HINDUTVA AND THE TRIBAL QUESTION: A STUDY OF THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION IN MADHYA PRADESH 2000 - 2015

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis titled **Hindutva and the Tribal Question: A Study of the Politics of Identity Reconstruction in Madhya Pradesh 2000 – 2015** submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** is the result of original research and has not been previously submitted for any degree to this or any other university.

Anshul Trivedi

CERTIFICATE

We recommend that this thesis may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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Abbreviations

ABVP	Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party
GGP	Gondwana Gana Parishad
JAYS	Jai Adivasi Yuva Shakti
KMCS	Khedoot Mazdoor Chetna Sangath
NBA	Narmada Bachao Andolan
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
VHP	Vishwa Hindu Parishad
VKA	Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram

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1. Introduction

Background

The 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat differed from other communal conflagrations in the past because of two important factors. Firstly, not only were there large numbers of Dalits and Non-Brahmins who took part in the anti-Muslim violence, arson and looting; but interestingly, members of the communities belonging to the Scheduled Tribes were also reported to have been involved in the violence in some cases. Secondly, conventional wisdom states that genocidal violence - which is described by the term "riots" in popular parlance - is a phenomenon which takes place predominantly within urban spaces with a thrust towards processes of individuation, anonymity and rootlessness. Such violence was absent within rural spaces which were characterized by stable power relations and a solidarity of the village community which is informed by relations of interdependence and familiarity. However, in the 2002 carnage, villages in the tribal district of Panchamahal also witnessed violence on Muslims, on a scale which cannot be overlooked (Gupta, 2002).

A report from a temporary relief camp in Halol, Gujarat states that the Muslims themselves claimed that the Bajrang Dal and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) had successfully mobilized the tribal community to inflict horrific violence on them. Of the 32 people convicted for violence in Naroda Patiya by a trial court for the massacre of 97 Muslims, 11 belonged to the Charra community, a formerly nomadic tribe which was denotified as a criminal tribe in the post-independence period and resettled in Ahmedabad (Mukherjee, 2012).

However, a study which analyzed the variations in incidences of violence across 216 towns and villages of Gujarat during the post-Godhra riots has attempted to argue that there was minimal, if any, participation of sections of the tribal population in the violence. They back their claim up by empirically showing that places which had a higher proportion of Dalits and Tribals saw lesser violence on a comparative scale. The violence, according to this study, was less likely in places where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was very strong or very weak but the most likely in places where the BJP faced tough electoral battles (Dhattiwala & Biggs, 2012). However, this approach does not explain how the BJP was able to secure victories in tribal dominated areas from

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where reports of mass violence unleashed by the tribal population had surfaced (Shah A. M., 2003). Even if we were to ignore the participation in violence, the electoral victories can be taken as an obvious indication of some measure of ideological acceptance of Hindutva among the tribes in the affected area.

Moreover, it must be pointed out that this was not the only instance where sections of the tribal population were mobilized as part of an ethnic Hindu identity to unleash violence on the non-Hindu other. Even before the post-Godhra genocide there have been instances of violence. In 1998, 36 Churches and prayer halls were burnt within a week in the Dangs district of Gujarat. These attacks, in which one section of tribal population attacked the other, were carried out to protest the alleged waves of conversions in those districts (Joshi S. , 1999). To get a sense of how important the issue of proselytization is in the ideological and political framework of the forces of Hindutva, it must be pointed out that those attacks were not an isolated episode restricted to Gujarat. In 1999, a Christian preacher Graham Staines was burnt alive along with his children by a Bajrang Dal activist in Odisha, on the pretext of retaliation for converting the tribal population to Christianity (Joshi A. , 2017).

However, whenever such instances occur, they are met either with bewilderment or shock among established academic circles. The mobilization of tribals in the acts of ethnic Hindu violence on the minorities has been met with denial and sought to be explained as acts motivated for reasons other than ideological hegemony of Hindutva.

Devy has tried to explain that sections of tribal population attacked the Muslims not because they believed in the constructs of Hindutva, but because they were made to fight a proxy war on behalf of the local Baniyas or moneylenders. The tribal population, he argues, do not share the same sense of medieval history – the hatred for Babar, destruction of temples by Muslim rulers - as popularized by the RSS; they do not know about Shah Bano either. The only face of Islam that they know is that of the moneylender. The tribal population which has become increasingly pauperized and indebted was merely settling scores with the Muslim moneylenders who had become a symbol of oppression and that too at the behest of Baniyas after considerable amount of coaxing (Devy G. , 2002).

A similar explanation is proffered by Chakraborty, who argues that the neoliberal development model has excluded the Dalits and Adivasis in Gujarat. The tribal

population has been robbed off its sovereign rights to natural resources and pushed further back in to the hills. This dispossession has forced them to the brink of destitution, turning them into pauperized wage labourers. The only resource which ensured their right to life was the Narmada River and when the mega dam project was proposed - which would lead to their displacement and further economic hardship - they organized a sustained protest movement and developed an indigenous critique of the State sponsored development model. In response, the Indian state, in alliance with the landed and business classes, "*used*" the ideology of Hindutva and the bogey of conversion as a countervailing mechanism to keep the secular polity and the subalterns divided and silent, and thereby suppress the people's challenge to the economic policies of the state (Chakraborty, 1999).

Now, it must be pointed out that the overwhelming majority of those killed in the Panchmahals were poor Muslims; they comprised of farm labourers, small cultivators, petty shopkeepers and the like, contradicting Devy's explanation of participation in violence only as a way of settling scores with the Muslim moneylender (Gupta, 2002). Furthermore, other sources attest that neither the tribal population's participation in anti-Muslim ethnic violence is totally unheard of, nor is their participation in many of the mass campaigns of Hindutva – like *Trishul Yatras* - organized by the likes of VHP unheard of. As early as 1990, in the predominantly tribal areas of Surat and Bharuch districts, in as many as 33 villages, there were attacks on isolated Muslim houses by tribals (Yagnik, 1995). It was not only in the context of the mega dam project and the attendant displacement of the tribal population that the forces of Hindutva intervened there; on the contrary, as the above instance shows, the Saffron Brigade has in fact mobilized the tribal population and has been systematically intervening in the tribal discourse from a much longer period of time.

In the face of such evidence, why is there hesitation to accept the participation in and ideological acceptance of the forces of Hindutva among certain sections of the tribal population? There are two reasons for this – firstly, the misapprehension of the contours of the rapidly evolving tribal identity and secondly, mischaracterization of the project of Hindutva by conflating it with Hinduism based on Brahminical observances. This thesis, then is an attempt, to dispel these mischaracterizations with regard to the project of Hindutva and the multiple trajectories of development which the tribal identity is undergoing in a rapidly evolving socio-political and economic setting.

The proposed study aims to understand the strategies of the Hindu Nationalist Movement which have enabled it to popularize the politics of Hindutva – both in the electoral and non – electoral spheres - and expand its social base among the tribal population in the State of Madhya Pradesh and the consequences of the popularization of Hindutva politics among the tribal population.

The 2014 general elections produced one of the biggest political shifts in the last 25 years. The 2019 election results just reconfirmed that what we are witnessing is indeed a tectonic shift in Indian politics. In 2014, the Hindu Nationalists got the most decisive mandate in their favour in independent India's history. While it must be conceded that electoral results are intricately balanced on a number of contingent factors, the massive mandates reflect an increasing and widespread political acceptability of the Hindutva doctrine among all sections of society within India's polity.

In their early phase, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Jana Sangh were identified with the upper caste – upper class interests while the Congress Party, for the most part, enjoyed the support of the Dalit and Tribal electorate of the country. This was especially the case in the tribal dominated districts of Western Madhya Pradesh which was considered a stronghold of the Congress Party (Baviskar, Adivasi Encounters with Hindu Nationalism in MP, 2005). However, since the last two elections the BJP has been able to win electoral contests in this region as indeed in most tribal constituencies of the State. This is part of the larger trend of the overall popularization of Hindu Nationalism in states like Chattisgarh and Jharkhand, which are tribal majority states. Behind these electoral victories – moments - there has been a long term social and political process at the ideological and everyday level carried out by the Sangh Parivar and its affiliated organizations.

Madhya Pradesh has not witnessed major communal riots like Godhra nor was it one of the theatres of bloody communal violence during the time of partition. The State has a tribal population of more than 20% and more than 6% Muslims; thus, it can be said that the State has a heterogeneous population. Therefore, the popularization of Hindutva among the tribal population becomes imperative for maintaining their political hegemony within the state. However, although the RSS has been active and comparatively strong in this region since the time of independence, it is only in the past

two and a half decades that the BJP has emerged as the biggest party in the electoral arena, which had otherwise played second fiddle to the Congress all these years.

The study attempts to understand the Hindu Nationalist Movement's pursuit of power by studying its strategies of popularization of the politics of Hindutva among the tribal population in Madhya Pradesh.

Framing the Debate

There have been predominantly three approaches of conceptualizing the politics of Hindutva. The first approach has attempted to understand the project of Hindutva within the framework of secularism and communalism. This problematization of the Hindutva question within the methodological dyad of secularism – communalism is endorsed by the Liberals and the Marxists.[1]

Neera Chandoke in her recent book, "Rethinking Pluralism, Secularism and Tolerance: Anxieties of Coexistence", provides a lucid liberal diagnosis of the phenomenon (Chandoke, 2019). The basic question animating her argument is how can people with different but deeply-held religious beliefs and worldviews coexist with each other? She argues that the mere presence of formal democracy is an inadequate condition for this to happen; instead, she locates the answer within a politics which entrenches the ideals of pluralism, secularism, tolerance, civility and respect for each other's religious views among the citizenry (Chandoke, 2019).

Chandoke bases her argument on the basic liberal axiom that a good life can only be lived in a good society. However, at the present historical conjuncture we are far away from the society which was envisaged by our founding fathers; on the contrary, given the antipathy particularly towards the Muslim minorities, we are hurtling towards a polity in which there exists an informal apartheid. If we have to avoid this fate, we need to embrace the principle of 'normative pluralism'. The principle of pluralism posits that there is no singular value or truth which explains the world. Hence, in order to coexist

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[1] A section of scholars within the Indian Marxist tradition conceptualize Hindutva as fascism; however, that is taken up later, in detail.

we need to cultivate equal respect for all religions and treat all religious communities equally (Chandoke, 2019).

For Chandoke, religious community or the community of one's birth is to be accorded primacy because it is a constitutive community i.e., a community through which an individual begins to develop an understanding of the world and is provided the values which enable her to coexist in this world. Any harm inflicted upon the constitutive community is to be considered an attack on their personhood and hence, cannot be condoned (Chandoke, 2019).

She argues that in order to for us to move from empirical to normative pluralism we need to uphold the value of secularism. However, the concept of secularism has lost its meaning because it has been forced to perform too many functions within the post-colonial polity ranging from ensuring national integration to gender justice. It needs to be rearticulated within the present context to salvage its meaning and potency (Chandoke, 2019).

The concept of secularism emerged in a very different historical and political context in India as compared to Europe. In Europe, the principle of secularism emerged out of a process of secularization, which in turn, was informed by the struggle for political dominance between the monarchs and the Church authorities on the one hand and the people and the clerical establishment within the overarching framework of the epistemic revolution which challenged the Church's monopoly of knowledge. Rationality and scientific temper began to take hold in the society undermining clerical authority. However, this did not mean that there was a tendency towards atheism; on the contrary, secularization implied the limited function of relegating religion to the private sphere of the individual (Chandoke, 2019).

In contrast, within the Indian context, secularism was adopted by the leaders of the national movement due to the politicization of religion and its overbearing influence on the public sphere which led to the construction of ossified religious identities ultimately resulting in the partition of the country. Hence, secularism, in India was a concord between two communities to ensure amity and unity in the effort of overthrowing the colonial power and then undertaking the onerous task of nation-building (Chandoke, 2019).

Secularism as a value is to be cherished because it is only by upholding it that we can ensure that we avoid episodic violence in society, which is something that most citizens desire and is a pre-requisite for a peaceful life. However, in her framework, secularism is restricted to the sphere of the state while within the society - marked by unprecedented diversity - amicable and respectful relations are to be maintained by the practice of the value of tolerance (Chandoke, 2019).

While such a conception takes issue with those who argue that Hindutva or other forms of communalisms rear their ugly head as a reaction to the imposition of a 'western' concept of secularism - propagating a de-sacralized existence unleashed by modernity - it posits a limited conception of secularism which defines it as a norm of upholding equality among different religious communities. In essence, the fundamental duty of the secular state or the advocates of secularism is to ensure non – discrimination between the two communities (Chandoke, 2019).

This is where Achin Vanaik, in his recent book, "Hindutva Rising: Secular Claims, Communal Realities", fundamentally disagrees with the liberal analysis of secularism and Hindutva and rejects this artificial division between the state and society. Working through the Marxist dictum of the state being a reflection of the interests of the hegemonic social forces within the society, he argues that the primary site of opposition to Hindutva and popularization of secularism has to be within the civil society (Vanaik, Hindutva Rising: Secular Claims, Communal Realities, 2017).

He refuses to characterize the Hindutva movement as fascist but rather describes it as a communal movement. He defines communalism as a process of competitive desecularization which helps to concretize divisions between different religious communities. This paradigm of politics accords the greatest importance to religious identities and encourages competition and conflict between various communities. He traces the emergence of such a politics to the period of 1906 – 09 when the colonial state decided to introduce the policy of representation based on communal identity (Vanaik, Hindutva Rising: Secular Claims, Communal Realities, 2017).

Vanaik, a self-professed advocate of the 'project of modernity', anchors himself within a thick conception of secularism; hence, he defends the classical conception of secularism as a separation of state with religion and secularization not merely as relegation of religion to the private sphere but the decline of the significance of religion

in civil society resulting in the greater secularity of the state. He disagrees with the notion that secularism should be restricted to the realm of the state and argues that this distinction of 'religion as politics' and 'religion as faith' is artificial. In fact, he argues that the seeds of Hindutva or communal politics, in general, are not restricted merely to the political structure but permeate to the religious systems, structures, institutions and elites. Furthermore, in order to counter the politics of Hindutva, he does not prescribe the popularization of tolerance within civil society but rather sustained political mobilizations based on secular nationalism, issues of the working class and consistent propagation of rationalist and scientific ideals within the sphere of the civil society (Vanaik, Hindutva Rising: Secular Claims, Communal Realities, 2017).

Vanaik's theoretical account of Hindutva definitely seems more rigorous, grounded and nuanced than the one proffered by Chandoke as the latter is restricted by the limitations of the 'prescriptive' nature of liberal analysis. His account of modernity as a fundamental disruption and the emphasis on civil society as a primary site for the propagation of Hindutva are important insights. Furthermore, his assertion that the possibility of communal mobilization or identity construction is not external to but immanent within the religious structure is also accurate. Here, it must be pointed out that Vanaik mentions in passing that since independence the RSS has culturally implanted itself within a section of Dalits and Tribals despite its upper caste doctrinal biases; however, he does not explain how is implantation possible without some cultural common ground? He clearly states that his work is an attempt to theoretically grasp the politics of Hindutva and he has not attempted to explain their mobilizing strategies (Vanaik, Hindutva Rising: Secular Claims, Communal Realities, 2017). This is a limitation of both these works. They are both restricted to the theoretical realm and do not attempt to explain its mobilizing strategies or the internal dynamics of Hindutva. Finally, it must be pointed out that most works, including these two, which situate themselves within either the Marxist or Liberal tradition, are ideologically opposed to Hindutva and hence, have a negative assessment of the project. This thesis, on the contrary, attempts to categorically restrict itself to understanding and explaining the project of Hindutva without arriving upon a value judgement on it.

The second major theoretical approach conceptualizes the Hindutva project as "fascism of our times" within the Indian historical, cultural and political context. This view argues that the attempt to construct a homogenized "us" versus "them" narrative -

through pogroms and destruction or defacement of Mosques and Churches – to achieve political ends, constructing a false sense of past greatness and a sentiment of this grandeur being ruined because of the other, a predominantly petty bourgeois base etc. are constituents of the Indian version of fascism (Patnaik, The fascism of our times, 1993).

Another argument on similar lines states that although classical concepts of fascism might not fit in this case, the project of the Sangh Parivar contains what is described as "fascist minimums" of (a) *fascist negations* i.e. anti – liberalism, anti – democracy and anti communism; (b) *generic ideological motifs and goals*, i.e. expansionist foreign policy, subsuming individual autonomy[2], some collective 'other' defined as an enemy, an apocalyptic perception of civilizational crisis; (c) *special and common features of style and organization*, i.e. charismatic leadership, glorification of violence, masculinity etc (Teltumbde, Introduction, 2005).

However, it is difficult to categorize the Sangh Parivar as fascist because, firstly, unlike the classical fascists the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has maintained a deliberate distance from the State and chosen to work within the realm of the civil society; the main ideological thrust of the RSS is towards "character building". Secondly, the organization in the RSS trumps the fascination with the Supreme Leader unlike in classical fascism (Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990's: Strategies of Identity Building, Implantation and Mobilization, 1999).

That there are striking similarities between the themes pursued by the Hindutva groups and the fascist techniques of "otherizing" a community, stereotyping it, invoking a glorious past, cannot be denied. It is also a fact that the earlier leaders of the Hindutva Movement extolled fascist leaders like Mussolini, Hitler. (Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990's: Strategies of Identity Building, Implantation and Mobilization, 1999, pp. 21 - 51)

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[2] Slogans like: "Nation First, Party Second and Self Last", found on the walls in the Maharashtra BJP Headquarter are indicative of the party's individual stance. (Source: "Celebrations at BJP's Maharashtra Headquarters, and the Wait for the Final Tally" from http://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics/celebrations-at-bjps-maharashtra-headquarters-and-the-wait-for-the-final-tally/, accessed: 20/10/2014) The RSS ideology promotes strong self abnegation among its cadres for the sake of the nation.

However, it will not be totally accurate to classify the Hindutva Movement as fascist – in the classical sense anyway - because of three reasons. Firstly, Hindutva as an ideology and a movement developed in response to colonialism. It must be noted that a discourse of civilizational superiority – not always based on facts – was employed by secular nationalists as well. We can find such articulations which invoke a past civilizational greatness and continuity of India in Hind Swaraj by Gandhi and even in the writings of the firm proponent of modernity, Jawaharlal Nehru (Sarkar S. , 1996). It must be pointed out, with regard to Patnaik's argument of a predominantly petty bourgeois base, that almost all political formations in the Indian context are class coalitions with varying degrees of support from the working and the petty bourgeois classes. However, in the Indian context this is not a sufficient condition for characterizing fascism. It must also be added that as per some estimates the trade union of the Sangh Parivar, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) is the biggest trade union in India; indicating a considerable base among the organized Indian working classes as well (Seth, 2020).

Secondly, though the Hindu Nationalists have had a tenuous relationship with the concept of democracy they have not rejected the concept of democracy altogether. While they have criticized the various liberal tenets like minority protections and the western origins of the Constitution, they have chosen to work within these very Constitutional confines and build their movement. As early as the 1930's Savarkar, one of the foremost ideologues of Hindutva, had endorsed the principle of one – man, one – vote.

"*All that an Indian National State can mean is that the Moslem minority in India will have the right to be treated as equal citizens, enjoying equal protection and civic rights in proportion to their population. The Hindu majority will not encroach on the legitimate rights of any non-Hindu minority. But in no case can the Hindu majority resign its right which as a majority it is entitled to exercise under a Democratic and legitimate constitution ... [The Muslims] must remain satisfied with the status they occupy and with the legitimate share of civic and political rights that is their proportionate due… The Hindus want henceforth to be masters themselves in their own house, in their own land.*" (Copland, Crucibles of Hindutva? V. D. Savarkar, the Hindu Mahasabha, and the Indian Princely States, 2007)

The Hindu Nationalists conceive of democracy fundamentally as the rule by the majority, which, according to them, is synonymous with the Hindus. Hence, they have not been opposed to the idea of democracy as majority rule, but have been opposed to special protections for minorities and have used universal language to push forward an exclusionary agenda[3] (Jaffrelot, Hindu Nationalism and Democracy, 2001).

Finally, and most importantly, as pointed out by Jaffrelot, the RSS decided to work within the realm of civil society. The "social" is the most important category in the ideological scheme of the RSS. Prefacing Golwalkar's "We or our nationhood defined", M. S. Aney puts forth the RSS's understanding of culture and nationalism. He emphasizes the distinction between the nation and the state thus: while the State is a political entity, nationality is primarily considered a cultural concept which is only incidentally political. Nationalism is to a social group what personality is to an individual. Nationality is a natural corporate sentiment with diverse manifestations amongst its members. The Nation State thus conceived is an organic whole where linguistic and cultural differences are superficial; they are different parts of the same organism whose "personality" is shaped by Hindutva (Golwalkar, 1939). Culture and nation precede the individual and State power is derivative of social power; towards which the Sangh Parivar aspires. Electoral politics is only one of the many means of furthering their strength. However, even without state power the movement within the society will go on. Therefore, it works through a number of social organizations to popularize Hindutva.

In the classical fascist doctrines, capturing state power and then shaping society through it was given importance. But with the Sangh Parivar the modus operandi is reversed. State power must be a reflection of power within the society. Hence, one can say that although the Sangh Parivar shares the ideological space with the far right, to classify it as fascist would require reworking the concept of fascism itself, because of the primacy accorded to the social in their pursuit of power, a calculated distance from the State and the acceptance – in nominal terms, at least - of liberal principles laid down in the Constitution.

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[3] The BJP proposed to replace the Minorities Commission with the Human Rights Commission, arguing that the former had sowed seeds of divisiveness in the nation.

As the Sangh Parivar has hitherto accepted to operate within the limits of the Constitution - which enables free individuals a bundle of rights and protections and where they are formally free to pursue the good life in accordance with their own beliefs as provided in the Constitution - the political project of the Sangh Parivar, it can be argued, is one of establishing complete ideological and political domination within the Indian polity, predicated on domination within the public sphere through the creation of the "New Hindu Man" which will not be achieved by the State – exclusively - but by society (Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990's: Strategies of Identity Building, Implantation and Mobilization, 1999, p. 60).

There have been various analyses of domination as a concept of power. According to Weber, all social interaction is influenced profoundly by structures of domination. He defines domination as:

"…*the possibility of imposing one's own will upon the behavior of other persons (and) can emerge in the most diverse forms.*" (Weber, 1986)

He goes on to consider that domination can emerge from social relations in a drawing room to a lecture hall; however, he chooses to confine the scope of domination to two forms, lest the concept is rendered useless. The two types of domination that he points out are: (a) Domination by the virtue of a constellation of interests, particularly by virtue of monopoly; and (b) Domination by the virtue of authority, i.e., the power to command and obey. While the former is based upon the influence derived from possession of goods or marketable skills guaranteed in some way and acting upon the conduct of those dominated - who remain formally free and are motivated by the pursuit of their own interests - the latter rests upon the absolute duty to obey, regardless of personal motives or interests (Weber, 1986).

However, as Lukes points out, Weber considers only legitimate forms of domination, i.e., which is recognized by those who are subject to it. He does not have any interest in illegitimate power. For Weber, the existence of domination turns only on the actual presence of the person successfully issuing orders to others (Lukes, 1974). However, this is too rigid a definition to locate domination because power exists as a capacity, and does not necessarily require the exercise of this capacity to assert or manifest itself. Power consists in the capability and responsibility for negatively or positively affecting

the subjective or objective interests of others; these may be influenced by acts of commission as well as omission of the powerful (Lukes, 1974).

Georg Simmel elucidates this point succinctly. The practical function of domination is not so much the exploitation of the other as the mere consciousness of its possibility. Further, the asymmetrical relationship destroys the subordinate's freedom only in the case of direct physical violation; in other cases, this relationship only demands a price for freedom which the subordinate would, if given a choice, not want to pay. Freedom never completely disappears in relations of domination. The worker is formally free to leave the entrepreneur as per his or her contract; however, in practice the worker is at the mercy of the employer (Simmel, 1986).

Many supporters of the Sangh Parivar point out to the complete absence of riots in Gujarat after the post – Godhra riots in 2002. But there is no need of another riot or pogrom as the Muslim minority community there has been shown their place already. The people at the helm of administrative power at the time of riots have not been brought to justice and have, on the contrary, gone on to become much more powerful. The Muslim minorities in Gujarat have had to pay the price of complete and abject subjugation and humiliation in front of the majority for the non – occurrence of riots in the past decade. For example, even after mass violence had ended after the 1993 riots, members of the minority community endured humiliation by being called various expletives on the streets (Veer, 1996). Similar insults were heaped publicly by then CM of Gujarat during the "Gaurav Yatra" who termed relief and rehabilitation camps as "children producing camps"- a reference to the Hindutva political discourse of excessive fertility among the Muslims – and so justified the insufficient efforts to rehabilitate riot victims (Subrahmaniam, 2012).

The idea of a Hindu Rashtra, then, can be understood as the creation of a "homogenous Hindu public sphere" where the minorities are a permanently dominated population both politically and socially. The category of Hindu has nothing to do with the spiritual, metaphysical or theological content under the tenets of Hinduism but is a totally political construction; it is a political category (Deshpande, 2006). It can be argued that the Hindutva Movement is creating new Hindu traditions which are adaptations or modifications of the theological and scriptural principles to suit their agenda for political domination.

The RSS has always obdurately maintained that it is a cultural and not a political organization, but it is, in practice, a political organization. Although it has chosen to operate from within the civil society and kept a distance from the State, its politics can be located in its exertions to construct a homogenous Hindu identity and public sphere, which forges a dominant political majority within the liberal democratic setup. Once a dominant majority is forged, the Muslim or Christian other will be subjected to the twin oppressions of cultural imperialism which consists of rendering the particular perspective of one's own group invisible, stereotyping the other group and establishing the cultural expressions of the dominant group as universal, normal and therefore, unremarkable; and secondly, violence which is defined as a social practice; it is the possibility of a person being under constant threat of being attacked by dominant groups just because of his or her membership of a certain group. While the acts of violence are individual in nature, the social context of these acts, which makes them possible and acceptable, give it a structural form (Young, 1990).

The Sangh Parivar constructs these social contexts - which make desecration of mosques and vandalizing Churches and targeted violence against and humiliation of minorities - acceptable in the public sphere. It has been observed that communal consciousness and ideas of Hindu Nationalism have acquired a commonsense quality – social context - through institutionalized repetition via journalism, textbooks, scholarship and other media (Ludden, 1996).

The monolithic identities – arrayed antagonistically - of the Hindus and Muslims are a myth (Shani, 2007). The creation of a homogenous public sphere requires political intervention on the part of the Sangh Parivar. The creation of this homogenous public is dependent on the twin projects of establishing hegemony within the heterogeneous Hindu social order riddled by caste differentiations, and domination outside of the order, among the minorities, mainly Muslims and Christians. Hegemony requires relatively widespread acceptance of ideas; domination, on the other hand, is characterized by the absence of acceptance. Episodic targeted violence against the minorities performs the function of keeping them dominated, subjugated and insecure. However, building hegemony within the Hindu social order is a long drawn political process which involves reconstruction of history and identities.

The reconversions are also one such process of reconstruction by which the tribal population is inducted in to the Hindu political fold. In fact, the primary task of the Hindu Nationalist Movement is the construction of a Political Hinduism – the new Hindu man - which is developed in response to and in order to counter the semitic religions of Christianity and Islam. As a result, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) have modified the tenets of Sanatan Dharma to construct a semitized Hinduism. The tenets of Sanatan Dharma ordain that one's religion is decided by one's birth. One cannot be a Hindu until one is placed somewhere within the caste hierarchy. However, VHP and VKA have introduced assimilation and absorption which are alien to Sanatan Dharma as methods of propagating Hinduism (Katju, The Politics of Ghar Wapasi, 2015). This has been called as a tactic of emulation and invention of tradition by the Hindu Nationalist Movement (Jaffrelot, Militant Hindus and the Conversion Issue: 1885 - 1990, 2010).

This campaign has its root in the Arya Samaj's Shuddhi Movement of the late 1880's. Shuddhi as a ritual was performed on the upper castes who had been "polluted" by coming in contact with non – Hindus or the so-called lower castes. However, by the late 19th century and early 20th century there had been increasing anxiety among the minority Hindus of Punjab, when censuses revealed that the population of Hindus was decreasing while the population of Christians and Muslims was increasing. The focus of Shuddhi was then turned towards the Dalits to dissuade them from joining the ranks of the Muslims and the Christians. This move was abetted by the granting of separate electorates by the British Raj and the stringent governmental criteria of qualifying as a Hindu: worshipping great Hindu gods, not causing pollution by mere proximity, and being able to enter temples and worship. The question of numbers had become very important. Earlier when the Arya Samaj had "reconverted" Dalits, it had been met with resistance at the hands of the orthodox upper castes which boycotted those who had been converted from outside the Hindu fold. However, the exigencies of the political scenario silenced them. The Shuddhi Movement lost support again by the mid – 1920's and 1930's and the reconversions to Arya Samaj became merely conversions to a sect and not as part of the larger movement of making Hinduism an egalitarian community.

In the post-independence period religious conversion was linked with "denationalization". In the Constituent Assembly, the right to profess, practice and propagate any religion, became a matter of discontent. Opponents of the bill argued that

the right to propagate religion was an anti-Hindu tool in the hands of the Muslims – who were blamed for the partition – and the evangelical Christians which were seen as agents of the empire. However, the article protecting the religious freedom was included in the Constitution notably due to Nehru's advocacy. While the Hindu Nationalists voiced their opposition to conversions to Christianity and Islam, they did not oppose conversions to Sikhism and Buddhism as these were religions which originated in India itself, thereby complying with the twin criteria of Hindutva according to which all those whose matrubhoomi (motherland) and punyabhoomi (holy land) were within India were to be considered Hindus (Jaffrelot, Militant Hindus and the Conversion Issue: 1885 - 1990, 2010). The demand for Jharkhand – which was partially Christianized - was seen by the Hindu Nationalists and a section of the Congress as a movement aimed at cessation from the union abetted by the missionaries, even though the demand was of a separate state within the union (Sundar, Adivasi vs Vanvasi: The Politics of Conversion in Central India, 2006). In order to check the conversion of adherents out of the fold of Hinduism, the VHP was set up with an agenda of Hinduization and anti-semitism with three major tasks for propagation of *dharma*: checking religious conversion to Islam, reconversion to Hinduism and building of strong *samskars* (Katju, Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Indian Politics, 2003). Since then, the issue of religious conversions has become a major political issue nationally.

Conversions out of the fold of Hinduism are hardly a new phenomenon. Guru argues that it was Brahminical Hinduism which formed the major context for Ambedkar's advocacy of conversion to Buddhism. It was a protest by the dominated to reclaim their humanity, since upper caste Hindus failed to develop an internal critique of their religion and restructure it suitably to ensure dignity and equality for all within its fold. He believed that Buddhism was a superior cultural and spiritual force and urged even upper castes to embrace it. The conversion entailed certain basic features, according to Guru; first, it delinked Dalits from the Brahminical moral universe and helped create independent standards by which all human beings and not only Dalits would be judged. Second, conversion enabled to shift the focus from maintaining everyday forms of ritual purity of the body and allowed an individual to fulfill the needs of intellectual self-determination and more importantly self-definition. Thirdly, it was aimed at providing intellectual and moral resources for the poor Dalit masses to break free from the clutches from the brahminical ideology of "karma" or fatalism, which justified

suffering in the present life on the basis of deeds in the past life (Guru, Return to Which Home?, 2015). It was an attempt to create a space where Dalits, primarily, could cultivate their individuality and define themselves. It has also been argued that conversions performed the epistemological function of judging religion in the public order (Wankhede, 2009). In other words, it subjected humiliating sacred impositions to individual reason in order to make the social order more humane. The underlying idea being stressed was one of agency, of actively defining oneself. According to Hindu Nationalists, those who have adopted semitic religions have been cajoled into doing so and need to be brought back in to the Hindu fold. They refuse to accept the agency of those who choose to embrace another faith.

The Tribal Context

In the context of tribes as well, conversions even during the colonial period invariably involved a break from the paternalist relations between the rulers and the subjects; articulating a different identity and being part of a different organizational structure emboldened the tribal population to protest against existing political and economic structure. The tribal identity was fluid and conversion was rooted in agrarian discontent (Sundar, Adivasi vs Vanvasi: The Politics of Conversion in Central India, 2006).

This fluid tribal identity has been subject to a lot of political contestation. The major framework within which the question of tribal identity formation has been understood has been assimilation versus integration. Assimilation entails total fusion and acculturation within the dominant cultural tradition, which refers to Hinduism, in this case. Integration, on the other hand, refers to the incorporation in to the larger society but not at the cost of the tribal identity (Xaxa, State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Post Colonial India, 2008). The category of tribe was a colonial construct and a residual category; the colonial administration defined those communities as tribal which did not practice Hinduism, Christianity or Islam. So, the tribes were peripheral to the larger social setting but always in interaction with the dominant tradition (Xaxa, Politics of Language, Religion and Identity: Tribes in India, 2005).

After independence the state adopted the integrationist approach and argued for preserving the distinct tribal traditions but at the same time removed the animist category for classifying the tribal population. Although there was no official document

or policy on the tribal question, the provisions within the Constitution imply the integrationist approach. The Constitution has provided special provisions for tribal areas, granted autonomy and has provided for reservations to ensure representation. It has provisions for safeguarding and promoting tribal culture and language, and the directive principles of state policy require the State to adopt policies which endeavour to bring tribes closer to the larger society (Xaxa, State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Post Colonial India, 2008).

However, another approach, championed by G. S. Ghurye and endorsed by the State through its Niyogi Commission Report, considers tribes as "backward Hindus". This has also been the position of the Hindu Nationalists, and they have used this report to push through their anti – conversion agenda and target the Christian community. The claim of tribes being Hindus is based on two reasons; first, that the tribes have been influenced by Hinduism and second, they worship nature like the Hindus. While it is true that tribal culture has been influenced by Hinduism - as tribes have been in constant and increasing interaction with the dominant tradition - it cannot be said that they are Hindus because tribal society did not have the same principles of social organization; the hierarchical caste system and its brahminical ideology were absent in their case. Moreover, while it is also correct that Hindus and tribes both worship nature, this is an insufficient basis to characterize the tribes as Hindus because then most tribes in the world would be eligible to be Hindus (Xaxa, Politics of Language, Religion and Identity: Tribes in India, 2005).

The interaction and assimilation or absorption of tribes with Hinduism has been a very long process. This process has been tortuous and far from uniform. Initially tribes were those communities which were considered to exist outside of civilization. However, interactions with the outer world in the form of conquests and colonization, penetration of markets and religious conversions brought the tribes in to the wider ambit of civilization. The three major methods of absorption have been traced back to firstly, adoption of the technology of the Hindu society by the tribes; secondly, absorption under the system of organization of production based on caste because it ensured mutual reciprocity and protected tribes against competition from other castes although it entailed a low status; and thirdly, the process of absorption has been situated in the larger context of state formation which provided the decisive framework for tribal transformation. While the absorption into Hinduism was a process, the conversion to

Christianity was more of an event and entailed change only in the religious aspects of the tribal community while Hinduism transformed all aspects of the social formation (Xaxa, Tribes, Conversion and the Sangh Parivar, 2009).

The organizing principle of Hinduism is caste, so it becomes impossible for a tribe to become a Hindu and still retain the status of a tribe. These are mutually exclusive terms and tribes are defined in opposition to castes. While the turn towards Christianity was in part abetted by colonial government, the reason for tribes to move away from caste and Hinduism was because Hinduism no longer performed the function of protection from competition and ensuring mutual cooperation. On the contrary, it was replaced by domination, subjugation, oppression and exploitation for the tribes, owing to their low status. In contrast the Christian missionaries addressed the issues of domination and subjugation and provided welfare and made the tribal identity pronounced vis-à-vis the Hindu society (Xaxa, Tribes, Conversion and the Sangh Parivar, 2009).

However, today we witness a change in this process. Increasingly the tribal population is embracing Hinduism, its rituals and mythologies and even exhibiting intolerance towards other religions; this turn to Hinduism is mediated through the popularization of Hindutva. While Hinduization of tribal society was a long, gradual, staggered and internal process, the current change is induced by the Hindu Nationalists. However, they refuse to categorize this as proselytisation; they merely call it reawakening of the original cultural ethos. It is argued that this is a conversion to a political ideology and not to a religious ideology (Kumar & Prakash, 2009). However, here it must be pointed out that this turn towards Hindutva includes instrumental use of religion via invented traditions etc.

However, while conversions out of the fold of Hinduism have been explained as acts of protests by the oppressed against subjugation under brahminical hegemony and defining themselves, the reverse phenomenon - that of a large part of the marginalized and "innocent" tribal population and a section of Dalits adopting Hindutva - has been explained in terms of calculated political machinations and traps of the upper castes to maintain their hegemony which are almost conspiratorial in nature (Teltumbde, Introduction, 2005). Communalization of the local context and the otherizing of Muslims or Christians or absence of movements for social justice are other explanations (Wankhede, 2009). While these are definitely important factors in the explanation of

this phenomenon, it is only a partial explanation. If, as Pinto suggests, remaining in the fold of Brahminical Hinduism would entail segregation and humiliation for the Dalits and tribal population and lead to strengthening of brahminical consciousness, and hence, xenophobia (Pinto, 2000), then why are swathes of tribes, particularly, across central India embracing Hindutva?

Another explanation of this phenomenon has been offered within the larger framework of transformation of the tribal society under the influence of colonial modernity and the penetration of the market in the tribal lands through the introduction of capitalism. This approach traces the change to the entrenchment of modern institutions of private property and commercialization of agriculture by the colonial administration as the starting point of this turn. The introduction of private property and the use of the hitherto collectively owned forest resources for commercial purposes broke the tribal social fabric and altered the division of labour. Commercialization led to increasing dispossession and transfer of land to non – tribal hands, while debt bondage and the imposition of exorbitant agrarian rents squeezed them further. In the post-independence period, the utilitarian developmental model exacerbated the process of dispossession among the tribes and further marginalized these communities. Recently, the increasing penetration of the market and debt coupled with general educational backwardness led to massive migration among the tribal community as labourers, ending their cultural isolation and hastening the process of assimilation (Singh K. S., 2009). Along with this, the process of stratification and class formation also took place and broke the lateral filial bonds of tribal society, leading to increasing fragmentation among the tribes (Xaxa, State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Post Colonial India, 2008).

These twin factors - the penetration of the market and internal fragmentation of identity within the larger framework of democratic politics - have been used to explain the increasing turn towards Hindutva in the case of Dalits. Gudavarthy argues that within the Dalit movement there has been a shift in the discourse from "annihilation of caste" to "secularization of caste". The latter seems more achievable and tangible, while the former has been frustrated for more than half a century. Acceptance in the Hindu fold from the erstwhile oppressor and the promise of the anonymity of the market and a share in the growth story are considered more pragmatic ways of achieving status through upward mobility (Gudavarthy, www.thehindu.com, 2014).

He has called this phenomenon of intra-subaltern conflicts as 'secular sectarianism'; it is the sustained failure of various group – based mobilizations to understand viewpoints and the nature of power dynamics and its implications for other groups that has led to a failure to transcend them in order to construct a unified identity to resist the onslaught of Hindutva (Gudavarthy, Secular Sectarianism: Limits of Subaltern Politics, 2020). The failure to understand the popularization of Hindutva emanates out of a fundamental inaccuracy in drawing the ontological map of the Indian society. If we are to understand Hindutva, we need to move beyond the given dichotomies of Communal – Secular, Left – Right, Hindu – Muslim or Brahmin and Non -Brahmin. Given that graded inequality is the fundamental feature of a caste-based society, we need to locate the political articulations and mobilizations at this site. After all, the Hindu identity is internally fragmented and Hindutva aims to unite all the Hindus; its primary task, therefore is to manage the internal contradictions born out of such fragmentation.

The reason why the majority of the oppressed have been unable to unite is because social power is both uneven and unequal; while groups have protested against the injustice meted out to them by those above them due to unequal power relations, they have failed to build solidarities with those situated below. This has led to a sectarian ghettoization where the oppressed groups have replicated existing forms even while adopting a universal moral rhetoric, as there remains an endemic gap between the social and political domains (Gudavarthy, Secular Sectarianism: Limits of Subaltern Politics, 2020). It is this sectarian ghettoization which provides space for the forces of Hindutva to intervene; when transcendence becomes elusive, negotiation for immediate mobility and security becomes a pragmatic option.

Panikkar makes a similar argument, wherein an invitation to become part of the "superior" tradition of Hinduism to the culturally marginalized tribal population - which has lived with a sense of deprivation till now - appears attractive. (Panikkar, Foreword, 2005) On the other hand, fragmentation of identity has created space for the Hindu Nationalists to intervene and use the increasing stratification within the Dalit community to co-opt and pit one caste against the other (Narayan, Facinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilization, 2009).

Of course, Dalits and Tribes constitute different social groups with their attendant specificities. Yet there is a larger point to be made about the secularization of identity

as a means to ensure acceptance, political influence and upward mobility in a democratic setup, especially keeping in mind that other projects of inversion by parties of social justice and accommodation by Congress have borne limited dividends at best.

However, it must also be stressed that Hindu Nationalism's approach towards any issue must always be studied in totality; this includes looking at electoral as well as non-electoral mechanisms. All these are partial explanations of the Hindu Nationalist approach to the tribal question. This becomes very important in the case of Madhya Pradesh, because here the RSS initiatives have resulted in electoral dominance as well. This is not the case, for example, in Kerala, where despite the greatest number of RSS shakhas, the BJP has not been able to open its electoral account.

This study will attempt to study the Hindu nationalist approach to the tribal question within the specificities of the politics of Madhya Pradesh. While the act of conversion outside the fold of Hinduism has been given a lot of analytical attention; the obverse and more widely prevalent phenomenon of acceptance of Hinduism has not been investigated in the same way.

Objectives

The study aims to understand the politics of the Hindu Nationalist Movement with respect to its approach towards the tribal population in the state of Madhya Pradesh.

Research Questions

1) How has the Sangh Parivar popularized the politics of Hindutva and expanded its base amongst the tribal population? What are the narratives and strategies employed by the Hindu Nationalists to forge and popularize a Hindu identity among the tribal population in Madhya Pradesh?
2) What are the consequences of the entrenchment of Hindutva politics among the tribal population? What are the forms of counter-narratives – of adivasi Christians or indigenous ones - to the hinduization of tribal identity?
3) What is the kind of relationship between the tribal mass organizations of the RSS – VKA - and the BJP and the State?
4) If the Hindu fold is humiliating, why do Adivasis adopt the Hindu identity? What is the process by which Hinduization takes place among the Adivasis?

Methodology

The study is based on survey of existing secondary literature on the tribal politics and Hindutva along with field visits to the districts of Jhabua and Alirajpur, spread out over the period of three years between 2018 - 2020. While copious literature is available on the subject of Hindutva and tribal politics, scholarship explaining the politics of this region - especially within the framework of identity formation - is unavailable. To fill this gap, these visits have been supplemented by thematically structured interviews of political and social activists and leaders belonging to various tribal communities, as well as those non-tribal activists and politicians who are important players in the political process in the predominantly tribal belt of Western Madhya Pradesh. The emphasis was on long qualitative interviews in order to understand the various articulations of tribal identity and their view on the discourse of Hindutva; towards this end, 24 long interviews were conducted. Along with these interviews, two events organised by the tribal outfit Jai Adivasi Yuva Shakti - or JAYS – were attended; the Leadership – cum – Workers' Convention held in Bhopal and the JAYS Mahapanchayat held in the Khandwa district of western Madhya Pradesh.

