity.

After giving a brief introduction of the tribals of Gujarat regarding their spread and movements for change, we shall dwell on Christian missionary interventions be it education, health, social work, development, social justice or faith formation. Missionaries developed their work among the tribals in three different phases: The first phase at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century (1880-1950); the second phase from 1950 to 1980 and the third phase from the 1980s onwards. We give a few perceptions of the tribals on the impact of Christian missionary interventions collected through focus group discussions in 40 villages of six districts of south Gujarat, viz., Narmada, Bharuch, Surat, Dangs, Navsari and Valsad. It is argued that most missionaries have changed their approach to interventions from a relief mode to a service delivery mode to a rights mode. However, the state, particularly the ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, has deliberately limited the

missionary interventions to religious discourse alone. It is not religious conversion *per se* but the other interventions of missionaries that trigger off change, and subsequently protest, hostility and resistance. This paper also carries a critique on a section of missionaries. It is hoped that what is happening to Gujarat tribals may also be happening to tribals elsewhere in India to a great extent with reference to Christianity and change.

## **Gujarat tribals**

The Bhil tribal belt ran from southern Rajasthan, eastern Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh to Maharashtra about 100 years ago. This belt was largely dry hilly, forested. Today we have 28 named communities in the list of scheduled tribes (S.T.) in Gujarat. The major tribes are: Bhils (20 lakh), Dubla or Halpati (4.6 lakh), Dhodia (4 lakh), Rathwa (3 lakh), Gamit and Naikda (2.5 lakh each), Dhanka and Kokna (2 lakhs each), Warli, Patelia and Kanbi (one lakh each). There are five minor tribes recognized as primitive tribes because of their extremely poor economic existence and another 11 minor groups mainly in mainland and Saurashtra areas of Gujarat (Lal 1998).

Within the hilly and dry eastern belt one can distinguish three arbitrary divisions such as northern, central and southern. In the northern division one finds Rajput Garasia, Dungri Garasia, and Bhil Garasia. In the southern zone are Vasava, Tadavi, Dubla, Gamit, Kokna, Dhodia, Warli, Bhil, Naika and Choudhary. There are more than 32 talukas which have a population of more than fifty per cent tribals. Much of the economy was subsistence level depending on a good monsoon. Much of northern and central belt was drought prone.

The tribals of Gujarat had by and large interactions with non-tribals and were not totally isolated. Rajputs, Mughals, British rulers and the merchants, traders, Baniyas, Muslims, Parsees, Hindus, and then Christians had intercourse with the tribals. And yet the tribals had their distinct linguistic, cultural, and demographic characteristics. The central Indian Bhil belt was parceled off after independence to Rajasthan, Gujarat, M.P. and Maharashtra and their languages were imposed on the tribals in the name of integrating them into the mainstream. Despite this effort substantial cultural and linguistic diversity exists among them even today. Tribes like Chaudhary and Dhodia have advanced economically due to education and irrigation.

## **The first phase (1880-1950) of missionary activity**

Of the two major streams of Christianity it was the Protestant missionary who began their activities among the tribals of Gujarat. The Christianization process among the Bhil of Gujarat is only 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 Church Missionary Society who pioneered the Christianization process in Sabarkantha district in Lusadia, Biladia, Ghoradar, Sarasu, Kotra and Baulia. Thompson provided medical services to 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 (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 Veda (Thana district) and Ahwa (the Dangas) (Hardiman 2002:179).

The missionaries established networks 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 (ibid: 179).

The missionaries always carried medicine on their itineraries, and gave as much help as they could to the sick. In time, large numbers of adivasis began coming to the missionaries for treatment. For example, the CMS Mission hospital and dispensary at Lusadia treated nearly 13,000 patients in 1919. Missionaries on tour similarly attracted large crowds demanding treatment. As one account of such a tour stated:

As soon as the news spread that we had come, we were simply besieged on all sides for medical help, and sicknesses of all kinds were brought to us.

