

## 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.