This particular region was chosen because for almost the entire previous decade the tribal belt of western Madhya Pradesh has seen a historic churning in its socio-political landscape. The RSS – BJP has invested heavily in this region while the Congress has enjoyed a historical presence here. The Christian missionaries have also long been active in this region; most importantly, in the past half a decade, this region has witnessed the emergence of JAYS. It is an autonomous tribal organization with massive traction among the tribal youth whose avowed aim is the socio-political assertion of the tribal identity. Therefore, this region has become a theatre of socio-political contestation among all the forces which are important elements in order to understand the approach of Hindutva towards the Tribal Question and its political response as well.

Within the western belt, the districts of Jhabua and Alirajpur were shortlisted because they both are tribal majority districts, and hence the tribal population sets the terms of discourse in these two districts unlike other districts which have a sizeable non-tribal population as well. A brief discussion of the basic socio-economic indicators of both the districts is undertaken in order to sketch a snapshot of the field.

As per the 2011 census, the total population of Jhabua was 1, 025, 248 of which 87% belonged to the Scheduled Tribes while only 1.7% to the Scheduled Castes. The three major tribes of this region are Bhils, Bhilalas and Patliyas; out of these the Bhils constitute the majotrity in Jhabua. The census recorded 91% of the population as belonging to the rural areas while only 9% of the population was urban. The literacy rate was a measly 43.3%. Agriculture is the main occupation in the district; however, the soil has very low fertility and the total irrigated area out of the net sown area is 26.38% (Government of India, 2015).

The district of Alirajpur was carved out of Jhabua in the year 2008. The total population of the district is 7, 28, 999 of which 89% belong to the Scheduled Tribes while Scheduled Castes account for only 3.7% of the population. Bhilalas constitute the majority in this district. The census also notes that the Bhilalas are more 'developed', 'literate' and 'resourceful' when compared to the Bhils. Like Jhabua, this is a predominantly rural district; 92.2% of the district is classified under the rural category while only 7.8% was classified as urban. The literacy rate is lower than even Jhabua at 36.1%. Even here the soil fertility is low and the net irrigated area is only 13.99% of the net sown area (Government of India, 2015).Jhabua

The fact of low agricultural productivity and lack of irrigation must be given special consideration as these two factors lead to less than average productivity forcing a substantial population to work as migrant labourers in the neighbouring cities of Gujarat. This forced economic migration plays a very important role in shaping the political and cultural discourse of the region.

Chapterization

This thesis is divided into five core chapters which are discussed here:

Who is a Hindu? Tracing the Construction of the Modern Hindu Identity

The aim of this chapter is to critically evaluate the various conceptualizations of the project of Hindutva or Hindu Nationalism. It will be argued that Hindutva must be looked at as any other form of identity politics: as a project of hegemonic construction of the Hindu identity. The Hindu identity, like any other identity, is unstable, contested and fragmented. This fact becomes even more important because of the very nature of

the religion and the inherent heterogeneity of traditions which make up the Hindu philosophical or theological order. Like other identities, opposing hegemonic projects attempt to essentialise and fix its meaning for their own political ends. Following this, three major projects of construction of Hindu identity as articulated by Gandhi, Savarkar and Ambedkar would be analyzed.

Who is a Tribal? Situating the Tribal Question

This chapter seeks to situate the tribal question through two objectives: firstly, it attempts an unpacking of the reasons for the conceptual confusions in defining the category of tribe, and tracing how it has evolved over time within the larger discursive context of a mass democracy; and secondly, it aims at bringing to light the dissonance between the sociological definitions and the political imaginations of the category of tribe.

The Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram: Synthesizing Savarkar's Imaginary with Gandhi's Method

This chapter attempts to analyse the major approaches to the phenomenon of conversion; to analyse the historical and ideological roots of the VKA in order to retrace the context of its emergence and interrogate its claims about the widespread conversion to Christianity among the tribes and the various factors which contributed in it. Finally, an attempt will be made to understand the ways in which the VKA operates and propagates its message among the tribal sections.

Hinduization and Construction of the Vanvasi Identity

The most obvious question with regard to Hinduization of tribes that comes up is – If the Hindu fold is perceived to be humiliating for those at the bottom of the hierarchy what explains the increasing acceptance of the Hindu identity among the tribes in the region? This chapter would attempt to answer this question by tracing the discourses which are used to construct the category of the Vanvasi by looking at the larger socio-political processes which have reshaped the Hindu social order making the choice of adopting Hinduism appealing to the tribal population and the overarching political context of this identity formation.

The Politics of Foregrounding the Adivasi Identity

This chapter analyzes the articulation of the Adivasi identity within the context of the fragmented polity of Madhya Pradesh. The Adivasi identity is being asserted most stridently by the Jai Adivasi Yuva Shakti or JAYS, an organization of tribal youth. They have shifted the discourse of tribal politics from resistance to representation by employing the language of rights enshrined in the Constitution. This chapter analyzes their politics and the narratives that they use to construct the Adivasi identity.

2. Who is a Hindu? Tracing the Construction of the Modern Hindu Identity

Introduction

The question, "Who is a Hindu?" and "What does it mean to be a Hindu?" is one of the most important questions of modern Indian history. At the risk of oversimplification, one can say that modern India's political history can be read as a contestation to reshape the Hindu social order and fix the meaning of this term. For long now, the Indian Right has been scorned upon by the mainstream intelligentsia for being intellectually vacuous and shallow. However, the events of the past quarter of a century tell us that while the Hindu Right might not have been able to convince those in the ivory towers of academia, it has persuasively answered this very important question where it matters most – to the people at the grassroots. Aijaz Ahmad perhaps sums it up best, "Their documents are at best turgid and unreadable for the stupidity of their content. Their organizational practices, by contrast, have often been frighteningly brilliant." (Ahmad, India: Liberal Democracy and the Extreme Right, 2015) While the quote above tells us more about the disposition of the mainstream intelligentsia rather than India's Hindu Right's documents; it is a grudging acceptance of the fact that for all its theoretical sophistication, political outfits on the Progressive-Secular end of the spectrum have failed to popularize their ideas among the masses at the scale of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS); the ideological fulcrum of India's Janus-faced right wing.

The aim of this chapter is to critically evaluate the various conceptualizations of the project of Hindutva or Hindu Nationalism. It will be argued that Hindutva must be looked at as any other form of identity politics; as a project of hegemonic construction of the Hindu identity. The Hindu identity, like any other identity, is unstable, contested and fragmented. This fact becomes even more important because of the very nature of the religion and the inherent heterogeneity of traditions which make up the Hindu philosophical or theological order. Like other identities, opposing hegemonic projects attempt to *essentialise* and fix its meaning for their own political ends. Following this, three major projects of construction of Hindu identity as articulated by Gandhi, Savarkar and Ambedkar would be analyzed.

I

The approaches to study Hindutva can be divided into two paradigms. The first paradigm, the Structural Marxist paradigm, defines it as the 'fascism of our times', while the second paradigm looks at it as a project of identity formation. These will be taken up seriatim. Writing in the immediate aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Prabhat Patnaik attempts to argue that communalism is the form that fascism takes in India (Patnaik, The Fascism of Our Times, 1993). This chapter aims at critically retracing these arguments in the discussion that follows.

Hindutva as Fascism of Our Times

Patnaik is acutely aware that he is trying to redefine the concept of fascism in a very different historical and political context; that is why his articulation is marked as much by its exceptions as by its assertions. According to this exposition, the world has changed from the time of "classical fascism" when it was witnessing a global financial crisis, the collapse of the gold standard, massive levels of unemployment in advanced capitalist countries, inter-imperialist rivalries, a serious socialist challenge across the world and an insecure bourgeoisie across the capitalist countries.

However, even though the context is completely different, as the abovementioned conditions do not obtain, he asserts, Hindutva as a movement is fascist in its ideology, social base, methods and programme. The ideological motifs of Hindutva of pitting a homogenized "us" versus "them", targeting and demonizing a "homogenized" minority identity and blaming it for all the ills of the current conjuncture of the nation, a sense of cultural superiority and the invocation of a golden age which has now been replaced by a deep sense of civilizational crisis, the reinterpretation of history in exclusively these terms and the attempt to overcome the current conjuncture not by a structural transcendence through a radical restructuring of class and power relations but by staying within the existing social order all definitely entail a striking similarity with earlier classical fascist invocations. Patnaik, quite uncharacteristically, goes on to argue that proponents of Hindutva reject evidence and dispassionate rational discourse and can only offer hate rather than a meaningful and a better future. This construction of Hindutva as an articulation of the irrational in opposition to an objective, sanitized,

scientific and reasonable discourse of socialism, which is typical of Marxist scholarship, has its own shortcomings, to which we shall return later.

With regard to tactics or methods he outlines the calculated use of violence, physical threats against opponents, mob violence, spreading rumours, lying, skillful manipulation of the media, symbolism and a knack for planning and executing mass spectacles as characteristically fascist in nature. All these are definitely present within the discourse of the politics of Hindutva. Within the classical Marxist characterization, while fascism is a tool for furthering the class rule of the bourgeoisie within a volatile politico-economic context; it is propelled to power on the back of the support of the petty bourgeoisie. This holds in the Indian context as well, as has been claimed by Patnaik. In India, the support base of Hindutva comprises of shopkeepers, traders, white collar workers, government officials and the salariat while excluding the bulk of the rural poor (Patnaik, The Fascism of Our Times, 1993).

Ideological incoherence and inconsistency, a deliberate obfuscation or 'vagueness' of ideological and political positions is the final and vital feature of fascism as pointed by Patnaik. He claims that the promises of fascism as a mass movement and the policies of fascism in power are poles apart. For example, historically while fascists employed the categories of "workers" and "socialism", fascism ruthlessly smashed the workers' movement everywhere it came to power. Even the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been regularly changing its *weltanchauung* (its view of the world or guiding philosophy). From Gandhian Socialism in the decade of the eighties, to the welcoming of liberalization in the decade of the nineties, to the adoption of unabashed neoliberalism in the twenty-first century (Patnaik, The Fascism of Our Times, 1993). This assertion, *prima facie*, is true.

While classical fascism emerged as a result of a global capitalist crisis during the interwar period, the circumstances of the rise of Hindutva are completely different. Patnaik concedes that while the implementation of the Mandal Report would have been the trigger for the rise of Hindutva, there was no immediate economic crisis that formed the context of its rise but it was *a protracted process*. However, the larger context, in which it emerges is the fall of the Soviet Union and the failure of "nation building" (Patnaik, The Fascism of Our Times, 1993). These two observations are two of the most important and useful insights that one can take away from his analysis of Hindutva.

The fall of Soviet Union had profound ideological consequences for global political discourse. First, it cast a huge shadow on the legitimacy of the universal socialist claims. Second, the defeat of the Soviet Union resulted in boosting Islamic fundamentalism across Central Asia; thereby, leading to a fillip to its Hindu counterpart as well. Third, it served the important purpose of re-casting the "Muslim" as the new other of imperialism, which reinforced and complimented the narrative of Hindutva (Patnaik, The Fascism of Our Times, 1993).

Secondly, and more importantly, he locates the rise of Hindutva in the failure of the project of nation-building. According to his assertion, fascism in India came about through a protracted process. He argues that the economic stagnation due to incomplete land reforms and stunted industrialization created a large pool of unemployed, underemployed and impoverished mass of people. They were a reservoir of discontent; people ready to be mobilized by the Hindu Right (Patnaik, The Fascism of Our Times, 1993).

The primary lacuna in this argument is that Patnaik is outlining necessary but insufficient conditions to redefine the concept of fascism and apply it to Hindutva in the Indian context. This shortcoming is not unique to Patnaik as has been observed by Vanaik. He argues that there is little or no consensus defining what are called "fascist minimums" across the political spectrum. This becomes all the more difficult when, as has been pointed out earlier, a phenomenon which dominated the interwar period but then was provisionally defeated has to be re-theorized in a completely different setting (Vanaik, Situating the Threat of Hindu Nationalism: The Problems with Fascist Paradigm, 1994). It is akin to the difficulty that crops up when one has to employ an old language to describe a new reality which is taking shape (Kaviraj, The Trajectories of the Indian State, 2010). In that case theorists have to force old concepts to do the new work in the new context and they invariably come up short.

What is constructed as the ideological scaffolding of fascism – a creation of a homogenized us versus them narrative, reinterpretation of all history in such terms and wresting power within the existing structure without the attempt to transcend it can be used for describing *all* identity-based mobilizations in general and religious mobilizations in particular. Similarly, his assessment that Hindutva's social base consists of shopkeepers, traders, white collar workers, government officials and the

salariat while excluding the rural poor, is inaccurate. Firstly, it is a broader class coalition which has a base across all classes. For example, the Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), the trade union affiliated to the RSS is the biggest registered trade union in the country (Seth, 2020). Secondly, almost all electoral and political formations in India have a multiclass base; while many of these motifs, for instance, might neatly fit in to the Dalit-Bahujan or Muslim political narrative and mobilization within the Indian context. They form an umbrella of generic traits insufficient for the characterization of a phenomenon as fascism. Thus, redefinition of fascism in these terms renders the concept too vague for analytical purposes.

While the fulcrum of the Marxist approach towards fascism, according to Vanaik, lies in the economic function it performs along with the fragile class relations that make the fascist option available and its success possible (Vanaik, Situating the Threat of Hindu Nationalism: The Problems with Fascist Paradigm, 1994). This privileging of the economic over the ideological, cultural or political aspects is quite apparent in Patnaik's argument as well. This becomes apparent when he claims that Hindu Nationalists have not been consistent in their ideological articulations or that they lack a coherent programme because they have changed their economic doctrine frequently from advocating Gandhian Socialism and Swadeshi to endorsing neoliberalism today. Here, he has mistaken the economic component of their programme to signify their entire political-ideological project. However, one can argue that the economic doctrine is merely a part of their larger project of constructing the Hindu Rashtra. In this pursuit, the Sangh Parivar has been steadfast, unequivocal and unabashed since the very start.

Furthermore, two theoretical limitations need to be engaged with. First, his assertion that the proponents of Hindutva are irrational and lack ideological coherence, are symptomatic of what Laclau calls the, 'lack of ontological tools available to political analysis' (Laclau, On Populist Reason, 2005). This is because Patnaik's assessment of Hindutva, suffers from a certain economic reductionism; where all social phenomena, in the last instance, are reduced to the economic contradictions within the given context. One can argue that this is a common feature within the Marxist paradigm while explaining Hindutva. hey are either plagued by a certain economic reductionism as mentioned above or by epiphenomenalism – which treats the superstructure or non-economic factors such as ideology as merely "effects" of the base with no specificity of their own (Torfing, 1999). Even if Patnaik does not reduce the entire explanation to

the economy, this approach definitely privileges the economic aspects over the political and cultural aspects. What about the *protracted process*, to which he alludes in passing, which led to the entrenchment of Hindutva in the polity?

Such theoretical limitations appear in Ahmad's otherwise incisive and richer analysis of Hindutva. Ahmad employs insights from Gramsci's framework to analyze the Hindutva project as a *process* establishing hegemony within the civil society. Using this framework, he is able to draw parallels between the development of fascism in Italy and India. He bases his argument on the premise that fascism is a result of the overlap between the economic structure and social history and the culture of fascism is the historical condensation of that *structure* (Ahmad, Fascism and National Culture: Reading Gramsci in the Days of Hindutva, 1993). While drawing these parallels, he argues that fascism can become a hegemonic force within semi-industrialized societies which have inherited powerful traditions of classicism, cultural conservatism, authoritarian religiosity and in countries which have failed to bring about revolutionary restructuring of the cultural life and redistribution of economic resources (Ahmad, Culture, Community, Nation: On the Ruins of Ayodhya, 1993).

Italy, in its long history, despite waves of Renaissance, Reformation or Risorgimento, could not consolidate and unify itself culturally, linguistically or politically. It failed to establish a secular culture free of the Vatican's influence. Similarly, in India, although Brahminism could not constitute itself into a Unified Church; nevertheless, its hegemony was never completely overhauled despite waves of religious and social reform movements which remained regional and could never gain a national character. As a result, India remained fragmented and could not constitute itself into a nation with a shared culture or language nor was it politically unified. Sanskrit remained the language of the Brahminical elite, while Latin performed that role in Italy. The mass linguistic idioms were various forms of vernaculars. On the economic front, inequalities were reinforced by skewed landholdings. In both these countries, language or the idea of a nation could not become the "unifying cement" (Ahmad, Fascism and National Culture: Reading Gramsci in the Days of Hindutva, 1993). It is here that a certain construction of cultural nationalism or Hindutva played the role of "unifying cement".

Ahmad conceptualizes Hindutva as a socio-economic and political process of establishing hegemony. He argues that the project of Hindutva is not only one of

minority-baiting but has an ambition much grander and totalitarian in scope. It aims at re-ordering and redefining Hinduism into a syndicated, monolithic, telegenic and aggressive form which is part Brahminical and part-plebeian (Ahmad, Culture, Community, Nation: On the Ruins of Ayodhya, 1993).

However, even though Ahmed, takes into consideration the important factor of the process of identity construction which is missing in Patanik's formulation; even he falls prey to the folly of privileging a certain economic determinism. The following illustration would assist in clarifying the point:

"*The Marxist idea of determination of the superstructure by the structure ... does not mean a direct reflection ... but simply that the structure serves as the condition of possibility and a limiting horizon for all superstructural development... Gramsci's emphasis here is obviously taken from Marx's famous formulation that the fundamental contestations in society do have their roots in the economic structure but they are fought out in such superstructures as politics, law, culture and morality – even religion... Any real acceptance of this formulation requires then the organization of the collective human agency which addresses the linkages between moral reform and the transformations of material life – a linkage for which the term in classical Marxism is 'class struggle'.*" (Ahmad, Fascism and National Culture: Reading Gramsci in the Days of Hindutva, 1993)

While attempting to evade a deterministic strain, much like Althusser's refrain of the 'lonely last instance never arriving', Ahmad, nevertheless ends up upholding the superficial dichotomy of base and superstructure in which the economy "structures" if not "determines" the superstructural "effect" while itself escaping structuration. It then subsumes linkages between moral reform and transformations of material life within and among other superstructural struggles under the category of "class struggle".

Ahmad is employing a false dichotomy between morals and 'material' transformations. In other words, the 'material' is confused with the economic while morals are restricted to the realm of ideas and thus to the superstructure. However, especially within the Indian context this is a problematic formulation as has been pointed out by Ambedkar. Ambedkar argues that an obverse relation holds in the Indian context. According to him, in a caste-based society, the superstructure directs the base rather than the other way round. Such formulations which employ the base/superstructure dichotomy end up

reinforcing the ontological and political primacy of class take away from the importance of considering the non-class ideological elements and processes in operation (Barrett, 1994).

Most importantly this approach only focuses on the external dynamic of Hindutva, that is, its response to the Muslim and Christian minorities, which is characterized by domination, violence and exclusion. In this process, it misses out the equally important internal dynamic of Hindutva, which is, its response to the contestation within the Hindu social order. For Hindutva, the Muslim is the *significant other* whereas the Dalit is the *insignificant other*; while the former needs to be dominated, the latter needs to be included or assimilated (Guru, Rejection of Rejection: Foregrounding Self Respect, 2009). Both these processes need to be analyzed together to understand the political project of Hindutva.

It cannot be denied that early proponents and ideologues of Hindutva were fascinated by the fascist upheavals in Italy and later in Germany. They drew upon works of European writers like Bluntschli and Mazzini to critique the universalist notion of territorial Nationalism based on a social contract which was being advocated by the Congress and develop their own ideas of an ethnic nationalism; where cultural belonging was the pre-eminent element. Culture, in this discourse, is not constructed and renegotiated but is a given. Hence, there is no possibility of an individual opting out of that culture. Both Golwalkar and Savarkar wrote approvingly of Germany's acts of imperial aggression and its invocation of race pride and even the resultant purging of minorities with whom differences were deemed incommensurable (Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990's: Strategies of Identity Building, Implantation and Mobilization, 1999).

Another dimension which resembles interwar fascist formations is the organizational principle and practices of the RSS. The organization of the RSS is not structured on democratic principles of accountability and transparency (Ahmad, Culture, Community, Nation: On the Ruins of Ayodhya, 1993). The head of the organization or the *Sarsanghchalak* is nominated in a closed-door meeting and not elected. In the case of a conflict of opinion; consensus building is encouraged rather than voting. The paramilitary style of the organization has also led to comparisons with fascist formations (Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the

1990's: Strategies of Identity Building, Implantation and Mobilization, 1999). Sangh cadres are trained in physical combat and members of its extra-parliamentary wing have been involved in violence and intimidation bearing a striking resemblance to fascist stormtroopers.

However, by the time Hindu Nationalists made contacts with European fascists, the RSS had already taken shape. It can be surmised that organizational practices such as nominating instead of electing the chief might be drawn more from various Hindu sects rather than from fascist organizations. Although, organizational decision-making is not democratic, it must be stressed that charisma is not the basis of authority of the leader and even after his ascension to the office of Sarsanghchalak, the basic framework of the organization remains unaffected. The cadres of the RSS pay their respect not to a leader but to the *Bhagwa Dhwaj* or the Saffron Flag (Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990's: Strategies of Identity Building, Implantation and Mobilization, 1999).

Secondly, and more importantly, the RSS and the BJP have never disavowed or rejected the tenets of liberal democracy (Ahmad, India: Liberal Democracy and the Extreme Right, 2015). Over the course of decades, the BJP has gained and relinquished power, at various levels of government by peacefully respecting electoral mandates.

The Hindu Nationalists conceive of democracy fundamentally as the rule by the majority; that is the Hindus. Hence, they have not been opposed to the idea of democracy, but have been opposed to special protections for minorities and have used universal language to push forward an exclusionary agenda[4] (Jaffrelot, Hindu Nationalism and Democracy, 2001). The objective is to construct a permanent majority; therefore, while they have criticized various liberal tenets like minority protections and the "western" origins of the Constitution, they have chosen to work within these very Constitutional confines and build their movement. As early as the 1930's, Savarkar, one of the foremost ideologues of Hindutva, had endorsed the principle of one – man, one – vote:

"*All that an Indian National State can mean is that the Moslem minority in India will have the right to be treated as equal citizens, enjoying equal protection and civic rights*

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[4] The BJP proposed to replace the Minorities Commission with the Human Rights Commission, arguing that the former had sowed seeds of divisiveness in the nation.

in proportion to their population. The Hindu majority will not encroach on the legitimate rights of any non-Hindu minority. But in no case can the Hindu majority resign its right which as a majority it is entitled to exercise under a Democratic and legitimate constitution ... [The Muslims] must remain satisfied with the status they occupy and with the legitimate share of civic and political rights that is their proportionate due... The Hindus want henceforth to be masters themselves in their own house, in their own land." (Copland, Crucibles of Hindutva? V. D. Savarkar, the Hindu Mahasabha, and the Indian Princely States, 2007)

Finally, and most importantly, as pointed out by Jaffrelot, in the classical fascist doctrines capturing state power and then shaping society through it was given importance. But, with the Sangh Parivar, the modus operandi is reversed. State power must be a reflection of power within the society. Hence, the RSS decided to work within the realm of civil society. The "social" is the most important category in the ideological scheme of things for the Sangh. Prefacing Golwalkar's, "We or Our Nationhood Defined", M. S. Aney puts forth the RSS's understanding of culture and nationalism (Golwalkar, 1939). He emphasizes on the distinction between the nation and the state. While the State is a political entity, nationality is primarily considered a cultural concept which is only incidentally political. Nationalism is to a social group what personality is to an individual. Nationality is a natural corporate sentiment with diverse manifestations amongst its members. The Nation State thus conceived is an organic whole where linguistic and cultural differences are superficial. They are considered to be different parts of the same organism whose "personality" is shaped by Hindutva (Golwalkar, 1939). In this discourse, culture and nation precede the individual. State power is derivative of social power, towards which the Sangh Parivar aspires. Electoral politics is only one of the many means of furthering their strength. However, even without state power the movement within the society will go on. Therefore, it works through a number of social organizations to popularize Hindutva. The RSS organizes itself horizontally by floating various fronts for almost every imaginable social category - representing gender, childhood, tribes, castes, parliamentary fronts, religious subjectivity. Each category is articulated in their own way giving it a fundamentally different social ontology from all other political formations (Ahmad, Fascism and National Culture: Reading Gramsci in the Days of Hindutva, 1993). Hence, one can say that although the Sangh Parivar shares the ideological space with the far right, to

classify it as fascist would require reworking the concept of fascism itself because of the primacy accorded to the social in their pursuit of power, a calculated distance from State and the acceptance, formally anyway, of liberal principles laid down in the Constitution.

As the Sangh Parivar has hitherto accepted to operate within the limits of the Constitution which enables free individuals a bundle of rights and protections and where they are formally free to pursue the good life in accordance with their own beliefs as provided in the Constitution; the political project of the Sangh Parivar, it must be argued, is one of establishing complete ideological and political hegemony within the Indian polity, predicated on hegemony within the public sphere through the creation of the "New Hindu Man" which will not be achieved by the State – exclusively – but by society (Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990's: Strategies of Identity Building, Implantation and Mobilization, 1999). In other words, it would be more accurate to characterize the Sangh Parivar as a totalitarian political formation which shares a lot of elements of fascism and Hindutva as a project of hegemonic construction of the Hindu identity.

Hindutva as Identity Formation

The other model conceptualizes the project of Hindutva as one of identity construction or the process of building the "New Hindu Man" (Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990's: Strategies of Identity Building, Implantation and Mobilization, 1999). This approach locates the rise of Hindutva in the long process of the formation of Hindu identity. This was a result of the onset of modernity under colonialism, cultural defense of the colonized against the cultural imperialism unleashed by the British Raj and the emergence of nationalism along with processes of modern state formation.

The meaning and origin of the term Hindu and Hinduism have been keenly debated by historians. This is so because of the very nature of Hinduism, which is not based on revelation. It does not have a single prophet, a single book, a singular doctrine, a monotheistic conception of God, an ecclesiastical organization and the idea of

conversion. Rather Vedic, Brahminical, Tantric and Buddhist systems are based on lineage, affiliation, cults and tradition (Jaiswal, 1991). Therefore, the meaning of the term has undergone a vast change and remains ever open to contestation over the course of time.

Hindus, it is argued, were not always a self-conscious community (Madan, 2003). Hinduism could be better described as a nebulously constituted community of communities or sects. The two earliest discourses were Brahminism and Sramanism. The Sramanic tradition included Buddhist, Jain and Ajivika sects. These sects were in constant interaction with each other but had fundamental conflict over ritual practices, beliefs, social norms and organization. While Brahminism was based on the principles of strict ritual observances and hierarchization. The Sramanic sects disavowed rituals such as animal sacrifice etc. These sects, their deities, cults and rituals which had an independent origin – unlike the sects of Semitic religions which are born out of different interpretations of a single text - were either included or excluded within either fold based not only on proximity of ideas and beliefs but also on the basis of socio-economic dynamics and political exigencies of the time. Some sects deliberately challenged rules of commensality, rules of food, drink and sexual taboos so as to challenge Brahminism while other sects which tried to transcend their caste status or caste rules ended up becoming new castes or sects. The heterogeneity in folklore, practices and beliefs is also attested by the varied renditions of the epic Ramayana with changing geographical location. The epic's narrative changed as it interacted with the local contexts. Even within Brahminism there were multiple streams. When there was a conflict between two *Smritis* both were held as law; further emphasizing the absence of any singular theological doctrine (Thapar, 1989). In other words, Hinduism was premised on the principle of orthopraxy and not orthodoxy. Doctrine or ideas were not primary and could be challenged; even the authority of the Vedas and Brahminical rituals could also be challenged – while still remaining within the ambit of what we call Hinduism, however, the rules of conduct had to be strictly followed (Jaiswal, 1991).

It must be noted here that identity formation is never unilateral and always a result of interaction (Jenkins, 2000). It is a process and not a moment. It is based on the dialectic between internal and external moments of identification and it contains both subjective and objective aspects to it (Bilgrami, Notes Towards the Definition of 'Identity', 2006). In other words, it depends on what others think of us or how they define us and what

we think of ourselves. The former can be classified as "categorization" while the latter can be called "group identification". Any actual collectivity possesses both these factors and social identity is a result of the struggle for fixing the content of the identity based on either of these. The subjective aspect or the internal dialectic consists of the agent reflectively endorsing his or her own identity or deeming it to possess an intrinsic value. However, this subjective affirmation is only a necessary but not a sufficient condition of identity formation. Identity crystallizes only through the interaction with the other.

Pre-modern Hinduism had a tendency of ignoring non-Hindu discourses altogether. Normatively, Hinduism is an all-encompassing system in which the 'other' does not exist and is not worthy of interest. Any 'alien' discourse can be included – as different castes or sects – and hence, put in a hierarchy. This characteristic of 'inclusion' along with 'hierarchization' is unique to Hinduism and led to the impossibility of the acknowledgement of the 'other' and in the absence of the 'other' there cannot be a coherent sense of one's own identity either (Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990's: Strategies of Identity Building, Implantation and Mobilization, 1999). This led some to argue that Hinduism was a European construction or invention. By this, it was meant that the British imposed a singular category called Hinduism on a heterogeneous collection of sects, doctrines and customs, while the Hindus themselves did not identify themselves as such (Lorenzen, 1999). However, this would not be an entirely accurate explanation.

The term Hindu, at first, implied an ethno-geographic category rather than a religious category and was employed by the Achaemenid Persians to describe all the people who lived beyond the banks of the river Indus or *Sindhu*, irrespective of religious belief. However, that does not mean that the Hindu identity was bereft of any religious or spiritual content which was only imparted to it in the 19th century. In other words, there was no internal dynamic or reflexive endorsement of their identity. While it is true that the term Hindu was used as an ethno-geographic category, there was a consciousness of a clear difference from the Muslim identity. This was articulated in the works of non-Brahmin poets like Kabir and Ekanath (Lorenzen, 1999). Some historians argue that these poets used the term Hindu to denote the Brahminical castes against which they were raising their voices of protest (Jha, 2007). However, it is important to note that there was a structural similarity among the various rituals practiced by the people in different regions and therefore, there were shared myths and ritual patterns which lent

some unity to a variety of beliefs (Thapar, 1989). In other words, Hinduism existed as a faith-based community and it had marked out a variegated but culturally unified space for itself across India (Madan, 2003). Consequently, to argue that Hinduism was constructed in the nineteenth century would be inaccurate. Nonetheless, we can assert that the nature of Hinduism was rather nebulous and the Hindu identity was fuzzy before the onset of its interaction with modernity.

Colonialism, Modernity and the Hindu Response

The onset of Modernity involves a fundamental discontinuity in history in four very decisive ways; in terms of the pace and scope of change; the nature of modern institutions and entrenchment of reflexivity as an ordering principle of all action and organization is equally impacted. First, the pace of change under the conditions of modernity is rapid when compared to previous eras. It is the most discernible in the technological sphere while permeating to other facets of social life as well. Second, with an advancement of technology, different areas of the globe are brought into contact with each other, which increase the scope of the given change; third, the nature of modern institutions is completely different from those which existed in previous eras. For example, the Nation-State as a social community and its political system is radically new and in complete contrast to what existed in the pre-modern-period. Finally, a characteristic feature of modernity is reflexivity. While reflexivity has been a feature of all human activity; under modernity, it assumes a completely different nature. This is so because under pre-modern conditions, reflexivity is limited to the reinterpretation and clarification of tradition. The past is always much more important than the future under such a mode of reflexivity. However, under modernity, reflexivity is embedded into the very foundations of system reproduction. Now, there is no intrinsic connection between the present and the past. Therefore, to sanction a practice because it is a tradition will not suffice any longer. Thus, tradition has to be reflexively justified keeping in tune with new incoming knowledge. In all cultures, social practices are routinely altered in light of incoming knowledge but only under modernity is this convention applied to all aspects of human life (Giddens, 1990). This is obviously not to argue that traces of the past in the forms of practices, customs and ideas do not survive. On the contrary, it is very important to take account of these survivals; for it is building upon these "traditional survivals" that new forms of articulations and

institutions are imagined as there are no clean breaks in history, however, at the macro level there is a fundamental discontinuity.

Moreover, modernity ushers in the era of disenchantment where God loses his sovereignty over the political realm and people become the primary agents of bringing about political transformation. It lends 'plasticity' to the social world. It is this belief that the social world is malleable and amenable to change, in tune with the collective preferences of the masses, which puts politics at the center stage of history in this era. Moreover, the elites lose their exclusive claim to the field of politics and the masses as agents now struggle against them to take up the mantle of leadership, inaugurating the era of mass politics (Kaviraj, The Trajectories of the Indian State, 2010).

These developments under modernity provide a space and resources for challenging the divinely sanctioned and unchanging social orders of antiquity and reimagining forms of communities. In Europe, modernity, primarily, came about as a result of economic processes and transformations in the capitalist mode of production. Marx describes this process as a result of the juggernaut spurred by the combination of factors such as industrial commodity production, a bourgeoisie in constant search for markets and rapid technological advancement compelling all nations to adopt, even at the pain of extinction, the bourgeois mode of production and thus, creating a world in its own image (Marx & Engels, 1999). However, in India, the traditional elite, failed to traverse an indigenous path to modernity. This was due to the lack of moral capacity within, owing to the complete grip of Brahminical ideology that dominated society. Which then precluded the possibility of subjecting the divinely ordered social realm to rational criticism (Guru, Introduction: Theorizing Humiliation, 2009).

In India, the primary instrument through which modernity was entrenched was the Colonial State. Political processes trumped economic processes as catalysts in facilitating the entrenchment of modernity here. It was in this matrix of onset of modernity under the aegis of colonialism and State formation that this fuzzy faith-based community of pre-modern Hinduism was reflexively reinterpreted and transformed into a well-defined, 'thick' ethno-religious community.

In the Indian context, colonialism marked a radical discontinuity from the past. The new State introduced new legal procedures, new techniques of governance and posed a completely new form of ideological challenge to the traditional Indian society. This in

turn led to the emergence of novel socio-political responses. Each of these developments had a profound impact on the Hindu social order and the nation; therefore, on the Hindu identity.

Colonialism introduced the idea of the sovereignty of the State. This was a novel idea in the Indian context because while earlier avatars of State had performed the traditional functions of defending the realm, fighting and defending themselves against the enemy states; the modern Colonial State's intervention reoriented the State towards society. In other words, it enabled the State to act upon society at an unprecedented scale. Gradually the entrenchment of one of the most centralized and interventionist States in Indian history took place. The unquestioned military might of the British gave a new kind of determinateness to the political territoriality of the Indian subcontinent. With the passage of time, the British acquired more and more territory and more people began to be subjected to similar sets of laws, political and economic processes producing much more discernible and pronounced regional identities and lending territorial identities a fixity which didn't exist before in the same way (Kaviraj, The Trajectories of the Indian State, 2010).

Colonialism dislocated the discourse of pre-modern Hinduism and posed a profound challenge to the traditional Hindu social and religious order. The traditional Hindu society was divided into castes and governed by the ideology of Brahminism. Each caste had a specific role to play and those who were holders of political authority were themselves governed by the rules of the caste order which prevented the possibility of them exercising legislative power over the productive arrangements of society. Their authority was restricted to upholding the injunctions of the caste system but could not alter facets like the caste membership or ritual hierarchies between groups (Kaviraj, The Trajectories of the Indian State, 2010). In other words, the wielders of political authority could only preserve the existing socio-political structure and not modify it as the law was divinely given. Another important aspect was the absence of a State, which in the modern sense, could actively undertake social engineering. However, the intervention of the colonial state fundamentally changed the nature of authority by opening spaces for new political articulations.

There were two features which put British conquest of India apart from other instances of colonialism. The colonial state entered India not all at once through a decisive

conquest but over a long period of time in a staggered fashion. Second, the British colonialists did not settle here but decided to use the sovereignty over India, bestowed by unquestioned military might, towards the end of economic exploitation. As a result, the early colonial state was not very keen to interfere in the 'strange' social habits of the people of this alien land to begin with. Even after a lot of protestations by the Christian missionaries - who had undertaken the task of proselytization with enthusiasm – castigating the colonial state for neglecting their duty of drafting legislations which aide their work, the colonial state decided to follow the policy of as little intervention as possible and practice a certain level of detachment (Kaviraj, The Trajectories of the Indian State, 2010).

However, it was the War of Independence of 1857, which forced a more direct involvement and the contradictions within the logic of the state's own ideological justification for colonizing India that its legal intervention became unavoidable. The earliest ideological justification for colonization was that of restoring a once-great civilization which had now decayed because of despotic forms of governance which the subjects had had to endure. This political failure had turned a once creative society into an 'Asiatic despotism' (Parekh, 1999). This despotism had to be replaced by a 'civil society' through securing life, liberty and property for its subjects and ensuring rule of law by an impartial administration (Parekh, 1999). The colonial state presented itself to be above the society, as a 'neutral' arbiter settling disputes between constantly squabbling groups. This was an essential component of the colonial government's justification for its own perpetuation later on as well. Of course, nothing could be farther from the truth (Pandey, 2006). Finally, the colonial state proffered that the failing was not merely political and administrative but cultural as well. It was the absence of scientific temper and rationality which had arrested the development of India in its march from barbarism to civilization. The predicament mandated not only new forms of government and administration but new ways of life as well. Therefore, the British employed laws as the primary means of political consolidation and social transformation (Parekh, 1999).

After the outbreak of the First War of Independence in the mid-nineteenth century, the colonial state ended its policy of detached administration and economic exploitation and assumed direct and more intimate control and a more interventionist attitude towards the matters of society and polity. They had to balance the imperatives of

governing in tune with the progressive liberal principles of the British establishment in currency by then, while avoiding another socio-political conflict which might precipitate into a full-fledged war, like they had just witnessed. Accordingly, in the post-war period the colonial state supported the legitimizing ideology, culture and customs of the feudal lords that they propped up. However, the already existing legal framework – introduced by the colonial state – had put processes in place which had profound legal, social and political implications. The customary law which was interpreted through the lens of traditional systems of justice lacked the certainty, consistency and uniformity required by the British conception of law. In the place of customary law, the rigid *Shastras* were introduced. The *Dharmashastras* which had nothing to do with laws but were sources for interpreting customs and traditions, turned into a veritable civil code. These changes gave an unusual amount of power to the Brahmins and adversely impacted the fluidity of the social life while reshaping the notions of authority and identity (Parekh, 1999).

On the other hand, the colonial state transformed the polity by introducing principles of liberal jurisprudence ensuring equality before law and making available the language of rights, equality and justice. The institutionalization of rational modes of governance opened up hitherto unavailable spaces for subjecting divine Brahminical doctrines and traditions to criticism based on reason. These changes gave non-Brahmins access to the language of individualism and resources to challenge the moral and legal discourse of Brahminism. This enabled the possibility of mobilizing against its oppressive traditions by invoking liberal notions of justice. The introduction of a Uniform Criminal Code curtailed the authority of the Panchayats which used to adjudicate on many matters, along with the enactment of new laws like the Widows Remarriage Act of 1856 and Castes Disabilities Removal Act of 1850 which eroded caste authority (Teltumbde, The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India's Hidden Apartheid, 2010). As a result, this period saw a lot of heated debates and movements for social reform within the Hindu social order, like the debate on abolishing Sati or for increasing the age of consent in the second half of the nineteenth century. Reformers like Ram Mohun Roy could now appeal to the sense of justice of the courts if the society was unresponsive because for the first time, both those spheres had been separated.

The colonial state, like any modern state, undertook operations of restructuring the society on a massive scale, unlike perhaps any other in the past. One of the ways in

which they went about carrying out these functions was through the process of enumeration. The colonial state needed to intellectually master this alien land which did not always fit within their given conceptual maps. The colonizers had a radically different social ontology of the Indian society when compared to the entrenched individualist, liberal social ontology of their own society. For them, the primary units of social organization in India were not individuals which formed certain impermanent groups but communities of the Hindus and the Muslims which were rigid and indissoluble (Kaviraj, Religion and Identity in India, 1997). They went about the task of enumeration through collecting, classifying, organizing, codifying information about their colonial subjects' diverse and heterogeneous religion, rituals, customs and various social groups or communities to effectively carry out the functions of governance (Parekh, 1999). This technique of governance provided incentives to the subjects to organize themselves into collectivities in order to bargain with the colonial administration because numerical strength became an important factor in such forms of negotiations. As a result, this period saw the emergence of a number of caste associations constituted by the modern educated elites of the respective castes with the aim of acting as pressure groups (Kaviraj, The Trajectories of the Indian State, 2010).

Castes turned out to be the most immediate and most easily accessible identities around which groups organized themselves and articulated their demands. This obviously underlines the salience of caste as a unit of organization in the common consciousness within the Hindu social order. However, another important reason for such a development was the nature of colonial society itself. Colonial policy badly hampered industrial growth, as a result, development of classes and concomitantly class consciousness remained stunted and therefore, class was not the major basis of mobilization. Finally, some basic forms of representation were being introduced in the political and administrative sphere by the colonial government. This altered the nature of authority in society, however, there was no universal suffrage. As a result, representatives were either chosen from above or were self-appointed owing to their class and caste privilege (Ahmad, India: Liberal Democracy and the Extreme Right, 2015).

These factors encouraged mobilization on the basis of either caste or communal identity. The recognition bestowed on these identities by the colonial state also made the hitherto fuzzy and loosely defined communities into more determinate ones. This,

in turn, also reinforced the notion of otherness, on the one hand, with respect to the Muslim community as well as between the Brahmin and Non-Brahmin castes. On the other hand, it reinforced the notion of otherness within the Hindu social order. Modernity interacted with a traditional identity like caste, however, it did not dissolve the pre-modern entity, as was envisaged in the teleological accounts of modernity – creating a world in its own image - but it fundamentally changed the nature of that identity. This had important implications in the overall development of the Hindu identity as it altered the fuzzy faith-based nature of that community to a much more well defined, self-conscious and determinate one.

All these changes in the nature of the Hindu social order brought about by the colonial state's techniques of governance and introduction of new practices of law led to many reform movements and put a question mark over the authentic cultural practices of Hinduism or what constituted the Hindu identity?

II

Cultural Defense and the Construction of the Hindu Nation

Before further discussion on the evolution of the discourse of Hindu identity, a brief excursus, of a Post-Marxist notion of hegemonic identity construction, as explicated by Laclau, to contextualize the argument of a radical reconstruction of the Hindu identity under colonial modernity, is in order.

Giddens argues that due to reflexivity being entrenched under the conditions of modernity, traditions are eroded and lose their uncontested hold over the social formation. Reason, therefore, assumes the most important role as those traditions now have to be justified through its prism. This lends plasticity to the social realm. Two observations need to be made here - first, modernity dislocates the socially sedimented structures – in this case of Hinduism - and thereby, its traditional mechanisms of social reproduction requiring new political acts of identification, articulation and political intervention (Laclau, The Making of Political Identities, 1994). Once the dislocation occurs, nothing remains the same. The defence of the community against its dislocation makes it impossible to repeat something which preceded the dislocatory moment. Even if the political project is one of restoring the previous identity, it has to reinvent that identity (Laclau, On Populist Reason, 2005). Second, with this dislocation, and the emergence of the space for the political articulation and construction of identities, there

is a proliferation of particularistic identities, elements or demands which lead to the fragmentation of the social realm. However, these multiple social identities coexist, Laclau argues, in larger communities which are constructed through the assertion of values which transcend these particular identities (Laclau, The Making of Political Identities, 1994).