The financial resources of people were extremely limited, so that whole areas of western allopathic medicine were beyond their reach. They could afford only the most basic drugs, and surgery was largely impossible without sterile and well-equipped operation theatres. They were particularly helpless in the face of serious epidemic disease, such as the great plague of 1896-98 and the influenza pandemic of 1918. There was little that they could do to help the people at such times (*ibid*: 180).

These early missionaries thought they had a civilizing mission to the primitive tribals. By Christianizing them the tribals would be changed and transformed.

1. Missionaries, mostly British, were moved by a belief that their own path to salvation through dedicated social work which 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 souls!
2. Did many tribals become Christians? Not really. It was mostly children from orphanages, destitute or the dying that accepted Christianity. These orphans eventually formed small Christian communities.
3. In this early phase the missionaries mostly did relief works and charities. In today's language they gave people fish to eat. They did not teach them to fish nor empowered them to fight for the fishing rights in a pond.
4. The first phase ended with independence. When most foreign missionaries died or left India, new ones did not replace them and their financial sources dried up.

### **The second phase (1950-1980) of missionary activity**

The situation of the tribals after decades of independence had not improved, though tribes like Chaudhary and Dhodia had progressed educationally and some economic differentiation was taking place among them. In a study by SPIER (1984:219) one can see the poverty profile of the sub-regions of Gujarat. Percentage of the poor to the total poor is the highest in eastern hilly areas inhabited by the tribals. Of the hundred poor 31% were found therein and 15% in South Gujarat plains, 21% in middle Gujarat plains, 13% in dry areas of north Gujarat and 16% in Saurashtra peninsula. Though Gujarat was the second most developed state in India industrially and agriculturally the tribal areas were the most backward and poor. The tribals had to migrate seasonally to the plains and cities for wage labour.

The policies of the state actively transferred the resources like land, water, and forests to non-tribal areas and hands. Land was acquired by the state for industrial development at a cheap rate from the tribals. Forests were denuded in the name of giving employment to tribals through forest cooperatives. Hundreds of villages were submerged by a series of dams built in tribal areas. Nehru who spoke of Panchsheel policy with reference to the tribals laid the foundation stone of Sardar Sarovar Dam (SSP) on the Narmada. Implementation of relocation and rehabilitation package in the case of Sardar Sarovar project oustees was poor (Punalekar 1998:297) Ukai Dam on the Tapi river in the tribal areas displaced thousands of tribals with little or no compensation.

A number of agencies were also found working among the tribals such as Gandhian workers, modern Hindu religious sects, NGOs along with the state's developmental projects. There are about nine integrated tribal development project (ITDP) units in Gujarat under the tribal sub plan. Villages that have more than fifty percent tribal population are also grouped under tribal pockets under the tribal sub plan for developmental purposes.

Indicting the government, Lal (1998:75) writes:

There has been almost a complete absence of programmes to generate countervailing forces of sufficient dimensions as to help the tribal community to become an equal partner in the process of growth.

Reviewing the tribal sub-plan he further comments that:

a clear perspective about the long-term strategy for development of tribals of a specific region has not yet emerged (1998:74).

Another scholar Pathy (1998:276) notes that:

development projects are handed down without any concern for the cultural-historical and ecological complexities prevailing in the tribal regions. Based upon anthropocentric premises of mutilating nature, customary institutions and values, imposition of individualism, statist ideology and reductionist worldview, the development practices have wrecked the physical, cultural and cognitive survival of the large masses of the country, specially tribals... Development has become a label for plunder and violence.

Against this backdrop we must discuss the entry of Catholic missionaries among the tribals.