All identities – like actions and words – derive their significance or meaning only by the virtue of their difference from other identities within a certain context. A relational complex of such elements or differences comes together to form a discourse which is the primary terrain of the constitution of objectivity. Hegemonic construction of popular identity entails discursively bringing together these disparate elements, identities or demands into a chain of equivalence. This equivalential chain of differences or identities totalizes its meaning through employing an empty signifier – a signifier devoid of any precise content - to fix its meaning and thereby, lending a tenuous closure to the identity. This precarious totality, in turn, only attains an identity which is more than a sum of its differences through a radical exclusion of a certain difference or identity to create an antagonistic frontier. In other words, the harmonious continuity of the social which has been broken leads to the emergence of a gap or a lack; and as a result, fullness of the community is missing. It is only in the process of hegemonic construction and a radical exclusion that the other and the self are defined and a totalization achieved. However, when differences come together to form a chain of equivalence it does not imply that the differences have been done away with; rather those differences are only domesticated while still being operative. There is a constant tension between equivalence and difference and this tension forms the basis of all social identity. Therefore, any identity is prone to be unstable. It is from the series of these particularities that a certain identity from within the chain of equivalences makes a claim of representing the precarious totality; again, reflecting the constant tension between the universal and the particular (Laclau, On Populist Reason, 2005).

Thus, one can argue that reconstructing the Hindu identity became a major cultural-political project due to the modern dislocation of the Hindu discourse in the face of the colonial challenge. From the above discussion, one can conclude that modernity had a twofold impact on the discourse of Hinduism - first, it developed into a more well-defined and tangible community while splintering into - now determinate - caste groups or particular identities. Second, this ensemble of disparate identities was lent a tenuous

closure by the emptying out and reconstruction of the category of "Hinduism". While the nation became the larger community or context and nationalism became the ideological discourse for the transcendence of the plethora of these particular identities or differences that had cropped up as a result of modern practices of governance like enumeration.

Pre-Modern Hinduism had no concept of the 'other' as any difference could be assimilated as long as rules of hierarchy and orthopraxy were followed. Kaviraj argues that the intellectual and political power of European modernity decisively ended the era of "evaluative isolationism"; comparing the ordering principles of one society with the other and coming to judgements became inevitable under such a scenario (Kaviraj, The Trajectories of the Indian State, 2010).

The colonial state adopted a strategy of gradualism, appropriation and conciliation rather than pursuing an aggressive policy of cultural intervention to bring about drastic changes. Even though evangelization was not pursued as aggressively; the activities of the Christian missionaries aimed at evangelical propaganda – particularly because of its association with the officials of the colonial state – had twin impacts. First, they were a powerful contributory factor towards the forging of communitarian bonds – a congealing of the identity - among the Hindus as the fear of the loss of faith became a distinct reality for many (Panikkar, An Agenda For Cultural Action and Other Essays, 2006). At the same time Christian missionaries set up schools which allowed the erstwhile untouchable castes to pursue a modern education which enabled them to break the spell of Brahminical ideology and question the social order further unsettling the Hindu discourse (Teltumbde, The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India's Hidden Apartheid, 2010). This time the alien identity – like all modern communal identities - could not be assimilated within the Hindu discourse as just another difference.

The impact of colonialism as a result was the irretrievable loss of the original identity while a new forced identity was in the process of being formed in response. The colonial state used the tactics of cultural denigration along with cultural hegemonization as a policy (Panikkar, An Agenda For Cultural Action and Other Essays, 2006). The presence of Christianity forced the Hindu intellectuals to defend their religion and its practices in rationalist terms. This forced them to revisit and reconstruct the doctrinal

edifice of the Hindu religion; thereby, fundamentally restructuring it. Moreover, the colonial state recognized the political need for Indian collaboration in the sphere of administration. Therefore, they recruited a section of the modernist elite belonging to the upper castes into lower and mid echelons of bureaucracy (Kaviraj, The Trajectories of the Indian State, 2010). These elites became not only the mediators between the colonialists and the colonized but also became the actual carriers and disseminators of colonial culture. This modernist elite played a decisive role in extending legitimacy to the colonial culture as a desirable goal among the subjects and thus, establishing its hegemony; this modernist elite played a decisive role (Panikkar, An Agenda For Cultural Action and Other Essays, 2006). For example, the political loyalty of the early modernist Bengali elite towards the East India Company was absolute. So much so, that during the First War of Independence in 1857, when most of North India was up in revolt, the Bengali elite was especially demonstrative of its loyalty. However, by the next decade this modernist elite had begun to openly contest the British version of Indian history (Chatterjee, 1995). It was this modernist elite – well versed in the rationalist pedagogy of the British - which performed the twin tasks of mounting a "cultural defence" against the cultural imperialism and denigration by the colonial state as well as the important political task of imagining the Indian nation (Panikkar, An Agenda For Cultural Action and Other Essays, 2006).

I would argue that the three major forms that this cultural defence took can be classified as renegotiation, rejection and revival. However, it must be reiterated that all three streams endorsed major socio-religious reforms and modernization of Hinduism in some form or the other (Chatterjee, 1995).

Renegotiating Hinduism

The stream of renegotiation can be said to be represented by Gandhi. He placed himself within the Sanatani tradition of Hinduism but his conception of the Hindu religion was open, dialogic, ethical and inclusive; in the words of Heredia, it was marked by a radical openness and a basic rootedness. In cultural matters he was an assimilationist; however, that assimilation did not entail cultural erosion of the other, rather it meant a fundamental belief in the validity of truth in all religions and the enrichment of various cultures without losing their identities. He never separated religion from politics but brought a religious ethic to the political domain. For him, religion was a spiritual quest

of the individual to attain salvation (Heredia, Gandhi's Hinduism and Savarkar's Hindutva, 2009). His reformist zeal could be seen in the public campaigns he launched against the practice of untouchability. It was only under his leadership that the Congress took up serious mass campaigns to abolish the practice. Moreover, he supported many temple entry movements like the Vaikkam Satyagraha. All these measures earned him the ire of the upper castes of the society. However, owing to his stress on reinterpretation and renegotiation rather than rejection; his positions on the caste system and the Varna Dharma remained comparatively intransigent. However, over time, his views on the nature of the caste system and Varna Dharma evolved considerably. He wanted a resolution of the problems of caste within the discourse of Hinduism. Although he challenged the structure, he did not attempt to overthrow it (Pantham, Against Untouchability: The Discourses of Gandhi and Ambedkar, 2009).

Rejection of Hinduism

The second form that this cultural defence took was the rejection of the Hindu social order. This stream was represented by Ambedkar. Unlike the upper caste modernist reformers, he had the subject position to understand the problem. He was born into an untouchable caste and therefore, had the subject position to understand the inhumanity and indignities which the Dalits had to face. His political career can be divided into three phases: the first phase sought to reform Hinduism. He wanted the Brahminical society to recognize the demands of dignity of the Dalits. He endorsed various movements like the Temple Entry Movements, the Mahad Satyagraha for laying claim to common resources and the freedom of worship and conscience. His advocacy of non-Brahmin priests and inter-caste marriages were also part of this strategy.

The second phase was marked by the attempt to carve out a distinct political space for the Dalit population as his appeals to reason of the upper castes had fallen on deaf ears. He then sought to employ the power of the State to reshape the society. It was in this phase that he petitioned in the second Round Table Conference. His petition claimed that the nomenclature of "Depressed Classes" was degrading and contemptuous and that it be changed to "Non-Caste-Hindus", "Protestant Hindus" or "Non-Conformist Hindus" (Pantham, Against Untouchability: The Discourses of Gandhi and Ambedkar, 2009).

However, resistance to the Hindu Code Bill made him realize the limitations of this path as well. Therefore, in his last phase, he embarked upon the rejection of the Hindu fold altogether by converting to Buddhism which he had reinterpreted in line with principles of liberty, equality, fraternity, reason, secularity and rights (Rodrigues, Reading Texts and Traditions: The Ambedkar - Gandhi Debate, 2011).

In other words, his attempts at reconstructing the Hindu identity so as to accommodate the difference of Dalit subjectivity within the chain of equivalence which constituted Hinduism being reconstructed failed, due to the principle of graded inequality and hence, graded power. Therefore, through his call to conversion, he attempted to articulate the Dalit identity in opposition to the entire Hindu fold which was hegemonised by Brahminism.

Revivalism as Social Reform and Ideology

The rise of the Hindu Nationalist ideology can be located in the socio-religious reform movements traced back predominantly to the Arya Samaj Movement from the period of 1870 to 1920. To counter the cultural denigration by British colonialists and the evangelical intervention towards proselytization; Arya Samaj under the leadership of Dayanand Saraswati embarked on a two-fold strategy of stigamatization and emulation of the threatening other along with invention of traditions (Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990's: Strategies of Identity Building, Implantation and Mobilization, 1999). As a result of this process, Hinduism and the Hindu identity was fundamentally transformed from a religion of heterogeneous practices and beliefs to an ideology and a tool of political mobilization (Sharma J. , Writing Vivekananda, 2013).

Dayanand Saraswati accepted Western criticisms of Hinduism about forms of worship and the social structure. His task was to defend what he considered to be the essential core of Hinduism. Therefore, his articulation obviously betrays his Brahminical position. His response was to construct a narrative of a mythical Vedic Golden Age, where Hinduism was free from all these deficiencies. According to this narrative, at that time the deity that the Hindus worshipped was in the form of an abstract absolute and the rigid endogamous caste system did not exist. On the contrary, the society was based on the Varna System in which children were sorted according to their capacities. Through this formulation, Dayanand, at once, defended and reformed the hierarchical

and Brahminical structure. Even though he considered Brahmins to be responsible for the development of superstitious beliefs, his alternative social model was largely based on the traditional Brahminical worldview. On the other hand, in order to counter the proselytization of the Christian missionaries, the Arya Samajists reinterpreted the tradition of *Shuddhi* or purification and incorporated it into the pantheon of practices of the Hindu religion. Earlier this ritual was performed only upon individuals belonging to the upper castes who had been polluted due to an "impure" contact of the outcastes. However, now it became an instrument of converting individuals from other faiths into Hinduism (Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990's: Strategies of Identity Building, Implantation and Mobilization, 1999).

The ritual of Shuddhi was now used mainly on the lower castes who had started rejecting the humiliating caste-based Hindu order and converting to Christianity or Islam in the hope for equal and dignified treatment. The nebulousness of the content of the Hindu identity can be gauged from the fact that at the time of the 1891 census, the leadership of the Arya Samaj had called upon its followers to identify themselves as Aryas and not as Hindus. However, all that changed when in 1909, the British in order to curry favour with the Muslim population started granting them certain concessions including the introduction of separate electorates. The importance of numbers and unifying the internal fragmentation and division within the Hindu order was acutely felt. In the context of the proposal of separate electorates to Muslim minorities, the Arya Samajists identified themselves as "Hindus" in the census of 1911 (Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990's: Strategies of Identity Building, Implantation and Mobilization, 1999). This immediate change in identification from an Arya to Hindu, in a matter of two decades, lends support to the argument that though the nature of Hindu identity and religion changed enormously under colonialism; however, it was not something constructed in the 19th century, although a certain sense of difference from Semitic religions like Islam and Christianity already existed.

The Arya Samajist reconstruction of the Hindu social order gave pride of place to language, territory and social structure along with the invocation of certain ethnic pride. These elements formed the essential core of the Hindu Nationalist ideology. Although many reformers had engaged with Hindu traditions, doctrines and practices and reinvented them to redefine the Hindu identity, none had given a theory of the State or

the Nation. Building upon the ideas of the reformers like Dayanand Saraswati and Vivekananda; Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a Marathi Brahmin, gave the most radical and political connotation to the Hindu identity by fusing it explicitly with the definition of the nation. Savarkar was a staunch modernist and an ardent believer in the idea of progress. Hence, he had no patience for traditions or doctrines and believed in refashioning them as per the pragmatic political demands of the day (Sharma J. , Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism, 2003).

According to him, internal fragmentation caused by an excessive emphasis on rituals, multiplicity of beliefs, sects and philosophical systems had divided and weakened the Hindu *race.* This in turn, had led to its enslavement at the hands of first the Muslims and then the British. The need of the hour was to unite the Hindu race with common purpose and personality into a strong Nation. Therefore, he criticized the practice of untouchability which had led them to embrace Islam; the primary other in his formulation. However, his criticism of the hierarchization and humiliation within the system of graded inequality remained within the Arya Samajist framework. He argued that Varna and the caste system had outlived their utility. Thus, he encouraged measures like inter dining and abolition of untouchability. However, he did not disavow the structure itself. Moving one step ahead from the Arya Samjist formulation, he asserted that there was no connection between being a Hindu and accepting the authority of the Vedas. Hindus were, according to him, bound together by common blood, common territory, common culture and common polity. These internal divisions of caste and sect were artificial. In essence, for him, Hindu was an ethno-political category. So, any individual, whose *Punyabhu* or Holy Land and *Pitrabhu* or Fatherland was India, would be called a Hindu. By this definition, even Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists - sects which were formed in express opposition to practices of Brahminical Hinduism - were included in Savarkar's construction of the Hindu identity and were part of the Hindu Rashtra. Only the Muslims and the Christians could never be part of the Nation as they did not meet these two criteria (Sharma J. , Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism, 2003).

In other words, Savarkar articulates the Hindu identity as a chain of equivalences which would include all religious identities informed by Indic religious traditions while radically excluding Muslims and Christians from his imagination of the Nation. Savarkar's definition of the Hindu identity was one of the broadest definitions of the

term. However, rhetorical invocation of common blood and oneness of culture could not make up for the actual hierarchization and humiliation based on the caste system within the Hindu fold. We can, therefore, state that although this was a radical reinterpretation of the Hindu identity, this was essentially informed by Brahminical Hinduism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter tries to study Hindu Nationalism or Hindutva within two broad frameworks. The Structural Marxist framework considers the project of Hindutva as fascism. This is an inadequate approach for two reasons - first, it is very difficult to settle the debate about what constitute fascist minimums. Second, this approach does not throw light at the long process and the internal dynamics of the Hindu fold which have a determinative influence on the project.

Therefore, it would be better to study Hindutva as a form of identity politics. Borrowing Laclau's conception of hegemonic identity construction, one can argue that identities are not fixed and essential but unstable and contingent due to being the site of constant tension between difference and equivalence. Under conditions of modernity, the social attains a certain plasticity which undermines traditions, foregrounds reason and makes the act of articulation indispensable in constructing an identity.

The term Hindu is very imprecise and of a very recent historical origin. It can be looked upon, rather, as an empty signifier, which performed the function of totalizing a disparate bunch of practices and rituals and lent fixity to the discourse. The onset of modernity under the aegis of colonialism dislocated the discourse of Hinduism. The legal, economic and administrative practices turned a diverse and fuzzy identity into a more determinate one. On the cultural front, the isolation of the Hindu discourse was ended with the entrenchment of colonialism and Hindu intellectuals were forced into a dialogue about their own religion and identity like never before. Moreover, colonial modernity had provided a language of rights and individualism and enabled the construction of a powerful internal critique of Brahminical Hinduism by the Dalits.

All these changes in the context forced the modernized elites of the time to come up with a cultural defence of their traditions. This cultural defence took three forms – renegotiation, represented by Gandhi; rejection, represented by Ambedkar and revival, championed by Savarkar.

Various social reform movements had erupted in the second half of the 19th century. The Arya Samaj founded in 1875 reinterpreted Hinduism by employing the technique of stigmatization and emulation of the threatening other and invention of traditions. This fundamentally changed Hinduism from a mere religion to an ideological discourse and a tool for political mobilization. Savarkar built upon the ideological edifice that these movements had bequeathed and emptied out the Hindu identity to enable the most elaborate chain of equivalence by redefining the category of Hindu in ethno-political terms. According to this definition all those who have their Fatherland and Holy land within India would be called Hindus, and they were the rightful rulers of Hindustan.

It is within this framework, that the proponents of Hindutva articulate their politics today where nation, culture, religion and civilizational elements are deployed in the contingent and contextual articulation of the Hindu identity.

3. Who is Tribal? Situating the Tribal Question

I mean it, when I analyse the stench –
To me it makes a lot of sense,
How the Dreadlocked Rasta was a Buffalo Soldier,
And he was taken from Africa, brought to America,
Fightin' on arrival, fightin' for survival...
If you know your history,
Then you would know where you are coming from,
Then you wouldn't have to ask me,
Who the heck do I think I am?

- *Bob Marley*

Introduction

The previous chapter attempted to sketch out the theoretical framework to understand Hindutva as a project of identity formation as opposed to the conventional Marxist formulation terming it as fascism of our times. This approach enables us to interrogate the internal workings of the Hindu fold and thereby, enriches our understanding of Hindutva. In other words, the fountainhead of Hindutva is the internal dialogue which takes place within the Hindu fold and we need to take cognizance of these articulations to understand the project of Hindutva accurately.

There has been a conceptual confusion with regard to the understanding of tribe as a sociological category and as a political identity. The involvement of sections of tribal population in the 2002 Gujarat pogrom and a weak denial of the same by theorists, portraying them as mere pawns in a bigger game, discussed in the introductory chapter, is a case in point. This inaccuracy has crept into our analysis because the dominant conceptualizations of the concept of the tribe do not accurately capture the existing reality of this category in the present context.

The present chapter will attempt to unpack the reasons for the conceptual confusions in defining the meaning of the category of tribe, and trace how it has evolved over time within the larger discursive context, firstly, of colonialism and then of a mass democracy. Accordingly, the chapter has been divided into two parts – the first part deals with the transformation that the tribes underwent due to the gradual transition of sovereign control from local rulers to the colonial state under the British. The second part analyses the transformation of the tribes under the entrenched colonial state, the changes it undergoes owing to its techniques of governmentality and thereafter, under the sovereign Indian State which adopts a democratic Constitution along with a utilitarian model of development in the post – independence era.

I

Sociological Definitions and Political Imaginations of the Tribe

Much of the early sociological theorization of tribes was based on the anthropological categories constructed through colonial scholarship. The idea of a civilization and an outlier was an important element in the context of defining the tribe in this framework. These frames became the theoretical foundation upon which the contours of the emergent tribal identity were debated, most notably by G. S. Ghurye and Verrier Elwin. This came to be known – rather inaccurately - as the debate between the isolation and assimilation of tribes. These debates reflected the underlying tensions and contradictions within the multiple articulations of the tribal identity. Given that Elwin went on to assume the role of an adviser on tribal affairs in Assam or the NEFA region in the Nehru Government and the Christian Missionary Activities Enquiry Committee, more popularly known as the Niyogi Committee Report constituted to examine the activities of Christian missionaries drew heavily on Ghurye's work (Xaxa, State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial india, 2008). It would not be wrong to argue that the debate had a determinative effect on the newly independent Indian State's approach to the tribal question and hence, the articulation of the tribal identity in the post-independence context.

The colonial encounter carried out a double transformation of the tribes - first, the transformation of these tribal communities through their political subordination and secondly, the transformation as a result of the novel techniques of governmentality which led to ossification of these hitherto nebulous categories (Kela, 2012).

The 19th century (1818 – 1907) can be called the period of political subordination and the establishment of colonial domination in tribal heartlands by disarming them and imposing forced sedentarization. The second phase, (1909 onwards) which can be traced to the beginning of the 20th century, was triggered by the decision of the colonial state to grant communal representation to communities. This made numerical strength necessary and unleashed a "politics of demography" which fundamentally reconfigured the tribal identity, which was sought to be rearticulated, by non-tribals mostly, so as to include them in the "Hindu" order within the context of an emergent nationalist movement (Bhukya, 2008). The following section of the chapter engages with such a rearticulation by discussing the political subordination of Bhils under colonial domination.

Phase I: Colonialism and the Political Subordination of the Bhils

Most colonial anthropologists defined tribes in an evolutionary perspective. According to Beteille, this perspective, stresses on the succession of social formations over a long period of time (Beteille, 1986). It regards survivals as anachronisms. While in the West, tribe and civilization could be neatly demarcated from each other and shown to be standing in opposition. In the Indian context, the distinction between the two becomes rather difficult because for the longest time, tribes and civilization have co-existed in India. Therefore, the problem in the Indian context was not one of defining tribes but of identifying them. The problem is further complicated because castes and tribes share many characteristics making it very difficult to distinguish one from the other. For example, there has been the practice of rigid endogamy within both castes and tribes. This is a phenomenon which is explained as a result of the fusion of tribes within the Hindu caste order. Moreover, tribes have been able to establish their own kingdoms. However, the legitimization of their rule required their "Hinduization". This entailed among other things, inducting Brahmin priests along with other occupational groups and with time replicating the structure of caste hierarchy (Beteille, 1986). Furer – Haimendorf argues that this co-existence was possible because of two reasons. Firstly, the lack of any population pressure and secondly, the *advanced* communities did not feel any urge to impose their values on communities which were outside their *civilization* (Furer-Haimendorf, 1977).

In fact, in certain courts, a Bhil was involved in the "Tilak" or coronation ceremony of the new Rajput ruler. The ceremony signified the transfer of authority from the Bhil to the Rajput; and this practice was still alive during colonial times (Kela, 2012). The specific context of India makes the evolutionary approach towards defining tribes entirely inaccurate. However, despite its obvious shortcomings, this approach was still used to define tribes, profoundly impacting policy prescriptions for tribes in the post-colonial period.

There is a dissonance between how the tribals themselves understand the meaning of the word 'tribe' and how others understand it; for them, a tribe denotes a set of people belonging to the same community, irrespective of whether a section of them is listed within the politico-administrative category of the same or not (Xaxa, Formation of the Adivasi\IndigenousPeoples' Identity in India, 2016). However, such politico-administrative definitions are patently insufficient while understanding the political *subjectivity* or self-image of the Bhil community of western Madhya Pradesh and to locate them as political actors in the present. What becomes crucial is to acquaint ourselves with the historical evolution of their identity within the context of the changing political economy - before, during and after the colonial period. Such a historical interrogation problematizes these given anthropological frames of analysis which were, as argued by Chandra, inaccurate readings of the actual socio-political landscape of the time (Chandra U. , 2013). Therefore, in order for us to understand how the Bhil community sees itself today and articulates its identity, such an exercise becomes indispensable.

Thus, one can argue that the historical approach is much more useful to analyse the concept of tribes in the Indian context. This approach restricts itself to a certain space and time and stresses upon the co-existence of different social formations. Here being defined as a tribe becomes a matter of remaining outside the limits of state and civilization for communities, whether by choice or necessity, rather than attaining a definite stage in the evolutionary advance from simple to complex formations (Beteille, 1986).

However, this definition imagines the tribe as something which exists 'outside' of civilization and state. Thereby, enabling the employment of categories of isolation, contact and assimilation in understanding the tribal identity. It must be re-emphasized

that under the populist post-structuralist framework both the state and civilization are part of the discursively constructed totality through the interaction of various identities and sedimented structures.

In the given context of overlapping histories, cultures and traditions along with co-existence between tribes and castes of the Hindu civilization, two important features of sociological distinction between tribes and caste emerge. These sociological differences are definitive territories or homelands and languages (Oommen, 2011). However, markers other than language and territory were employed to define the tribes, both during and after the colonial period. The identification of the tribes has been deeply imbricated in the processes of politics within the overarching framework of a competitive electoral democracy. This makes the subjective articulation of their histories and identities an important tool for us in developing an understanding of them as political actors.

Kela has problematized the very categories of contact and isolation by questioning the nature and degree of both in the pre-colonial period,

"The difficulties of communications in the plains should warn us against easy generalizations about adivasi regions where inhibiting factors bulked so much larger: thicker, more continuous forests, hills and mountains, lack of roads, fear of tribesfolk. Of course cultural contact took place, carried on two legs, but it is impossible to avoid feeling that contemporary scholars make as much a fetish of contact as their predecessors did of isolation." (Kela, 2012)

A simplistic definition of Bhils in terms of contact, assimilation, isolation or their characterization as simple peasant societies, shorn off their specificities, is rather inaccurate. They have always been a diversified group which were separate from the agrarian order yet related to it within the overarching matrix of the political economy of the region. As a result, they had a similar relationship with Hindu cultural practices and beliefs, that is, they were separate yet related to it. We can say that they were at the absolute margins of the discourse of Hinduism during that period of time. Given the diffused nature of Hinduism this interaction influenced tribal societies and many Hindu motifs appeared in their myths and folklores along with prohibitions of commensality and intermarriage. They invited contempt among the upper echelons of the Hindu

society by their food habits which included practices like beef eating, as per John Malcolm, the British administrator in the region (Kela, 2012).

In the pre-colonial period, twin factors of demography and ecology played a determinative role in shaping the various States and the relationship of tribes with them by inhibiting agrarian expansion. Population density remained low during the late medieval period and as a result only the most fertile zones were densely populated. At the time, the political map of most of India could be sketched as a patchwork of regions, isolated nodes of prosperity and settled agriculture surrounded by forests populated by tribes, locked in different degrees of conflict and co-operation with the ruling regime of the region. The incentive for agrarian expansion in the difficult terrains of the hills and forests was rather low because of the plentiful availability of land. The limited coercive capacity of the medieval state also played an important part in ensuring the relative isolation of the tribes during this period. The tribes were more than capable of defending themselves through raiding along with warfare and hence, could not be completely subordinated. The other important factor which enabled a relative separation of the tribes were the dense forests and the difficulty they presented in cultivation. However, within this vast stretch of forests lay pockets of settled cultivation and tracts inhabited by tribes which practised shifting agriculture along with other forms of peasant agriculture (Kela, 2012).

In 1818, the region to the north of the Narmada was divided into numerous small principalities of Alirajpur, Jobat, Jhabua, Ratlam etc. These principalities had Rajput rulers presiding over a predominantly Bhil peasantry. This pattern held in most of western Madhya Pradesh. As stated earlier, Bhils were not a homogeneous group. A snapshot of their heterogeneity is captured in Malcolm's three-fold division of Bhils in the region of Nimar in the first half of the nineteenth century. The first group consisted of the hill dwellers who did not have any permanent dwellings. They were characterized by mobility and were separated from the agrarian order, or rather even hostile to it. The second group is broadly similar to the first except that they lay a greater stress on cultivation and exchange. While the third group of Bhils were those who had 'merged' with the agrarian order. They worked as fieldworkers, village watchmen and were settled in the villages adjoining the forests. These were the fewest in number and had even adopted the language of the cultivators. In Alirajpur and Jhabua, Bhils and Bhilalas formed the overwhelming majority of the population whereas in Dhar,

Badwani and Khargone the non–tribal population made up one – third to half of the total population although they were confined to fertile tracts. However, the level of sedentarization was lesser in Jhabua and Alirajpur and therefore, the Bhils here depended mainly on the forests for their sustenance (Kela, 2012).

Until then the Bhils were loosely embedded in the sovereign structures and exercised a great deal of autonomy. This is borne out by their entitlement to *haks* or customary dues in the form of tolls from roads passing through their territories, tributes in grain and money from the villages in the plains and even from the local courts. These dues symbolized three very important things for the Bhils. First, the dues have been described as a symbol of their political autonomy; second, it was a way to assert their territorial claim and finally, they reaffirmed the status of Bhils as partners in the exercise of sovereign power in the region. The gradual establishment of British rule decisively changed the very nature of the sovereignty exercised and therefore, the relationship of the Bhils with the forests and local elites (Kela, 2012).

The period from 1818 to the end of the century can be read as the period of political disempowerment and forced sedentarization of the Bhil population at the hands of superior colonial forces in collaboration with the local rulers and elites. The British brought entirely new attitudes towards questions of sovereignty, forests, cultivation, land and taxation. For them, the concepts of shared sovereignty with the Bhils or a certain political autonomy secured through mutual understanding with the local elites was incomprehensible. The loose structures of sovereignty increasingly gave way to an absolutist conception. The two fundamental changes which took place with the British take over were the change in the nature of the relationship between Bhils and the local elites and the extension of authority into hitherto forbidden terrain, viz. the hill region where the earlier rulers had only been able to rule through a partnership with the Bhil chieftains. These changes led to an enormous increase in the power of the local elite who collaborated with the colonial powers and tilted the balance in their favour vis-a-vis the Bhils (Kela, 2012).

The colonial officials looked upon Bhils either as a race of people given to violence and looting which had to be suppressed by force or by infantilizing them. This implied that they were capable of reform given that they were subjected to persuasion and punishment in the right measure. This colonial attitude was a result of a decided bias

against the mobile character of the Bhil society although some sections were taking up settled peasant agriculture; and secondly, because of the phenomenon of the intermittent Bhil raids. The raids had been carried out for various reasons like to settle personal scores and to confront those who did not pay the customary dues or *haks*. However, the colonial administrators looked upon raids as rebellions and gave utmost priority for orchestrating violent reprisals against the raids in order to control them. In adopting such attitudes towards the Bhils the colonialists were reinforcing the worldview of the non-tribal elites of the region who were their collaborators (Kela, 2012).

The colonial administration justified its rule through the ideological claims of improvement and protection. It was on these two ideological pillars that all colonial policies stood. While at the local level, like in Alirajpur, they had started to bring changes to laws and regulations that governed the forest use Two comprehensive pieces of legislation which signalled a decisive shift at the pan-India level in this terrain were the Scheduled Districts Act, 1874 and Indian Forests Act, 1878. These Acts identified tracts of forests and by extension the tribes inhabiting them for conservation and protection; while at the same time the colonial state made a concerted effort to root out shifting agriculture as it was deemed to be inimical to forest conservation (Chandra U. , 2013).

A brief perusal of the provisions of these Acts is required to understand the overall trajectory of colonial policy on the tribes before returning to the local setting of Alirajpur and Jhabua where selected measures of these policies had already been introduced with disastrous consequences. According to Guha and Gadgil, for the British the forest was a site of resource extraction and profit while for the tribes, for centuries it had been a site of provision (Guha & Gadgil, State Forestry and Social Conflict in British India, 1989). Above all, colonial forestry was driven by the imperatives of commercial gain. The political dominance of the colonial state and the availability of superior technology at its disposal made completely new modes of resource extraction possible. State management of the forest on this scale had hitherto been unknown in India; while in earlier times, state intervention in forests did take place, it was restricted towards highly specific ends. The Forest Act strictly prohibited the sale or barter of forest produce while allotting a specified quantum of timber and fuel to each family of rights holders. By doing so, the colonial state radically redefined property rights;

altering the system of forest management. It changed the system that was which was earlier geared towards local use and control to that of the profit motive. The other important change was introduced by the way of a concerted opposition against shifting agriculture which tribal communities practised. Improvement, economic extraction through the timber trade and revenue generation through agrarian expansion were the primary motives of the colonial state. Shifting agriculture was inimical to them as the areas cultivated under shifting agriculture were those with the most valuable timber species (Guha & Gadgil, State Forestry and Social Conflict in British India, 1989).

The forced sedentarization of tribal population in the aftermath of the dying away of shifting agriculture had two-fold consequences – firstly, it led to a cultural loss for the tribal population as that form of cultivation lent a distinctive character to these communities which were based on communal labour; secondly, with decreasing access to the forest, the tribal communities were sucked into the vortex of the agrarian economy; into unequal relations with the cultivators and rich peasants of the plains, dependent on and dominated by moneyed classes. In other words, they became agrestic serfs (Guha & Gadgil, State Forestry and Social Conflict in British India, 1989). As a result, in some instances the curbing of shifting agriculture led to violent confrontations between the colonial state and the tightly knit tribal communities. However, this resistance was articulated outside the nationalist movement's discourse. Such confrontations were much more pronounced in areas where non-tribal landlords and moneylenders had come to exercise a dominant influence on the tribal population. The Bastar Rebellion of 1910, is one such example, where a campaign was mounted against *pardeshis* or outsiders, which were the so-called low-caste Hindu cultivators (Guha & Gadgil, State Forestry and Social Conflict in British India, 1989).

A similar denouement of the colonial intervention can be traced in Alirajpur and most of western Madhya Pradesh. In 1869, Alirajpur came under British superintendence and while the king remained the figurehead, the actual policies were devised by the Bhil Agent. This brought about a set of far-reaching changes which led to increasing economic distress for the common peasants and tribal population of the region. The ideology underlying these reforms was to increase revenues even though they did not get used for the betterment of the subjects or for infrastructure projects but was diverted to the ruler's household to cover his personal expenditure (Kela, 2012).

In what might be read as a precursor to the 1878 Act, a tax on forest use was introduced. Forests were declared as state property and sale of bamboo and timber within the state was subjected to a tax, although double the rate was charged from outsiders who came to sell the same items. This regime of taxation under British superintendence carried on for 14 years upending the relations of the tribes with the agrarian market-based order. The necessity to raise money to pay taxes and the limits imposed on resource utilization from the forest made the Bhils dependent on the Baniya and thereby led to increased immiserization. The gradual accretion of grievances due to this new administrative regime triggered a rebellion in 1883. The Bhils raided and laid siege to the treasury demanding the abolition of British superintendence and the reinstatement of the King's rule. They demanded a return to the old regime, where their control of the forests and autonomy both were safeguarded. However, the rebellion was crushed and its leaders Chitu and Bhuwan convicted (Kela, 2012). By the end of the century, shifting agriculture had been curtailed to a large extent and a forced sedentarization and peasantization of the Bhil community increased in the Jhabua and Alirajpur belt. This forced sedentarization brought with it attendant political, economic and cultural changes as well.

A similar rebellion against the paying of taxes led by a Bhil named Bhima was also crushed by the superior military might of the colonial administration in adjoining district of Barwani. What is interesting to note in these instances is the articulation of the Bhil identity or their self-image and their grievances during trials after their capture. From the oral traditions and their testimonies, it can be gleaned that Bhima and his comrade Khajia were considered as functional equivalent of kings and they raided because they were hungry indicating the economic ruin brought about by the colonial regime. Moreover, the songs describe them as poor yet powerful and the local elites as terrified of them. The primary antagonist in the ballads is neither the farmer, the Brahmin or the king but the figure of the Baniya. It is important to note that the bhil chieftains adopted some Hindu practices like Bhima was said to keep a Brahmin boy as a priest and the naiks in one instance avoided a visit by saying that the day was unfavourable and that they had to perform a *pooja* (Kela, 2012).

The forced sedentarization of the Bhil population enhanced the pace of their acculturation. This period also saw the trickling in of Hindu social reformers and Christian missionaries and with them new religious and cultural ideas. Gradually

attempts at tabooing old food habits of Bhils like eating beef became a widespread phenomenon, albeit with limited success, indicating the increased presence of Hindu influence on the Bhils. Similarly, the custom of keeping a long lock of hair at the back of the head among the Bhils was also an import from Hinduism. In the adjoining district of Barwani, the landholding Bhilalas of the plains were the most acculturated, as they had been living in close proximity to the Hindu peasantry for the longest time. It became difficult to distinguish the bhilala tribe from the Hindu castes (Kela, 2012).

This difficulty is shared by Baviskar as well while writing on the politics of Narmada Valley in Alirajpur and Jhabua towards the end of the 20th century; she found it hard to categorize the Bhilalas as either tribes or castes (Baviskar, In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley, 1995). It is believed that the Bhilalas came into existence because of the miscegenation between the Rajput rulers who established their dominance in the area around 1440 and the Bhils who they ousted to take control. Greater cultural interaction with the agrarian society of the plains over a long period of time led to the emergence and entrenchment of the notions of hierarchy, purity and pollution within the Bhilala consciousness, as is borne out by the practice of ranking the Mankars, Bhils and Naikdas below them and following tabboos on intermarriage and commensality with these groups. However, this embrace of Hindu cultural practices was limited as the Bhilalas retained their separate myths of creation. As per their creation myth – Bhilalas, Bhils, Dheds, Chamars and Mankars all come out of the bodily wastes of the original couple Dhedya and Dumbda. The myth prescribes endogamy within these groups but does not hierarchize them; unlike the Hindu myth of the four castes originating from different parts of Bramha's body and thereby, acquiring a certain ritual station (Baviskar, In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley, 1995). Xaxa has called this process as Hinduization and counterposed it to the process of Sanskritization; he argues that while Sanskritization entails moving up the caste hierarchy by emulating those at the top, the tribes have not witnessed an upward mobility in status or even the wholesale adoption of caste hierarchy. Hinduization, refers to the adoption of some of the ideas, values and practices of the dominant community owing to the process of acculturation while not being integrated into the caste structure. This becomes an important point in the context of the Bhils and Bhilalas. They have been characterized as hardly differentiable from

the peasant society with which they co-existed by many anthropologists as well (Xaxa, State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial india, 2008).

<center>II</center>

Phase II: Nationalism, Demographic Politics, Anthropologist-Administrators and the Tribes

The onset of the 20th century and the introduction of the Morley-Minto Reforms inaugurated the phase of the politics of demography. Before the British colonial state entrenched itself in India, a sophisticated and complex literature on castes was already available. Moreover, this literature and discourse was not only in vogue among the intelligentsia of the time but had also penetrated within the masses of the society. However, no such corresponding category of tribe was available before the colonial state's initiatives at obtaining systematic knowledge about the Indian society. At the beginning the British used the categories of tribe and caste interchangeably. However, it was later that markers like geographical isolation and primitive living were added to the list of tribal characteristics.

The colonial encounter and its introduction of demographic politics reshaped the entire political and administrative landscape of India. This profoundly affected various communities including those which later on came to be classified as tribes. The modern tribal identity was shaped as a result of the interaction and contestation of these communities with the modern state. First this interaction and contestation happened under the aegis of colonialism and then under the metanarrative of a developmental democracy which resulted in major changes in their relation with land, forests and in their religious and cultural practices.

The British brought completely novel sets of attitudes, structures and techniques of exercising sovereignty over their colonial subjects. These attitudes evolved out of the larger transformations which took place in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries like the development of the administrative apparatus of the territorial monarchies, the emergence of sets of analyses and forms of knowledge, beginning in the late sixteenth century, which was concerned with the knowledge of the state in all its different elements, dimensions and factors of power which were termed as statistics; this statistical form of knowledge was now applied not at the household or the family, as the basic unit, but at entire populations which had their own dynamics which could now

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be quantified and calculated like death rates, rates of diseases, birth rates, epidemics etc. Population became both the object and subject of power. It is the subject of needs and aspirations and an object in the hands of the government, the thing, on which it acts (Foucault, 1991).

Hereafter, the population was to be the end of government rather than the power of the sovereign; who had been external to the principality he ruled, thus far. This was reflected in the various ideological justifications for colonial rule that the British had to advance like playing a neutral arbiter among constantly squabbling groups and ensuring the revival of a once great civilization by ensuring good governance and the rule of law and more importantly, in the context of the tribals, by civilizing the savages and thereby protecting them and improving them at the same time (Chandra U. , 2013).

The colonial encounter posed profound ideological challenges to the Hindu social order by ending the intellectual isolation of Hinduism and forced the elites to encounter a rational critique of their religious and cultural practices along with normative philosophical claims from which they were derived.; In an attempt to develop their own responses to these challenges, they constructed the mythical golden age when all the superstitions, oppressive practices and structures were supposedly non-existent. All the evils in society were sought to be explained as later accretions which should be reformed not as a concession to the European colonialists' critique but in order to preserve the "true" essence of Hindu society which had seen a general spiritual and hence, a material decline. Thus, this was necessary to recover its once dominant political status.

Apart from the ideological change, there were also profound cultural changes that were experienced as a result of the colonial intervention. This was because of the introduction of the techniques of governmentality led to an "objectification" of the social and cultural milieu. As Cohn observes in his analysis of the effects of census on the Indian society:

"What had been previously embedded in a whole matrix of custom, ritual, religious symbol, a textually transmitted tradition, had now become something different. What had been unconscious, now to some extent becomes conscious. Aspects of the tradition can be selected, polished and reformulated for conscious ends." (Cohn, 2004)

However, this process of objectifying the diverse and nebulous cultural practices and structures of the population through a census was fraught with difficulties like coming up with definitions and categories which captured the social reality adequately. So, from the time the practice of collecting data through the census began, there were difficulties in defining concepts like what constituted the village or defining what constituted castes or tribes and what was their proper place in the hierarchy. Given that the place on the ritual hierarchy was based on a normative criterion like status, it included a lot of political negotiation. This whole process was by no means objective but was informed by deeply held beliefs of the British census officials about Indians and their social structure along with their value judgements on it (Cohn, 2004).

In fact, Sundar has argued that the census also served a very important ideological function for the colonial state in keeping with its tactic of 'divide and rule' (Sundar, The Indian Census, Identity and inequality 1999). By emphasizing the differences of religions, castes, tribes and languages present within the polity, it aimed to reinforce the colonial state's discourse that, India on its own was ungovernable and therefore, needed continued presence of the British to maintain order (Sundar, The Indian Census, Identity and inequality, 1999).

Obviously, there was a lot of opposition to the census, both at the individual and community level. This was because the artificial fixity or 'substanitialization' that census was to lend, impinged upon the strategies of upward mobility, survival and negotiation of various groups. The oppositional mobilizations took three main forms. Firstly, petitions to have the names of castes changed with a view to achieving higher status; secondly, complaints about the biases of enumerators and thirdly, about the form of questions including the very need for keeping records of caste itself (Sundar, The Indian Census, Identity and inequality, 1999).

Out of these, the third complaint regarding the forms of questions about whether caste should be enumerated at all is of use to this discussion. In the context of emergent communal politics in the period approaching independence along with the increasing importance of numerical strength both the Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League began active intervention in the process to influence the census. Savarkar called upon Hindu Sabhas to ensure that the tribal population be classified as Hindus (Sundar, The Indian Census, Identity and inequality, 1999). By this time various Hindu organizations

were already involved in the proselytization of tribes and they took up the mantle of mobilizing opinion on these lines. The demand to classify Adivasis as Hindus became increasingly strident especially in Chotanagpur. Here, it must be pointed out that the Adivasis were by no means alone in such political lobbying[5] (Sundar, The Indian Census, Identity and inequality, 1999).

However, the confusion regarding the enumeration of the tribal population as Hindus was not entirely the result of competing political claims but was a constant topic of debate even among the enumerators themselves. This was partly a result of the nature of the tribal identity, which had had considerable cultural interaction with the Hindus, as discussed in the previous section.

Colonial administrators, anthropologists and census officers from Herbert Risley, J. H. Hutton to Sedgwick etc. had difficulty in differentiating tribes in terms of their religious practices from other so-called lower caste Hindus. As a result, the category under which tribes were to be enumerated kept changing from one census to the other - from animism to tribal religion - and was defined in contradistinction with Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, for the purpose of the census; while in their personal remarks the colonial officials noted the difficulty of telling animistic or tribal religions apart from practices of Hinduism[6], Ghurye quotes Risley,

"... one and the same religion figures in the original returns of the census under as many different designations as there are tribes professing it." In his opinion, Hinduism is, "... Animism more or less transformed by philosophy ... magic tempered by metaphysics." Finally he concludes that there is, "...no sharp line of demarcation can be drawn between Hinduism and Animism. The one shades away insensibly into the other." (Ghurye, 1963)

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[5] Even Jains, Sikhs and Dalits were involved in these negotiations. The case of Jains is especially interesting. Around the time of the 1941 census, Jains petitioned for the provision of the option of identifying themselves as a distinct religious group. This was to be done in order to safeguard their distinct identity which otherwise was threatened by assimilation. This is important because unlike Dalits they had not been part of the Hindu fold.

However, in a matter of a little more than half a century, today a Jain, Amit Shah is the President of the BJP and a hardline Hindutva figure. So is the case with Vishwa Hindu Parishad Chief Praveen Togadia and present Gujarat Chief Minister Vijay Rupani who all belong officially to a religious minority i.e. Jains, but hold powerful positions within the leadership of RSS and the BJP despite not being numerically preponderant across India.

[6] Similar observations were made by Hutton, the Census Commissioner of 1931.

The argument of a certain overlap among animistic and Hindu religion is not restricted to the writings of Ghurye but is accepted by subsequent scholarship as well (Xaxa, State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial india, 2008).

The characterization that the colonial anthropologist-administrators arrived at was steeped in racial prejudice. After the first war of independence in 1857, as the colonial state assumed direct control and a more interventionist role, it aimed to obtain detailed knowledge about the alien population that it was supposed to govern; and thereby it went about commissioning various anthropological works on various tribes and castes to get a better sense of the social structure.

It is argued that this prejudiced way of seeing tribes was a result of colonial epistemology, as nurtured by anthropologists, drawing heavily upon the Darwinian theory of evolution (Damodaran, 2011). The Evolutionist theories of Darwin, in vogue by the middle of the nineteenth century, ranked human societies on a scale of development – from the civilized to the barbaric races. The European race was considered the apotheosis of human development while the various indigenous populations around the world, on the bottom end of the scale, were considered barbaric. This had very important political implications as the colonizers used these constructs to justify colonization of various barbaric populations of non-European descent by the 'superior' European mind as something which was required for the good of those very people along with the general improvement of their condition and expansion of 'civilization' (Radhakrishna, Of Apes and Ancestors: Evolutionary Science and Colonial Ethnography, 2011).

Many indigenous populations were considered relics of the bygone era – like the Australians, the Native Americans and the wild tribes of India; these were considered closer to apes than to humans. However, they could have been civilized but only with the assistance of the advanced races. Attempts were made by anthropologists to trace racial affinities amongst various indigenous groups while proposing an evolutionary scale within India itself. The Aryans – fair-skinned, of noble lineage, who spoke a stately language and worshipped powerful Gods - held the pride of place (Radhakrishna, Of Apes and Ancestors: Evolutionary Science and Colonial Ethnography, 2011).

The non-Aryan races were the original inhabitants of the land and comprised the lower end of the hierarchy. These tribes and outcastes were defined by their dark skin and stereotyped as being animal-like, addicted to drinking and merrymaking; having loose emotions and a low intellect (Bara, Alien Construct and Tribal Contestation in Colonial Chotanagpur: The Medium of Christianity, 2010). However, this internal hierarchization of the Indian social structure was not entirely the result of the Darwinian gaze. The colonial anthropologists drew heavily on the Brahminical texts like the Vedas and used them almost as historical sources to support their hypotheses, Radhakrishnan quotes Samuelson,

"A comparison of the accounts that are given of (dasyus) in the Vedas with the Indian aborigines of today shows conclusively that some of them must have possessed a very low bodily and mental organization – indeed they were a more debased type of beings than what is not called mankind." (Radhakrishna, Of Apes and Ancestors: Evolutionary Science and Colonial Ethnography, 2011)

Another link between the level of civilization and the degree of moral progress was also sought to be established. It was argued that, the greater the level of civilization the greater the degree of ethical progress. In other words, this implied that the European races were at the apex of the hierarchy in terms of moral or ethical progress and other races had to be brought to their level. Drawing upon Darwinian and Brahminical sources, the tribes were painted as immoral and unethical whose ancestors were represented by their barbaric practices like cannibalism, infanticide, human sacrifice etc. Thus, having stereotyped the tribes as immoral, it was claimed that they had constituted the 'hereditary criminal classes' of the Indian society through its various historical phases (Radhakrishna, Of Apes and Ancestors: Evolutionary Science and Colonial Ethnography, 2011).

Moreover, with the introduction of new laws regarding land and forestry by the colonial state, the rate of indebtedness and land alienation among the tribes shot up. With the help from Christian missionaries, some tribals attempted to negotiate with the state. However, these efforts proved to be rather inadequate, given the poverty, illiteracy and the lack of knowledge among the tribal population about how to use the bureaucracy to make claims of justice through the institutions of the State. This resulted in many armed insurrections by various tribes against the colonial state (Damodaran, 2011).

These insurrections forced the colonial state to take notice of the massive discontent that was simmering beneath the surface within the tribal communities due to the imposition of colonial measures; however, this also led to the reinforcement of the colonial prejudice which considered some indigenous races as violent and barbaric by nature (Damodaran, 2011).

As a result, entire tribes were classified by the colonial state as 'criminal', which later came to be referred to as the 'Denotified and Nomadic Tribes of India' in the post-independence period (Devy G. N., 2006). A number of tribes, including Bhils, were classed under the category of criminal tribes, as and when they resisted the colonial state and its policies, especially through arms. These people were branded as 'born criminals' and acts were legislated which provided for establishing settlements for these 'criminal' tribes to which they could be confined and be forced to undertake low paid work. These tribes were kept under constant surveillance and were required to report to the guards more than once in a day to ensure that they had not escaped those settlements (Devy G. N., 2006).

The enactment of such laws, which branded some tribes as 'born criminals', betrayed the racist attitude of the colonial state which obviously was working within the framework of the colonial epistemology as developed by the official colonial anthropologists. Again, the British colonialists, in fact, justified the continuation of their colonization of the Indian subcontinent to the public back home by arguing that their intervention had brought about certain reforms in the customary laws of the various barbaric and criminal races and they needed to continue to rule in order to safeguard these gains. It must be pointed out that even after decolonization, the attitude of the police and bureaucracy, vis-à-vis these tribes did not change much for a considerable period of time (Radhakrishna, Of Apes and Ancestors: Evolutionary Science and Colonial Ethnography, 2011).

Assimilation versus Isolation or Utilitarian Nationalism versus Differentiated Inclusion

It is in the backdrop of such a tortuous history of profound political, cultural, intellectual and economic transformations within the Bhil community, the demographic politics of the colonial state and a strong Nationalist movement that we need to locate the debate

on the nature of tribes between Verrier Elwin and G. S. Ghurye. Both of whose perspectives played an important role in tribal policy making.

Most of the early definitions of the term 'tribe' built upon the body of literature developed by colonial anthropologists. Hence, they defined it in terms of its interaction and relation with caste, peasant formations and civilization (Xaxa, State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial india, 2008). These frameworks drew upon the evolutionary perspective of defining tribes and as a result posed them in opposition to civilization. While it can be argued that Verrier Elwin belonged to this tradition, over time, he came to jettison much of the colonial gaze which informed it and even inverted it. On the one hand, it has been argued that his framework has romanticized the tribal identity (Prasad, Against Ecological Romanticism: Verrier Elwin and the Making of an Anti-Modern Tribal Identity, 2003). On the other hand, he has been labelled an isolationist (Ghurye, 1963) by the nationalist politicians and sociologists. The following discussion will attempt to take these arguments seriatim.

While there is little scope to question the romanticist underpinnings of his initial work on tribal life in India the charge of isolationism is rather inaccurate. Elwin came to India as a Christian missionary to 'civilize' the oriental folk and spread the word of Christ. However, upon arriving here, he got influenced by Gandhi after a brief stay with him in his Ashram at Sabarmati. This initially led to some friction, and finally a break, with his Christian missionary comrades, embedded as they were with the colonial project. After a brief stint as a missionary, he embarked on a career as a self-taught anthropologist but unlike other colonial anthropologist-administrators he lived among the tribes his entire life, defended them through his work against the prejudicial colonial gaze and even ended up framing policies for the tribes in post-independence India (Guha, Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India, 1999).

Elwin was branded as an isolationist and primitivist by nationalist mainstream on account of a book he published in 1939 on the Baiga tribes where he argued for a National Park for the tribes in wild and inaccessible parts of the country directly supervised by a Tribal Commissioner. In these areas, powers were to be devolved to the tribal councils and village headmen would be vested with their authority like the old times. Non–tribals would not be allowed to settle in the area except by obtaining a licence via the government; no missionary activity of any religion would be allowed

within these areas and tribal life and culture would not be broken up. The efforts towards economic development were to be intensified, education was to be simplified and adopted to the tribal needs while the tribes would be allowed to freely hunt and fish within that area (Elwin, Issues in Tribal Policy Making, 1977). As early as 1936, many representatives in the legislative assemblies had already begun to attack the anthropologist-administrators during debates on excluded areas for their 'wish' to keep the primitive people of India 'uncivilized' and in a state of barbarism for their intellectual fetish (Elwin, A Philosophy for NEFA, 1964). This book added to the controversy and invited the wrath of nationalists of various hues.

One of them was the socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia who, in 1958, publicly declared that the retention of the policy of "inner line permits" introduced in 1873 by the colonial government was unconscionable and foolish in an independent India. He opposed the idea of a "reserved forest" for the tribes which prevented a citizen of India from accessing any part of his own nation (Guha, Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India, 1999). Lohia's criticisms of the autonomous tribal regions were based – firstly, he considered these regions as a hurdle in the process of national integration of a country which had recently undergone a partition and experienced massive violence in the process; and secondly, on a rights-based argument, that this autonomy curtailed the right of a citizen to freely access regions of his or her own country.

A much more concerted ideological and theoretical challenge was posed by Ghurye. His approach has been described as anchored in "Normative Hinduism" (Venugopal, 1986), 'Hindu Nationalism" (Upadhya, 2002) and his nationalism is said to have a Hindu fascist content (Bhukya, 2008). His primary claim, made in a book titled, "The Aborigines – so called – and their Future", published in 1943, was that tribes were "Backward Hindus" and that the assimilation of tribes with the Hindu civilization is not only desirable but beneficial for them (Ghurye, 1963).

To situate his arguments, a brief sketch of his intellectual and theoretical framework would be useful. Before being trained as a social anthropologist, Ghurye obtained a masters' degree in Sanskrit (Bhukya, 2008). His sociological imagination was shaped by the intellectual currents of British Orientalism, nationalism and diffusionism. The orientalist construction of India emphasized on the antiquity and civilizational unity of

India and relied heavily upon ancient Sanskrit texts for the same. As a result, Indian civilization became identified with Brahminical Hinduism which became the defining feature of Indian society. In the newly emergent nationalist consciousness, the ideas of an unbroken Aryan civilization played a very important political role (Upadhya, 2002).

The basic diffusionist assertion that superior races would dominate inferior ones and thereby transmit civilization also resonated with him. For him, every culture had a history that could be discovered and that most individual cultures and cultural traits had an external rather than an autochthonous origin. He considered culture and civilization as two sides of the same coin. They were both a complex of ideas, beliefs, values and social practices. The Vedic Age was the most suitable anchor to understand Indian culture for him; in other words, religion and religious consciousness formed the foundation of culture. The questions of livelihoods, control over resources or ecological adaptation do not figure in his definition of culture. There is a definite conflation of culture, civilization and religion in his framework. To sum up, according to him, Brahminical Hinduism stood at the centre of Indian civilization and its ideas were essential for the integration of society. Therefore, absorption of diverse religious and 'backward' groups was necessary for national integration. However, he failed to take into consideration questions of domination, exploitation and conflict within the Hindu civilization or culture on the one hand and syncretic practices between Hindu and Muslim cultures within the Indian context on the other hand (Upadhya, 2002).

Moreover, his framework argued for absorption rather than acculturation as the latter is a two-way process and implies reciprocity. He advocated absorption of tribes into the Hindu fold. That meant Hinduization of the tribes rather than the tribalization of Hinduism. This would lead to the vertical integration of various groups into a social structure dominated by Indo-Aryanism and Brahminical Hinduism (Venugopal, 1986). In his reply to Elwin, he employed this framework to interpret a vast range of factual data collated from accounts of various anthropologist-administrators and census officials His arguments in the book will be briefly discussed below.

First and foremost, Ghurye privileged the religious aspect of tribal identity above all else by pointing out that it was very hard to differentiate between the religious practices of Bhils and Gonds with those of so-called lower caste Hindus. He invokes Risley to argue that Hinduism is but Animism more or less transformed by philosophy. Secondly,

he took exception to the use of the word aborigine to describe the tribes as he argued, in line with his diffusionist proclivities, that the question of who were the original settlers of India cannot be reasonably settled and the use of this label was not necessary for the tribes to be provided special attention by the authorities. The use of this term would only let loose the forces of disunity (Ghurye, 1963).

He draws upon many instances of a similarity in cultural practices of Hindus and tribes like Korkus who both celebrate Holi or the fact that Bhils were the custodians of a temple on Mandhata Hills in the Nimar region where worship was still offered to make his case. On the economic front, he agrees that the tribes live lives of great material deprivation and for that their grouse against the Hindus was legitimate. However, the principal responsibility for the economic ruination of tribes, as per Ghurye, lies at the door of the colonial administration which led to a loss of land for them (Ghurye, 1963). This, it must be said, is not completely incorrect.

Ghurye concedes that although on balance the result of contact, assimilation and co-existence with the Hindus has been beneficial for the tribes it would not be wrong to argue that some undesirable changes had crept into the tribal way of life as well. But then again, the process of breaking up and remaking of groups had been in progress for the longest time. It would be wrong to say that it has been all bad for the 'backward' tribes. He then goes on to present a rather flimsy defence of Hinduization of tribes against its four major criticisms levelled by Elwin – the emergence of the practice of untouchability, the lowering of the position of women, the introduction of child marriage and the suppression of tribal song and dance due to contact.

With regard to untouchability, he asserts that the tribes which embrace Hinduism are not stacked at the bottom with the untouchable groups but are stationed above them. The Bhils, in fact, aspire to the Kshatriya status as well. Moreover, the presence of an overall negative attitude towards untouchability in the country and the presence of militant anti-untouchability movements like the Kabirpanthis are deemed sufficient to ensure that the evil of untouchability will not affect the tribes in a big way. He addressed the other three criticisms together. On the lowering of the position of women among Hinduized tribes, he proffers, that there is hardly any evidence to support the fact apart from the injunctions by the Hos and Gonds against dancing by their women. However, although it is true that until recently women dancing was looked down upon in the

Hindu societies. Now the attitudes were changing and the popularity of folk dances among Hindu women had become a reality and there was even possibility of the introduction of dancing into the curriculum of schools as a form of exercise. However, most of the tribal dances, in his opinion, were sexual in nature. Therefore, the prohibition of dancing cannot be considered as lowering the position of women. He goes on to argue that it would have been better had only mixed dancing been banned rather than an overall ban. He defends the appearance of child or pre-puberty marriage after Hinduization by arguing that although it is unfortunate it is not an unmitigated evil as it acts as a mechanism of curbing premarital sexual license which is common among the tribes (Ghurye, 1963). These arguments bring out the normative primacy that he accords to Brahminical Hinduism in his framework. The tribes and their cultural practices are not seen on their own terms but measured against the sexual, marital and social norms of Brahminical Hinduism. A not-so-subtle hierarchization of values can be read in his defences.

Although Ghurye does not consider the question of economic deprivation or ecological adaptation of tribes in great detail. He argues that the continuation of traditional tribal pursuits like shifting cultivation must be seen and weighed against the needs and welfare of the general community. Once this lens is applied to the tribal question, such traditional practices become dangerous and undesirable (Ghurye, 1963).

Ghurye defended Elwin against the charge of abetting proselytization and welcomed the efforts of the missionaries in providing education and other means of their "upliftment" but charged him for being an isolationist, no-changer and a revivalist; preaching a flawed policy given that the seclusion of the tribes under scheduled areas had not yielded favourable results in the past and was unlikely to yield them in the future (Ghurye, 1963).

However, this was a misrepresentation of Elwin's position. In his book, 'A Philosophy for NEFA', published in 1957, he defends himself by providing proper context for his arguments on the policy of isolation (Elwin, A Philosophy for NEFA, 1964). He had advocated isolation as a temporary measure because at the time India was still colonised and any contacts that the tribes had with the outsiders were debasing, economically exploitative and culturally destructive in nature. Social workers and nationalists were not allowed within those areas but money lenders, forest officials, landlords and liquor

vendors had free access to those areas and were having a disastrous impact on the tribal population. Firstly, he agreed that the idealization of isolation was inaccurate as tribal life in the NEFA region was closer to the Hobbesian state of nature of being nasty, brutish and short rather than Rousseau's Noble Savage living a pristine life in harmony with nature. Secondly, the state of complete isolation had never existed. The tribes had always been in contact with the larger society and often the contact had pernicious effects. Finally, the transformation brought about by the onward march of modern industry and the emergence of the welfare state had made the isolation of tribes unthinkable (Elwin, A Philosophy for NEFA, 1964). The Indian State, according to him, settled this debate by introducing the policy of covering the entire country with Community Development Blocks by the year 1963, bringing tribes into the mainstream of modern civilization; rendering the matter of debating its desirability redundant (Elwin, Issues in Tribal Policy Making, 1977).

For Elwin, the question was always about the terms of integration. He argued that the advocacy of assimilation would be better described as an argument for detribalization. Detribalization is based on a rather poor view of the tribal life; their religious practices, culture and social organization (Elwin, A Philosophy for NEFA, 1964). As discussed above, such a condescending attitude towards tribal life is clearly discernible in the arguments put forth by Ghurye.

However, while Ghurye's sociological frame is considered as the theoretical bedrock for the Hinduization of tribes and the concomitant spread of Hindutva's influence among them. It has also been argued that Elwin's romanticism and celebration of cultural primitivism laid the foundation for Hindutva (Prasad, Against Ecological Romanticism: Verrier Elwin and the Making of an Anti-Modern Tribal Identity, 2003). Cultural Primitivism is defined as, 'the discontent of the civilised with civilization, or with some conspicuous and characteristic feature of it.' (Guha, Savaging the Civilised: Verrier Elwin and the Tribal Question in Late Colonial India, 1996)

Rather than outrightly labelling Elwin as "anti-modern", it would be better to understand his position as bringing out the limits of modernity with regard to the tribal question in the twentieth century. To be sure, Elwin recognised the positive potential of modernity; the comfort, better health, art and beauty that it brought about, as well as the emergence of the ideals of freedom from want and fear. However, he was not

oblivious to its immense potential for devastation as borne out by wars being waged on an industrial scale, the appearance of the hydrogen bomb, the establishment of totalitarian governments across large swathes of the world and increasing bureaucratization of democracies (Elwin, A Philosophy for NEFA, 1964).

He was not alone in being sceptical about the fruits that modern civilization had to offer especially to the tribal population. His inhibitions were shared by none other than stalwarts like Gandhi and on the issue of tribes, by that high priest of modernity, Nehru himself. His preface to Elwin's book called into question the ideas of progress and the strains of rapid assimilation. He was of the opinion that the encounter of tribes with modern European civilization had been an unmitigated disaster for the aborigines across the world – from the Americas to Australia putting an end to their arts and crafts and their way of life and such a possibility now arose in India as well. Therefore, they must be allowed to develop as per their own genius so that the well-meant efforts to improve them do not end up causing injury (Elwin, A Philosophy for NEFA, 1964).

The fate of the tribes, in the post-independence period, has vindicated Elwin in a way. The increasing level of proletarianization, displacement, landlessness, poor health and educational indicators along with raging violent conflicts over resources on tribal settlements in Central India all point towards that direction. We can surmise that with regard to economic development of the tribal population, while Ghurye, invoked the utilitarian principle of the greatest good by juxtaposing tribal interests against 'general' welfare; Elwin championed the recognition of economic and cultural differences and wanted a more inclusive model of development.

While it is correct that he opposed Christian missionary activity within tribal areas. It would be wrong to argue that he laid the foundation for the proliferation of Hindutva in those areas. As has been argued above, the presence of Hindu motifs can be traced way back to at least the early colonial period. Moreover, as early as 1923, even before he had set foot in India, the organised propagation of the Hindu religious tradition through the popularization of Ramayana and the figure of Ram had already begun among the Bhils under the aegis of the Bhil Seva Mandal organised by Gandhian reformer A. V. Thakkar (Hari, Thakkar Bapa, 1979).

By 1941, Elwin was convinced that tribal religions were part of the larger Hindu tradition, however, there was a certain freedom and flexibility to the tribal faith which

was absent in the mainstream Hindu thought (Guha, Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India, 1999). This was a rather popular perception about tribes in Central India at the time. Ghurye quotes Ambedkar from the Constituent Assembly Debates on the sixth schedule:

"The tribal people in the areas other than Assam are more or less Hinduised, more or less assimilated with the civlization and culture of the majority of the people in whose midst they live." (Ghurye, 1963)

His opposition to the Christian missionaries was the result of the propagation of unbridled communalism among the tribal population and their rather questionable methods. They included bribing and terrorizing them by threats of beating and abusing them (Guha, Savaging the Civilised: Verrier Elwin and the Tribal Question in Late Colonial India, 1996). The gradual entrenchment of Hindutva cannot be ascribed solely to an opposition to missionary activity in the region but must be traced to protracted social and cultural processes over a long period of time.

Tribes in Independent India: Free to be Serfs!

The independent Indian State embarked upon the process of economic development through rapid industrialization adopting a utilitarian welfare state model. The Central Indian tracts with tribal populations were enlisted under the fifth schedule. The criteria followed for the scheduling included, preponderance of tribal population; compactness and reasonable size of the area; under-developed nature of the area and marked disparity in economic standard of the people. The laws operational in the area prohibited or restricted the transfer of land by or among members of the scheduled tribes in such areas (Radhakrishna, Appendix: A Brief Review of Laws Impacting Adivasis, 2016). A provision for the formation of Tribal Advisory Councils with far reaching powers were also made. However, the final version adopted was a rather 'emasculated' version. The members of the assembly came to the conclusion that given their state of backwardness, the tribes would not be able to cope with complicated legislation or administration, and therefore, it was not to be given decisive powers; partly on account of the objections raised by members of the provincial legislatures (Sundar, Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar 1854 - 1996, 1997).

The State identified the tribes on the basis of 'tribal characteristics', on their cultural and spatial isolation from the bulk of the population. These characteristics included

primitive way of life, tribal origin, remote habitation and general backwardness in all respects. As per these rather ambiguous criteria, in 1951, the total population of the tribes was estimated at 19.1million; however, by 1976, the total went up to 40 million (Galanter, 1984). Moreover, the State acknowledged a positive duty to ensure development in the spheres of health, education and economic advancement rather than merely the negative duty of protecting them from exploitation and alienation (Sundar, Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar 1854 - 1996, 1997).

This utilitarian model of industrialization led to a forced dispossession, displacement and immiserization of the tribal population on large scale. Within Madhya Pradesh, 73% of the tribals were classified as cultivators while 20.5% were classified as agricultural labourers. While in schedule five areas like Jhabua, tribals own the majority of the land, it is mostly forest or wasteland; owing to the poor quality of the soil in these tracts. Therefore, while land owned is a lot, the net sown area is less. This made cultivation insufficient for their sustenance which led to a rise in seasonal migration among tribes as labourers on construction and mining sites. Apart from this the phenomenon of land alienation has continued despite the aforementioned provisions being in place. There were a massive 54,139 cases of land alienation till 1994. Out of these, 54.67% were rejected and land restoration took place only in 3.15% of the cases (Prasad, Tribal Survival and the Land Question, 2002).

The penetration of the market has exacerbated these changes in tribal society. The increasing 'marketization of society' has led to a decline in earlier forms of reciprocity that inhibited accumulation, led to marginalization of women, the growing dominance of men in economic matters and the breakdown of the norms of collecting forest products only for self-consumption (Nathan & Kelkar, 2012).

In the post-independence period, the tribal community had now been transformed into a more or less peasant community whose identity is shaped by the common experience of displacement, exploitation, dispossession and a sense of cultural loss. The most important element of the tribal identity which distinguishes them from the other Hindu groups, is their relation to forests and land. This was acknowledged across the spectrum from Elwin to Ghurye and was reinforced by the introduction of schedules demarcating special tracts of land for them. The question of integration or assimilation is now over; the tribes have been assimilated by the State as unequal citizens. They are one among

the many 'differences' or 'demands' which have been included into the discourse of a competitive electoral system. In other words, we can say that they have traversed a long distance from being a society to just another community negotiating for their fair share.

Conclusion

The preceding arguments have attempted to clear the theoretical misapprehensions with regard to the tribal identity owing to the baggage of anthropological and politico-administrative definitions of these groups which cloud our analysis of the various possible political articulations of the tribal identity. This gap is due to the failure to understand the tribal *subjectivity* or self-image and rely excessively on given definitions, which do not capture the reality today. However, if we trace the evolution of the identity of the Bhils and Bhilalas who populate western Madhya Pradesh and eastern Gujarat, historically, we can begin to solve this puzzle.

The history of the Bhils over the last two hundred years can be described as the history of gradual inclusion within the Hindu mainstream. It has been a journey in which they were reduced to a community from being a society in themselves. In the west, tribes have been defined as those groups which lie outside civilization. But in the Indian context, tribes and civilization have coexisted. Through the course of the argument, we have shown that Bhils were a differentiated society and were already interacting with the Hindu society before the British arrived. The Bhilalas of the plains had even adopted many Hindu cultural practices owing to a longer period of interaction with mainstream Hindu society.

The onset of British colonialism disarmed the Bhils and imposed a forced sedentarization which unleashed forces of acculturation and greater intermixing with the Hindu peasantry. In the first half of the 20th century, the politics of demography which was ushered in by the colonial state's techniques of govermentality, effected a double transformation of the tribal identity. Firstly, it ossified hitherto fuzzy categories and secondly, it made various Hindu organizations actively begin to make attempts to include them within the Hindu fold so as to bolster numerical preponderance.

In the late colonial period, there was a debate, for the first time, about the terms of inclusion of the tribes which was sparked by the provision of representation of backward tribes in provincial legislatures under the Government of India Act, 1935 (Galanter, 1984). This debate came to be known as the debate between the isolationists

and assimilationists. The former were largely the anthropologist-administrators who wanted to 'protect' the tribes from exploitation by outsiders, in line with their colonialist credo of improvement and protection. On the other hand, were the nationalists who saw any attempts at extending special protections as a move to 'divide and rule' by the colonialists.

With the onset of independence, the debate was settled in favour of assimilation. The Bhils and other tribes of Central India, were accorded some special protections for their right to land and forests under the fifth schedule and reservation of seats in legislatures. However, now they had to frame their politics in the language of citizenship. They were just another difference which was accommodated within the diverse Indian electoral democracy. In effect, they had transformed from a society to a community.

The development trajectory of the newly independent state led to large scale displacement, dispossession and immiserization of the tribes. Majority of the tribes were now peasants and owing to the forces of capitalism, a section had also been converted into cheap migrant labour. The further penetration of the market into society fundamentally undermined the political economy of the tribal community based on provision and geared it towards a political economy of profit.

All these developments unleashed new cultural forces and greater acculturation in relation to the dominant Hindu identity. Here it must be reiterated that the Bhil self-image was always very distinct from the Dalits as their identity was shaped by dispossession and colonization rather than the ideology of purity and pollution. They saw themselves as kings and warriors; a sub-section of their population, the Bhilalas, traced their ancestry to miscegenation with the Rajputs; a status that, as a result, they too aspired for (Fuchs, 1977). The primary antagonist in their discourse, as per their ballads, was the Baniya and not the Brahmin. Their experience with Brahminical Hinduism and as a result their terms of engagement were very different.

If we place their response within the frame developed in the last chapter, it can be argued that their attitude towards Brahminical Hinduism and their response to the process of Hinduization has been within the Gandhian frame which sought cultural renegotiation for status and recognition with the Hindu fold; unlike the Ambedkarite response of its rejection. It must also be stressed that what has taken place with the tribes is not Sanskritization but Hinduization. While the former entails a certain upward

mobility in the caste hierarchy owing to the emulation of the cultural traits of those at the top of the hierarchy. Hinduization refers to the adoption of some ideas, beliefs and cultural practices of the dominant community owing to acculturation without being integrated into its caste structure based on ritual hierarchy.

From the above discussion, it can be argued, that we must look at the Bhil community as just another acculturated peasant community which has a long history of interaction and even limited inclusion within Hinduism, which has not been affected by the ideology of purity and pollution, at the scale of Dalits anyhow. The Bhils and Bhilalas have become just another demand or difference to be incorporated in the project of the construction of the new Hindu identity within the overarching framework of a competitive multi-party democratic system.

The process of Hinduization has been going on since before the British arrived. However, in the post – independence period, concerted efforts to Hinduize the tribes as part of establishing the Hindu nation were undertaken for the first time. The next chapter traces the historical and ideological roots underlying the approach of the forces of Hindutva to the tribal or as they say the 'Vanvasi' Question and thereafter undertakes a brief overview of their methods of aiding and abetting the process of Hinduization among the tribal population.

4. The Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram: Synthesizing Savarkar's Imaginary with Gandhi's Method

Introduction

In the analysis of Hindutva and the Tribal Question, the previous chapters have attempted to argue two fundamental points – firstly, that the Hindu identity has been shaped as a result of socio-political contestations over the last century and a half. These contestations to fix the content of the Hindu identity were forced upon the hitherto isolated Hindu community due to the onset of colonialism and the completely alien intellectual, normative, and administrative discourses to which it subjected the Hindu society. It was a form of cultural defence in the face of imperialism.

This cultural defence was articulated within three discursive frameworks – revivalism, renegotiation and rejection. All three discourses spawned their own political expressions. The discourse of revivalism propounded by Savarkar formed the basis of the ideology of the Hindutva movement; the discourse of renegotiation was the bedrock of the ideology propounded by Gandhi and the liberals which made up the mainstream of the Indian national movement; while the discourse of rejection formed the ideological basis of the Dalit political movement spearheaded by Ambedkar.

These discourses held out different moral and political resources for different sections within the Hindu social order, marked as it was, by the principle of graded inequality. Here the second part of the argument must be re-emphasized, which is, each section of the Hindu social order negotiated differently with the dominant discourse of Brahminical Hinduism. This was based as much upon their pre-given place in the order as it was on their subjectivity which was shaped by their specific historical experiences. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to analyze the cultural negotiations and articulations of the tribes in western Madhya Pradesh through a simplistic binary of Brahminism versus Non-Brahminism, as their identity was not shaped based on ritual humiliation governed by the clauses of purity and pollution like the Dalit sections, but primarily by the experience of being dispossessed of their lands and forests under colonialism.

This was the primary reason why the principal antagonist in the tribal discourse is not the Brahmin but the Baniya and the political mobilization of the tribes poses the figure

of the outsider as the other: '*pardeshi*' in Bastar or the "*diku*" in Jharkhand. It must be noted that the *pardeshis* and the *dikus* predominantly comprised of oppressed castes and members of the working class (Sengupta, 1980). This points towards the absence of a solidarity among the Dalits and the Tribes due to the absence of a common opposition to Brahminical Hinduism, leading to a certain fragmentation of the social sphere.

The Bhils of western Madhya Pradesh, for example, have had a long history of interaction with the Hindu social order and as a result, different sections within the Bhil society have been acculturated to differing degrees. Some like the Bhilalas have even aspired to the Kshatriya status. However, they have not jettisoned their founding myths and practices in the process. This process of Hinduization, that is, the adoption of ideas, beliefs, and cultural practices from the mainstream Hindu society, has been going on for a long time since before the onset of British colonialism. This obviously does not discount the fact that the interaction took place within the context of unequal power relations.

It is within such a context, that we must trace the emergence of the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) and their construction of the category of the 'Vanvasi' to analyze their construction of the tribal question. The VKA is an affiliate of the RSS which focuses on organising and mobilising the tribal communities towards the larger goal of Hindu Nationalism, which is establishing a Hindu Rashtra. It is important to consider that the VKA came into existence as a response to the growing influence of missionaries among the tribal population and their conversion to Christianity in Central India.

Religious conversion has been the subject of intense political debates and contestation within India and there has been a long history of both resistance to and championing of conversions as a means of socio-political self-definition. Therefore, to understand the VKA and its politics we need to contextualize its evolution within the larger process of the rearticulation of the Hindu identity within the three streams mentioned above.

The present chapter then has the following objectives – firstly, to contextualize the ideological framework within which the debates on conversion take place; secondly, to understand the history of the popularization of Christianity among the tribes and finally, to trace the evolution of VKA and the strategies adopted by it to achieve its objectives.

I

Understanding Savarkar's Revivalism: Hindu as an Empty Signifier

To understand VKA's construction of the category of *vanvasi* we need to understand the ideological underpinnings which inform their approach. As discussed earlier, all identities are unstable and subject to articulation as they are the site of constant tension between difference and equivalence; the particular and the universal. It is the hegemonic act of articulation which totalizes this bunch of disparate elements into a chain of equivalence; this totalization is achieved by the twin moves of a radical exclusion and the employment of an empty signifier. (Laclau, On Populist Reason, 2005)

Savarkar's rearticulation of the category of Hindu must be read as such a hegemonic act of the construction of identity which empties it out and creates an antagonistic frontier which excludes the semitic religions, i.e., Muslims and Christians, and thereby attempts to include all other elements or identities into a chain of equivalence under the empty signifier of Hindu. The most lucid exposition of his articulation of such a Hindu identity can be found in his book, "Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?" (Savarkar, 1969).

Savarkar was writing at the beginning of the 20th century and his articulation reflects the dominant themes and ideas of those times. It can be argued that his articulation was the philosophical expression of the most violent, sectarian, and totalitarian tendencies that modernity and the emergent industrial order had to throw up at the time.

Reconstructing a historical past in the service of the political aims in the present was not something which was exclusive to Savarkar; in fact, it was a common practice among the nationalists of various shades at the time and even those who were on the margins of the Indian national movement, like Ambedkar. However, while for Ambedkar, the local configuration of power dictated by the upper castes, performed the role of the other; for Savarkar, it was the Muslim and later the Christians. In pursuit of his ideological ends, he ended up ignoring the complexities of ancient and medieval period and identifying the Indian civilization exclusively with the Hindus (Kumar M. , 2006).

Savarkar conceptualised politics as the conflict of life and death between the self and the other (Savarkar, 1969). In his case the significant other were the Muslims; however, from time-to-time Gandhi, non-violence, Christianity and Buddhism all played that role in his narrative (Sharma J. , History as Revenge and Retaliation: Rereading Savarkar's "The War of Independence of 1857", 2007). Intimations of Carl Schmitt's powerful critique of liberalism and the conceptualization of politics as a division and choice between friend and foe are quite discernible, although they came almost a decade after Savarkar's work.

The major objective to be achieved through such a reconstruction of history was to rearticulate the Hindu identity in such a way to counter the criticism of the oppressed castes within Hinduism, which had by then developed a robust critique of Brahminical Hinduism under the leadership of Ambedkar and other non-Brahmin leaders. The inclusion of the oppressed sections had become an important political task to shore up the numerical strength of the Hindu community in the era of the politics of demography inaugurated by the introduction of the census. Since the last decades of the 19th century *Shuddhi* Movements had been started by the Arya Samaj to bring back the Dalits into the Hindu fold due to the threat of large-scale conversions to Islam and Christianity. Therefore, Savarkar drew upon myths and polemic to construct the Muslim as the primary other of the entire Hindu community.

He did so by introducing the elements of culture, race and civilization in the definition of a Hindu. A brief exposition of his argument will help in elucidating the point. In his book, Savarkar is at pains to stress that Hinduism and Hindutva are not the same. Hinduism is but a derivative of a larger concept of Hindutva, whose meaning is closer to Hinduness whereas he declares Hinduism as an essentially sectarian term. Basing his arguments upon oriental research he writes that it was the Aryans, their earliest ancestors, who founded the Hindu civilization which was the oldest in the world; and it was their language and culture which formed the kernel of a common nationality. He invokes an episode from the Hindu epic of Ramayana to argue that it was the victory of Ram and his march into Sri Lanka which constituted the geographical and sovereign limits of the Hindu nation by bringing the entire landmass under his sway. Interestingly, he classifies Hanuman and Sugreev as non-Aryans who still owed their allegiance to Ram. This victory was the moment of birth of the Hindu people (Savarkar, 1969).

Savarkar then undertakes an interesting reconstruction of the episodes of the rise and fall of Buddhism in India. He argues that the rise of Buddhism enriched the civilization in the matters of religion, philosophy, and culture. However, the Buddhistic principles that preached non-violence and universalism proved to be its undoing. He compared these principles to opiates that lulled the nation into a false sense of security which was unable to resist barbarous attacks of those 'races' like the Mongols who were 'inferior' to them culturally but possessed superior military might. So, while the achievements of Buddhism were to be celebrated, it must be borne in mind that similar or more glorious epochs had existed in the nation's history. Moreover, as per Savarkar, the expansion Buddhism, propounding non-violence, proved to be disastrous for 'national virility'. This attack on Buddhism, served the purpose of critiquing Gandhi's articulation of the Hindu identity intertwined with the precepts of non-violence and thereby justified his call to, 'Hinduize all politics and militarize Hindudom!'

This decline was only reversed by the rejuvenation of the Vedic culture within the nation; as a result, even the varna system which he called the distinctive mark of Hindu culture was also restored. However, here Savarkar makes two important ideological interventions. Firstly, while explicating the meaning of the words, *'Sindhusthan'* and *'Arya'*, he contends that they did not indicate merely a geographical definition – from the Indus to the seas - or even have any theological or scriptural connotations. Although the words have been borrowed from the Vedic tradition, they have been resignified and applied to all those who lived on the other side of the Indus: whether they belonged to *vaidik* or the *avaidik* tradition; whether they were *brahmins* or *chandals*. It signified the inheritance of common blood, culture, country, and polity. Secondly, in his view, the law of progress must be prioritized over doctrinal orthodoxy. Institutions must be designed to serve the society, and if they outlive their utility, they can be discarded. While the varna system was an important marker of the nation, elements of blood, race and country were equally if not more important; therefore, even communities like the Sikhs and the Arya Samajists who did not believe in the varna system were entitled to be called Hindus (Savarkar, 1969).

It must be noted here, in keeping with his view of discarding or rearticulating old orthodoxies, he undertook activities of social reform, during the period in which he was barred from political activities by the colonial government. These included opening one of the first inter-caste temples which allowed entry to Dalits and encouraged and took

part in inter-dining with them. Along with these he also initiated *Shuddhi* campaigns to bring Dalits back into the fold of Hinduism (Devare, 2011). Whenever a tension between the normative and practical arose, he always privileged the latter in pursuit of his immediate political goals. So, while he invoked the Vedas and the elements of the varna system symbolically given their grip over the popular imagination of the common Hindus, he made them subservient to the immutable laws of progress or evolution and the exigencies of politics and thus, enabled their rearticulation. This was required to 'unify' the Hindu fold which was very divided on philosophical, doctrinal, and ritualistic grounds. (Sharma J. , Hindutva: Exploring the Ideas of Hindu Nationalism, 2003).

To unify the divided Hindu fold, he infused the identity with elements of race, civilization and culture and lent the Hindu identity an ethnic quality through his historical reconstruction. Savarkar was a votary of theories of racial domination which were in vogue at the time. He drew upon the writings of German zoologist Ernst Haeckel who had explicitly advocated such racism in the process. In fact, Savarkar had even congratulated Hitler for pursuing his racist policies along with other fascist regimes like Mussolini and Franco (Baber, 2004).

According to Savarkar, the Vedic restoration led to an extended period marked by peace and plenty enjoyed by the peasant and the princes alike; only to be rudely awakened by the invasion by Mohammad Ghazni. The onset of invasions by the Muslim raiders began a conflict of life and death which has been going on ever since. It was only after the conflict with the Muslims that the Hindus became acutely self-conscious and were welded into an unprecedented unity. He says:

"Sanatanists, Satnamis, Sikhs, Aryas, Anaryas, Marathas and Madrasis, Brahmins and Panchamas – all suffered as Hindus and triumphed as Hindus... All those on this side of Indus who claimed the land from Sindhu to Sindhu, from Indus to the seas, as the land of their birth, felt that they were directly mentioned by that one single expression Hindusthan. The enemies hated us as Hindus and the whole family of peoples and races, of sects and creeds that flourished... was suddenly individualised into a single being." (Savarkar, 1969)

In other words, Savarkar is constructing his own chain of equivalence by including all different identities – linguistic, religious, sectional or caste based – into one people, by

excluding the Muslims and erecting an antagonistic frontier. So, while he makes allowance for internal diversity within the Hindu fold, the only identity which is giving these otherwise disparate elements a sense of totality is their antagonism to Islam. Therefore, the Sikh Gurus like Teg Bahadur and Govind Singh are called protectors of Hindus along with the Rajputs who were engaged in battles with the Islamic invaders. (Savarkar, 1969). So, the construction of a common history of antagonism to Islamic invasion plays a fundamental role in Savarkar's articulation of the category of Hindu.

However, he is acutely aware of the hierarchical divisions within Hinduism which preclude the unity required for a common Hindu identity. So, he reiterates that many people who belong to the *avaidic* tradition are averse to accepting the term Hindu as it is identified with the dogmas and religious practices of Hinduism. However, the similarity between the two is superficial; and that the rejection of the Vedas does not disqualify someone from being called a Hindu. He bolsters his point with the example of the Jains, who supposedly had been calling themselves Hindus, without accepting the tenets of Vedas or orthodox Hinduism. This, however, is an inaccurate claim, because as late as 1941, the Jains had petitioned with the government to not be enumerated as Hindus (Sundar, The Indian Census, Identity and Inequality, 1999).

Therefore, while the common blood of Vedic ancestors is of primary importance in welding Hindus together, the observance of Vedic rituals and practices is secondary. This is so, he argues, because inter-caste marriages over the centuries had made the flow of common blood possible among the Hindus; thereby constituting them as one *race*. This is the case not only for the castes but even for the tribes who had lived on the margins of society. Individuals could move up and down the caste system based on their actions; this articulation refused to recognise the structural and ideological aspects of the caste system and explained caste as merely a function of one's actions. This theory, though inaccurate, was rather popular in that era among the reformers according to which Kshatriyas could lose their status by taking up agriculture while tribes could be *raised* to the status of Kshatriyas if they displayed bravery (Savarkar, 1969).

It must be emphasized that Savarkar describes the attainment of Kshatriya status by the tribes as *raising* their status; this clearly shows that although he personally did not believe in the dogmas of Brahminical Hinduism and considered them antithetical to Hindu interests, he was working within its discursive ideological framework while

allowing for symbolic mobility and accommodation within the caste hierarchy to secure 'unity' among the Hindus.

The introduction of the element of race, or racialisation of the Hindu identity, performs the important ideological function of resolving this tension within his framework by converting the Hindu identity based on graded inequality into an ethnic identity where a common culture and history play an equally important role along with its religious elements in its definition. This allows him to argue that Brahmins and Chandals, Aryans and Non-Aryans, Rakshas and Yaksh, Vaanar and Kinnar, Jains and Namshudras and even the aborigines of Andaman were all Hindus; as they constituted not only a common race or *jati* but also a common nationality (Savarkar, 1969). However, only a common history and even common blood were insufficient criteria to define a Hindu due to the shared historical inheritance with and the recent conversion of the Muslims. Therefore, he further introduces the element of civilization into his articulation.

Savarkar reconstructs the story of civilization through the symbols and cultural resources of Brahminical Hinduism. For him, the story of India's civilization begins with the Vedas, the Ramayan and the Mahabharat; these epics welded Indians into a common race. Moreover, he argues that Sanskrit was the common tongue at the height of India's civilization and was the source of all other languages which developed from then on; most notably Hindi.

Such a reconstruction enabled the complete identification of India's civilization with the Vedic Hindu religion; he then conflates the religion with the nation. Thereafter, he introduces the most important qualification in his definition of the category of Hindu, that is, of *punyabhu* or Holy land. As per this criterion, it was insufficient to term anyone who considers India as one's fatherland as Hindu. A Hindu is one who considers India as one's fatherland and one's holy land at the same time. Since the Muslims and the Christians belong to an alien civilization as their holy lands lie outside the geographical confines of India, their love and loyalty would forever be divided! (Savarkar, 1969).

To sum up, all those religions which are indigenous to India's civilization, which is defined through symbols of Vedic Hinduism and its mythology, and all those who are ready to accept India as their *pitrabhu* or fatherland and their *punyabhu* or their holy land would qualify as Hindus. Since the tribal religions of Bhils, Santhals, Kols were

indigenous and common blood of our ancestors was shared by them through intermarriage, they too were Hindus. It must be mentioned that animistic practices such as worship of nature or animals reflected a lower stage of human development and was a mark of primitiveness for him (Devare, 2011). However, the association with any orthodox sects or recognition of Vedas was not important in this case (Savarkar, 1969).