The second phase (post-Independence) was largely a story of the activities of the Catholic missionaries among the tribals of Gujarat. Catholic Mission in Sabarkantha began working with Garasia Bhils. The period 1965-69 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 Campanian. Food for a work programme under USAID alone included construction of 2750 wells, 1896 houses, and 1384 bunding work of 279 miles for soil and water conservation. These have given periodic employment to 79,203 people

and were a bulwark against famine in the years 1965-69 (Garritz 1984). In south Gujarat Jesuit priests, stationed at Bharuch to look after the religious needs of Christians were invited by Vasava tribals of the area to assist them. Soon an enthusiastic band of young Spanish missionaries began to work in Bharuch and Surat districts largely among the most numerous and poorest Vasava tribals in dry, forested, hilly areas. These tribals had been subjected to extortion and exploitation by money-lenders and traders.

The drought of 1965 again gave them an opening 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. They were glowing examples of missionaries who disregarded their own health for the sake of the tribals. Fr. Caricas could not be brought to look after his health when thousands of Vasavas were starving. He died a premature death on August 9, 1967 due to dysentery. Tribal missions also spread in other districts of South and Central Gujarat by different congregations of Catholic missionaries male as well as female. The main activities were limited to education, health and relief.

Different congregations of Sisters are also working among the tribals. Almost each mission station has a contingent of Sisters. Some congregations busy themselves with traditional activities such as dispensing medicine, education and religious instruction especially to women.

The role of the Sisters in teaching the tribal women in the Christian faith and world view must be recognized. This is partly because women are culturally more accessible to women 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, and adult literacy for women, teaching tribal women alternative means of earning a livelihood and so on (Lobo 1991:47).

The Catholic missionaries today in eight districts of central and south Gujarat run the following activities and institutions: rural centres 40; city centers 15; with 400 personnel working in them. In the education sector: research and development centres 3; high schools 37; primary schools 15; ashram shalas 9; technical institutes 5; typing centres 2; tailoring centres 2; balwadis 224. In the health sector: hospitals 3; dispensaries 24; mobile clinics 6; social welfare hostels for girls 26; for boys 23; social welfare centres 19; milk cooperatives 4; homes for the aged 3; mahila mandals 337; legal aid centres 3 (*Directory* 2002).

The Catholic missionaries in 1980s began a series of primary and secondary high schools in tribal areas realizing the poor quality of education given to tribals. For instance, the Senior School Leaving Certificate examination results were around 15 per cent in schools in tribal areas but the missionary schools began securing fifty, seventy, ninety and even hundred per cent results. This had an indirect impact on non-missionary

schools which raised their standards too. The high per cent of results secured by tribals enabled them to seek higher education in colleges and universities, thus making it possible for them to enter the mainstream professions like teachers, lawyers, doctors, nurses, etc. The Catholic nuns engaged themselves in starting *mahila mandals* (women's associations) basically for inculcating savings habit, but also for teaching preventive health care, awareness of women's rights, and so on.

The second phase is distinctly marked by a shift from charities and relief to transmitting skills to tribals for income generation. Missionaries began milk cooperatives in Vyara and Mandal in Surat district, Dediapada and Jhagadia in Bharuch district and also in Dang district. These helped significantly to raise income for the tribals. To carry forward the simile used in the first phase the missionaries continued giving fish to eat but also taught people how to catch fish by themselves. 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 mode, and a few even to the rights mode, viz., raising social awareness, fighting for justice-the liberation theology style.

### **Positive perceptions of tribals on missionary activity**

Some tribal beneficiaries during my field work in the month of February 2003 reported that Christian tribals do not believe in witches but other tribals do. The buffalo scheme and milk cooperatives of missionaries have raised income in our villages. Watershed programmes have reduced migration considerably in our villages. Sisters come to our village and take care of our health needs. PHC medicines are not effective. There is a difference between government ashram schools and missionary schools. The trustees of the former eat up the money. They do not want our children to come up. The older missionaries mixed with us, they loved and served us. Because we studied in their boardings we are now economically better off. Sisters who run mahila mandals talk of women's rights and prepare us for struggle with the forest department. They also prepare us for income generating schemes.