From the above survey of his arguments, we can surmise that the reconstruction of history in terms of Vedic Hinduism and its myths and the racialisation of the Hindu identity to give it an ethnic quality were the most important elements or instruments of Savarkar's framework to articulate a new Hindu identity. It is precisely these instruments that the Hindutva brigade employs for its ideological framework even today.

Since underlying his entire political and philosophical framework lay a deep-rooted demographic anxiety in an era when communal representation was an issue of immense political importance, he called upon the Sikhs not to bargain for concessions on the basis of being non-Hindus but like the Non-Brahmins as an important minority community *within* the Hindu fold itself. Once again referring to the process of census enumeration, he goes on to argue that while the Sikhs can be classified as Sikhs religiously, they must be classified as Hindus racially, nationally and culturally (Savarkar, 1969). This argument brings out the distinctive ethnic nature of the Hindu identity as constructed by Savarkar.

Two Arguments Against Conversion: Comparing Savarkar and Gandhi

It is within the context of this demographic anxiety that one needs to understand the various positions on the issue of conversion. It must be stressed that it was this anxiety which compels Savarkar to declare that those who have been 'forcibly snatched' out of their '*ancestral home*' only need to pledge wholehearted allegiance to their holy land and their fatherland to be welcomed back into the Hindu fold while recognizing the violence and discrimination unleashed by the hierarchical Hindu order only in passing (Savarkar, 1969). This is the ideological fountainhead wherefrom present day programmes of Ghar Wapsi and other assimilative strategies of VKA and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) emanate.

This demographic anxiety underlying his thought is especially important because it distinguishes Hindutva from Gandhian frame of reforms and opposition to

proselytization amongst the oppressed and the marginalized. The motivations underlying their approaches are completely divergent: while for Savarkar, the integration of the tribal and Dalit population is necessitated due to the need to shore up demographic strength; for Gandhi, moral reform within Hinduism was an end in itself because he did not articulate the Hindu identity in ethnic terms and collapse it with national identity.

Amritlal Thakkar or Thakkar Bapa who was widely considered Gandhi's surrogate on matters related to the tribals was drawn to work for them because of the extreme deprivation that he witnessed during his famine relief work in the Panchamahals in 1919 (Hari, Thakkar Bapa, 1979). Gandhi did share misgivings about conversion of tribals by Christian missionaries with Savarkar; however, he did not blame them for their work. Rather, Gandhi blamed the mainstream Hindu society for neglecting the Bhils thereby, opening the door for missionaries to intervene (Srivatsan, 2006).

For Gandhi, service or charitable work was supposed to be an end in itself; not a means to achieve any other motive. It must be borne in mind that at the time, Christianity had a strong association with the culture of the colonial power; therefore, according to Gandhi, conversion to Christinaity entailed a 'Europeanization' of the converts and a certain cultural alienation. Despite his reservations, Gandhi did not advocate any legal barriers to conversion as it would interfere with the freedom of the Christians to preach and practice their religion, but he did stress on the purity of motivation of the missionaries and the informed consent of the converts (Heredia, Religious Disarmament: Rethinking Conversion in India, 2007).

However, the fundamental distinction between the two approaches can be summed up in their attitude to the other. While Gandhi operated within the normative framework of Hinduism and was opposed to missionaries converting the Dalits and the tribal population; he did not consider their conversion to be a threat to the 'nation'. His reform and upliftment included introducing the tribes to Ramayan and propagating the abstention of liquor, but he defended religious freedom of missionaries and invited them for a dialogue; however, his primary concern was the welfare of the tribal population and not checking missionaries. Gandhi's approach on religious matters is self-regarding and laced with moral and ethical considerations. When he was questioned about how

to 'convert' atheists, he advised his followers not to engage in an argument but to set an example of purity and good conduct (Gandhi, 1987).

Interestingly, Gandhi was opposed to the practice of *Shuddhi* as well, which Savarkar championed. According to Gandhi, real *Shuddhi*, would entail each individual trying to attain perfection within their own faith. The changing of religious 'compartments' would be useless without an attendant moral rise. The emphasis on morality and conduct is the most important aspect for him. Conversion is useless if it does not lead to the moral betterment of the individual and by extension, conversion was not required for moral betterment (Claerhourt, 2014).

This approach is in complete opposition to Savarkar who scoffed at faith and religiosity; he was a militant modernist and atheist in this regard. For example, he considered cow worship as a completely superstitious practice which should be done away with; it was one thing to say the cow is divine and another to believe it (Devare, 2011). So, the invocation of Hinduism was entirely for instrumental purposes without any ethical or moral investment; and the primary concern was not the welfare of the tribal population but to prevent their conversion out of the Hindu fold due to a deep-seated demographic anxiety. The absence of such anxieties within Gandhi's construction of the Hindu identity enabled him to possess both basic rootedness, which mandated respect for traditions and a radical openness, which mandated respectful dialogue within and amongst various religious and theological traditions (Heredia, Gandhi's Hinduism and Savarkar's Hindutva, 2009).

In keeping with the Gandhian spirit of service, Thakkar started the Bhil Seva Mandal in 1922, to undertake welfare activities for the tribals. Small Centres or Ashrams were started by him and his workers who helped the impoverished tribals with food and clothes and distributed medicines, propagated temperance and related religious tales to them; within six months four schools, a hostel, a dispensary and many cooperative societies were established. The volunteers for his Ashram vowed to live an austere life of dedicated service to the Bhils along with other oppressed groups; a life of purity in word, deed and spirit, indicating a deeply moral and ethical commitment (Hari, Thakkar Bapa, 1979).

Ambedkar's Argument for Conversion as Emancipation

There were deep-rooted anxieties about proselytization shared by various sections of the nationalist movement, although the ideological motivation behind them were vastly different. However, the oppressed sections, especially under the leadership of Ambedkar, used the method of conversion as a political expression of resistance and emancipation. Therefore, it is important to revisit the arguments underlying the act as they form the crux of the moral justification for conversions and by extension the right to proselytize in the Indian context.

Ambedkar exposed the immanent moral barbarity within Brahminical Hinduism and provided its most powerful critique out of the three who engaged with it and attempted to transform it. This obviously was owing to his subject position because of which he had first-hand experience of the degradation that the Dalit community faced in their daily lives. For him, the quest for dignity and equality was not merely a matter of moral reform but an existential concern. He questioned and criticised the employment of the term *Harijan* or children of God as for him equality in the eyes of God was inadequate, what he desired was equality in the here and now.

Towards this end he traversed a long political and philosophical landscape; using various strategies to achieve his ends. Unlike Gandhi, he was not at all skeptical about modernity; in fact, he believed in its emancipatory potential as in the modern era power and authority were anchored in reason and were no longer divinely sanctioned. Therefore, he used the resources provided by modern representative institutions to petition with the State to obtain justice which was denied to the Dalits in the realm of the (un)civil society, based as it was on relations of power derived out of brahminical morality.

His career can be divided into three phases – the first phase was when he attempted to reform Hinduism from within, appealing to the reason and morality of the caste Hindu society. The second, when he attempted to carve out an autonomous political constituency for the Dalit community and finally, the third phase, when he sought a moral, spiritual and political refuge outside Hinduism and within Buddhism (Rodrigues, Reading Texts and Traditions: The Ambedkar - Gandhi Debate, 2011).

During the first phase, he attempted to mobilize the Dalit community for non-violent, mass actions to demand equal recognition within the Hindu fold. For this, he organised the Mahad Satyagraha for equal access to the village water body to the Dalits; supported

temple entry movements like the one in Nasik; he publicly burnt the Manusmriti to signal his opposition to its laws and ideology and even conducted mass thread ceremonies. However, these attempts were thwarted by the caste Hindus and thus, were deemed to be insufficient by Ambedkar in retrospect (Pantham, Against Untouchability: Discourses of Gandhi and Ambedkar, 2009).

In the second phase, he attempted to carve out an autonomous political constituency for the Dalits by petitioning with the colonial government. During the Second Round Table Conference, in his representation, he put up a proposal to change the demeaning nomenclature of the Dalits from depressed classes to 'Protestant Hindus' or 'non-conforming Hindus'. Furthermore, he advocated the provision for separate electorates for the Dalits with the colonial government; a position which laid the foundation of one of the most important ideological contests between him and Gandhi. The latter believed that untouchability was a socio-religious evil and had to be fought through reform and not through separate electorates. Eventually the deadlock was broken, much to the dismay of Ambedkar, by the fast unto death by Gandhi. In his speech, on the ocassion of the ratification of the Poona Pact, he reiterated that although the demand for separate electorates was not wrong, these mechanisms could not be a solution for the larger problem of the Dalits and that it was necessary to devise some means whereby, they could not only become a part and parcel of the Hindu community but also occupy an honourable position within it (Pantham, Against Untouchability: Discourses of Gandhi and Ambedkar, 2009).

However, for Ambedkar, measures like temple entry or thread ceremonies were seemingly insufficient. According to him, caste was the defining feature of Hinduism which could not be reformed. Untouchability was merely an aspect of it while inequality was the normative foundation upon which the Hindu culture was based. This malaise could not be countered only through political means but required a comprehensive cultural response. The third and final phase of his political career was dedicated to the articulation of such a cultural response to Brahminical Hinduism.

For Ambedkar, culture was expressed through history, values, ways of life and standards of valuation (Rodrigues, Reading Texts and Traditions: The Ambedkar - Gandhi Debate, 2011). Until these cultural anchors of the Dalit identity were not changed, the standards of valuation would not change, which in turn would mean that

formal rights and equality guaranteed by the State would not ensure equal dignity and recognition in the eyes of the Hindus. Therefore, conversion out of Hinduism was the only way to escape the moral gaze of the caste Hindus. Rejecting these normative anchors of Hinduism enabled him to carve out a space for defining the self anew (Guru, Rejection of Rejection: Foregrounding Self Respect, 2009).

However, while rejecting Hindu religion he articulated and advocated a religion based on principles and not on rules; because the former was centred on morality while the latter only used morality instrumentally to achieve its ends (Rodrigues, Ambedkar as a Political Philosopher, 2017). It was only Buddhism which was consistent with these criteria and conversion to Buddhism opened the discursive space to articulate a critique of Brahminical Hinduism while remaining within the Indic tradition (Heredia, Religious Disarmament: Rethinking Conversion in India, 2007).

There are two very important aspects of his act of conversion which need to be emphasized – firstly, he wanted it to be a very public act undertaken collectively by the Dalit community and secondly, it was not merely a rejection of Hinduism but the embrace of *Navayana* Buddhism which was premised on reason and normatively embedded within the matrix of the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity (Skaria, 2015). It was in this rearticulated discourse of Buddhism that Ambdekar saw the possibility of emancipation for the Dalit community.

In the above discussion, we find interesting overlaps and divergences within the philosophical and political frameworks of these three personalities. Unlike Gandhi, Ambedkar and Savarkar shared a positive outlook towards modernity and the avenues that it offered for jettisoning the dead weight of tradition by the rearticulation of history and cultural practices; but differed on the question of conversion out of the Hindu fold and its political consequences. This difference was born out of their respective subjective positions within the hierarchy of Hinduism; for Savarkar, only conversion within the fold was acceptable but conversion outside it posed a political danger to the ethnically defined Hindu nation; while for Ambedkar, dignity within the Hindu fold was unfathomable.

On the other hand, Savarkar and Gandhi both shared an unease against conversions and by extension, the proselytization undertaken by the missionaries. This shared opposition to proselytization by Christian missionaries produced an unlikely marriage

between the Hindu Nationalists and Gandhi; the former were the most acerbic critics of Gandhi on almost all other matters but on the question of conversion they considered him to be a voice of reason (Bauman, 2008). However, they had entirely opposite views with regard to the role of religion and its moral and ethical foundations and their attitude towards the other. While for Gandhi, the other had to be invited for a dialogue and transformed in the process; for Savarkar, the other had to be vanquished as politics was a struggle of life and death with the other for him.

Gandhi and Ambedkar were together with regard to the ethical and moral investment they made in their articulation of religious identity, although they differed vastly in their assessment of the resources that Hinduism provided for moral upliftment, and therefore, held divergent views on the necessity and merits of conversion.

The VKA synthesized the ideological framework of Savarkar with the method of welfare or Seva of the Christian missionaries and the Gandhians for their own ends. So, while they also started various Ashrams or *Seva Prakalps* for the welfare of the tribal population, they infused it with a message of Hindutva which did not restrict itself to an espousal of the Hindu religious morality and ethics among the tribes, like Thakkar Bapa, but employed it instrumentally to counter the threat of the Christian other.

II

Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram: Consolidating the Hindu Anxiety Against the Christian Other

In his elucidation of the concept of Hindutva, Savarkar underlines the importance and rues the absence of a National State being complimented by a National Church (Savarkar, 1969). The diffused and decentered nature of the Hindu social order had become a cause of concern under the ethno-nationalist imagination of Savarkar. The cultural and, by implication, national unity warranted the establishment of a singular entity which mediates the differences within the Hindu social order and anchors it. The RSS and its offshoot the VKA play the role of such an entity which is dedicated to 'uniting' the Hindu fold against the ever present cultural and political threat of the Semitic religions and secular discourses.

The VKA was established in 1952 by Ramakant Keshav Deshpande, popularly known as Balasaheb Deshpande, a trained *swayamsevak* or volunteer of the RSS. The

fundamental reason behind its establishment was to check the growing influence of Christian missionaries and their proselytizing activities (Vaid, 2011). As per the narrative of the VKA, the movement for regional autonomy through a separate state of Jharkhand was 'separatist' in nature or questioning the territorial integrity and sovereignty of entire India. This separatism was being instigated by the Christian missionaries who had considerable influence in the Jashpur area at the time. This view was shared by Ravi Shankar Shukla, the first Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh in the post-independence era. Shukla was known to be part of the Hindu traditionalist section of the Congress and was in fact introduced to Congress through Moonje, one of the biggest leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha. He set up the 'Christian Missionary Activities Enquiry Committee' more popularly known as the Niyogi Committee in response to the strident protests for Jharkhand that he witnessed on his maiden tour to Jashpur (Sundar, Adivasi vs Vanvasi: The Politics of Conversion in Central India, 2016).

The committee's report endorsed the viewpoint of the advocates of Hindutva. It saw proselytization as a threat to national security which undermined the principle of peaceful coexistence. This proselytization was aimed at creating a Christian party along the lines of the Muslim League and ultimately make a claim to create a separate state or at least create a militant minority (Heredia, Religious Disarmament: Rethinking Conversion in India, 2007).

However, the issue of conversion of the tribal population and anxieties about it among some sections of the Hindu society are intertwined and share a long history which dates back to the middle of the nineteenth century when the Christian missionaries came to India to propagate their religion under the aegis of colonialism. This history needs to be retraced to contextualize the emergence of the VKA and its politics and interrogate its claims.

In the narrative of the VKA, the Christian missionaries are depicted as scheming and conniving agents, who took advantage of the noble and unsuspecting forest dwellers and their poverty, to convert them to Christianity, thereby, destroying 'Hindu' culture and strengthening separatist tendencies (Vaid, 2011). In these accounts, tribals are portrayed as passive and docile recipients subjected to cultural domination by the missionaries. However, the spread of Christianity among the tribes was not such a one-way process.

Christianity came to the shores of India through the traders from the West Asia much before the colonial powers like the Portuguese and the British arrived. The Christian communities were well integrated in the society of Kerala way before the Britishers had arrived and made no organized attempt at proselytization. This could have been so because they were granted a ritual status equivalent to the Nayars and therefore, this inflection of religion with a high status in the ritual hierarchy precluded the possibility of opening the doors of the religious community to those who were below them in the hierarchy without risking the loss of their own high status as is warranted in the process of proselytization. This status quo was broken by the onset of Portuguese rule in Goa where a policy titled 'Rigour of Mercy' was enacted which mandated that the subject population could either choose to convert or leave as per the logic of Church – State unity. In this context the Church's influence was dependent upon colonial patronage. However, this was not the case under British colonialism (Heredia, Religious Disarmament: Rethinking Conversion in India, 2007).

The British colonialists initially exercised a policy of privileging their commercial interests and therefore, did not encourage Christian missionaries as it was believed that it would antagonize the local population. However, after 1813, the colonial government opened the British territories to the missionaries and propagating the Christian faith was seen as an essential part of the 'civilizing mission' assumed by the colonialists. To begin with, the missionaries tried out the 'percolation theory'. According to this theory, within a caste-based society where the upper castes exercised immense social power, if they would be able to convert the powerful Brahmins the rest of the society would emulate them, and the faith would percolate down to the lower rungs. However, the local traditions and systems of belief proved to be much more resilient than they had anticipated. The ideology of caste was all encompassing and made conversions of Brahmins well near impossible, as they insisted on them being allowed to retain their caste privilege even after conversion. This was not possible for most of the Christian denominations. Therefore, their attention shifted to those sections which were situated on the margins of the caste structure and the Hindu society – the Dalits and Adivasis. This strategy met with success and as a result the majority of the converts to Christianity belonged to these groups in the nineteenth century (Heredia, Religious Disarmament: Rethinking Conversion in India, 2007). The success of this strategy is borne out by the census figures between 1871 and 1901. This period saw a rapid rise in the population

of Christians in India and the converts belonged predominantly to the oppressed sections of the Hindu society and the tribals. Many conversions took place *en bloc* when the leaders of the caste or tribe decided to convert to Christianity and the rest of the members of the group followed them (Zavos, 2001).

As part of the civilizing mission, apart from encouraging proselytization, the colonial government also introduced western education for the natives as they wanted to produce a class of persons Indian in race and blood but English in tastes and opinions. They were convinced that once they had created such a class which was exposed to western education and morality, they would make better subjects and form the social basis of the legitimation of the state. In 1835, this scheme was given official assent and by 1844, the colonial government opened the gates of recruitment within the civil administration for the natives who had mastered English education. However, one of the biggest obstacles in operationalizing this scheme was the lack of funds at the disposal of the government. Given the hefty investment and administrative skills required, neither the private sector nor the philanthropists showed any overt interest in such an undertaking. Finally, the government turned to the Christian missionaries to set up educational institutes towards this end. The missionaries agreed but their primary objective in assisting the government was the propagation of Christianity (Copland, The Limits of Hegemony: Elite Response to Nineteenth-Century Imperial and Missionary Acculturation Strategies in India, 2007).

So, while the government ostensibly declared that it would pursue a policy of non-interference in the religious matters of the native society, it allowed the priests in these schools to preach the gospel after school hours and stock the Bible as well. The preachers who had not met with great success in their usual methods of proselytization turned to education as a means towards that end as well. However, these efforts yielded very limited success. Different sections of society reacted differently to these efforts and there was widespread popular hostility to Christian proselytization which was not restricted to the Hindus only but even the Parsi and Muslim communities shared this deep unease as well. In some instances, the converts were beaten up, boycotted, or even killed; as a result, by the middle of the nineteenth century, there were only fifty thousand Christians in India approximately and most of them had been converted in previous waves of proselytization in the South. This opposition to proselytization increased in the aftermath of the revolt of 1857; however, the demand for western

education did not decline as it was a proven method to obtain government jobs (Copland, The Limits of Hegemony: Elite Response to Nineteenth-Century Imperial and Missionary Acculturation Strategies in India, 2007).

It is in such a historical and political context that we must locate the establishment of the first Church in the Chotanagpur region in 1845 by the German Lutheran missionaries. The Munda and Oraon tribals had been forced to bear with 'conceptual denigration' at the hands of colonial ethnographers who placed them at the opposite end of the mainstream brahminical Hindu society (Bara, Alien Construct and Tribal Contestation in Colonial Chhotanagpur: The Medium of Christianity, 2009). It would not be incorrect to extend this characterization to all the tribes in Central India at the time. The tribal communities had to negotiate the increasing presence of outsiders into their territory during the colonial times – this entailed a cultural and economic loss for them as they were reduced from being original landowners to serf-like conditions. Unlike the case of the Dalits, the promise of equality and dignity did not appeal much to the tribes as they already possessed relatively egalitarian traditions within their own communities. However, the tribes used the Christian missionaries as an instrument to fight for their rights; and in this fight the medium of Christianity gave them the cultural and political resources to resist the oppression of the outsiders who were responsible for their economic exploitation while at the same time, proximity to the missionaries proved to be useful in bargaining with the all-powerful colonial state. (Bara, Western Education and Rise of New Identity: Mundas and Oraons of Chotanagpur, 1839 - 1939 , 1997).

Proselytization caught pace with the arrival of a Jesuit priest named Constance Livens who began with elementary education and health services but soon realised that the real problem faced by the tribes at the time was their inability to defend themselves in the court of law in cases of land alienation and debt bondage. Therefore, after a brief study of the land records and related laws, he began defending the tribals against the moneylenders and the colonial government successfully. This popularized Christianity among the tribes leading Livens to proclaim that the Zamindars are the best missionaries in Chhotanagpur. (Heredia, Religious Disarmament: Rethinking Conversion in India, 2007). The other major reason why the Jesuits found success among the tribes was because they allowed them to retain many of their customs unlike the protestants. At the same time, access to English education opened avenues of

upward mobility for the tribes and created a tribal middle class which became politically self-conscious and obtained the hitherto unavailable language of the politics of the 'mainstream'. As a result, it was this predominantly Christian middle class that formed a sizeable number among the leadership of the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj and the Adivasi Mahasabha which went on to articulate the demand of Jharkhand (Bara, Western Education and Rise of New Identity: Mundas and Oraons of Chotanagpur, 1839 - 1939 , 1997).

The relationship of the missionaries with the colonial government, though, was not always of collaboration; it was an ambivalent and vacillating relationship which was shaped by the competing imperatives of the colonial state to extract maximum surplus while managing the status quo as far as local configuration of power is concerned; while the missionaries were guided by the imperative of gaining as many converts as possible for their faith and denominations. Similarly, tribes also did not agree to all the dictates of the missionaries in political matters as is displayed by the trajectory of Birsa Munda's uprising; while the missionaries supported his struggle against the local moneylenders, they were hesitant to extend their support when he took a confrontationist stance against the colonial government. As a result, Birsa and his followers turned against the missionaries as well (Sharma K. L., 1976).

However, this is not to say that the missionaries did not use dubious means to achieve their ends as well. The first half of the twentieth century saw massive conversions amongst the tribes and thereby, the increasing influence of the missionaries. In some places this led to missionaries almost running a parallel administration which included compounding minor offences and making people pay fines into the mission accounts, concealing crimes, boycotting non-Christians, recruiting labour for the tea gardens, plantations and army and running cooperative banks into which remittances were deposited. There were instances of preference being accorded to Christians in matters of land settlement. In a Political Agent's report in 1913, it was stated that most conversion was taking place due to material incentives – namely assistance with marriage ceremonies, easy loans etc. The government of the Central Province, on its part, did not accept his report and did not take any action against such practices. However, in 1936, the Bishop of Ranchi was found to be using the desperate drought conditions in the area to extend loans on easy terms given that the tribals agreed to cut off their top knots, a practice borrowed from Hinduism. He raised a fraudulent demand

for funds from the government on the pretext of building new chapels and schools in the State of Udaipur, citing a huge demand from the area. However, the numbers that he had cited were inflated. As a result, an enquiry was ordered and thereafter, missions were asked to maintain registers of converts, missionaries, and preachers and to notify the government of changes in these numbers, if any. These provisions were the precursors to the anti-conversion bills that were later enacted in the states of Madhya Pradesh and Orissa (Sundar, Adivasi vs Vanvasi: The Politics of Conversion in Central India, 2016). It must be restated here that some of the missionaries were also indulging in the propagation of undiluted communalism against the Hindu religion (Guha, Savaging the Civilised: Verrier Elwin and the Tribal Question in Late Colonial India, 1996). The vilification of Hinduism as a philosophical and religious order was part of the colonial project of cultural domination which sought to portray the Hindu society as degenerate and therefore, required improvement through colonization (Zavos, 2001).

Another noteworthy dynamic was the opposition that the missionaries faced at the hands of the princely states. The authority of its rulers was based on the exploitative feudal system which was the primary cause of unrest among the poor tribals. The ruler was the symbolic figurehead of this system. So, in 1922 in the Jashpur State, for example, the Lutheran missionaries encouraged the tribals to refuse to do *begar*. Along with this, issues like excessive taxation and forest rights proposed by the ruler, were being opposed. During one of the demonstrations, violence broke out leading to the death of a constable and the ruler's forces retaliated violently, arresting and injuring the priests and tribals in the process. The ruler demanded that the colonial authority expel the missionaries out of his fiefdom. However, the ruler's demands were not met (Sundar, Adivasi vs Vanvasi: The Politics of Conversion in Central India, 2016).

The landlords and the rulers of various princely states, in response, actively patronised Hindu Nationalist formations who had organised at the grassroots level to respond to the rapid conversions amongst the tribal population. By 1940's organisations like the Arya Samaj, Hindu Mahasabha along with other lesser known organisations like the Shradhanand Trust, Shradhanand Dalitodhar Mission, Arya Pratinidhi Sabha and Bihar Navyuvak Society were actively involved in bringing the tribals back within the Hindu fold. Apart from carrying out reconversion through *Shuddhi* ceremonies, these organisations also raised two primary demands – firstly, to restrict the provision of privileges extended to the tribals only to those sections which have not converted to

Christianity; and secondly, to enumerate all non-Christian tribals under the category of Hindus in the census (Rizvi, 2014). These are important elements of the Hindutva discourse on tribals as both these demands make the tribal identity contingent upon Hinduism and the RSS and many organisations subscribing to Hindutva still raise such demands.

In line with this discourse, many princely states passed anti-conversion laws with a view to ban conversions to Christianity. These included the Raigarh State Conversion Act, 1936; the Surguja State Hindu Apostasy Act, 1945 and the Udaipur State Conversion Act, 1946 (Xaxa, Tribes, Conversion and Sangh Parivar, 2009). Paradoxically, missionary activity became easier in the post-independence period as propagation of religion was a Constitutionally guaranteed right, unlike the colonial era when the government had to balance various interests for its own perpetuation. This made the local rulers even more uncomfortable. After the protests against Ravi Shankar Shukla, Balasaheb Deshpande was appointed as the Director of the Tribal Welfare Department and posted in Jashpur. Here, imitating the missionary methods, within a year, Deshpande set up a hundred schools for tribal children in the district with the assistance of the State and the local ruler of Jashpur (Sundar, Adivasi vs Vanvasi: The Politics of Conversion in Central India, 2016).

The antipathy of the local rulers with the Christian missionaries was well reflected in the number of anti-conversion bills that they had introduced. In continuance of that trend, the ruler of Jashpur, Vijay Bhushan Singh Judeo, patronized the VKA and donated a part of his property to set up the Ashram. Thereafter, he donated a fixed percentage of his privy purse to cover the expenses of routine work of the VKA apart from donating more land to the organization over time (Sapre, 2014). He is described by one of the senior VKA pracharaks as "a staunch advocate of Hindutva and a patriot" (Kuber, 2019). Of course, his feudal interests seamlessly aligned with the anti-missionary agenda of the VKA as well.

In the narrative of the RSS, the VKA is not a political organization but a means to carry out 'Seva' or serve the tribal population. However, a closer enquiry reveals that Seva is a very important medium for constructing the Hindu identity and consolidating the Hindu fold. The medium of Seva as a political tool was introduced by Hindu *Sangathans* or organizations which sprang up in response to the Christian missionary

activity in the late nineteenth century. These *Sangathans* emulated two key features of the Christian missionaries which they considered to be its strengths – first, the process of building up a Church-like congregation called missions and secondly, their tradition of providing social service. The medium of Seva became a very important part of the strategy of the RSS under the stewardship of M. S. Golwalkar, its second Sarsanghchalak. It was part of the effort to recast the organization in a new mold following the ban on it in the aftermath of the murder of Gandhi by an ex-member. It was Golwalkar who started this tradition of "targeted Seva" to cater to the marginalized groups like the so-called lower castes, tribals and women through this network of affiliates. (Bhattacharjee, 2016).

The RSS functions through its affiliates like the Sewa Bharti for service; Vidya Bharti for education; Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram for tribal welfare to entrench itself in the society through social work. All these organizations work in co-ordination and further the agenda of Hindutva through their everyday interactions within society. By some estimates, these organizations together run nearly 67, 000 educational projects, around 20, 000 health projects, over 19, 000 self-reliance projects and over 20, 000 social projects (Bhattacharjee, 2016). The VKA alone runs 250 hostels, around 4, 000 health projects and around 1, 500 Ekal Vidyalaya or Single Teacher Schools in the tribal areas. Some Ekal Vidyalaya are run by the VHP in tribal areas as well as those areas which are backward in nature (Kuber, 2019).

The VKA was a part of this political design when it was established in 1952. In its early phase, its activities were restricted in and around the Jashpur district of undivided Madhya Pradesh. Gradually, by 1968 it was decided to extend its presence to areas of Chhotanagpur and West Bengal among other regions. It was in this period that a hostel for tribal students was planned in Jhabua in western Madhya Pradesh. However, it was only after the end of the Emergency in 1977 that the VKA assumed a truly national character and ambition (Sapre, 2014).

The four projects of the VKA, apart from the hostels, which set it apart from any other social service organization are - the *Shraddhajagaran* Prakalp or Faith Awakening Project which was started in 1962; *Jan Swaasth Aayaam* or People's Healthcare Project which was started in 1964 but functioned with a certain stability only after 1971; *Vanvasi Hitraksha* Prakalpa or Tribal Rights Protection Project which was started in

1977; *Eklavya Khelkood Prakalp* or the Eklavya Sports Project which was started in 1987 (Sapre, 2014). It is through these projects, in co-ordination with the affiliates of the RSS mentioned above, that the VKA employs the medium of Seva to intervene within the civil society and construct the Hindu identity within the tribal areas.

Through the medium of Seva or service, the VKA fulfils three objectives – firstly, it provides an effective counter to the tactic of missionaries of converting tribes through the provision of material allurements; secondly, it extends the presence of the Hindu public sphere in tribal areas where through schools, hostels, health projects etc. Hindu Nationalist ideology is propagated; thirdly, the medium of service becomes a useful means of winning goodwill among the tribal communities which live in very deprived regions and this enables the VKA to mobilize the tribal population for their electoral and non-electoral ends. It must be reiterated that Seva as a political means of mobilization was employed by Gandhian activists as well. However, the VKA has recalibrated it into a means of 'embedded mobilization' (Thachil, 2011).

The VKA activists, by posing as 'apolitical' service providers among the tribal population, are able to influence their political behaviour by embedding themselves within the community (Thachil, 2011). In fact, the VKA activists exhibit a certain disdain for 'politics', which comes across as a dishonourable and Machiavellian undertaking in their description; whereas they describe their own work as 'social service', something which they consider much more noble and unselfish. This is borne out by the contrasting ways they are described in the narrative of the RSS:

On RSS:

"*Sangh ka kaam toh vyakti nirman ka kaam hai, toh achchi baaten seekhna hai, koi bhrastachar nahi karna. Galat vyavhar nahi karna, ladkiyon mahilaon ke sath aisa nahi anaachaar nahin karna. Apna dharma kya hai aur wo shresth kaise hai ye batana.*" (Kuber, 2019)

On Politics:

"*... Toh rajneeti main ye chalta hai, aap ne dekha ki Maharashtra main kya ho raha hai. Aise bolte hain ki rajneeti aur yudh main jo us samay apne ko madad kar de uska sath apne ko lena hai. Aur rajneeti tabhi badlegi jab samaj jagrut hoga sashakt hoga tab rajneeti ke logon pe bhi usi prakar se kaam karna padega.*" (Kuber, 2019)

All the morally and ethically appropriate qualities are linked to the work of the RSS, whereas, through the example of the Maharashtra Assembly elections, politics is portrayed as something unprincipled, whose only aim is to grab power at all costs. This narrative also reasserts the centrality of the social sphere in the design of the RSS and the VKA. This studied distance from and disdain for "politics", paradoxically enables the practice of the most viciously unscrupulous politics by the leaders of the BJP, when required, because that is how it is supposed to be anyway. It is but a means to an end – which is establishing ideological hegemony in the social sphere.

This strategy also enables the BJP to appeal to the largest cross section of the population – across the caste and class divide – without having to offer any programmatic clarity in terms of policies to the electorate and balance the contradictions that arise out of governance. The VKA, for example, has been opposing the recent policy moves of the NDA Government regarding the provisions of Indian Forest Act:

"*Virodh toh kar hi rahe hain uske sambandh main. Indian Forest Act ka jo virodh abhi peeche kiya wo toh kai maheeno se virodh kiya hai. Ye kalyan ashram ke sangathan ne kiya aisa bol nahi sakte, ye toh rajnitik party aur bureaucrats ka bhi rehta hai. Ab kya hua na ki Van aur Land ye dono ka hai - Rajya ka bhi Vishay hai aur Kendra ka bhi, toh 10-11 rajyon ne alag-alag kanoon bana rakhe hain. Parson jaise Javdekar ji ne bataya ki saare kanoon ko leke aur unka adhyayan karke wo kya hai uska ek draft hamare bureaucrat logon ne banaya hai aur wo sab rajyon main adhyayan karne ke liye bheja hai. Halanki humne toh usko bhi criticise kiya hai ki agar aapne sare stakeholders ke liye batane ko bola hai toh wo toh ho nahi sakta is prakar se. Toh abhi toh theek hai peeche le liya hai unhone. Aur hum toh isliye virodh kar rahe hain ki PESA aur vanadhikar implement ho jaye, wo hone ke pehle hi aap adhikar ko cheen rahe ho vapas. Toh usko implement kariye ye agrah ka vishey hamra aaj bhi hai.*" (Kuber, 2019).

The VKA opposed this legislation by passing a resolution in their Kendriya Karyakari Mandal (Organiser, 2019). In the representation to the Union Government, they raised two principal objections – firstly, that the draft was prepared in English and hence, was unintelligible to the overwhelming majority of the tribal population; and secondly, the time alloted for feedback was too little, given that it was an election year. However, the VKA did not take an unequivocal position on the proposed amendments, thereby,

setting aside room for manoeuvre when the negotiations eventually take place (Ramchandran, 2019). This measured approach might also be because the current Union Government is led by the BJP and hence, the opposition was not vocal but carried out through petitions and prayers, or it might be a structural constraint for an organization which believes in assimilation of the tribes and hence, aims to balance the interests of the tribal sections with the non-tribal sections of the society.

However, apart from enabling electoral mobilization, the more important and everyday task of the VKA schools, hostels and medical projects is to construct a Hindu public sphere to impart 'Hindu' *Sanskars* or values among the tribal population. In fact, Deshpande considered the protection of *Dharma* and culture as the 'essential' task of the VKA, in the absence of which, other work, which may be termed 'non-essential', loses its meaning. It was this emphasis that the VKA laid on the defence of *Dharma* and culture among the tribals that set it apart from other organizations which work for tribal welfare (Sapre, 2014). This clearly illustrates that all the projects are secondary and instrumental in nature, while defence of *Dharma*, i.e. propagation and popularization of Hindu socio-religious codes among the tribals is the primary task of the VKA.

So, while the VKA accuses the Christian misisonaries of eroding the culture of the tribals, they do not actively participate in conserving it either, except when it has to be done instrumentally to demarcate themselves from the Christians; for instance, the VKA activists tried to stop the practioners of Adi Dharma from performing the ritual of planting a sapling in the *akhara* and took the matter to the police. However, although they would resist such practices they would not go all out because it is considered an internal fight within the Hindu fold (Sundar, Adivasi vs Vanvasi: The Politics of Conversion in Central India, 2016).

Figure 1: Entrance of VKA Hostel in Alirajpur.

This was what I came across in my field visit to a VKA run hostel named *Shri Vallabh Vanvasi Balak Ashram* in the district of Alirajpur on the afternoon of 12th February 2020. There are two more such hostels in Jhabua. I was given a tour of the premises by Shankar Ningwal who was the *Chhatravaas Pramukh* or Hostel Incharge. He refused to let me record the interview as I did not have requisite permission from the appropriate authority in the VKA bureaucracy; however, since I had come through a reference of a functionary of the RSS network in the district, he hesitantly showed me around and answered my questions.

Shankar was 46 years old and belonged to the Bhilala tribe. He obtained a master's degree in Commerce from a local college, which at the time was rare among the members of his community in the area. Maybe only two or three more people had the same degree at the time, according to him. He joined the RSS in Middle School and has been an active member since his youth. From this information it can be surmised that he belonged to a comparatively well-off and well-integrated family of Bhilalas which practised agriculture, given that he had a college education in a district where the literacy rate was 36% as per the last census.

The hostel had a total of 37 tribal students from classes sixth to tenth. These residents were provided food and lodging free of cost. The VKA-run school in the compound is affiliated to the Madhya Pradesh Board of Secondary Education and its medium of instruction was Hindi. The annual fees of the school came to fifteen thousand rupees approximately. There was no compulsion on the hostel residents to attend the VKA-run school and around 12 students attended the Government school of the area while staying at the Hostel.

All the hostel residents had to follow a very strict daily routine. As per the routine, the students wake up early in the morning and then do *Suryanamaskar*, a Yoga exercise, which is followed by the morning prayer of the RSS which goes on for around 15 minutes in which all the great figures of the nation's history are remembered. This is followed by breakfast and school. Upon their return they have time dedicated for their studies. However, in the evening, there is the RSS *Shakha* conducted in the compound in which they take part. This comes under their physical activity which is followed by *Bhajan* sessions in the prayer room located at the top floor of the hostel. After that the residents watch television for some time and then go off to bed.

The prayer room is very austere with small stone shelves at the corner which hold the pictures of all the Gods. Prominently, the photos of Ganesh and Krishna are placed at the top along with photos of leaders of the sect called the Gayatri Parivar. Below this are photos of Shiva, Lakshmi, Saraswati. At the side, in the second shelf, there is a picture of the sanctum sanctorum of the *Shabari Dham* which has the figures of Shabari sitting at the feet of Ram and Lakshman. Shabari is the only supposed tribal figure on that shelf. There are no pictures of tribal Gods of the Bhils and the Bhilalas other than that.

Figure 2: The Prayer Hall of the VKA Hostel in Alirajpur.

The quality of the construction of the hostel is good and it seems recently built; a fact which shows that fifteen long years in power for the BJP in the state makes funds available for such endeavours as well. The dormitories of the hostels are named after important figures in the pantheon of Hindutva like Maharana Pratap and Vivekanand. Interestingly, when I interacted with the children, they greeted me by saying, "*Jai Shri Ram*", a greeting which I heard only at that hostel. I did not come across such a greeting

again during my entire field visit as the tribals in the villages greeted each other by saying, *"Ram-Ram"*, a common greeting across the villages of the Hindi speaking states. Moreover, the walls were decorated by sketches and paintings made by the young residents, which again included important figures of Hindutva like Savarkar among many others.

Figure 3: Entrance of Dormitories, VKA Hostel in Alirajpur.

So, the essential work of imparting Hindu *Sanskars* among the tribals, according to Deshpande, is done indirectly through the internalization of a certain regime followed by students in the VKA-run hostels which leads to a subtle but definite acculturation and Hinduization. The symbols, images and habits around which the entire routine of the hostel is designed, subconsciously normalizes the Hindu cultural and religious values at the expense of the indigenous tribal ones, exacerbating the process of Hinduization among the tribal students and making it a part of their self during the formative years of their lives. The complete absence of tribal Gods except Shabari – who is also an import of the Hindutva discourse - in the prayer hall and the religious greeting by the students are striking examples of this.

However, there are only three VKA hostels in the district – two in Jhabua and one in Alirajpur. These are obviously insufficient to cater to the demands of a large tribal population. However, the RSS works through a network of organizations and is not dependent on any one affiliate. The other major means of embedded mobilization employed by the RSS is its voluntary work at watershed development through an NGO called Shivganga. This project was started by Mahesh Sharma, a full-timer of the

Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad and Harsh Choudahry, a member of the RSS. He is a member of the Bhilala community and has a royal lineage. He completed his MTech at IIT Delhi and is the VKA-incharge of Madhya Pradesh.

The overwhelming majority of Jhabua's population is involved in small-scale agriculture; however, the region faces a major problem of lack of water for irrigation and irregular and uneven rainfall pattern means that drought-like conditions arise frequently (Das, 2008). Shivganga is a social organization which aims at creating infrastructure for making check dams and ponds for water conservation. Towards this end, they take up the task of training the village youth of the region as 'Village Engineers'. However, this aim of the organization was arrived upon after brainstorming sessions with the tribal youth of the villages and was not imposed from the outside:

"18 se 20 percent dropouts ki sankhya hai. unhone 5th, 6th, 8th tak padhai kari phir dropout ho gaye aur ab 18 saal se upar ho gaye. Aisi ek badi population hai gaon main. Aur ye ek badi energy ho sakti hai gaon main unke liye kuch karne ko… dusri ye bhi thi ki ek energy hai gaon main isme shuru karte hain. Humne isko naam diya vanachal sashaktikaran yojna. Samanyatah jab vikas ki baat hoti hai toh vyakti ke empowerment ki baat hoti hai bas. Woh bhi ek financial formality hi reh jati hai. Humne bola aisa nahi hoga balki poore khsetra ka sashaktikaran karna hoga. Hum logon ne gaon ke yuvaon ka prashikshan shuru kiya 3 divasiya. 3 din ka rakha jisme ye sikhaya ki gaon ka vikas kaise ho. Aisa karke humne yuvaon ko jodna shuru kiya. Usme ye sochna hai ki apne gaon ke dukh kya hai, uske karan hum kya sochte hain, uska nivaran hum kya sochte hain. Aur nirantar yehi sochna ki gaon ka kaise karen. Aise sabse kiya toh sabne identify kiya ki pani ek problem hai." (Choudhary, 2020)

The emphasis of the project is to develop "social leadership" as opposed to political leadership. The organization has spread to 800 villages of the region over the last two decades:

"Ye jo prakshishan hai teen din wala aisa toh 800 gaon kar liya hain. Aur 200-250 aise hain jinme logon ne seekh ke apne gaon main kuch kiya hai. Pani rokne ke liye, ped lagane ke liye kuch. Aur ab ye yuva team hai karte karte lead role main aa gayi hai. Shuru main agar main 93-96 ka sochun toh wahan social leadership ka bhi abhav tha. Jo bhi leadership thi wo political thi. Aisa hota tha ki gaon main jao toh aap kiske paas jaoge. Jaise aap bata rahe the ki wo bole ki jab tak likhit aadesh nahi hoga toh gaon

main pehle aisi sthiti thi ki jao hamara neta hai pehle usse baat karo. Wo ek samanya cheez thi aur aap se wo baat hi nahi karenge. Ye mana hi jata tha ki uske through hi aao. Aisa hota toh ki bahut badi rukavat hai lekin ab ek samajik netritv tayyar ho raha hai iske dwara." (Choudhary, 2020)

The reason is that hegemony in the social sphere is of utmost importance; constructive activities of an everyday nature are encouraged over joining a political party because the latter leads to ideological baggage which apparently leads to an alienation from the grassroots. One must represent the "*Samaj*" not a Party. A familiar trope of disdain for politics and elevation of social work or *Seva* can be located even here in the design of Shivganga as well:

"Woh kya hai uska political affiliation ho jata hai aur political party ka karykarta ban jata hai wo. per samaj ka karyakarta nahi reh pata. Wo ho hi jata hai. Kyunki samaj hai na political vichardhara se bahut alag nahi reh pata, per uski apni pesh hai. Main bhi jaise bolta hun ki socho tum ki activism theek hai per activity zaruri hai. Haan lekin agar activity karne wala vyakti activism main jayega toh wo prabhavi hoga. Agar hum itihas dekhen toh wo activism safal hua hai jiske base main activity thi pehle. Abhi ye kya naya shuru hua hai… Wo samaj main kuch kaam kar raha hai, change ke liye. Usne khud mehsoos kiya hai isliye usko laga ki samaj main aisa nahi aur isliye activist ban gaya. Abhi aisa nahi ho raha na… Abhi kya hai wo sare narrative chal rahe hain, political activity chal rahi hai aur wo involve ho gaya hai. Uski jo political affiliation hai wo us political party aur vichardhara se ho gayi. Usko zameen ki anubhuti hai hi nahi." (Choudhary, 2020)

This intervention has earned the organization a lot of goodwill and popularity across the state. However, Shivganga does not restrict itself to building infrastructure to conserve water, but on the contrary uses this goodwill for the subtle purpose of Hinduizing of the public sphere. The tribal youth involved with the Shivganga project hold *Kaanwar Yatras* every year with the express aim of developing a *Teerth* or holy place in their respective villages under the campaign of "*Mera Gaaon, Mera Teerth*"; furthermore, youth teams in every village take up the public celebration of Ganesh Chaturthi as part of their 'leadership' role.