### **Negative perceptions of tribals on missionary activity**

The contrary viewpoints mentioned during the same field visits, *inter alia*, stated that the missionaries do not assist the Bhil who are the poorest in Dangs district through schools and other developmental interventions. They work more for the Kokna who are better off. No doubt the mission has sunk 25 wells in our village but most of them have no water. Watershed programme has given labour to our village but the social distribution of benefits has not been satisfactorily done. Two households have cornered 50 per cent of the benefits of watershed. Quarries do considerable damage to

the health of children, women, and crops. For instance, silicosis, irregular monthly periods, still births, urinary tract infections have increased. But missionaries have not taken up the fight. So also about sanctuaries in Dangs, and in Bharuch districts. There are also the dam displaced persons of Ukai and SSP. The missionary tends to confine us to worshipping the Lord and not to indulge in dirty politics or fighting for one's rights. The younger missionaries do not easily mix, love and serve us like the older ones. There is a distance growing between younger missionaries and the tribals. Though the younger ones know our language better they show less intimacy. The missionaries have helped us and yet we are not self-reliant. Many missionaries operate on paternalistic lines when identifying the beneficiaries of their schemes. Sometimes they give more importance to running institutions than to the people for whom the institutions are meant.

### **What if the missionaries close their missions?**

Some of the tribal responses to the above question were: If the missionaries closed the missions our children will suffer in their education. Our health will suffer. Our religion will suffer. Mission is in our hearts. We did not accept religion for material gains. We will manage on our own. But some said that if mission stops, religion will stop and the developmental activities will also go away. The missionaries provide us listening ears to our woes and empathise with us. This gives us dignity, which no one gives. Since others stated that by becoming Christians their vices like drinking and smoking are under control. With drinking gone their family life has improved and there is better economic wellbeing too. Their houses are clean, they dress clean, and their behaviour has improved. The lifestyle has changed for the better. There is peace in the house and less violence on women. If the mission stops then they might revert to an older lifestyle and habits. A few also said that in the past the missions gave education, housing, etc., free but it is no longer so. Therefore it does not matter if they close down.

### **Observations on the second phase**

The Catholic missionaries were one of the many agencies working among tribals. The tribals had to negotiate with many competing agencies. Many Gandhian organizations and Hindu religious sects were instrumental in Hinduising the tribals. The Gandhians spread puritanism along with their service to the tribals. Most of the Hindu sects like Moksha Margis and Sat Kevals preached tee-totalism, taking daily morning purificatory bath, not eating meat but subscribing to vegetarianism and so on. The Hindu rightists were awakened after the missionaries who worked for the tribals in inaccessible areas of jungles. Later the Hindu rightist organizations crept



in gradually to nullify or counter the work of the missionaries and reconvert the tribals. They started dispensaries and ashram schools to win back the tribals. Hindutva organizations had begun giving service delivery to the tribals along with their agenda of Hinduising the tribals. Another significant aspect which emerges is that:

the work of the missionaries among the exploited tribals was a pain in the eye for the non-tribal vested interests such as shopkeepers, moneylenders and landlords because the doormat (the tribals) from under their feet was pulled by the missionaries. The realization that the booty was slipping out of their hands dawned on them. They invented overt and covert ways of harassing the missionaries. The Hindutva organizations further mobilized the police, the government bureaucracy and politicians against the missionaries (Lobo 1991:46).

It is fashionable not only for Hindutvavadis to discredit the missionaries but also for academicians and scholars. For instance, a noted scholar writing on the tribal situation in Gujarat (Lal 1999:80) hardly mentions the missionaries among the voluntary organizations stimulating and guiding social change among tribals. He mentions a whole list from Mahatma Gandhi, A.V. Thakkar, Jugat Ram Dave, Bhil Seva Mandal, Rani Paraj Seva Mandal, Arch Vahini, SEWA, Bhartiya Agro-Industries Federation, Sad Guru Seva Sangh, and Adivasi Seva Samiti.

The Catholic missionaries took a gradualist approach to religious conversion. On the contrary barring a few who were conversion oriented, most missionaries were development oriented. Conversions if any were a matter of a slow process after due reflection and deliberation from the tribal. Conversion was not tied to or linked to the development, relief or material interests. Developmental projects, education, health were open for all tribals. Certainly there were some conversions but one cannot speak of mass conversions.

### **The third phase (1980-) evangelical missions**

A number of modern Pentecostal Protestant sects such as Alleluias, Pavitra Atmas, and Gospel Church Unionists have been sweeping the tribal areas with their brand of evangelism. Most of this new brand of missionaries was from South India. They did not believe in a 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.

Sects tap a crucial vein in the corpus of popular ideas, viz., those that relate to afflictions, sickness, misfortunes and calamities and a way to overcome them. Sectarianism supplies an oversimplified picture of a complex situation. For instance, it acknowledges that misfortune is brought about by a host of evil forces or agents who are employed by Satan and are to be conquered by the power of the Holy Spirit. The gift of healing involves the ability to diagnose the cause of affliction and to prescribe suitable remedies such as fasting, prayer, imbibing such substances as blessed oil, maintaining Bible as talisman, recitation of protective spells and so on. In their charismatic and prayer sessions, the Pentecostalists use the traditional tribal idiom of vibrating as if in a trance, and whipping up frenzy. Some of these sects forbid their followers to consult a physician or doctor and rely solely on healing by the Holy spirit.

Some sectarians 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 like the Adivasis that is going through a period of confusion, especially in the realm of their cognitive sphere, will accept a package that is simple, clear and absolute. Sectarianism appears perhaps to them as an answer to this confusion and anxiety as it reinforces fellowship, fellow-feeling and spontaneity in worship.

Sectarian evangelism affects Catholic missions in a significant way. On the one hand the former are gaining recruits and on the other they are pulling the rug from under the feet of the Catholic missionaries. The latter are not dramatic in their operations or liturgy but pay attention to the all-round development of the tribals, by introducing them to activities and modes of behaviour that are rational, with a liberal interpretation of the scriptures suited to the tribal context. Catholic missionaries show a healthy respect for the native culture. However, the evangelicals emphasize local participation and leadership unlike the Catholic missionaries. This may be one of the reasons why they spread faster than the Catholics. The activities of these evangelicals have attracted the attention of the government. But the government does not easily distinguish between the various types of missionaries. To them all missionaries are the same. So, Catholic missionaries also get smeared by the same brush (Lobo 1991:23-54).

### **Some observations on the third phase**

The evangelical sects began to get a strong response from the tribals especially in Dangs district. In 1961 the Christian population of this district was 654, which was less than one percent of the population. In 1991 there were 7500 Christians- 5 per cent of the whole. Estimates for the late 1990s put the figure at between 15000 to 20000 Christians.

This alarmed the Hindu nationalists who themselves were actively Hinduising the tribals. Conversions to Christianity went diametrically

against the Hindu Rashtra ideology. They countered the missionaries by emulating the missionaries in education, medicine as well as disseminating Hindu culture by building temples, shrines, celebrating Hindu festivals, and reconverting the tribals. The success of the evangelical sects is largely because of the continuous marginalization of the tribals having little hope except in a religious package offered by these sects. The package could divert the attention of people from their miseries and real issues.

The success of these sects can be attributed to the failure of the state and other agencies to reach out to the tribals who were increasingly marginalized year after year. The tribals who lived for centuries in the Dangs are made to feel that they are ill at ease in their own habitat. They are encroachers into the forest land. Their lands are taken away for wild life sanctuaries. They have to migrate for most of the year to the plains and cities for casual labour. In such miserable conditions evangelical sects come and preach a kind of short cut to miseries. 'Pray to Jesus, he will solve your problems.' These sects do not attend to key issues of tribals like land, forest (sanctuary, dams,) unemployment, but preach salvation. Before salvation we need livelihood.