In such a scenario where the state has proved to be ineffective and corrupt in addressing the everyday problems of the common tribals and ensuring that they are included in the

process of development, the RSS-VKA step in through their network of social organizations to mobilize the tribals through seemingly apolitical activities. This helps them in electoral as well as ideological mobilizations from time to time.

Hitherto, the phenomenon of Hinduization of tribes was understood primarily through three conceptual approaches. Firstly, through the approach known as the, 'Hindu method of tribal absorption'. It was a gradual method of absorption which took place mainly under the system of organisation of production based on caste. This system was based on reciprocity. The tribes were drawn to this method of absorption within the caste system because the productive activities of various castes were protected from competition under this system. It was a complex and protracted process. The second approach states that in order to understand the process of Hinduization it has to be located within the overarching context of 'state formation' which led to the transformation of tribes into regional castes. The third approach can be called the process of Sanskritization; according to which groups lower down in the hierarchy try and adopt the lifestyle of groups above them in the hierarchy. The increasing contact with the caste society due to changing economic and political forces led to such acculturation and emulation among the tribes. Although, this approach has been criticized because the tribes tended to exist outside the caste hierarchy altogether; so, when and why did this emulation and transformation take place becomes very difficult to establish. However, this organized intervention by the VKA has changed the nature of Hinduization of the tribal identity decisively because in earlier methods of Hinduization, no outside political agency was involved in the process; it took place on its own over a very long period of time (Xaxa, Tribes, Conversion and Sangh Parivar, 2009).

Moreover, the earlier conversion was towards a religion but what VKA is facilitating is a conversion to a political ideology as well, where faith or doctrinal commitment within the religion compliments and is derived from the larger political project of constructing a *Hindu Rashtra*. In the process, the forces of Hindutva are fundamentally changing the nature of Hinduism itself. Hinduism is doctrinally a non-proselytizing religion. This aspect of Hinduism within the discourse of Hindutva, however, was a feature which was viewed negatively and as a serious shortcoming because it made the religion vulnerable to the attacks by the other religions which undertook conversions. Therefore, this aspect had to be changed (Katju, The Early Vishwa Hindu Parishad:

1964 - 1983, 1998). To evade this apparent contradiction, the VKA and VHP have rebranded their proselytization as reconversion or *Ghar Wapsi.* So as per the argument of the VKA all tribals, by definition, are Hindus, and so their activities cannot be looked at from the same lens as those of the Christian missionaries: since the VKA is merely bringing them back in to the Hindu fold. Therefore, the anti-conversion laws do not apply on them.

Conclusion

The present chapter has attempted to understand the history and politics of conversion in India and the concomitant evolution of the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram. The matter of conversion out of the Hindu fold has always been a matter of great social and political import in the Indian context. The three main figures who rearticulated the Hindu identity in the nineteenth century - Savarkar, Gandhi and Ambedkar - also laid the foundation of varying approaches to the act of conversion out of Hinduism which is still a polarising issue even to this day.

While Savarkar and Gandhi were both staunch opponents of conversion out of the Hindu fold, their reasoning, and approaches to questions of conversion and faith were totally divergent. Gandhi was a man of great faith and had tied this faith with the precepts of non-violence and Truth. He honestly attempted to practice his faith and that involved a heavy ethical and moral investment in it. For him, the mere act of conversion was insufficient to ensure moral upliftment.

Savarkar, on the other hand, was an atheist and had little faith in the myths, doctrines, and ideals of Hindu religion. However, he did not shy away from using these myths and ideals symbolically to construct his political narrative and the modern Hindu identity. He emptied out the category of Hindu and rearticulated it in racial, civilizational, and cultural terms, thereby, allowing him to label all faiths and communities which had their origin within India as Hindus. In the process, he excluded the Semitic religions of Islam and Christianity. Therefore, while he was against the conversion of Hindus or tribals to Semitic faiths, he encouraged their reconversion through the means of *Shuddhi* back in to the Hindu fold, whereas Gandhi opposed even the *Shuddhi* ceremony.

The main difference between the two opponents of conversion was their approach to the Semitic religions or the Other. For Savarkar, the other represented a mortal threat and had to be eliminated, laced as his philosophical framework was with a deep

'demographic anxiety'. Gandhi's approach was informed by a radical openness and hence, the other had to be invited for a dialogue and both the parties were to become better practitioners of their faith as a result.

Ambedkar, as opposed to these two, was a Dalit. Given the harsh lived experience within a caste-based society, reform for him was not a moral imperative, but an existential requirement. In his career, he first attempted to reform Hinduism from within by supporting mass thread ceremonies, organising movements like the Mahad Satyagraha and various temple entry movements. However, soon he was convinced that Hindu system was anchored in the principle of inequality and unless he changed this moral anchor by fundamentally breaking away from the Brahminincal gaze, there was no chance of the Dalits achieving equality and dignity, in the present. Therefore, he converted to Navayana Buddhism; as according to him, it was only within this normative framework that the Dalits could attain the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity.

These three approaches inform the present-day debates around conversion as well. The VKA synthesized the ideology of Savarkar with the method of Gandhi to start their work among the tribals under the leadership of Balasaheb Deshpande. However, it must be noted that the VKA was not motivated by the urge to 'serve' the tribals, unlike the Gandhians, although afterwards they co-opted the term for their political ends. The VKA's primary motivation was to check the spread of Christianity among the tribal population.

As per the narrative of the VKA, Christianity was imposed upon the simple and unsuspecting tribal population by the shrewd missionaries. However, a closer perusal of the history of the popularization of Christianity in India, in general and the tribal population in particular, brings out a different picture. Majority of the converts to Christinaity in the nineteenth century were the Dalits and tribals. For the Dalits, Christianity became a medium to escape the moral anchors of Brahminical Hinduism which informed the system of graded inequality. However, the tribals did not share this motivation for conversion as they already had relatively egalitarian communities. The tribals, on the other hand, used the medium of Christianity to fulfil their own economic, political and cultural ends (Bara, Adivasis and the Conversion Conundrum: Some Lessons from History, 2017).

Christianity ensured upward mobility through English education and employment; but most importantly, the missionaries helped them in their battles against the moneylenders and the colonial government. As a result of this, Christianity spread rapidly within the Chotanagpur region; however, this also invited the wrath of the local rulers whose power was dependent on upholding the feudal order which the missionaries were resisting.

Antipathy to proselytization was not a novel phenomenon and was not restricted only to the Hindus and existed way before the RSS or Hindu Mahasabha had even taken shape. However, among the feudal elites and the revivalists, this antipathy was the most pronounced. Hence, they came together and organised against the missionaries in the pre-independence period which resulted in the enactment of many anti-conversion laws by the princely states. It was this strain of illiberal and revivalist tradition vis-a-vis Christian missionaries upon which the VKA drew to consolidate ideologically and organisationally.

The VKA imitated the Christian missionaries and set up schools, hostels and medical centres through which they began their work to 'serve' the tribals. However, this service apparatus performed various functions. It ensured embedded mobilization for the BJP, but most importantly, it allowed them to check the spread of Christianity and to propagate the ideology of Hindu Nationalism. The students in the VKA-run schools and hostels are imparted Hindu values through seemingly routine practices like participating in *bhajans* and *arti*; attending the *Shakha*; performing Yoga every morning or greeting each other by invoking Hindu Gods.

Apart from schools, they intervene through a plethora of social organizations, to fill in the vacuum created by an unresponsive and corrupt state. One such initiative is the Shivganga project which is ostensibly an NGO geared towards holistic development of villages and watershed development. The project mobilizes and trains tribal youths from villages to address the persistent problem of droughts and shortage of water in the region. This is done by training the tribal youths as Village Engineers to build small check dams and ponds. Apart from that, they also encourage organic farming and forest conservation. The idea is to build up a 'social leadership' from among the tribal youth in villages dedicated to the welfare of the village itself. This initiative has brought the Organization a lot of goodwill. However, apart from its developmental activities, the

Organization also takes up *Kaanwar Yatras*, organizes public celebrations of the Ganesh festivals through its team of volunteers in their villages and encourages them to develop Holy sites or *Teerth* in their respective villages. Thus, the developmental work becomes a subtle instrument in the larger project of Hinudizing the public sphere in the tribal tracts.

This has transformed the process of Hinduization among the tribals. Earlier approaches were characterized by gradual absorption within the Hindu fold as a caste over a long period of time. This process was not facilitated by an outside agency and was autonomous in nature. The VKA, with its imitation of the missionaries and the organised dissemination of Hindu values has changed the nature of this process and Hinduism itself which was a non-proselytizing religion. This change is directed not only towards a religion but towards a political ideology. However, they have branded this proselytization as 'reconversion', implying that all tribals were originally Hindus.

To sum up, it is often argued that the Chrsitian missionaries and the VKA are destroying tribal culture. While both these forces vehemently deny this charge and position themselves as protectors of tribal culture; it must be asserted that such claims are based on the false assumption that culture is a stagnant and closed phenomenon. Nothing like the 'authentic' tribal culture exists, especially after seventy years of assimilation brought about by the all–encompassing state and market forces. Culture in the tribal hinterlands of western Madhya Pradesh is a cite of intense political contestation and Hinduization is one dominant manifestation of it. The next chapter attempts to understand this process of Hinduization among the tribes.

5. Hinduization and the Construction of the Vanvasi Identity

Q: Aaj adivasi hone ka kya arth hai?
A: Bas usme paida hue hain wahi bacha hai baki kuch nahi hai.

- *Laxman Muneea, Petlavad*

Introduction

The modern Hindu identity has been constructed over a century-and-a-half as a result of interaction with the state, first under the aegis of colonialism. Colonialism decisively displaced the Hindu discourse, forcing the Hindu elites to rearticulate it within the context of the national movement and the concomitant process of state formation as a form of cultural defence. This defence took three major forms – revival, renegotiation and rejection. Different sections of the Hindu social order adopted different forms, given their subject position within the system of graded inequality mediated by their historical experience.

Colonialism ended the 'evaluative isolation' of Hinduism and forced it into an encounter with semitic and proselytizing religions such as Christianity on a large scale, under the aegis of colonialism. The ideological justification of the colonial state was to 'civilize' the native population and that entailed getting rid of the subject's superstitious and backward practices and spreading the word of Christ. However, in its earliest phase, the colonial state chose not to interfere in the religious matters of the colonized society and concentrated exclusively on surplus extraction.

In the aftermath of the War of Independence of 1857, the policy of detached administration of the colonial state came to an end. Thereafter, the colonial state introduced laws for social reform and decided to set up schools which would impart English education to create a class of Indians who were Indian by birth but British in their cultural preferences. The idea had been around for a while but gained traction only after the revolt. However, at the time, the government could not allocate funds for such an endeavour. Since the private sector also didn't show any interest in investing in such schools, they turned to the missionaries for this project. The missionaries agreed to assist the colonial government in its project - on the condition, however, that they be allowed to proselytize. The colonial state acquiesced to their demands, and thus began

the rather ambivalent and chequered relationship between the colonial state and the Christian missionaries.

Indian society, across religions, was resistant to the proselytizing instincts of the Church. However, among the tribes, Christianity became a medium of negotiating with the colonial state, a resource to resist the exploitation of landlords and moneylenders, a means to access western education and thereby, to chalk out a path of upward mobility. It was owing to these factors that Christianity became popular among the tribes, especially in the Chotanagpur region.

The introduction of the census and the policy of granting communal representation by the colonial government inaugurated the era of demographic politics and gave birth to profound demographic anxieties. In this context, the non-proselytizing nature of Hinduism began to be looked upon as a shortcoming which needed to be cured. Conversion became a matter of great political importance. This anxiety triggered the beginning of active Hinduization among tribal communities, a process which till now had been occurring passively.

In the post-independence period, ironically, conversion to Christianity became easier due to the incorporation of liberal principles within the Constitution regarding freedom to practice and preach one's religion. It was to counter this supposed 'threat' that the VKA came into existence as an agent of active Hinduization. However, as pointed out earlier, these processes of Hinduization were already in motion when the VKA arrived. Therefore, to understand the phenomenon of Hinduization among the tribes, we need to situate it within the context of the structural socio-economic changes which took place in the polity.

In understanding the process of Hinduization among the tribes, the most important question that comes up is - If the Hindu fold is perceived to be humiliating for those at the bottom of the hierarchy because of the system of graded inequality under the caste system, why do many among the tribal population make this choice? The objective of this chapter is to attempt to answer this question.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part situates the phenomenon of Hinduization within the context of historical and socio-economic transformation of the traditional social structure, which is its fundamental enabling condition. The second part discusses the historical antecedents of Hinduization among tribes in western

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Madhya Pradesh. The third section attempts to bring out the narratives of the Vanvasi identity employed by the VKA and other affiliates of the RSS. This is followed by an analysis of their methods of identity construction and the operationalization of these techniques of Hinduization based on interviews conducted during fieldwork.

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The Conceptual Riddle of Mapping Social Change among Tribes

The concept of Hinduization has evolved in contradistinction to the concept of Sanskritization. The latter thesis, advanced by renowned sociologist M. N. Srinivas, posited that caste groups which were pegged at the lower end of the hierarchy of the caste system moved up the ranks by emulating the dominant castes of the region. This process of upward mobility through emulation was called Sanskritization. However, the application of this framework to map cultural change among the tribes has been contested. The primary objection to the adoption of this approach to the tribes is that if we apply this framework to the tribes then we must presuppose that tribes are also part of the Hindu society and by extension the caste society; whereas tribes have been primarily defined in opposition to castes (Xaxa, State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial india, 2008).

Xaxa argues that while there was some cultural emulation by the tribes due to increasing interaction with the larger Hindu society, this did not lead to upward mobility for them. Even in cases where the heads of tribes adopted the Kshatriya status, their subjects remained outside the Hindu society and did not experience any upward mobility. Majority of the tribes did not become part of the caste structure and their social life also remained unaltered based on kinship relations. What took place in the case of tribes, then, could be more accurately described as Hinduization, wherein the tribes were acculturated to the ideas, values and practices of the dominant community by the simple process of contact and not for mobility (Xaxa, State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial india, 2008).

Religious reform movements have been a major source of Hinduization among the tribes. These movements have been a result of the act of internal criticism where the community sought to reform itself and its religious practices to improve its lot. This took two directions – one led to the assertion of the original tenets of their tribal religion and the other pushed towards the adoption of more powerful deities through

Hinduization and Christianity. The Bhagat movements are an apt example of the latter where the tribes adopted certain practices and values of Hinduism in their endeavour (Xaxa, State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial india, 2008). However, there are some limitations in this conception of Hinduization as advanced by Xaxa, which need to be pointed out especially with regard to Bhils in western Madhya Pradesh.

He argues that in the post-independence period, another method of Hinduization was that of 'coercive absorption'. Unlike the original process of Hindu absorption which took place voluntarily due to economic co-operation and security, coercive absorption took place through the administrative practices of the state which refused to give tribals the choice of declaring their religion outside the major religions of the world. Thereby, the tribes were enumerated as Hindus in the numerous census exercises which took place in the post-independence period (Xaxa, State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial india, 2008).

This characterization seems unfair. While it is true that the state should have given the tribes the option of enumerating themselves through the category of tribal religions, simple enumeration cannot qualify as absorption. The question that we need to answer is how Hindu beliefs and practices permeated into the consciousness of the tribal society. In fact, Hinduization has become a widespread phenomenon among the tribes in Madhya Pradesh. This is because of the structural changes which the Hindu social order has undergone in the recent period owing to the process of secularization unleashed by modernity.

Secularization and the Transformation of the Traditional Social Structure

It is important to sketch the broad contours of the larger socio-historical process of secularization and the attendant process of de-ritualization because they have had a determinative impact on Hindu religion as well as the social order. Therefore, they structure the entire discourse of identity construction in the present context.

At its most elementary level, the concept of secularization could be defined as the loss of belief in a God or religion within a society. This trend can be mapped by a decrease in the observance of traditional habits such as going to the mosque or church or the prohibition against religiously derived practices like abstaining from the consumption of beef or pork (Bilgrami, Secularism, Identity and Enchantment, 2015). However, this characterization is deemed to be insufficient as it can be argued that a diminishing

public role for religion and declining involvement in religious institutions leave 'true religion' untouched to a large extent. Faith is not something that lends itself to an easy examination. It is possible that there is no direct correlation between observing traditional practices as mandated by religion and having a deeply held faith. Hence, through the decline of these observances, what is lost is actually a shallow adherence to and performance of religious roles and rituals and not the withering of religious faith. Therefore, an alternative definition of secularization restricts it to the phenomenon of diminishing social significance of religion, which implies that there is a discernible decline in the difference that religion makes in the operation of social roles and institutions as well as beliefs and actions of the individual (Wallis & Bruce, 1992).

This diminution in the social significance of religion is brought about by the processes that modernization unleashes on society, namely social differentiation, societalization and rationalization. Firstly, the process of social differentiation creates specialized roles to handle specific functions which were hitherto carried out by a single institution. So, while the religious institutions were primarily responsible for imparting education or scientific research in the earlier epochs, these roles are fulfilled by specialized institutions in the secular age. Social differentiation also leads to a growing range of occupational diversity and life situations due to economic modernization and growth. This multiplicity of life experiences shatters the single moral universe and makes way for the emergence of a plurality of moral conceptions which compete with each other (Wallis & Bruce, 1992).

The second element of secularization is called societalization whereby, increasingly, life is not organized locally but societally. This refers to the process by which large communities tend to replace the small, closely knit communities given the emergence of large-scale industrial and commercial enterprises. These large communities are mostly nation-states. As a result of the disintegration of local communities, religion becomes a private matter and no longer a necessity to organically hold up the social order by an overarching moral framework (Wallis & Bruce, 1992).

The third and the final feature of secularization is the process of rationalization. While the earlier two elements were structural changes, rationalization refers to changes in the way people think and act. Weber charts out four different kinds of rationality – practical, substantive, theoretical and formal. Under conditions of modernity, people

develop modes of thinking which involve the search for the best means to an end but within the matrix of rules and regulations (Scott, 2015).

This process also involves the pursuit of technically efficient means of securing this-worldly ends. One of its most potent forms is the development of technology and machinery. The development and entrenchment of technical rationality increases efficiency and reduces uncertainty, in turn, reducing reliance on faith and thereby, undermining the significance of religion (Wallis & Bruce, 1992).

It is important to note that the Indian trajectory of secularization is structured by its own historical contingencies. Vanaik argues that in the west, the term secularization emerged after the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. At the ideological level the enlightenment, the gradual diffusion of scientific temper, and formation of a civil society owing to capitalist industrialization which forced a reassessment about the nature and position of religion in the society. Along with these factors, equally important were the practical considerations - namely the unending and exhausting wars of religion and sectarian strife. The Treaty of Westphalia put an end to the wars, but the secular state rose out of struggles against religious conformism that followed. Secularization in the west, thereafter, is attributed to the Protestant ethic and the internal dynamics of Christianity are proffered as an overarching framework for this process (Vanaik, Hindutva Rising: Secular Claims, Communal Realities, 2017).

However, in India there was no widespread presence of Christianity nor could we develop our own version of enlightenment. Even the ideologies of nationalism and liberal democracy were imported from the west. In India, secularism developed as a political compact which was necessitated by the need to put up a joint front against British colonialism; therefore, what we had was a communitarian adjustment rather than a proper secularization of society like in the West. In India, capitalism has been the primary carrier of secularization of society and not Protestant Christianity. It is the gradual entrenchment of capitalism under the aegis of the State which has unleashed this process, which in turn led to the expansion of the market, urbanization, individuation, and rationalization in the Indian society. The feeble nature of secularism, though, can be ascribed to the inability to chart an indigenous path to enlightenment here (Vanaik, Hindutva Rising: Secular Claims, Communal Realities, 2017).

So, what has been the trajectory of Secularization in the deeply religious society of India? Secularization as decline in religious belief or withering away of faith would be an inaccurate characterization of the Indian society. It would be more accurate to argue that religion as an ordering principle of society has given way to the state shaped by the politico-legal precepts of the Constitution to a substantial degree. The process of secularization as mapped through social differentiation, societalization and rationalization and their concomitant impacts can definitely be traced most demonstrably on the caste structure. The Hindu social order is a system which privileges orthopraxy over orthodoxy; hence, while challenging various doctrinal dogmas and even the Vedas was acceptable, observing the rules of the caste system was of utmost importance. In other words, caste was the mechanism through which Hinduism was operationalised in the everyday lives of people. Caste has both ideological and rule-based structures which were challenged and rearticulated; therefore, the framework of secularization of caste needs to be explicated to preface the findings from the field.

Sheth, in his analysis of the secularization of caste, asserts that the caste system and, by extension, Hinduism were subjected to forces of rationalization, especially under the colonial regime. Before the Britishers came in, one of the earliest value-neutral characterizations of the caste system delineated the following features – first, it was a hierarchical system with the Brahmins at the top and the 'untouchables' at the bottom; second, it contained the idea of purity and pollution which manifested itself through the entrenched practice of untouchability; third, the existence of a plurality of castes separated by the practice of endogamy, occupation and commensality; fourth, these castes enforced the observance of their customs and rules through strict sanctions against those members who dared to trespass the limits; and fifth, relationship of castes with political organisation. This summation of the caste system was empirical and did not depend on religious scriptures as a source of information like the orientalist intellectuals (Sheth, 1999).

The Britishers brought with them their orientalist gaze as well as the missionaries. While the orientalist scholars depended upon Brahminical sources to understand the Hindu social order, thereby, normalizing the elite view of caste and Hinduism, the latter, driven as they were by their primary motive to proselytize the natives, held a very biased and low opinion about the philosophy and practices of Hinduism. So, while the

orientalists viewed caste as performing some positive functions, the missionaries decried caste as an unmitigated evil. However, the colonial administrators were driven by utilitarian motives of the State and hence, were focused on moulding this ancient and unchanging structure towards their own economic and political ends. As a result, many of the anthropologically-minded administrators ended up contradicting the point of view of both the missionaries as well as the orientalist scholars (Sheth, 1999).

Moreover, now the notions of caste began to be refracted through the lens of hitherto alien values of individualism and equality. From the beginning of the twentieth century, caste enumeration became a part of the census. This led to the ossification of a once nebulous entity of caste and in turn gave rise to protests by those who were being enumerated for registering their correct status among other things. Although various caste leaders made various petitions and representations to the colonial administrators, the final word in the case of the dispute lay with the administrator, who in turn depended on religious scriptures to guide his judgement, aided by his limited practical knowledge. This put the colonial administrator in a position where they had to perform two functions – firstly, to adjudicate upon the disputes regarding the fixing of status of various castes, thereby rewriting traditional codes and undermining traditional authority, and secondly, ensuring the availability of the language of rights to their subjects (Sheth, 1999).

These contrary functions unsettled the discourse of caste and encouraged people to organise themselves on caste lines to negotiate with the colonial government. Various castes located similarly within the ritual hierarchy across regions and states began to organise themselves into nationwide federations and associations, as numerical strength assumed paramount importance as a factor in determining the bargaining capacity with the government.

On the other hand, this also led to the undermining of the normative anchors of caste itself as notions of equality and rights gained traction among the subjects as a new consciousness swept through the oppressed sections enabling anti-caste mobilizations. The hitherto unavailable vocabulary of social justice animated movements of the oppressed castes which interrogated the ideological basis of ritual purity and pollution and challenged the corresponding entitlements and privileges that flowed from such a stratification of society. Now the articulations were not restricted to internal critiques

but also had external resources which were deployed to develop a systemic critique. Therefore, challenges assumed different forms and had different objectives which included attempts of rejecting and transcending the Hindu caste order itself as well as the limited aim of ensuring upward mobility and inclusion within the caste system. It must be noted that attempts at ensuring upward mobility within the caste system were not new but the possibility of external critique, by employing the language of rights and appealing to the reason of the State, opened up new avenues and articulations for the movements of the oppressed castes.

In other words, we can say that the introduction of modernity under colonialism and its attendant techniques of governmentality set in motion processes of 'rationalization of the caste system' and the Hindu social order. Along with this, the process of societalization was also initiated as the subjection of the entire subcontinent under a singular state and political domination at the hands of the British had given birth to the imagination of India as a nation-state and various articulations of nationalist politics flourished as a result.

By far, the most far-reaching transformation brought about by the subjection of the caste system to the forces of rationalization was the gradual de-ritualization of caste. According to Sheth, the basic features of the matrix of rituality can be summed up as follows – first, a religious ideology of purity and pollution; second, the religiously sanctioned techno-economic organisation of the village with food production and distribution systems, especially; third, customs and traditions of castes evolved over centuries (Sheth, 1999). The process of de-ritualization of caste was expedited by the attainment of freedom and the establishment of a state governed by liberal principles of individual rights, equality before law and the principle of one person-one vote within the overarching context of a bourgeois democracy. In fact, it can be argued that de-ritualizing caste was one of the primary objectives of the Constitution as the fundamental rights outlawing untouchability and discrimination on the grounds of caste and religion were expressly enshrined to make traditional authority subservient to the morality of the modern democratic state.

The economy also underwent a fundamental transformation in the post-independence period. The rapid modernization and industrialization undertaken by the state opened new occupational opportunities which were unavailable in the traditional structure.

Earlier, the division of labour was inextricably intertwined with and ritually circumscribed by the caste structure. Many occupations which were marked by the rituality of caste such as barbers, potters or oil pressers have all been rendered redundant due to the advent of the technologies of mass production and the free exchange of these products in an increasingly market-based monetised economy. Over time, better roads and more means of transport have enabled good connectivity between cities and village. The diminishing outputs in the agrarian sector has forced the people to seek employment in the city, in the construction sector in particular and as part of the unorganized sector in general; based on these developments we can argue that the traditional ties based on rituals have definitely loosened (Srinivas, 2003).

Urbanization has also been responsible for weakening the hold of caste on the everyday lives of the people unlike in the village-based communities which are predominantly engaged in agrarian activity. The provision of affirmative action through reservations in government employment and in educational institutions over the decades has led to the emergence of a class of educated elites belonging to the middle class even within the erstwhile oppressed communities. Earlier the castes used to be internally undifferentiated but due to the aforementioned structural changes, each caste group has now successfully created its own middle-class, leading to massive internal differentiation due to economic stratification. In other words, the nexus between caste, hereditary ritual status and patterns of occupation has been dented to a very considerable extent; as a result, Sheth opines that castes now exist as micro-communities based on kinship sentiments and relationships and no longer relate to each other primarily as units of ritual hierarchy (Sheth, 1999).

Furthermore, the process of de-ritualization was now accompanied by the attendant process of politicization of caste under the context of a competitive democratic setup and has led to the erosion of caste system as a ritual hierarchy and transforming it into a horizontal organisation of communities vying with each other for political power in the structures of governance and representation and for economic resources. As a result, now caste consciousness articulates itself primarily through the language of communitarian assertion rather than in the terms of ritual purity and pollution (Sheth, 1999).

While agreeing with the major thrust of the argument, it would be incorrect to argue that the systemic aspects of caste have ceased to exist like Srinivas or to argue that a complete horizontalization of the Hindu social order has taken place, on the lines of Sheth; for that would entail overlooking the power relations which are inherent in the working of the system even today. What is clear is that caste has lost its inner content and cannot be sustained ritually. The forces of market, democracy and rationality have not effected a 'withering away of caste' through embourgeoisement like Srinivas would suggest, but have transformed castes into communities and in the process opened up spaces for contestation for and among these communities for resources, status and dignity. In other words, these entities cannot be re-identified as castes in the classical sense (Alam, 2006).

The de-ritualization of caste has created a void which is being filled through various ideological projects of identity construction. These projects of identity construction are taking place in the context of a 'disenchanted caste system'; wherein although the system is not held together through ritual sanctity, the life chances of an individual are determined significantly if not completely by their location in the system. For instance, Satendra Kumar's analysis of the transformation of a village in western Uttar Pradesh shows us that castes now function as networks based on kinship which aid in upward mobility of individuals from their own castes. Moreover, factors like the prior availability of land and economic surplus have become essential in order to diversify and ensure upward mobility in the changing economy (Kumar S. , 2014). Therefore, internal differentiation has had a clear impact on the prospects of those individuals sharing the same caste identity.

These communities are denoted by the term *Samaj*. This category is important for our purposes as well and needs to be explained as it is the category employed by the political practitioners and members for self-identification as well as identifying other communities. These include all types of communities such as castes and sub-castes, religions, tribes, linguistic and even ethnic communities. It refers to communities which are anchored within their own identity but at the same time function with flexibility to forge alliances with different communities within a given discursive context owing to the possibilities opened by secularization.

These far-reaching changes due to secularization have transformed the nature of the caste system and thereby, the Hindu social order itself. Hinduism cannot be solely characterized by the entity of caste now, although it definitely remains an essential component of it. Due to increasing de-ritualization, the process of Hinduization becomes an even more important object of inquiry; for in such a context, caste and tribe become homologous to a certain extent, at least insofar as political mobilization is concerned. Both are subsumed under the categorization of *Samaj*.

The interchangeable meaning of this term in mass consciousness comes across when this term is used to refer to castes as well as tribes. While describing the state of tribal communities, Vikram Achchaliya, a founder member of Jai Adivasi Yuva Shakti (JAYS), said:

"...baiga hai aur in jo janjati hai inme bahut hi kuposhan hai, mahilaye kuposhit hai bachche. Rashtriya paimane se double jo hai mrityu dar, rashtriya paimana jaise 17 point kuch hai 17 duni 34 point dar kuch hai. Hamare bachche marne ka mrityu dar hai. Toh ye kitni bhayawah sthithi hai. Hamare samaj ki jo betiya hai, betiya bhi bade-bade shahro me aap dekh sakte hai, waha par aaya kaha." (Achchaliya, 2020)

While describing the process of how tribal villages were set up earlier, Shankar Tadwal, an activist of the Adivasi Ekta Parishad said:

"*...aur gaon basane ke time pe kuch aisi dharna hui thi jahan pe hindu samaj ke logon ne ek bahut bade maidan main murti laga di thi aur aise dheere-dheere wahan logon ki basti ban gayi aur murtiyan lagti gayin. Aur kabhi-kabhi wahan jharna phoot gaya aur daldali ho gaya, janwar satane lage, sher ya reech ya bhalu utarne lage to adivasi poora gaon chodh ke dusri jagah chale jata tha.*" (Tadwal, 2020)

Shankar uses the same term again to explain the how marriages among different groups take place within the Bhilalas:

"*...aur jaise mere bhai ka ladka hai Jhiniyan wo dhanot samaj se laya. Ab dhanot samaj bhi gai-bel aur bhains ko khata hai. Lekin ladki ko laya aur ladke ek badwe pujari ko bula liya aur chane bhunj ke ek jagah puja path karaya aur phir ladke-ladki ko chane khilaye aur bache chana panch baithke khaye aur uske baad hamare naat main aa gaya. Matlab hamari jati main aa gaye.*" (Tadwal, 2020)

In the above three quotes, the same term *Samaj* is used by Vikram to denote the category of tribe in the classical sense to refer to all tribes in general; while Shankar uses the term in the first instance to refer to the Hindus as a whole,in the second instance the same term is used to refer to a clan or sub-caste called *naat,* which he then equates with his own caste. It must be pointed out that Shankar is an advocate of defining the Adivasi identity in opposition to the Hindu society, but he acknowledges the presence of sub-castes within his tribe as well. This interchangeable use of the term is not due to them being unaware, inarticulate, or due to the absence of terms in the vernacular which describe these groups accurately. It is because that is how they see the social structure; it comprises various groups in competition with each other for resources and recognition.

The process of secularization, as Bairy observes, opens the space for the substantialization of caste whereby identifying with the caste becomes one of the many available choices for individuals which they can choose from, depending upon the context. At the same time, it does not discount the process of castes becoming blocs or ethnic-like identities competing with each other without any necessary binding logic that relativises them (S., Being Brahmin, Being Modern: Exploring the Lives of Caste Today, 2010). Castes now function like associations and communities at once, depending on different contexts (S., Beyond Governmentality: Caste-ing the Brahmin, 2019). This definition, as can be surmised from the above examples, can be extended to tribes as well in the changing socio-economic setting.

II

The previous section was an attempt to grapple with some of the theoretical issues that present themselves when we try and apprehend the rapidly evolving Hindu social order and the tribe's place with respect to it. This section will attempt to understand what constitutes Hinduization, its history in the region and thereafter, based on interviews conducted in the field with a cross-section of activists of various social and political organizations in the districts of Alirajpur and Jhabua. It will also attempt to outline the strategies through which the RSS and the VKA operationalize this process.

Conversion as a Process: The Historical Antecedents of Hinduization

Till now, any understanding of Hinduism was completely collapsed with the caste system; however, it can be argued that the increasing de-ritualization of the Hindu

social order under the secularizing tendencies of the modern democratic state and the market makes assimilation within the Hindu fold a viable option for the tribals. It would be wrong to dismiss this as false consciousness on the part of the tribals; on the contrary, we must, irrespective of our ideological predispositions, look at it as an act of agency or a positive cultural, economic and political choice on the part of the tribal population.

However, can Hinduization be equated with conversions? The act of conversion can be analyzed from various perspectives. Heredia has devised four lenses to analyze conversions. The first lens looks at conversion as change. In a democratic society this simple change, however, might have serious consequences for those communities which are constituted by exclusivist and particularist identities. The second lens looks at conversion as subversion. Under this view, conversion is looked upon as an act of subversion by the dominant community, especially when that ethnic community is identified by religion. Often, owing to the dominance of the majority religion, religious and national identities get conflated. The third lens looks at conversion as atrocity. Many religious fundamentalists respond to conversion with denial and resistance. This has led to large-scale ritualistic violence to redraw and re-emphasize the boundary of the religious community which the act of conversion transgresses. The fourth looks at conversion not as an event but as a process. Conversion under this framework is not viewed as a single and irreversible event which cannot be undone in the future (Heredia, Interrogations from the Margins: Conversion as Critique, 2011).

If at all we must look at Hinduization as conversion, it will have to be looked upon through the lens of conversion as a process, not an irreversible event. We must attempt to understand the transformation that the tribal communities are undergoing and the attendant process of Hinduization and therefore, we need to contextualize it within the larger historical and socio-economic picture. This is especially important because the act of conversion itself takes place differently in different contexts and hence, its nature needs to be interrogated given the fact that Hinduism is a non-proselytizing religion and does not have any provisions for conversions unlike Christianity. For, as Heredia argues, while we must not reduce religious conversion solely to economic and political concerns; we must not be oblivious to the fact that conversion has inevitable consequences for the political economy of the society (Heredia, Religious Disarmament: Rethinking Conversion in India, 2007).

Hinduization among the tribes of western Madhya Pradesh is not a novel phenomenon. It has been taking place for more than a hundred years. Today, along with de-ritualization, the chief agents of Hinduization are the market and its ever-increasing penetration in society - like the process of migration to urban centres in Gujarat and hyperconnectivity with the mainstream Hindu society through the internet. Isolation as a lens to understand tribal identity has been rendered redundant. The VKA – RSS combine merely facilitate and intensify this process through their socio-cultural and political interventions.

The RSS definitely views conversion outside the Hindu fold as subversion and atrocity as its entire politics is informed by a demographic anxiety and episodes of ritualistic violence that groups affiliated to the RSS undertake in order to intimidate the missionaries and to discourage proselytization are often highlighted; the case of Graham Staines being a prominent example. However, these approaches do not shed light on the other process that the RSS undertakes, namely the Hinduization of the tribal identity. This task of the reconstruction of the tribal identity is carried out through the gargantuan network of social organizations of the RSS which work in a synchronized manner toward this end.

The campaigns of Ghar Wapsi have invited the most attention, mostly because they are events designed to do this. However, Hinduization of the tribals is a much more gradual and long-drawn-out process and behind these 'events' of Ghar Wapsi lies a process which builds upon older traditions of diffusion and popularization of Hinduism. Heredia asserts that conversions which take place either through active assimilation or passive absorption are the most common modes in South Asia both for individuals as well as groups. In such scenarios, there are no radical discontinuities — rather the new is added on and the old is not completely negated. These minor changes over a period of time might lead to a change in religious allegiance. This change might not be discernible at once but only after a certain period of time has passed do these begin to be recognized (Heredia, Religious Disarmament: Rethinking Conversion in India, 2007).

Three such movements which can be seen as part of a long process of Hinduization of tribes are Govind Guru's Movement among the Bhils in 1911; the Devi Movement among the Warli tribals in the Bombay Presidency in 1920; and the movement led by

Mama Baleshwadayal in Jhabua in the post-independence period which would assist in illustrating the point.

Govind Guru's movement started around 1911. He was a Banjara by caste and made his living as a tenant farmer. One account argues that after a revelation, he styled himself as an ascetic from the *Dasnami* sect. He built upon the existing legacy of the Bhagat Movement whereby adherents of that sect had developed a faith in Vaishnavite and Shaivite deities. He asked the Bhils to not indulge in thievery, deception and adultery, to give up their arms and take up settled agriculture, to give up drinking liquor, to abandon their faith in witchcraft and exorcists and wear *rudraksh* around their necks and put a red flag over their houses. As per some accounts, he had preached for nearly nineteen years to the Rajputs; however, it was only when he took his message among the Bhils that he developed a large following (Hardiman, 2003).

Under colonialism, many Bhil practices such as demanding levies from travellers who passed through their territories, the practice of stealing cattle from rival clans and their violent feuds which were often murderous, were all criminalized. Moral self-reform along the lines which were preached by Govind resonated with the Bhils because their old ways of life had been upended by the colonial state which reserved for itself the monopoly of violence. He made scathing attacks on dominant castes such as the Rajputs, Brahmins and the Muslims who provided the bulk of the recruits in the police force. However, he was less critical of the British, as for him the local configuration of power were the principal antagonists while his views were on many counts congruent with those of the colonial state. The local rulers of the princely states were weary of Govind's movement and moreover, they depended heavily on the tax from liquor for their revenue and Govind's stress on abstaining from liquor was bad for their coffers. Therefore, they started harassing him and his followers; they expelled him from their kingdoms and hounded him in the nearby princely states as well. In response, Govind declared that he would establish an independent kingdom on the Mangadh Hills. He along with his armed followers laid siege on the Mangadh Hills; this development alarmed the local rulers and they called in the British who defeated them and jailed Govind (Hardiman, 2003).

However, even jailing him did not lead to an erosion of belief among his supporters. In 1919 he was released by the colonial state on the condition that he would not visit the

adjoining princely state of Banswara. However, Govind refused to keep his side of the bargain and went to Banswara, where he was received by a massive crowd of his followers. This resulted in him being rearrested in 1921 and staying in jail till 1923. The continued popularity of Govind's movement was a cause of concern for the colonial state as it undermined the legitimacy of the local ruler who was their client (Hardiman, 2003).

The nationalist movement entered the Bhil tracts in 1919. There was a severe famine in the area in the previous year and the conditions were dire. It was then that Amritlal Thakkar during his famine relief work saw the plight of the Bhils. He set up the Bhil Seva Mandal in 1922. The nationalists invited Govind to stay in one of their Ashrams; however, the relationship remained strained as he refused to comply with the rules and norms of Ashram life, eventually leading to a parting of ways. Meanwhile, the nationalists continued with the reforms and their 'service' continued among the Bhils and Thakkar was a big votary of imparting Hindu *samskar* to them. By the final years of his life, Govind seems to have been won over by the nationalists as he became increasingly critical of the British who he had earlier thought would be his allies against the dominant Rajputs. This change of heart might have been brought about by the common oppression that the Gandhians and his followers faced at the hands of the colonial state. In the process, he began to identify himself as a Hindu through the last years of his life (Hardiman, 2003).

There was a similar movement among the Warli tribals in the New Bombay Presidency in the 1920s. The movement began as a propitiation ceremony to the mother goddess or Devi. However, soon it took a totally different trajectory and was turned into a movement against the Parsis, who were the community which exploited the tribals in the region. This was a religious movement but to its lay followers it was a means of ridding themselves from the yoke of exploitation. The movement had a simple message – adoption of teetotalism, vegetarianism, non-violence, and cleanliness. While these values were being propagated the movement did not invite any opposition; however, as soon as wage demands and social boycott of Parsis were added to the agenda the movement started being opposed. It was co-opted by the Gandhian nationalist movement which was sweeping through the region at the time. However, as a result, the British clamped down upon it considering it to be a rebellion against the colonial government. Interestingly, the Parsis opposed the conversion of the tribals to

Christianity in the area even though the missionaries had stayed away from the entire movement. Their logic was simple, they did not want the tribals to get access to modern education as that would open the doors of upward mobility for the tribals and adversely impact the availability of cheap labour to be exploited (Heredia, Religious Disarmament: Rethinking Conversion in India, 2007). Even in this movement of self-assertion by the tribals, they did not undertake the simple imitation of upper-caste values. Rather what took place was an eclectic appropriation and synthesis of various cultural elements and beliefs of the politically and socially dominant sections of society (Hardiman, 2003).

There were other pulls towards Hinduization as well. By the early twentieth century, a conference was organised by the Bhilala aristocracy of the Vindhyas calling upon the Bhils to return themselves as Hindus in the census. Yet, in the 1931 census, the officials noted that there were no organised campaigns to Hinduize the tribal population in Central India. However, through a long interaction with the Hindu mainstream, some elements of the Hindu social order seeped into the Bhil society, as the division of their society into pure and impure communities shows (Kela, 2012).

A similar movement was initiated by the socialist leader Mama Baleshwardayal, popularly known as Mamaji. In the year 1933, there was a severe drought in Jhabua. Mamaji drafted a letter to the government asking for immediate action on the dire situation on behalf of the local tribal population. In the letter, he referred to the Bhil adivasi as 'annadata' or the provider. This infuriated the local ruler of Jhabua and he handcuffed and paraded the signatory on the streets for this crime, as only the king could be referred to as the provider. Dayal launched a massive agitation against the ruler which led to his removal by the British in 1934 (Banerjee, Grand Old Man of the Socialist Fringe: Mama Baleshwar Dayal, 1999).

Mamaji next launched a sustained agitation against '*Begar*' or bonded labour and usurious practices in the mid-1930s with considerable success. At the time there was a rule that the Brahmins and Kshatriyas could not be employed as bonded labourers as per the law of the princely states. The agitations alone were not yielding results. So Mamaji wrote to the Shankaracharya of Puri and asked him to perform the ritual of *Shuddhi* and make the Bhils wear the sacred thread, thereby, according them Kshatriya status. This congregation was held and in a large public ceremony the Bhils wore the

sacred thread and were freed from their bonded labour. This successful movement assumed massive proportions in the region in the fight against Begar (Banerjee, Grand Old Man of the Socialist Fringe: Mama Baleshwar Dayal, 1999).

In all these movements, the principal antagonists were the dominant upper castes and the feudal lords and all these movements built upon the existing tradition of Bhagat movements and used the values associated with Brahminical Hinduism such as vegetarianism, teetotalism and an emphasis on cleanliness and wearing the sacred thread to mount a resistance. However, not all these values were accepted unquestioningly by the Bhils. Govind's diktat to give up belief in witchcraft was not accepted. It did not end the practice; rather it forced it to be swept under the carpet. This demonstrates that the tribals were not passive recipients of these values but were using them instrumentally to organise against the exploitation of the upper castes. The reform movements had attracted the relatively prosperous and educated sections of the tribal society, which began to run out of steam when it became apparent that they were not fulfilling their real motive of improving social status (Kela, 2012).

These episodes, despite their unorganized and sporadic nature, can be read as a long-term process of conversion or Hinduization as a result of constant interaction with the Hindu society within various contexts. The other important point to note is that while Christianity was looked upon as a means of upward mobility and hence, was popular among the poorer sections of the tribal community, the adoption of Hindu mores through reform was popular among the elite sections of the tribal community and the thrust towards it died down with time because it could not ensure either upward mobility or improvement in social status. The distinctive feature of these movements was that although these were movements towards Hinduization, they were not triggered by the politics of demography. Although the context of all these movements was the oppression and exploitation at the hands of the upper castes, the movements in Warli and Mangarh Hills were movements focused on self-improvement while Dayal's movement merely used Hindu rituals to fight the practice of bonded labour. These are also important examples of the strategy of renegotiation adopted by the oppressed to achieve their ends as opposed to rejection. Overall, these movements introduced and popularized Hindu motifs, rituals, and values among a section of the tribal population, thereby, enabling the introduction of a diffused Hinduism throughout the region.

Samarasta: Harmonizing Differences by Symbolic Inclusion of the Vanvasi

All human beings have an innate desire to be recognised by their fellow human beings as inherently valued and be seen as worthy of respect (Guru, Rejection of Rejection: Foregrounding Self Respect, 2009). They find meaning and define themselves as encumbered selves or as members of a community by being part of a culture and a history (S., Being Brahmin, Being Modern: Exploring the Lives of Caste Today, 2010). This urge is shared alike by individuals and communities which seek collective cultural recognition and self-respect.

A democracy then becomes a site of contestation not only for redistribution of resources but for obtaining recognition and self-respect as well. In a society based on graded inequality, this contest becomes even more important. The groups on the margins of society use various political formations as instruments to attain these ends. The political formations, on their part, attempt to construct various narratives to include the marginalized communities within their discourse to obtain a majority. A brief excursus to discuss the history of the tactic of symbolic inclusion is in order.

The process of de-ritualization of the Hindu social order and the resulting assertions of dignity and equality by the untouchable and oppressed castes compelled the Hindu orthodoxy to refashion the Hindu identity. The imperative of mobilizing the oppressed masses comprising the Dalit and Non-Brahmin castes for the cause of the nationalist movement led to the rational reinterpretation of Hindu tradition to include them within the national community by undermining the ritual aspect of the caste system. This took various forms; while radicals like Periyar used the external resources at their disposal to articulate a summary rejection of religion and the caste order, many reformers used moral resources within the tradition to argue for inclusion of Dalits within the Hindu social order through temple entry movements. Due to his strategy of rejection and the concomitant espousal of rationalism, Periyar was largely confined to the margins of the nationalist movement while the mainstream, championed by Gandhi, adopted a strategy of renegotiation.

One such creative response was to make the celebration of Hindu religious festivals a public event. This brought the deity out of the temple, making it accessible to all sections of society and questioning the boundaries of purity and pollution mandated by

the ideology of caste. This can be seen as the inversion of the various temple entry movements. This technique was very successfully employed by Congress stalwart Bal Gangadhar Tilak. He used the public celebrations of the Ganesh festival towards the end of nationalist mobilization and in the process he rationalized the sacred as secular (Harvey, 1986).

For the Hindu traditionalist Tilak, the large-scale public celebration of the Ganesh festival was a means of spreading national culture and facilitating national cohesiveness. According to him this spirit of cohesiveness could be rekindled only by the revival of Hinduism. Towards this end, he reinvented the festival by transforming a one-day event into a ten-day affair. Large public images were installed in the mandaps, group aspects of the festival were given utmost importance, subscriptions were collected for organising the festival, a fair or *mela* was organised where various groups sung political songs on politically important issues of the day and finally, on the tenth day, a large public procession was taken out for the ceremony of the immersion of the idol. The public celebration of the Ganesh festival opened a space for Tilak to articulate an anti-imperialist politics within the revivalist tradition. He used this space to popularize ideas such as swadeshi, regeneration of indigenous industries and opposing Viceroy Curzon's policies. Tilak also organised public celebrations of the Shivaji festival along with the Ganesh festival. Along with challenging the ritual boundaries of Hinduism and paving the way for inclusion of oppressed sections within the Hindu social order, these two public celebrations performed the twin functions of constructing a nationalist and anti-imperialist consciousness while at the same time Hinduising the public sphere (Pati, 2007).

The RSS – VKA have built upon this tradition and encouraged the oppressed sections to undertake public celebrations of Hindu religious festivals on a large scale. This has enabled them to navigate through the contradictions arising out of the ritual aspects of the caste system and construct and normalize a de-ritualized Hinduism within the public sphere.

There are three primary sites on which collective identities are constructed - history, rituality, and state. The RSS through its various affiliates undertakes the tortuous process of reinscribing each of these sites with elements of Hinduism. It would not be inaccurate to suggest that all these interventions are but a small part leading to the grand

project of the construction of a civic religion which involves the instrumental invocation of Hindu myths, faith, and religious tenets (Sarkar T. , 2012). Each of these aspects of identity construction are taken up seriatim.

Blending Mythology with History to Hinduize the Past

We can employ Narayan's framework of pastness and caste memories, which he used to analyze mobilization of Dalits by the discourse of Hindutva, for our purposes as well. This is so because, as argued earlier, all groups – castes, religions and tribes – have been transformed into communities and associations denoted by the term *Samaj* in popular parlance, owing to the effects of secularization and politicization in a democratic context. Therefore, this framework can be used to analyze the intervention of Hindutva among the tribes as well.

 The VKA constructs its narrative of Samarasta by building upon the already existing diffused cultural Hinduism in the public sphere owing to the history of the aforementioned movements. What the movement undertakes is a construction of pastness rather than history because the latter still lends itself to certain objective and scientific scrutiny. The construction of pastness is untethered to any such requirements. According to Narayan, pastness is both the truth and imagination and is shaped in the process of remembrance of the past through its narration. The sense of pastness among communities is represented in the form of folklore, popular histories, myths, rituals, and commemorative ceremonies which reminds them of a glorious past, a pitiful present and an uncertain future. This sense of a collective past is disseminated through schools, churches, temples etc. and is sustained in language, commonsense and ideologies. This sense of pastness is the fountainhead of one's identity (Narayan, Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilization, 2009).

However, he adds, collective memories of communities which are developed and transmitted over a long period of time are not static but dynamic, not singular but multiple and hence, highly contested. This collective memory is not only divided between official and community memory, but it is divided within the community itself. This multiplicity or division opens a space for various political formations to shape these memories in tune with its own discourse. One such method of intervention is the construction and popularization of the memory of heroes of various communities from myths and histories, which are then reinterpreted in consonance with the requirements

of the specific political discourse (Narayan, Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilization, 2009).

One very important instance of the popularization of the memory of a hero is the celebration of the birth anniversary of Birsa Munda. However even the choice of the hero has important underlying political motives and implications:

"Abhi 15 tareekh ko birsa munda jayanti ka karykram tha wo bhi hamne manaya. Isme bhi udeshya hai ki 25 saal main birsa munda ne jo apne samaj ko swabhiman diya, vastavik main wo poore desh ke janjatiyon ka din hona chahiye. Woh jo aap bol rahe the ki janjati samaj ko maloom hi nahi hai ki wo kaun hai. Hum moolniwasi hai aur 9 august ko vishwa moolniwasi diwas manana, woh toh vishwa bhar ke jo indigenous hai unka din hai, yahan ke adivasi moolniwasi nahi hai. Yahan is desh mein rehne wale sabhi moolniwasi hai. Toh ye jo bhram ho raha hai na vastavik adivasi ko samjhna chahiye ki hum kaun hai." (Kuber, 2019)

Birsa Munda is a tribal icon and enjoys a cult following among the tribal population and so, bestowing public recognition to his memory through commemorative ceremonies is a common feature across the ideological divide. However, the observance of his memory serves two important functions in the scheme of the VKA - firstly, Birsa during the course of his movement against the British Raj expected the missionaries to help him but when they backed-down he turned against them as well (Sharma K. L., 1976). So, in Birsa, they find historical resources to rearticulate the tribal history as one which also includes antagonism towards Christian missionaries.

Secondly and more importantly, the objective is to pit the celebration of Birsa's anniversary against the celebration of the International Day of the World's Indigenous People celebrated globally on August 9th. In fact, the VKA has taken a stated position against the celebration of this day (Naidunia, 2018). It is important for the RSS to delink the identity of tribals in India from the global discourse of indigeneity. This is because the golden Vedic age is an important rhetorical and ideological device to negotiate the political challenge thrown up by the discrimination and oppression born out of the system of graded inequality within Hinduism. The VKA approaches matters of caste and tribal identities within the ideological framework of *Samarasta* or harmony. The idea of Samarasta posits that in ancient times, the caste system as described in the Vedas did not envisage a society based on a hierarchy where the worth of the individual was

determined by his birth. On the contrary, the worth of an individual was based on *guna* and *karma*, i.e., qualities and deeds. It was only later that the system was perverted and *varna* degenerated into *jati* and led to entrenchment of discrimination. Interestingly, it partially blames long spells of foreign or Muslim rule for this degenration. What is required to get rid of this evil is social reform and not political mobilization around castes. In fact, mobilization of the oppressed castes is looked upon as deleterious for the nation under this framework (Ambekar, 2019).

This is so because the RSS is driven by the aim to 'unite all the Hindus' and hence, the internal contestation between the oppressed and dominant castes is one of the biggest challenges for their project of 'harmony'. It goes about accomplishing this task by constructing narratives which symbolically include all the marginalized sections in their narrative, thereby responding to the need of cultural recognition while in the electoral sphere, it tries to give representation to various social groups. However, the strategy of representation is very flexible and context-bound and keeps evolving.

This is the primary reason why the RSS rejected the term Adivasi or the original settler and replaced it with *Vanvasi* or forest dweller. The acceptance of the possibility of pre-existing cultures and practices dislocates their entire discourse which traces the nation's present to the Vedic past. However, this has become a major controversy as the term Adivasi has become popular among the common tribal population and has taken root in their consciousness over time (Xaxa, Formation of the Adivasi\IndigenousPeoples' Identity in India, 2016).

Other important examples of the reconstruction of the past in the VKA's discourse are the figure of Shabari from Ramayan and the episode of the Bhils extending support to Maharana Pratap in his battle against the Mughals –

"*Gondon ko bhi dekhiye na, unka itihas bhi dekhiye, 52 qile the unke aur wo kabhi bhi mughlon se hare nahi aur Rani Durgawati se leke Raghunath Shah tak sabhi se lade hain aur abhi tak lad rahe hain. Toh main hamesha bolta hun ki pracheen kaal se aaj tak saare sangharshon main hum sath main lade hain. Ye toh Maharana Pratap aur Shivaji ke sath the ye toh humen maloom hi hai. Aur Maharana Pratap ke sikke ke ek bajoo main bhilon ka ek tha aur aaj bhi rajtilak Bhil hi karta hai.*" (Kuber, 2019)

The example of this political alliance between the Bhils and Maharana Pratap is stripped of all historical context and nuance and presented in the narrative of the VKA as a proof

of "Hindu" unity against the Muslim invaders. However, out of these two, the figure of Shabari is the most interesting as it brings out the entirely instrumental nature of these mythical and historical figures. The same mythical figure is reinterpreted and deployed to suit different discourses and contexts. The figure of Shabari in the state of Uttar Pradesh is portrayed as a protagonist of the Musahar caste who aided Lord Ram in his righteous mission to defeat Ravan (Narayan, Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilization, 2009). However, the same Shabari in Gujarat is appropriated as a tribal deity through the construction of a temple in her name in order to mobilize the tribal communities in the Dangs (Kanungo & Joshi, 2009).

The purpose is to appropriate the diverse histories and myths, with their specific contexts and complications, as part of a narrative of a singular Hindu past by reinterpreting them. It bears reiteration that I found the photograph of the same shrine of Shabari being used in the prayer room of the VKA hostel in Alirajpur for young tribal children, which indicates that images from that shrine are being used to popularize an alternative history and mythology of the Bhils.

Hinduizing the Personal and Public Spheres via Rituals

As discussed earlier, diffused Hinduism was already pervasive in the region due to a history of reform movements. However, the majority of the tribal population, especially in the rural areas, still worshipped their traditional deities. The Gods of the Hindu pantheon such as Ganesh were outside imports and were popularized among the tribes through a concerted campaign, says Laxman Singh Muneea, a 58-year-old Bhil who works in a Gandhian School called *Sampark Gram* in the city of Petlawad in the Jhabua district:

"… *ye sab - Ambaji, Ganpati, ye mere samne aaya hai. Main bahut bada ho gaya tha uske baad aya hai. Hamare yahan toh ye hota tha, ki shadi byah main mooni patta laake wo karte the aur bhabhar the unke yahan aam ke patta aur ninama the unke peetal ke patte late the aur poojte the aur shadi karte the. Wo hamare yahan abhi bhi hai - prakriti puja, per ab ye dheere dheere ganpati puja, matlab ab har ghar main ganpati bithana, amba bithana. Ambaji aye pehle, unka devi sthan local tha, wahan pe garba lake karna shuru kiya.*" (Muneea, 2020)

Laxman is referring to the concerted campaigns undertaken by the RSS to popularize the Hindu deities like Ram, Hanuman and Ganesh among the tribes. This campaign

started in 2000 and culminated in the Hindu Sangam in 2003. It was a mass campaign to raise awareness against the missionaries and conversions. Hitesh Sharma, an ex-Sewa Bharti functionary and presently BJP party member of the Alirajpur district, attested to the fact:

"Main 20 saal pehle ki baat kar raha hun. Ye sab 2000 se parivartit hua hai. Iske alawa inki dharam ke prati ruchi badhi hai. Jaise pehle ye ram ka naam toh lete the, jaise adivasi agar ek dusre se milega toh bina ram-ram ke nahi milega, lekin wo ram ko jante nahi the. Sewa Bharti ke madhyam se ghar-ghar main Hanuman ji ki murti ki sthapna ki gayi hai yahan per. Hindu Sangam hua 2003 main toh uska bhi ek achcha prabhav pada tha gramin kshetra main bhagwan ke bare main jana. Jo padhe likhe log aye toh unhone bhagwan ko jana. Toh us karan kya hai ki dharmik anushthan hone shuru hui."
(Sharma H. , 2020)

Before the active intervention by the Sewa Bharti, around two decades ago, the figure of Ram did not have a religious connotation in the consciousness of the common Adivasi of the region even though they used to greet each other with *Ram-Ram*. This also attests to the pre-existing diffused presence of cultural motifs of Hinduism among the tribal communities. This intervention, carried out in an organised fashion, marked the beginning of popularization of Hindu deities and mass religious ceremonies among the tribes of this region. These mass ceremonies often become occasions for the reconversion ceremonies as well (Vandevelde, 2011).

However, the extent of Hinduization was uneven among the tribes and marked by various factors. For example, the Bhilalas who had been more integrated into the agrarian structure for a longer period, were much more acculturated. Moreover, by virtue of land ownership among them they were also comparatively better off than Bhils.

The presence of Hindu values, beliefs, and practices among the Bhilalas is brought out by their difference over beef-eating. When quizzed as to what differentiated the Bhils from the Bhilalas, Vikram Singh Chouhan, a young Bhilala entrepreneur based in the city of Alirajpur, answered:

"... dekhiye sir farak toh kuch zyada nahi, rehan sehan badhiya hai, shadi, mrityu ka nukta sab kuch barabar hi hai. Matlab sanskriti hamari ek jaisi hi hai. Farak bas yehi hai ki Bhil janjati gau-mans ka sevan karti hai... hum toh khilaf main hai kyunki Bhilala

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janjati main koi bhi nahi khata hai. Patliya jaati hai usme wo bhi nahi khati hai sirf Bhil hi khate hain. Baki Bhilala mein chicken mutton chalta hai. Isliye hamare Bhilala jati ke log Bhil ke yahan khana nahi khate. Abhi toh kafi sudhaar aa gaya, jana-aana, uthna-baithna sab shuru ho gaya hai." (Chouhan, 2020)

So, while other rituals were the same and non-vegetarianism was the norm among the tribes, the transgression of eating beef was serious enough to warrant the abandonment of interdining and intermarriage with the Bhils. Although it is claimed that these divisions are no longer as pronounced among the tribes and with time the consumption of beef by tribes has gone down across the board, this distinction remains a significant indicator of the entrenchment of Hindu practices and values, especially among the Bhilalas.

Building upon such a cultural matrix in the region, the RSS used the Kaanwar Yatra, a Hindu pilgrimage, to propagate Hinduism among the tribes, especially the youth. The Narmada river is considered sacred by the Hindus as well as the tribals. In this Hindu pilgrimage, devotees take water —usually from the Ganga but in this case from Narmada— and walk all the way to one of the twelve jyotirlings, in this case, located in the holy city of Ujjain and offer the water to Shiva. Sharma said:

"Narmada ke prati inki astha shuru se rahi hai aur sawan ke somvar hote hain usme hum Kaanwar Yatra nikalte the... aur wahan hazaron ki sankhya main apan yuvaon ko bulate rahe hain. Inka panjiyan bhi hota tha wo iska shulk bhi dete the, jo bhi hamara shulk hota tha jaise 100, 200 rupay. 2-3 din ki yatra rehti thi aur usme baudhik hota tha aur sabhi tarah se rehta tha. Aur narmada ka jal le jate the ki bhaiya iska chidkav apne khet main karna hai. Gaon ke andar jo mandir hain usme jal se abhishek karna hai taki apan sampann ho, apni kheti achchi ho, parivar achcha rahe. puja main narmada jal rakhna hai. Ye sab apan unko seekhate the." (Sharma H. , 2020)

Sharma tells us that the tribal youth were required to pay a registration fee of Rs. 200-300 for a pilgrimage of 2-3 days and during the trip *Baudhik* or ideological sessions were conducted. Along with that, they 'taught' the tribals to use this water for *Abhishek* in their local temples for the well-being of their crops and prosperity. These rituals were not part of the original tribal religious practice. Over the years, this Yatra has become an elaborate affair with arrangements being made to provide free refreshments, organizing *Bhandara* or public feasts and making spaces to watch television and

providing other opportunities for relaxation to the pilgrims. This has resulted in soaring popularity of the Kaanwar Yatra among the tribal youth (Muneea, 2020). However, the RSS does not directly get involved in this process, using its affiliate Sewa Bharti and other frontal organizations to organize the Yatra.

These interventions achieve two very important objectives; firstly, they enable the constitution of the Hindu subject. The insights of Butler's theory of the construction of gender through performativity can be used in this context as well (Butler, 1988). All identities are crystallized through a series of acts which are consolidated through their repeated performance. These individual acts at once constitute and expand the Hindu life-world. The regular performance of these public rituals over a sufficiently long period of time form the basis on which the Hindu cultural structure, marked by these shared experiences, is erected. It is through such rituals that the Hindu identity is constructed and culturally sustained. Secondly, such pilgrimages forge a sense of community inscribed with Hindu motifs amongst the tribals. Turner asserts that these mass rituals create a liminal staging of oneness which transcends social separations of everyday life and creates a temporary but vivid bond of equality as well as a transient, but momentarily real, felt community of equals (Sarkar T. , 2012). It is through the enactment of such rituals at the everyday level that the Hindu identity is constructed, concretized, and sustained over time while enabling the simultaneous Hinduization of the personal and public spheres.

State as an Instrument of Marginalizing the Other

Liberalism envisages democracy as an arrangement whereby unencumbered individuals freely elect their governments whose legitimacy is based on working majorities which are made and unmade through the process of rational deliberation within the polity. However, the actually existing democracies are a theatre of intense contestation among various groups or communities which are situated within the matrix of unequal power relations structured by historical, economic and cultural factors. So while the individual votes, the collective rules. Politics then becomes the art of forging a collective identity to gain a majority.

The most easily accessible collective identities in the Indian context are those anchored in religion, caste, or tribes. As stated earlier, the political project of the RSS is to convert Hindus into a permanent majority, this entails ensuring a numerical preponderance of

the Hindus and therefore, conversion outside of the fold becomes a major obstacle in this process. Moreover, given the absolute identification of the nation with the Hindu community under the ideological dispensation of Hindutva, the act of conversion in effect becomes a threat to the sovereignty and integrity of the nation. Slogans such as "*Hindu Ghata, Desh Bataa*" are the popular expressions of such ideological assertions.[7] Therefore, in this framework, religious conversion outside the fold of Hinduism is transformed from a self-regarding activity related to an individual to an other-regarding activity with public ramifications; which is a patently illiberal stance. The State then becomes an important site to resist the onward march of the missionaries.

The VKA and other affiliates aim to marginalize the 'other' – in this case the Christians – in the sphere of law. In a resolution passed in 2016, they demanded a nationwide ban on conversions, citing the need to preserve the cultural rights and heritage of tribal communities, and demanded that the Central Government pass a Freedom of Religion Act ending conversions and implementing it with immediate effect in states such as Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Arunachal Pradesh which already have anti-conversion laws in place. Moreover, they have asked for the constitution of a National Commission to conduct an enquiry into the social conflicts which arise out of conversions among the tribes. In order to bolster their demands, they cite examples of the partition of East Timor and Sudan, calling conversions a real threat to the unity and integrity of the nation:

"*In this contemporary age the world has witnessed that the East Timor has been bifurcated from Indonesia and became a new country and Sudan has been divided into two nations as North and South Sudan. It is necessary to protect the unity and integrity of the nation by identifying different new methods of conversions adopted and the Institutions supporting them indirectly in the cover of service and development. The activities of World Vision, CASA and CCF are not unknown*" (Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, 2016)

The other aspect of their strategy is to pose as the defenders of 'indigenous faith' against the semitic threat from the outside. It is keeping in tune with such a framework that another resolution of the VKA asks the Government to preserve and protect the '*Devasthan*' or places of worship of the tribals and identify and honour the priests of

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[7] It can be translated as: If the number of Hindus decline, the country will be divided.

various tribes, as these are part of Hindu culture which flourished by incorporating all such cultures since time immemorial:

"*Unity in diversity is specialty of the India's ancient culture. Our distinct ways of life and values have evolved by incorporating theses uniqueness of various Janjati Culture. Cultural Identity of the Janjati communities has taken shape from time immemorial accumulating the experience and wisdom inherited from their ancestors. These values of Janjatis can be experienced in their day-to-day life and in their devotion towards the nature and unknown spirit beyond the nature… Janjatis enjoy a community way of living. Devasthanas at village level have got a very significant importance in their lives; but no effective measures have so far been taken by the society or the Government to protect and safeguard these Devasthanas. Traditional Priests like Baiga, Pahaan, Bhumka etc have a very important role to play in religious rituals and other social activities among Janjatis. The unseen spiritual powers in the nature; which are known in different terms in different Janjati communities are pleased by priests chanting mantras for well being of the people and to keep their lives healthy and pleasant. Realizing the Supreme God in the nature and keeping devotional approach towards it, in fact, is a scientific one. Because of this approach, the equilibrium and ecological balance in the nature is maintained. People at large are depended on such priests in their day-to-day lives even today. We need to understand the scientific approach behind these rituals and not give up them terming as superstition in the name of modernity. Therefore, it is need of the hour to identify all such traditional priests; and to encourage and recognize them.*" (Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, 2016)

This assertion of timelessness dehistoricizes the cultural discourse of Hinduism and aids the VKA in constructing a past through the employment of myths and taking liberty with history, when required. On the other hand, recognition of priests is geared towards the co-option of important religious and cultural figures of various tribal communities while positioning Christianity as an 'alien' force bent on destroying the 'authentic' culture of the tribes.

The law provides reservations based on the historical and material deprivation based on caste and tribal identity. While the VKA has not taken a position against reservations, they have demanded an end to the provision of reservation to those tribals who choose to convert to Christianity; they even presented a memorandum to former President

Pratibha Patil as part of the campaign (Organiser, 2009). In fact, the RSS has plans to run campaigns among the tribal population to persuade them to register as Hindus in the upcoming census in 2021 (Dainik Bhaskar, 2020).

At the local level they keep raising the demand to end reservations for the converted tribals as attested to by Father Rocky Shah, a Catholic priest, and the PRO of the Jhabua Diocese:

"...toh abhi ek issue aya tha ki all those who converted unka certificate radd kar diya gaya tha tribe ka. Agar ye hat jayega to unki job ka problem badhega... unhone bola ki wo ab christian ban chuke aur apni sanskriti chodh chuke hain toh they are not tribals. Court main hamara argument yehi tha ki ek bhi vyakti ne apni sanskriti ko nahi chodha hai. Toh ye hi mera base rkha hai yahan pe ek bhi tribal ne apni sanskriti ko nahi khoya hai..." (Shah F. R., 2020)

The demand to end reservations for converted tribals firstly, lessens the appeal of conversion due to the prospective loss of employment opportunities and secondly, collapses the identity of tribals within the larger discourse of Hinduism. These measures underline the importance of the recognition of the identity by the State in the framework of the RSS. However, to mobilize popular support for these measures, continuous low-intensity campaigns against the missionaries and conversions and Hinduization are required at the everyday level. Both these processes feed off each other. This everyday activism creates the local contexts within which otherization of the Christians takes place. That is the primary task of the VKA and other affiliates.

The discourse of the VKA paints the Church as an anti-national outpost of the western world which is fostering separatist tendencies that need to be checked, even though the actual population of Christians remains an insignificant 2.3% as per the last census. These figures are hugely inflated, and the threat of potential conversion is blown out of proportion by the Sangh Parivar. For example, while at the time of the 2001 census, the actual population of Christians was around 25 million, the VHP claimed it to be around 60 million (Vandevelde, 2011). This exaggeration is required to keep the issue of conversion relevant in western Madhya Pradesh where, by their own admission, the number of converts has gone down:

"...Church bandh kabhi nahin hota. Kaam bandh ho jaaye ye bahut kam dekhne ko milta hai. Lagaataar chaalu rehta hai. Parinaam bahut kam hai unko. Main abhi

chokhwada naam ke ek gaaon mein gaya. Mujhe kahaa bahut isaai ban rahein hain wahaan. Maine poocha kitne ban rahein hain? Bola 300 parivar hain hamaare yahaan usmein se 50 – 60 parivar isaai hain. Maine poocha kitne saal ho gaye Church ko? 100 saal ho gaye hain... 1000 bachche padhte hain unke school mein. 100 saal se hain... itne bachchon ko padha woh rahein hain, itna paisa woh lagaa rahein hain tab bhi aapke gaaon mein 50 hi kyon bane? Toh woh bole har saal 4-5 bante hain aur 3-4 waapas aate hain...” (Surange, 2019)

Surange, a full-time worker of the VKA, who has worked in Jhabua, himself admits that the missionaries have not been able to get the results that they would have liked given the amount of resources, both in terms of money and time, that they have invested. The continuous process of conversion and reconversion among the tribals also points toward the fluid nature of the discourse and the nebulousness of the tribal identity. However, despite the limited results, the Church keeps on functioning and never shuts down. This, in his opinion, is their biggest strength.

Christians are concentrated in some pockets of Jhabua like Thandla and Petlawad. However, the condition in Alirajpur is even worse. The Catholic population there, as per Father Rocky Shah, does not comprise of more than 4-5 families and 20 members of the church, even after 25 years. However, there are other Protestant sects which are actively proselytizing, though they are not doing so forcefully but supposedly through the power of their healing:

“*See what happened Alirajpur main 25 years ho gaye humko start kiye. abhi hamari population wahan pe 12-15 log hai, zile ka bata raha hun apko. catholics I mean. Koi conversion nahi kiya kuch nahi kiya, lekin BJP aur RSS dono party ne wahan church ko ana allow nahi kiya... Gujarat border ke 5-6 gaon main aisa (conversion) hua hai, hum maan rahe hain lekin they are evangelicals... they are Shaloms. We are facing problem in this district also because of these people... they convert. The problem is that they are neither forcefully converting neither they are giving anything, nothing, but they are praying and their prayers are very powerful, if you ever get a chance to go, 100% healings are there. And after you heal you think I was about to die so better I join this religion. Toh wo log bhi aise kisi ko bhi convert nahi kar rahe hain. Jo bhi log aa rahe hain unko hi baptise kar rahe hain.*” (Shah F. R., 2020)

The negligible growth in the number of converts points towards the hegemonic position that the VKA-RSS has established with respect to the cultural and religious discourse of the region. However, even after achieving a dominant status and checking proselytization to a great extent, the RSS has been on the offensive against the Church:

"Alirajpur ka problem political hai... karan tha ki education hub banana chahte the hum. Aur wahan pe patel hain wo BJP se hain aur kafi samay tak MLA rahe aur wo nahi chahte the ki church wahan school khole. Aur jo hamne khola wo panchon zilon main best school hai - Don Bosco, well known international community hai wo. Jinhe humne bulaya tha... Idea ye tha ki jitne bhi tribal bachche hai yahan pe, 36 school hai altogether." (Shah F. R., 2020)

This narrative reveals the primacy accorded to the sphere of civil society in the framework of the RSS. The attempt now is to inundate the public sphere with institutions possessing a Hindutva bend in the field of education and health. This task is accomplished by flaring up local issues and articulating them in religious terms. This has been described as the strategy of ethno-religious mobilization through instrumentalist involvement of activists of the RSS or its affiliates in the local affairs of a region (Froerer, 2006).

According to Father Rocky, Don Bosco, a Catholic school, was the best-performing school in the surrounding five districts of Jhabua, Ratlam, Neemuch, Mandsaur and Alirajpur. The local BJP MLAs also ran a school in the district and considered Don Bosco as a competitor. Therefore, when in August of 2019, a student of Don Bosco drowned in a nearby dam during a half-day outing, the organizations affiliated with the RSS-BJP mounted immense pressure on the authorities to shut down the school. According to the priest, they demanded that the school pay the family a sum of ₹ 1 crore as compensation if they wished to continue to run the school. Moreover, they would not allow the Church to use their other land - a farmhouse - situated just next to the MLA's own farmhouse. The value of that land is claimed to be in crores. After negotiation, the amount was reduced to ₹ 25 lakh and the school paid this amount to the family. It would take a long time for the school to recover from this loss and regain financial viability (Shah F. R., 2020).

This incident was common knowledge in Alirajpur and the reputation of the school had taken a hit after this. It is through such techniques that the otherness of Christianity is

emphasized. These interventions create the social contexts which are then used to mobilize mass support for marginalizing and disempowering the Christian religious identity at the site of the state. These two processes are intertwined and become the framework through which anti-conversion and anti-Christian sentiments are diffused through the public sphere. Such contexts can then be used for mobilizing for violence if required, as was witnessed within the tribal areas of Gujarat against the missionaries.

Conclusion

The preceding argument attempted to analyze the reasons for the conversions of tribals towards Hinduism. This becomes important given the fact that the Hindu social order is based on the caste system, which in turn is premised on the principle of graded inequality. If the Hindu fold humiliates, then what explains the increasing Hinduization of tribes?

To answer this question, we need to understand the changes that the caste system has been subjected to under the forces of secularization and politicization over the last century-and-a-half. The process of secularization has three basic elements—social differentiation, societalization and rationalization. As the colonial state entrenched itself and unleashed forces of modernization on the state and the economy through various processes, the caste system also underwent a change.

Independence and the establishment of a liberal, democratic state intensified the processes of de-ritualization, which was now aided by the process of politicization of caste. The expansion of industrialization and the development of the economy and urbanization undermined the traditional village economy. Thereby, the structures through which caste reproduced itself were also weakened. Moreover, the provisions of reservations in public employment and education created an educated middle-class among the oppressed sections and led to internal stratification among the tribal communities. This broke the nexus of caste, ritual status and occupation. However, it would be wrong to argue that a 'horizontalization of caste' took place. Rather, the caste system became 'disenchanted'; which meant that castes did not relate to each other as constituents of a ritual hierarchy but as kinship-based communities. However, one's location in the hierarchy remained a significant determinant of one's life chances. The caste groups now functioned like communities and associations in competition with others for resources, recognition, and power.

These caste-based and tribal communities attained a certain homologous quality as far as political mobilization was concerned. They were described by the term *Samaj* which is a term used to denote any group – caste, religion or tribe – within the socio-political field as all communities had been reduced to a mere group which had to flexibly forge alliances with other such groups to attain its political ends within a given discursive context. Caste or tribal communities could no longer be re-identified as far as their internal content and logic were concerned. In other words, there existed a constitutive void within them which was being filled by various projects of identity construction. It is within such a context of de-ritualization and secularization that Hinduization can be looked at as an exercise of agency by tribal communities in western Madhya Pradesh.

The process of Hinduization has a long history in the region. This can be mapped through three movements in the twentieth century – the Govind Guru Movement among the Bhils, the Devi movement among the Warlis and the movement against bonded labour by Mama Baleshwardayal. All of these saw the tactical adoption of Hindu cultural practices, symbols and values by the tribals in their struggle against their immediate antagonists. Importantly, this process of Hinduization was not informed by the imperatives of the politics of demography and was an autonomous process. It must be emphasized that even after the acceptance of Hindu cultural mores, the tribes did not convert into castes but managed to retain their unique identity. However, these movements ensured the presence of a diffused Hinduism in the territory occupied by the Bhils in western Madhya Pradesh.

We must contextualize the politics of the RSS-VKA and the reconstruction of tribal identity as a continuation of these trends as it draws upon their legacy. The trajectory of Hinduization must be located within this matrix of the prevalence of a diffused Hinduism throughout the public sphere, the contest for cultural recognition, self-respect, and aspiration of upward mobility in a rapidly modernizing economy.

Any collective identity is constructed on three sites – history, rituality, and state. The RSS through its affiliates takes up the task of constructing the Vanvasi identity on all these three sites. While the first two aspects are governed by the internal dynamics of the Hindu fold, the third aspect relates to the external dynamics governed by state. The RSS uses a mixture of history and myths to symbolically invoke and include tribal icons within a singular Hindu past. The inclusion of Shabari within the pantheon of Hindu

Gods; the de-contextualized invocation of the political alliance between Maharana Pratap and the Bhils; and the celebration of the anniversary of Birsa Munda as the day of Indian indigenous people to pit it against the global discourse of indigeneity are apt examples of this. Moreover, through Sewa Bharti, Hindu deities which had a cultural but not religious significance in the Bhil tracts were popularized via the public observance of various rituals like the Kanwar Yatra among the tribal youth. The long-term performance of the pilgrimage would lead to the emergence of a sedimented Hindu identity among the Bhils.

Finally, the RSS-VKA use the site of the State to marginalize the Christian identity by raising demands to ban conversions, which curtails the fundamental right to freely practice and propagate one's religion. There have also been campaigns to restrict the extension of reservations to those tribals who have embraced Christianity, hampering their life chances. It is by the instrumental intervention in the everyday local affairs of the region that conflicts of a secular nature are communalized and mass sentiment against conversions and Christianity is sustained despite the fall in the rate of proselytization. It is within this framework that Hinduization of the Bhil tribe is being carried out in the region of western Madhya Pradesh.

However, the constitutive void which facilitated the Hinduization of tribals has also enabled the emergence of the JAYS, a tribal organization born out of a movement of the assertion of Adivasi identity in the region. Even in its nascent stage, it has had a significant ideological and political impact on the region. The next chapter will analyze this counter-hegemonic movement.

6. The Politics of Foregrounding the Adivasi Identity

Introduction

The previous chapter has attempted to capture the process through which the RSS-VKA are constructing and popularizing the Hindu identity among the tribes – Bhils and Bhilalas – in the districts of Jhabua and Alirajpur in western Madhya Pradesh. This project is being aided by two important factors – firstly, the permeation of a diffused Hinduism in the public sphere due to a history of reform movements which introduced Hindu symbols and values among the tribes in the region; and secondly, the transformation within the Hindu social order due to the secularization and politicization of caste under the structural pulls and pushes of a modern state and a competitive electoral system.

The forces of secularization have given birth to a 'disenchanted caste system' wherein the various castes do not primarily relate to each other through the matrix of rituality but are organized as communities which function as kinship-based networks. This emptying out of the internal content of caste has necessitated its rearticulation and made caste one among the many available choices for individuals to identify themselves. However, to argue that the structural, ritual, or hierarchical aspects of the system have ceased to exist would be premature. On the one hand, while de-ritualization has opened up a space for contestation within and among these communities for resources, recognition and power, on the other hand, the life-chances of an individual are still significantly determined by their location within the caste hierarchy.

Apart from this, the penetration of the market into the farthest corners of the polity, increasing urbanization, better connectivity between places, forced migration due to agrarian crisis and the unprecedented permeation of the internet have made for a hyper-connected world which has expedited the process of what Elwin called 'detribalization' or 'assimilation' (Elwin, A Philosophy for NEFA, 1964). The Government of India's earliest criteria defined tribes based on certain characteristics such as 'primitive' traits, distinctive culture, shyness with the public at large, geographical isolation and economic backwardness (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2017). None of these traits, which were vaguely defined and hence, contested, would suffice to define the tribal

communities today, as clearly demonstrated by the developments discussed in the preceding chapters. The earlier governmental discourse on tribes has been decisively displaced by the developments discussed in the preceding chapters. As a result, both tribes and castes have acquired a certain homologous quality as far as political mobilization is concerned, with an ongoing rearticulation of the tribal identity in particular, in response to this changing context. This is being done through multiple projects of identity construction. It is within these overarching changes that we need to locate the process of Hinduization of tribes, as one of the many projects of identity construction going on. These changes have increased the appeal of the politics of renegotiation of tradition or symbolic inclusion practised by the RSS-VKA. Since Hinduism is not a proselytizing religion, the process of 'conversion' takes place through a long drawn everyday process in which the tribal identity is constructed on three sites – first, of history, by inventing a past with an admixture of mythology when required; second, by introducing new rituals among the tribes whose repeated performance ensures the reproduction and sustenance of the new identity, and finally, by marginalizing the 'other' on the site of the state by introducing illiberal clauses in laws relating to conversion, and attempting to delink the tribal and Christian identity by arguing for discontinuing provisions of reservations to those who have gone out of the fold of Hinduism.

However, these very developments have created the conditions for the emergence of an Adivasi consciousness in the region based on the politics of rejection of tradition. This position of rejection is being articulated in Madhya Pradesh through the Jai Adivasi Yuva Shakti (JAYS) organization; that is waging a movement dedicated to the cause of Adivasi rights. Although the movement is in its formative stage and many of its positions, tactics, and narratives are not set in stone, what is clear beyond doubt, is the emergence and popular traction of the Adivasi identity in the region. This chapter will attempt to – first, situate this movement within the larger context of the history of tribal assertions; second, locate the immediate reasons behind the emergence of this force, and finally, understand their articulation of the Adivasi identity, their objectives and the challenges that they face in this project, on the basis of interviews conducted during fieldwork.

I

From Rebellion to Representation: Changing Nature of Tribal Movements

Tribes constitute approximately 8 percent of the entire population of the country and the majority, of these tribes are located in central and western parts of the country in the states like Jharkhand, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, and Gujarat. The tribal communities within these states are called non-frontier tribes and are protected by the provisions of the fifth schedule of the Constitution (Shah G. , 2004). The intervention of the British colonial state decisively shattered the relatively isolated and self-contained nature of these communities which led to their breakdown and fragmentation. For the last century and a half these communities have been constantly rebelling and agitating through various means. As discussed earlier, the concept of the tribe has been a matter of great political contestation and therefore, unsurprisingly, the tribal movements have also been studied through various lenses.

Sinha classifies the tribal movements into ethnic rebellions, reform movements, political autonomy movements within the Indian Union, secessionist movements and agrarian unrest (Shah G. , 2004). However, such a neat division is infeasible from the analytical standpoint as all these elements are present and operate simultaneously in all these movements and therefore, to look at these in isolation is misleading. For example, most of the tribes in central and western parts of the country underwent forced sedentarization under colonialism and took to settled agriculture; consequently, elements of agrarian unrest pervade all tribal movements. On the other hand, this has also led analysts to subsume tribal movements under peasant movements. However, even this would be an inaccurate characterization of these movements as there were certain important factors which made them distinctly 'tribal' rather than merely peasant movements. This specificity was brought out in the methods, ideologies and aims which drove these movements. In other words, they rebelled not merely as peasants but as tribes; this is a factor which is too important to be overlooked.

The tribal movements were localized, context-bound and dependent on many contingent factors. The early tribal movements, during the colonial period, are described as elemental, spontaneous, and violent (Singh K. S., The 'Tribals' and the 1857 Uprising, 1998). They were officially registered as depredations, disturbances, riots and raids; however, these episodes must be looked at as part of the ongoing movement of resistance against the local as well as colonial dispensation of power

(Singh K. S., Colonial Transformation of Tribal Society in Middle India, 1978). The differences were a result of the changing structure of political economy and local contexts under which these were being carried out. It is, however, clear that only large, homogeneous, landowning tribal communities with a relatively stable economic base like the Bhils, Mundas, Oraons and Santhals were able to channelize their unrest into movements of resistance; whereas the smaller and economically more marginalized tribes like Birhor, Baiga or Sahariya were unsuccessful in doing so (Singh K. S., Introduction, 2006). Therefore, rather than looking at these movements of resistance as scattered episodes it would be more useful to retrace their history in order to understand the evolving responses of the communities and situate the present-day tribal movement led by JAYS in Madhya Pradesh within that framework.

In the modern period, Singh has divided the tribal movements into three historical phases - the first phase, from 1795 to 1860, is described as the period of primary resistance; the second phase, from 1860 to 1920, is the period of intensification of colonialism; and the third phase, from 1920 to 1947, is the period of secular and political movements (Singh K. S., Colonial Transformation of Tribal Society in Middle India, 1978). However, we can also analyze these movements within the matrix of the nature of state power and capital and the response of the tribal communities. This provides a better historical template to further develop our understanding of tribal movements rather than simple descriptive periodization. By extending the thematic and temporal lens, the history of tribal movements can be divided into four phases – first, rebellions; second, marginal assertions within the national movement; third, participation and protest within the structures of developmental democracy; and finally, claims for representation within the neoliberal state apparatus.

Rebelling Against Alien Claims of Sovereignty

The antagonism between the Bhils and the state dates back to the medieval period. The Bhil polity that existed in the era before the Rajput influx was decentralized and egalitarian to the extent that the chiefs did not rule over the rest of the tribe through taxation or surplus extraction. The earliest conflict was settled in the favour of the militarily superior Rajputs; this period is marked by the resistance and ouster of Motia Bhil who remains a revered figure even today. However, even after subordination at the hands of the Rajputs, the Bhils could manage to retain a large degree of political

autonomy. The Rajputs were succeeded by Marathas who ruthlessly suppressed the resistance of the Bhils. The long drawn bloody encounter ended with the defeat of Holkar's Army in 1817 at the hands of the British which led to the transfer of control of all Holkar's territory south of Satpuras, including Khadesh in Maharshtra. These episodes only highlight the fact that the exploitation and oppression of the Bhils at the hands of the reigning authority of the state, and their antagonism towards it, pre-dates the establishment of British colonialism (Baviskar, In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley, 1995).