## Discussion

It is a bit difficult to identify the exclusive contribution of missionaries to change among the tribals as there are multiple agencies working among them. We need to work out in a more focused way the missionary impact in specific sectors like education, health, relief, development, social action, legal action, etc. Overall, despite the hard struggle of missionaries, early Protestants and then later Catholics, numerically few tribals have become Christians (0.42%). One cannot on this count say they have been successful. But on many other counts—education, health, development and social justice—they have been successful. It is after the 1980s under the modern evangelical Protestant sects that tribals in pockets like Dangs and its surrounding areas accepted this brand of Christianity in bigger numbers inviting the wrath of Hindu nationalists on a large scale.

When the missionaries run schools for urban middle classes no cry is heard against them but when missionaries start schools for rural tribals then the conversion bogey is raised. The urban middle classes want to appropriate and limit the excellent services of the missionaries to themselves. Missionary schools provide the right ambience for the middle classes to study in English medium for going abroad. It has been a fashion to reduce the missionary contribution only to conversions and give them a bad name and hang them. This comes largely from Hindu nationalists. There are of course those who realize the wider contribution of missionaries in the sector of

education, health, development and of late their efforts to raise social awareness, legal awareness, and their fight for human rights and social justice. This has contributed to ushering in change among the tribals more than merely due to conversions. Indeed the future of the missionary contributions is not in the relief and service mode but in the rights mode.

By focusing on conversions alone the Hindutvavadis want to discredit the missionary contribution to overall change introduced by them through their interventions like education, health, and development. Hindutvavadis have replicated the missionary model in relief and service delivery. But they are unlikely to take to the rights mode. The missionary interventions go diametrically against the Hindutvavadis. Hindutvavad is nothing but resurgence of Brahminism or upper caste interests. These upper caste interests were under threat due to the secular democratic institutions which went against the interests of hierarchically ordered Hindu caste society. Those at the top of the hierarchy had power, privileges, perks, status and honor.

One cannot merely attribute the violence on Christians to these evangelical sects. It is also due to the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) which had no base among the tribals but wanted to get a foothold among Adivasis. After unleashing violence against Christians BJP won more seats in tribal areas for assembly elections. Not that the Congress did much for the tribals. It kept them in poverty and during the last forty years the tribals were increasingly marginalized.

### **Critique of missionaries**

Missionaries were singularly known to have ushered in modernity into India though it was not their primary aim. Modernity was ushered in mainly through education and health activities. Modernity was also ushered in by working on the consciousness of masses by raising their social, legal, and human rights awareness. Fight for social justice had engaged many early Protestant missionaries and then Catholic missionaries. The modern evangelical Protestant sects have little to do with either development, or social justice. They engage in a kind of mumbo jumbo which resonates with the tribals. Hardiman (2002) makes the following observation:

In all this there was a dramatic reversal. Whereas in the past the missionaries had stood for 'civilization', it was now Hindus who accused Christians of being guilty of the latter, by duping credulous 'tribals' into conversion through what they depicted as trickery. It was argued that the missionaries should have confined their medical activities to the practice of 'modern' scientific bio-medicine.

Missionaries in the past fought against superstition while evangelical missionaries are spreading superstition or irrationality by having recourse

to faith, healing and prayer rather than bio-medicine. However, Hindutvatadis fail to distinguish Catholic from Protestant missionaries and from among the Protestant missionaries the earlier main-line churches and the latest, the evangelical sects. They lump them into one. They display their ire on all hues of missionaries.

### **Christianization and Hinduisation**

In Hinduisation or Christianization what the tribal stands to gain or lose is a question one must ponder. What is good for the tribal in his search for identity, cultural autonomy, integral development, without compromising his dignity? What has happened to the Hinduised tribals? There is a well documented case of Dublas, or Halpatis as they are known, who have largely become bonded labourers to the rich Patidar and Anavil Brahmins of South Gujarat. It is a case of a tribe becoming a caste and being placed at the lowest rung of Hindu society. They are the modern untouchables. A few other upwardly mobile tribals also Hinduise after being educated and securing employment in cities. They want to pass off as non-tribals for fear of ridicule from non-tribals. These must be distinguished from the large masses of marginalized tribals.

It is true that there have been and there are different types of missionaries. One cannot throw out the baby with the bathwater. The missionaries have also changed their ideologies and action. The tribal context in which missionaries entered the tribal areas, the interventions at the initial stage and later how they changed—from relief, charities to social work, and development to social action to rights and justice mode. Does Christianization answer the real issues of tribals? The perceptions and views referred to in this paper suggest a partial yes and no.

Sumit Sarkar has commented on the missionary question saying that for the earlier missionary social justice was not the main agenda of the missionaries but a fall out of their craving for conversions. But for the modern day missionary, barring the evangelical sects, social justice and liberation theology has become a key issue. The number of Catholic missionaries killed, murdered or harassed for their work for social justice is on the rise. Sarkar also comments that it is this brand of missionaries that the Sangh Parivar is mortally afraid of and not the converting variety, though their rhetoric is full of anti-conversion.

### **Missionaries and the state**

Missionaries have shifted from a religious ideological stance to a developmental stance...religion to development...conversion to development over the decades. But the state, particularly the BJP in Gujarat, wants them implicated in ideological/religious issues. Christians are 0.42 per cent of

Gujarat and Muslims are 11.5%. And yet Christians are more feared or powerful due to institutional spread. Legal awareness brought about among tribals by missionaries has been threatening to the vested interests including the state. The only way to attack the missionaries is through the ideological way, by implicating them in the conversion racket. It does not matter if the BJP in collusion with the state is actively Hinduising the tribals. The state here has got paranoid about Christians. They have unleashed a hate campaign and violence against them by burning churches 12; vandalizing churches 14; physical attacks 17; harassments of all kinds in the tribal areas of Gujarat during 1997-1999 (Lobo and Macwan 2002:10 ff). The BJP promised an anti-conversion law against the Christians and has enacted the same in 2003. While this may satisfy the gullible masses it will not satisfy the tribals whose issues are not religious but related to livelihood, employment, education, income generation and survival.

### **Conclusion**

For nearly three months we intensely toured the tribal areas of Gujarat, visiting some fifty villages talking to several hundreds of men and women. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, their economic condition spurred by the ecological degradation has increased at least five fold in the last five years. Displacement (direct or indirect) due to dams, quarries, land alienation, deforestation, transfer of resources of tribals to non-tribal hands, has led to ecological degradation and misery for the tribal people. Not only masses of tribals are found unable to find sustenance in their degraded habitat but also their labour is exploited by vested interests. This has led to waves of seasonal migration in tribal areas. Child labour is rampant and on the increase. Attaining the objectives of universal primary education, as promised in the 93<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment, is a far cry. Even child labour in the carpet industry, something that has been declared hazardous, is quite common. Those from the education ministry see the low levels of learning of these children when they come to seek admission in our schools at the secondary level. The average food security of most tribal households from their own crop production has been reduced from 90 days to about 70 days a year. Water has become extremely scarce, thanks to the continuous degradation of forests and the washing away of the top-soil.

The Christian missionaries have dedicated themselves to producing citizens who are secular through their schools. The emphasis they place on developing cognitive skills and a questioning attitude in their students is indeed good. This perhaps is more dangerous than converting a few to Christianity. The Hindutva forces are more worried about the secular education or 'the secularists' than religious conversions. It is to contain their secular character that they are given the label of conversionists. Coming to

conversions, one must reflect seriously if the converts have changed their socio-economic status after conversion. Quite often it remains unchanged. Only a few individuals manage to come up. There is individual mobility and not societal mobility. Religious conversion has helped some of the tribals who were marginalized due to the policies of the state. It is this marginalization that Christians need to fight both at the ideological and empirical level. The BJP government is diverting the minds of Church personnel by engaging them in only religious issues, so that they have no time or interest to empower the tribals in a systematic manner.

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Sardar Patel Institute of Economic and Social Research (SPIER)

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