However, the defeat of the Marathas did not solve the 'Bhil problem' for the British. The prolonged period of resistance against the militarily superior Rajput and Maratha kingdoms meant that a section of the Bhil community fled to the hills while the other section settled in the plains and took to agriculture. The constant warring and the famine of 1802-03 destroyed the economy, and as a result the Bhils took to looting and plundering. Thus, highway robberies, raids on towns, theft of cattle and abduction of hostages by Bhils became common in the area (Benjamin & Mohanty, 2007). From the state point of view, Khandesh was an important nodal point in the trade route connecting Agra in the North and Nandurbar from east to west (Upadhyay, 1986). Thus, to counter the 'Bhil problem', initially, the British employed force; however, even till 1819, reports of 'disturbances' were widespread and the tactic of using violence could not subdue the Bhils as another outbreak in the Satpuras in 1822 showed. This brought about a change in strategy and a 'policy of pacification' was adopted to tame the 'wild' tribes and enlist a section of them in the Bhil Corp in 1825 (Baviskar, In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley, 1995).

The policy of pacification, along with the setting up of the Bhil Corp, also entailed the appointment of Bhil Agents – who would be responsible for encouraging the Bhils to take up settled agriculture by aiding land grants and loans of bullocks, ameliorate their conditions, redress their grievances, ensure payment of their pensions, inspire confidence in the government, maintain peace and punish offenders. Over time, the numbers in the Bhil Corp swelled. In 1829, the imperial state also opened a school in the area to impart basic education to the Bhils. These were the first Bhils to receive a formal education. However, an overwhelming majority of the Bhils who were part of the corp were assigned unhealthy outposts. The desperate poverty and the lack of experience meant that Bhils were not very adept at agriculture; even the provision of

some seed capital and lenient terms of loan repayment did not seem to do the trick. The rent-free land became unproductive after a few yields due the unavailability of manure which meant that the Bhil's dependence on the forest as a source of sustenance continued (Benjamin & Mohanty, 2007). Although these measures attained a certain degree of success there were reports of constant disturbances by sections of Bhils across the territory which point towards a failure to co-opt or subdue the Bhils through the policy of pacification.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw some of the biggest tribal rebellions. Nationalist historians have interpreted these rebellions as a part of the protracted movement of anti-colonial nationalism which began with the War of Independence in 1857. In this framework, these tribal rebellions were against those elements which destabilized the tribal identity, namely – colonial intrusion, the trader, the moneylender and the revenue farmer (Chandra, Mukherjee, Mukherjee, Pannikar, & Mahajan, 1989). The latter three elements metamorphosed in the figure of the *Diku* or the outsider.

However, it would be misleading to argue that these tribal rebellions were part of the 'nationalist' insurrection. The Bhils, along with the Mundas, Santhals and Oraons, largely kept aloof from the 1857 insurrection. This aloof response of the Bhils also points to a complicated and mixed picture. The Bhils of the Malwa region exhibited their loyalty to the British by providing protection and shelter to them in the Sitlamata Caves, when the Bengal Troops mutinied in Mhow (Singh K. S., The 'Tribals' and the 1857 Uprising, 1998). While the Bhils remained unenthused during the War of Independence they continued with their depredations and raids even after the war was officially over; this underlines the absence of a 'nationalist' imagination behind their actions.

The rebellions led by Khajya Naik, Bheema Naik, Tantya Bhil and Chitu are the most important episodes in the decades following the uprising of 1857. Narratives of rebellions led by these figures have played an important part in the articulation of the tribal identity in the regions of western India. A brief discussion of these rebellions is undertaken here.

Khajya was in the employ of the British from 1831 to 1851 and was assigned the task of guarding a post at the Agra-Bombay road (Banerjee, Recovering the Lost Tongue: The Saga of Environmental Struggles in Central India, 2008). In 1851, he was convicted

of killing a prisoner in his custody, and consequently removed from his post and sent to jail. In 1855, he was granted a pardon; however, rather than resuming his service within the Bhil Corp, Khajya and his comrade Bhima organized a band of rebels and began raiding. The most important factor to note here was that even though he was rebelling against the British, he did not join the Holkars; instead, his actions were triggered by the prior rebellions of the Bhil chieftains of Barwani and it was towards them that he turned (Kela, 2012).

Khajya and Bhima along with their followers intensified raids and plundering, emboldened by the challenge posed to British authority by the 1857 uprising. Khajya was once again captured, pardoned, and reinstated in 1858; following which he even collected intelligence for the colonialists till as late as 1860. In that year, Khajya mutinied once again on the pretext of unsettled dues, and joined the rebels and began raiding travelling parties (Baviskar, In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley, 1995). The British finally managed to capture and execute him in 1860; however, Bhima remained beyond their reach for the time being (Kela, 2012).

The Bhils across the region remained restive and the colonial state re-employed its old methods of retributive action in a more concerted and ruthless manner. In this endeavour the British state entered hitherto uncharted territories. Retributive expeditions in the hills became much more frequent and as a result, military garrisons were set up in the hills leading to unprecedent extension of colonial authority and punishment for the Bhils in the hills. Moreover, now the colonial state began encroaching on the terrain of autonomous tribal law as part of its strategy to subdue the Bhils. After a long pursuit, Bhima was finally captured in 1867 and sent off to Port Blair where he died in 1876 (Kela, 2012).

There were two other noteworthy rebellions; one was led by Tantya Bhil in the Khandwa district and the other was led by Chitu in Alirajpur. Tantya was born in 1842 to a tenant farmer. This region was brought under the Zamindari system after the uprising of 1857. The decade of 1860's saw consecutive monsoon failures for three years and yet the landlords aided by the British refused to provide any relaxation in the collection of rent; most tribals became indebted to the local moneylenders or *sahukars* due to such conditions. Tantya refused to take loans from the moneylenders and instead

beat up the landlords and his men when they came to collect rent. This was considered a serious offence and he was sentenced to a one-year prison term for it. Even by the time of his return, the conditions had not changed much and the harassment at the hands of the landlords continued unabated. In 1872, he once again revolted against the landlords, beat them up, and this time fled to the jungles. There he mobilized support and for a decade and a half he attacked the landlords and the police stations. His band of rebels posed a grave challenge to the authority of the state by setting up seemingly parallel institutions through the resources obtained by robbing the landlords. Finally, Tantya was captured in 1888 and was sentenced to death in Jabalpur; but not before he became a local legend among the Bhils who gave him the epithet of 'Mama' or uncle (Banerjee, Recovering the Lost Tongue: The Saga of Environmental Struggles in Central India, 2008).

In Alirajpur, before 1861, the intervention of the colonial state was indirect but after the Bhil Agent assumed power, conditions changed. This resulted in the direct intervention of the colonial state in the Bhil society, through the economic sphere, which became the immediate trigger for rebellion. The agent upended the fiscal system, introduced new taxes on forest use and banned private distillation of liquor. These changes led to an enormous increase in the power of the moneylender or the *sahukar* due to the necessity of raising money to pay taxes which became a major cause of the exploitation of the Bhils, who were still mainly dependent on the forest and shifting cultivation in the area and so, it can be argued, were not completely integrated into the monetized peasant economy. Such policies gave rise to the conditions of revolution in the countryside. The two years leading up to 1881, saw bad monsoons which exacerbated the already desperate conditions of the tribal peasantry, and acted as the trigger of the rebellion. Chitu, a headman, mobilized the disaffected sections and orchestrated raids on the towns lining the highway (Kela, 2012). He targeted the *Sahukars* who had hoarded grains in such desperate times, looted their stores and distributed the grain among the people (Banerjee, Recovering the Lost Tongue: The Saga of Environmental Struggles in Central India, 2008). Some days later, the Bhils led by Chitu they laid siege to the treasury of Alirajpur and demanded the reinstatement of the king's authority and the abolition of British superintendence. Chitu was capture and during his trial he stated that he had no intention of subverting the structures of authority

but wanted the grievances of the desperate peasantry to be addressed. He was sentenced to life in prison for his actions (Kela, 2012).

These episodes have important insights to understand the Bhil identity. The most important is that the Bhils had distinct conceptions of, and their own claims to sovereignty, and did not identify with the local rulers nor with the colonialists. This manifested particularly in the persistence of the idea of "Bhil Raj", which was to animate movements in the future as well. Second, the primary targets in all the above cases were the moneylenders or the landlords. The British were targeted because it was through their might that this system of exploitation was upheld. Third, the complaints of the Bhil chieftains were formulated as grievances against the British for withholding their rights and privileges, which implies a grudging acceptance of their power. In other words, these rebellions were aimed at extracting concessions from the colonial state rather than at overthrowing it (Baviskar, In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley, 1995). Fourth, the Bhils' own justification of the raids and plundering reveals the importance of the immediate context. The Bhils, as per their own testimonies, were driven to rebellion because of desperate hunger, poverty and exploitation and not as a part of a movement for national self-determination (Kela, 2012).

The end of the era of these rebellions mark the end of the claims of sovereignty by the Bhils. Hereafter, they were disarmed and integrated into the structure of the State as peasants. Sedentarization opened the Bhils up to new social and cultural forces and it was during this period that various 'reform' movements or movements of Hinduization started to take root in the tribal regions of western and central India. A nationalist consciousness had begun to be politically organized into a fledgling mass movement; the tribal communities engaged with this stream as well. Moreover, the Scheduled Areas Act of 1874 was introduced which set the grounds for the classification of communities within these areas as Scheduled Tribes (Prasad, 'Adivasis' and the Trajectories of Political Mobilization in Contemporary India, 2016). This was the primary enabling condition for the emergence of a 'tribal' identity.

In other words, this was the beginning of an era of secular and political mobilization of the tribes. However, throughout this phase, the tribal communities remained on the

margins of the national movement. This will be illustrated by the discussion of two movements – one of the Bhils and the other of the Gonds in Chhotanagpur.

Trapped in the Margins: From National Movement to the Nehruvian State

The tribal movements in the second half of the nineteenth century also had an ethnic component. However, by the second decade of the twentieth century, the Bhils had taken to settled agriculture and had commingled with other peasant castes. The peasant movement in Bijolia, Rajasthan, therefore, can be considered as an instance of the entrance of Bhils into associational and organized politics. By 1920, the nationalists had begun organizing the peasantry and they decided to mobilize the Bhil peasantry in the movement as well. The responsibility for the same was assigned to Motilal Tejawat, a spice merchant from Mewar (Singh C. S., 1985).

This task was carried out by floating a common forum by the name of *Eka* which was open to tribals as well as non-tribals. Through this forum, Tejawat initiated some reforms within the tribes like abstinence from liquor, meat-eating and doing away with the practice of bride price. He publicly identified with Gandhi and this became a cause of concern for the colonial state as well. *Eka* came up with a memorandum whose demands catered to both the peasant as well as the tribal communities - like ending British monopoly on opium cultivation, putting an end to the excesses of revenue officials, abolishing begar and ending the restrictions placed on minor forest products and use (Singh C. S., 1985).

The movement enabled them to secure a few concessions from the state, albeit minor in nature, like exception in *rasud* and begar. These concessions were designed to break the unprecedented unity between the Bhils and the peasant castes by pitting one against the other. However, the attempt ended in vain as the Bhils led by Tejawat were energized by the slogan of 'Gandhi Raj', under which, it was claimed that there would be no exactions on the Bhils. However, although Motilal proclaimed himself to be a follower of Gandhi and the slogan of 'Gandhi Raj' was being used for mobilization, the movement itself did not completely adhere to Gandhian methods, as evident from incidents of minor violence with state officials becoming commonplace. Furthermore, Motilal attained a messianic stature and demanded complete obedience. However, these were completely antithetical to the Gandhian method (Singh C. S., 1985).

The non-cooperation movement brought out the agrarian distress simmering beneath the surface. The nationalists initiated a no-rent movement, which spread across the region rapidly. The Eka went from village to village mobilizing peasants and tribals. Despite threats, they refused to end the movement and proclaimed that they were determined to establish a Bhil Raj. This created panic among the local rulers which led to a tragic showdown in which Bhils were massacred and their houses burnt by the forces of the Sirohi State. This stirred up the Bhils and a few more concessions like right to collect forest produce and remission of dues for the current crops was granted to pacify them; however, the unrest continued. Motilal was eventually arrested in 1929. These movements led to unprecedented levels of politicization of Bhils and many of them were enrolled as Congress members as well (Singh C. S., 1985).

It is interesting to note that during the same period, the Bhils in Banswara were waging a struggle which culminated in an armed stand-off, under the leadership of Govind Giri. These two Bhil movements, conducted just three hundred kilometers apart, make for an interesting comparison. The movement led by Govind is classified as a religious reform movement; however, elements of reform like the propagation of abstinence from liquor were part of Motilal's movement as well, although the latter's is considered a peasant movement. While the figure of Gandhi was an important mobilizational tool in Tejawat movements, Govind and his followers remained reluctant of endorsing the nationalists till almost the end of their movement. In the final analysis, both these movements were animated by the imagination of the establishment of the Bhil Raj and did not adhere to the dominant ideology of non-violence, indicating the fact that they inhabited the margins of the national movement.

Such disregard for the precepts of non-violence was shared by the Gonds as well and was on display in the Forest Satyagraha initiated in Central India in 1930. The Congress, driven by the imperative to increase the mass base of the party, decided to defy the new laws regulating forest use. However, the Congress itself was divided among itself as to what extent to pursue the cause because the predominantly middle-class base of the Congress shared the colonial state's idea of forest conservation and there was a clear conflict of interest between the agriculturalists and the tribals as the former benefitted from the protection provided by the new regulations. Therefore, after deliberation, it was decided to restrict the action to the violation of grazing laws rather than extend its scope to other forest produce as well. This had little impact and the

breach was not taken seriously by the colonial state, at first. However, with time, the leadership of the movement was wrested by the tribal elite. They not only took other produce from the forest but the movement also spiralled into attacks on forest officials and police officers in the districts of Mandla and Betul. The Congress, on its part, dissociated with the actions of the tribal leadership and reminded them that they were not fighting for mastery over the forest but for Swaraj (Prasad, Unravelling the Forms of 'Adivasi' Organization and Resistance in Colonial India, 2011). In the imagination of the Gonds, of course, Swaraj would have been meaningless without mastery over the forest.

This reiterates the hiatus between the nationalists and the tribal consciousness and interests. Moreover, at least in the case of Bhils, this also points to the fact that although the tribal movements in this period were being waged together with peasant castes and within the overarching framework of the national movement; they remained driven by local contexts rather than a broader tribal or Adivasi identity. The demands were also mostly restricted to remission of dues or relaxation in regulations regarding the use of forest produce. In fact, the districts of Jhabua and Alirajpur remained almost untouched by the nationalist calls for civil disobedience and non-cooperation (Baviskar, In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley, 1995).

At the same time, this was not the case in the eastern part of India. In Jharkhand, the tribal elite had begun to organize the tribal communities to bargain with the state and the nationalist movement dominated by the Hindus. This strand of tribal politics was championed by Jaipal Munda who organized the Adivasi Mahasabha in 1938 to articulate the demand for regional autonomy within the emergent nation-state whose contours were visible in the Government of India Act, 1935. It was due to such articulations that the fifth and sixth schedules were incorporated into the Constitution which provided a modicum of protection and autonomy to the tribal communities. These provisions also enabled the crystallization of an all-encompassing 'tribal' identity, which had hitherto been absent (Prasad, 'Adivasis' and the Trajectories of Political Mobilization in Contemporary India, 2016). It can be argued that by securing the provision for the fifth schedule through the Adivasi Mahasabha and then through the Jharkhand Party, the tribal communities of central India entered, rather belatedly, within the framework of the politics of demography.

Participation and Protest in Developmental Democracy

The third phase of tribal movements saw them simultaneously participate in, and protest against, the emergent developmental democracy. This phase witnessed the impoverishment of tribal communities due to the loss of land and livelihood inflicted by the utilitarian development model despite participation within the structures of democracy. The impact of such a model of development, its' fallout, and the response to it are discussed in this section.

In the post-independence era, the state embraced a utilitarian model of heavy industrialization; the capitalist class was not robust enough to face the challenge of global competition and therefore accepted the role of a subordinate partner of the state. The Nehruvian vision for tribal development was a combination of economic improvement and cultural preservation. The tribal communities were to be protected from the vagaries of the free market and provisions against transfer of tribal land into non-tribal hands were to be provided, while their cultural practices were to be preserved. In keeping with this vision, the Tribal Welfare Department and Special Tribal Multi-Purpose Blocks were set up for promoting welfarist measures like education, public health and income generation. This allocation of a majority of funds for education and social services was at the expense of providing funds for productive activities and improving agriculture. This strategy led to an increased gap between tribals and non-tribals, while the tribal elite was able to appropriate most of the benefits flowing from these welfare measures. It was only during the fifth five-year plan from 1974 to 78 that the tribal sub-plan was introduced, which resulted in a better utilization of funds (Prasad, Environmentalism and the Left: Contemporary Debates and Future Agendas in Tribal Areas, 2004).

On the other hand, the tribal communities had to pay the heaviest price for achieving the objectives of rapid industrialization. State-led industrialization projects meant that tribal communities had to face large-scale displacement. It is estimated that approximately 21.3 million people have been displaced due to such mega-projects in fifth schedule states; out of these 8.54 million or 40 percent belong to tribal communities. Furthermore, despite clauses legally prohibiting the transfer of tribal land, there has been a large-scale diversion of land as well. By 1999, there were

4,65,000 registered cases of tribal land alienation covering 9,17,000 acres of land in 11 states (Xaxa, State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial India, 2008).

The ongoing agrarian crisis has made matters worse for the tribal communities which have taken up peasant agriculture in big numbers. The growing input costs and removal of agricultural subsidies have made peasant agriculture unsustainable which in turn has exacerbated the tribals' economic marginalization. This is one of the major reasons why from the years 1971 to 1991 the percentage of marginal farmers with landholdings below 1 acre increased approximately from 17 to 39; the percentage of large farmers declined from 4.7 to 0.9; while the percentage of medium farmers declined from 30.4 to 9.9 (Prasad, Environmentalism and the Left: Contemporary Debates and Future Agendas in Tribal Areas, 2004).

The tribal communities usually made up for their agricultural deficit by relying on the forests but there has been a steady erosion in their access to forest land as well. In the three decades from 1950 to 1980, every year, around 10 thousand hectares of forest land was diverted; largely for agricultural purposes. The rate of diversion of forest land sky-rocketed in the next decade, with 17 lakh hectares of land being diverted per year. However, this time the diversion took place mainly for big developmental and industrial projects (Prasad, 'Adivasis' and the Trajectories of Political Mobilization in Contemporary India, 2016). Consequently, by the beginning of the 1990's, 51.1 percent of the tribal population lived below poverty line, which is 15 percent more than the general population (Xaxa, State, Society and Tribes: Issues in Post Colonial India, 2008).

The agrarian crisis has forced the tribal population to supplement their income by taking up work as migrant labourers in the adjoining urban areas in mines, construction sites and factories. The lax implementation of programmes like the MGNREGA and the state's emphasis on maintaining a flexible labour market meant that economic distress forced Bhils to take up jobs in such unsafe and unregulated work conditions leading to dire consequences (Baviskar, Contract Killings: Silicosis among Adivasi Migrant Workers, 2008). However, in tribal communities of western Madhya Pradesh, seasonal migration to urban centres has become an irreversible and regular feature of life now. In fact, it is only through this casual labour that peasant agriculture with a meagre economic base can even be sustained. According to some estimates only 12 to 20

percent of households among the Bhils in western Madhya Pradesh can rely solely on cultivation; therefore, in those households which have basic food security, the young men take turns to migrate to earn extra cash to insure themselves against caprices of the agrarian market or pay off loans; while in the poorer Bhil households, entire families migrate to survive. A survey among select Bhil villages of Jhabua found that almost half the adult population of those villages migrated to perform casual labour in cities (Mosse , Gupta, & Shah , 2015). This process of proletarianization and forced migration exposes them to forces of acculturation as well (Baviskar, Tribal Politics and the Discourses of Environmentalism, 1997).

The stiffest challenge to the developmental state sketched above, in western Madhya Pradesh in general and Alirajpur in particular, was posed by the movement against the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP). This project is one of the most expensive multipurpose river projects in India. It is claimed that the project will enable the irrigation of 1.8 million hectares of land, supply drinking water to 40 million people and generate 1,450 MW power over a span of three decades. However, the dam would displace an estimated 1,99,500 people, out of which 59 percent belong to the tribal communities. This is a conservative estimate; anti-dam activists put the figure of those affected and displaced at 10,00,000 people (Baviskar, Political Uses of Sociology: Tribes and the Sardar Sarovar Project, 1995).

The movement was spearheaded by a coalition of social organizations and NGO's under the rubric of Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). The Khedoot Mazdoor Chetna Sangath (KMCS) was one such group responsible for mobilization against the dam in Alirajpur. KMCS was set up in 1983 by a group of non-tribal activists who began their intervention by mobilizing tribals against the high-handedness and corruption of the petty officials and local contractors in their dealings with the tribal population. Over time it organized the tribals for their claim to *nevad* or cultivation of patches of forest lands which in legal terms is encroachment; however, without that tribal subsistence was impossible. Their action was premised on the assertion that the tribals were the actual owners of the forest and the government was the one encroaching upon their lands. In their analysis, the need was to insulate the tribal communities from the overbearing intervention of the state. Therefore, in their construction of the tribal identity, the 'other' was the outsider and the state. They adopted the strategy of '*Sangharsh*' and '*Nirmaan*' or protest and development. Along with protesting against

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the excesses of the government officials, they thus started experiments in joint forest management, watershed development, primary education in Bhili language, primary healthcare through homeopathy, formation of self-help credit groups, running cooperative societies and conservation of indigenous agricultural seeds and practices (Banerjee, Recovering the Lost Tongue: The Saga of Environmental Struggles in Central India, 2008).

The NBA, began in 1985 under Medha Patkar's leadership; although the construction of SSP started in 1961, the whole project got momentum only when the World Bank agreed to partially finance it (Baviskar, In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley 1995). The NBA decided to eschew party politics and instead depended on mass mobilization, building coalitions with various local and international NGO's and disseminating information about the issues through newsletters, films and press briefings. The methods adopted would be civil disobedience and non-cooperation with government officials at the local level. It is ironic that after 40 years of independence a Nehruvian project was being resisted by Gandhian means! Even though the movement decided to stay away from electoral politics it did lobby for and endorse those candidates which were sympathetic to its cause. While the movement's immediate trigger was the massive displacement due to the dam, over time, the activists and intellectuals involved in the movement broadened their focus from displacement to an ecological critique of the entire developmental model. However, these precepts were not necessarily shared by those directly affected by the project – the tribals and the patidars (Baviskar, In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley, 1995). In the end, although the movement had far-reaching effects in terms of initiating a debate about displacement induced by the utilitarian development model, and securing compensation for the affected population, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of increasing the height of the SSP.

Three features of the movement need to be pointed out. Firstly, the movement articulated its demands in the language of environmentalism and sustainability, rather than exclusively focussing on displacement and tribal rights. One reason for avoiding a particularistic articulation might have been because a significant section of the affected people, apart from the tribals, were also the landowning Patidar caste in the Nimar region (Baviskar, In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the

Narmada Valley, 1995). However, such a framing of the contradiction led to a certain theoretical obfuscation of the ground reality.

Second, both the movements were led by non-tribal activists or outsiders. They were responsible for creating the ideological framework which sustained the movement. They adopted the tactic of showcasing the tribals affected by the project and downplayed the patidars. Though this 'strategic essentialism' helped in sustaining the narrative of the movement, it assimilated the tribals into a politics of 'resistance' giving rise to a false binary of resistance versus development, which led to an unwarranted romanticization of the tribal identity. This was not how the tribals saw the issue on the ground (Baviskar, Tribal Politics and the Discourses of Environmentalism, 1997).

Thirdly, and most importantly, the movement decided to maintain a distance from electoral politics and state structures. This politics from a distance, ideological purity, and the construction of an idyllic tribal relationship with nature, were considered acts of misrepresentation and arrogance by the tribal activists. The privileged middle-class activists or outsiders were afforded this space which was unavailable to the ordinary tribal activist. In fact, enthused by the success of the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Dalit movement in Uttar Pradesh, there were certain articulations of the primacy of representation and the necessity of capturing state power developed by the tribal activists and politicians at that time. However, such attempts remained marginal (Baviskar, Tribal Politics and the Discourses of Environmentalism, 1997).

The limits of this model were frankly admitted by Rahul Banerjee, one of the activists of the KMCS, which aimed at freeing villages entirely from the intervention of the state. The KMCS encouraged the tribal villagers to make important political decisions through consensus rather than competition, and keep the state away from interfering. However, this curtailed the scope of their operation:

"*Jo hara hua candidate hai usko vote kyun dega koi? Jo Alirajpur hai usme kam se kam 1200 gaon hai. Nahi 1200 nahi wo toh poora Jhabua main hai, Alirajpur main hoga 600 gaon hoga. Matlab Jhabua se 3-4 seat hain, matlab 300-400 gaon aur sangathan kabhi 30-40 gaon se aage nahi gaya. Kyunki tha hi vaisa ki state ke virodh main jaanaa hai ye karna hai wo karna hai, theek niyam the ki kuch khana pina nahi hai. Ab 30-40 gaon hai, hum 50 jeet te the, 50 nirvirodh hota tha… usme sab milke tay karte the ki kaun hoga sab. Lekin ab toh dheere dheere wo sab bhi khatam ho gaya hai. At a peak*

in 1993-94 mein 30-40 gaon mein poora hamara control tha. Lekin poora toh 300-400 gaon hai. Baki jagah pe toh nahi hai. Toh aap Vidhan Sabha nahi jeet sakte ho." (Banerjee, Interview of Rahul Banerjee, 2020)

Even Baviskar notes that the villagers looked upon the activists as providing free services to them in dealing with the high-handedness of the state. However, they were not seen as representing them (Baviskar, In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley, 1995). After a point, the tribals could not evade the reach of the state and therefore, were compelled to engage with electoral politics.

II

JAYS: From Resistance to Representation

The current phase of tribal movement, from 2013 onwards, has emerged from the historical experience of the past three decades of politicization and mobilization aimed at mounting a resistance to the state by practising a politics from a distance or the margins. This phase is being led by the Jai Adivasi Yuva Shakti or JAYS and is an attempt to break with the past and shift the social and political discourse of the tribal communities out of the margins and bring it within the mainstream by employing the vocabulary of representation. The second section of this chapter will discuss the political and ideological aspects of this nascent movement.

Clientelistic Politics and the Crisis of Representation

In Madhya Pradesh, a two-party system developed quite early and while the Jan Sangh and the BJP were traditionally a party of the upper caste elites, the Congress enjoyed the support of the oppressed sections including the Dalit and tribal communities. However, despite the total tribal population being more than 20 percent, the tribal communities have not been able to assert themselves politically throughout the last seven decades. There are four reasons for this – first, the tribals have not been able to produce an educated middle class which could provide it effective leadership. Second, the polity of MP has always been marked by a great degree of fragmentation because the state was not created based on a demand of any linguistic or cultural group; rather it was cobbled together during the colonial times for administrative convenience, and then with some modifications retained as a state in the post-independence scenario. This gave rise to regionalism which, in turn, spurred factionalism in the Congress, with

multiple locally dominant upper-caste leaders claiming space in the party. This curtailed the opportunities for a numerically preponderant, but socially and educationally oppressed group like the tribals to find their own space. Third, there is no large bloc of intermediate castes like in other states of north India, and various castes are concentrated within their respective regions. Therefore, the idiom of Bahujan politics does not necessarily translate into as effective an electoral strategy in MP as in other north Indian states. Fourth, the Congress in this state had a responsive elite which sought to practice the politics of inclusion through various measures of governance (Pai, 2010).

Therefore, this fragmentation of the polity has ensured the sustenance of a two-party system. While some parties like the BSP or the Gondwana Gana Parishad (GGP), have come up and tried to unsettle the system, they have not been able to alter the status quo to a considerable extent and have been forced to enter into a bargain with the two larger formations, viz. Congress and the BJP. This has also meant that no independent tribal leadership has been able to develop in the state and the oppressed communities have been sucked into the vortex of the two-party system. The tribal leadership which developed in the post-independence period has been clientelistic in nature. The Congress has traditionally been a dominant force in the western belt and enjoyed support among the tribals; however, it has done so through a system of elite co-option, whereby locally influential tribal leaders are co-opted by the upper caste leadership of the party. Therefore, a patron-client relationship between the tribal representatives and the electorate is observed across the State.

This crisis of representation among the tribal communities of the western belt is the trigger behind the rise of JAYS, as per Hiralal Alawa, the National Convenor of the organization:

"Jo tribal ki leadership hai aur jo maine feel kiya hai wo vyaktigat leadership hai. Jo community based leadership honi chahiye jaise ki koi community ko sath leke chale jaise hum logon ke issue hai jaise ki panchvi anusuchi wala issue hum isliye utha rahe hain ki 5th schedule wale 10 states hain unko jode isme..." (Alawa, Interview of Hiralal Alawa, 2019)

However, the discontent with misrepresentation is not restricted only to party politics but also extends to the politics of movements within the tribal belt as well. Chetan Patel, an activist of JAYS, for example, put forward this criticism of the NBA:

"Sir aapne ye dekha hoga ki adivasi ka netritva hamesha other caste ne kara hai. Aaj agar NBA ki jo netri hai - Medha Patkar, wo adivasi toh hai nahi, per uski jo poori fauz hai sipahi hai wo adivasi hain. Kyunki zameen adivasi ki hai, narmada ke us chhor wo log aur is chhor bhi wo log. Amarkantak se last dam tak aap bolo zameen toh 70% adivasi ki hai. Par hamesha adivasi ka netritva other ne kiya hai. Wo ladai hamari thi lekin hamare log pehle hi bante hue hai toh ladna chahte hi nahi the, koi aur vyakti aaya aur mukhiya ban gaya... Toh 32 saal pehle jo andolan shuru hua tha toh usko (dam) wahin ruk jana tha wo badhta kyun gaya? Toh hamare logon pe sirf log apna naam chamkate hain, andolan chamkate hain, apni jeb bharte hain... Toh jo Narmada Bachao ki ladai hai, ye agar adivasi karta, iski leadership Adivasi karta toh ye ladai kabse khatam ho jati. Ye dam bhi nahi banta aur ye kaam bhi ruk jata." (Patel, 2020)

The abortive politics of representation articulated by the tribal activists during the peak of the NBA has thus finally found an assertive forum for its articulation in JAYS. Moreover, in the two decades since the movement lost steam, the market and affirmative action policies have enabled the development of a small but politically conscious and articulate middle class among the tribal communities in the region which acts as the social base of the organization's leadership.

New Age Movement: The Evolution of JAYS

JAYS can be described as a quintessential new age tribal movement since it grew out of a social media page and transformed itself into one of the most strident voices for tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh. A brief discussion on its evolution and the principal figure behind it would throw some light on its leadership and its political vision.

Hiralal Alawa was a Resident Doctor in AIIMS, Delhi. He was interested in the social and political issues of the tribal population and his views on the topic started gaining

the attention of the tribal youth online; sensing the traction of his posts he made a group on Facebook by the name of JAYS. He was convinced that he could mobilize the tribal youth, and decided to convert this Facebook page into a grassroots organization. The decision to not become a part of any existing tribal rights group was because he believed that the latter did not focus on issues that really mattered to the tribal communities. In order to set up an organization, he started meeting and discussing his ideas with tribal activists who were either stationed in the national capital or visited it in the course of their activism (Kumar R. , Ankhan Dekhi: Ek Kahani JAYS ki, 2020).

In May 2013, Alawa convened a 'Facebook Panchayat' in his home district of Barwani, to meet with those who had followed him on Facebook, predominantly the tribal youth. The first meeting was attended by 200 people. After this, in October of the same year, Alawa organized an 'International Facebook Mahapanchayat' in Indore, with the aim to bring together tribals from the neighbouring countries of Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh as well. Although the Mahapanchayat was not attended by the tribals of the neighbouring countries, some tribals of Indian origin stationed outside India, and many in the Fifth Schedule states did attend the conference. The discussion in these conferences was held around the provisions of the fifth schedule and the tribal icons (Kumar R. , Ankhan Dekhi: Ek Kahani JAYS ki, 2020).

Another such 'Facebook Mahapanchayat' was organized in the Dewas district of Madhya Pradesh in 2015. The essential role of social media to mobilize the tribal youth is a unique feature of this movement. The use of social media was important in establishing a link with the tribal youth given that Alawa's new organization did not have a lot of resources, a challenge that all oppressed communities face:

"*Toh sabse pehle hamara tha ki youth se connectivity kaise karna hai aur youth ko kaise ekjut karna hai. Hamare paas sansadhan bahut zyada the nahi aur jaise baar-baar Delhi se ya Gwalior tha toh Gwalior se ana possible nahi tha toh social media se tribal se judna aur unke kya issues hai usko leke social media pe post karne lage.*" (Alawa, Interview of Hiralal Alawa, 2019)

The figure of Alawa has become an important symbol of the movement. A part of Alawa's political appeal lies in his accomplishments within the 'mainstream' society and his exposure to the 'world'. Among his supporters, he is seen as a person who decided to give up a lucrative and stable job in a big city, a thing coveted among the

economically vulnerable sections, to come and fight for the cause of the tribals, despite not hailing from any established political dynasty. This is a recurring theme in many of the speeches and conversations of other activists and members of JAYS.

Alawa personifies the new generation of tribal leadership, which is educated, middle-class, based in cities and not villages, and who either own small businesses or are employed as professionals in the corporate sector rather than being farmers. They have the confidence and the tools to be able to represent themselves against the dominant non-tribal communities and the state machinery. The youth are the primary social base of JAYS. The educated tribal youth has become the vanguard of this new politics, snatching the mantle from the older generation who did not have as much exposure, as per Anurag Khadia, Jhabua District President of JAYS:

"*Jo middle class hai. Vah padha likha hai, vah shikshit hai, vah samajhta hai, asliyat kya hai. Ye jo hamare bujurg hain unko gumrah kar rakha hai shuru se, to samajhne me time lagega. Sir yadi aap dekhoge to jitne bande JAYS ke rahenge, anya BJP-Congress ko laakar khada kar do bolti band kar denge unki. Hamare samne kuch nahi lagte hain vo.*" (Khadia, 2019)

The popularity of JAYS among the youth was re-established when within two years of the Dewas Facebook Mahapanchayat, the decision to contest student body elections in the western Madhya Pradesh paid rich dividends. JAYS-backed tribal organizations swept the student council elections in 13 districts. These victories assumed added political importance because they were secured at the expense of the RSS-backed Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP). Until the advent of JAYS, the ABVP had been able to secure victories in student union elections in the Malwa-Nimar region despite the demographic make-up of those districts being predominantly tribal in nature (Kumar R. , Adivasi Chhaatra Sangathan JAYS ne Lahraya Parcham, Manuwadiyon ka Soopda Saaf, 2017).

Adivasi: From Petitioner to Ruler

After the impressive showing in the student body elections the next big mobilization undertaken by JAYS was 'Mission 2018'. This was an attempt to mobilize all the tribal communities in the central and western parts of the country to orchestrate a *gherao* of

the Parliament to draw the attention of the government towards the flagrant violation of the rights of tribals (Forward Press, 2018). However, this should be seen more as an attempt to build momentum towards the then upcoming state elections in which JAYS intended to participate. In fact, the centrality of participating in the electoral process and capturing political power is what sets their agenda apart from the previous phase of tribal movements and the countless other organizations claiming to fight for the cause of the tribals. The organization wants to end the 'politics from a distance' practised by movements and activists of the previous era. In Alawa's articulation, the tactic of negotiating with the state had proved to be futile for the past seven decades and therefore, there was no use of continuing with old methods of repeatedly holding rallies, sit-ins, protests and cultural programmes of song and dance (Alawa, Adivasi Youth Should Enter Politics for their Identity and Self-Respect, 2018).

This is made amply clear by Alawa's views on the NBA:

"*Wo log jab Narmada se doob kshetra hota hai to andolan karte hain baki silent rehte hain wo log. Unka movement wahin tak seemit hai. Jab pani bhar raha hai toh active ho jayenge per aam logon ki rozmarra ki samasya nahi uthate jaise health ki problem hai toh kabhi Narmada Bachao wale nahi aayenge ya kabhi kisi adivasi bachchi ke sath kuch galat ho gaya toh Narmada Bachao wale nahi ayenge. Wo sirf Narmada ko bachane ke liye hi active hai aur kuch nahi.*" (Alawa, Interview of Hiralal Alawa, 2019)

The disillusionment with the politics from a distance is evident. The approach of the previous generation limited the horizon of tribal mobilization. Moreover, after the Supreme Court judgement allowing the construction of the dam, the NBA's activism has also become routinized and restricted to monitoring the state-led process of rehabilitation and relief, and ensuring that it is executed justly. The structural critique of the development paradigm no longer holds. Therefore, displacement and rehabilitation do not capture the entirety of the social and political landscape of the tribal communities in the region. JAYS emphasizes on taking up everyday issues of deprivation and injustice along with monitoring the rehabilitation process. Opposition to the developmental state and the market has given way to organizing the community to get their fair share in the process of development (Alawa, Adivasi Youth Should Enter Politics for their Identity and Self-Respect, 2018).

This formulation shifts the entire tribal discourse from rights and resistance, to the idea of representation. The hitherto nebulous ideological discourse of the movement is driven by the centrality of capturing political power and ensuring representation. The political project of JAYS, then, is one of developing the tribal communities as a singular electoral bloc; this requires shifting the anchors of the tribal identity from ideas of ecology and environmentalism to ideas of self-respect, dignity, and rights. The articulation of the Adivasi identity on these lines is essential for the project. It is clearly reflected in how JAYS assesses the challenges facing the tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh:

"*Abhi sabse bade challenge tribals main division hai, dusra ashiksha hai aur teesra hai berozgari. Jaise 10-15 percent jo padh gaya hain tribal wo berozgaar hai toh unka problem hai ki naa job mil paa raha hai aur na hi wo kheti laayak bache hain. Padhne ke baad kheti karna bhul gaye wo log.*" (Alawa, Interview of Hiralal Alawa, 2019)

To reiterate, the major challenges facing the youth of the tribal community as per Alawa are internal division, illiteracy, and unemployment. The tribal identity is thus no longer being articulated in idyllic terms of an organic connection with nature and the forest; although various protective laws like PESA and FRA are invoked, they are secondary concerns employed mostly for rhetorical purposes, for without political power one cannot get these laws implemented.

This view is shared by a group of young JAYS activists of Khandwa who argue that migration needs to be checked by giving employment, which is scarce in tribal regions:

"*JAYS to kam kar hi raha hai jaha tak sadhan, sansadhan, shikshan ke karan jo yuva rahega naukri me chala jayega, ya phir kai tarah ki nai nai factory ka nirman hoga to usme yuva ja sakta hai; main dikkat to hai is or sarkar ko dhyan dena chahiye, agar hit ki baat karti hai to sarkar ko bhi is or aakarshit hona chahiye. Itna kshetra hai ki tribal ke liye karoro arbo rupaye aate hai, unhone rojgar ke liye kya sadhan uplabdh kiya. Is prakar ka prayas hona chahiye. JAYS ka yahi kaam hai ki logo ko jagrat karke shiksha ke kshetra me jagrat kare. Yuva to apne aap adhikar mangne ke liye, aajkal to aap dekh hi rahe ho ki, apna adhikar mangne ke liye yahi sabse badi puja hai.*" (JAYS, 2020)

In the run-up to the 2018 assembly elections the JAYS created quite a stir by giving the slogan of '*Ab ki Bar, Adivasi Sarkar*', which echoed the famous BJP slogan of '*Ab ki*

Bar, Modi Sarkar', and further announcing that it will field candidates in 80 constituencies although there are only 47 seats reserved for the tribals (Trivedi, 2018). However, the organization could not emerge as a third force in the state. The reasons for that will be discussed in the concluding section of this chapter.

Multiple Constructions of the Adivasi Identity

The foregrounding of the Adivasi identity opens new political possibilities and therefore, formations like the Congress and JAYS construct this identity by employing various narratives, while the RSS-VKA oppose the usage of this term and aim to replace it by the concept of Vanvasi. The Adivasi identity is primarily articulated on two sites – first, through the provisions of the Constitution, and second, through the cultural and political discourse. The Congress, being a mainstream party with a traditionalist ideological orientation, sticks to the Constitutional definition, while its leaders place it within the Non-Brahminical Hindu tradition.

According to Congress leader from Madhya Pradesh Digvijay Singh, the tribal identity as defined by the Constitution is based on exploitation by the outsider:

"*As far as tribals are concerned they have been an exploited lot. Over the years they were driven by people who came from outside, exploited and then driven from their home and hearth and their land and whatever they had. So it is the Indian Constitution, I think, which has given the tribals a privileged identity and rightly too, so that the centuries of exploitation not only stops but they have been given an opportunity to compete with the best and when we talk of reservation it is not a favour to them but an opportunity which they have not been getting because of the exploitative character of the non-tribals.*" (Singh D. , 2020)

However, Vikrant Bhuria, a Congress leader from the Bhil community, identifies himself as a Hindu and invokes the Non-Brahminical tradition to define the Adivasi:

"*Haan hum apne ko hindu identify karte hain. Hamara jo adivasi samaj hai wo kafi sare dharmon ko lene wala samaj hai. Aur inki ye manyata hai ki agar prachin kaal se koi aaye the toh wo adivasi the... Aap humko jaan karke, kyunki ye manuvadi soch hoti hai. Ye kya karti hai ki ye logon ko baantati hai - kisi ko Brahmin main, kisi ko rajput main, kisi ko vyapar karne walon main aur baki ko shudra main bantegi. Hum us cheez*

ke kattar virodh main hai. Yahin pe ek deewar khadi hoti hai. Jo unka Hinduism hai wo alag hai aur hamara Hinduism alag hai." (Bhuria, 2020)

The Congress position on this politically sensitive matter of conflating Adivasi identity with Hinduism, is informed by the principle of non-interference. Therefore, while it will protect the freedom of the Adivasi to identify with any religion, as opposed to the RSS campaign to persuade them to register as Hindus; the Congress will also not provide any alternative cultural or religious articulation of the tribal identity (The Hindu, 2020). The policy proposals and the political narratives of the Congress foreground the aspect of exploitation and privilege the redistributive aspect of the tribal identity while staying ambivalent on the matters of religion. In other words, they do not articulate the tribal identity in opposition to Hinduism.

Rejecting 'Imposition' of Hindu Identity, Reviving Adivasi Assertion

The articulation and assertion of an autonomous Adivasi identity is indispensable to JAYS's project of reconstructing the tribal identity as an electoral bloc, which entails rejecting its absorption within the Hindu social order. However, this rejection is articulated in the language of reviving the original religious and cultural tenets of being an Adivasi, rather than embracing a new order as a mark of protest against the existing order due to humiliation, like in the case of Dalits.

The articulation of the Adivasi identity plays three very important functions within its framework – first, it helps to unite the various tribal communities which are socially fragmented and spatially scattered due to historical reasons, but constitute around twenty percent of the state's population. The problem of internal fragmentation is one of the most pressing challenges in front of JAYS which has not been able to spread as effectively within the eastern belt populated by the Gond tribal communities. However, this problem is not unique to the JAYS but is common to most projects of tribal identity construction which locate themselves within the frame of electoral politics. In fact, the division within the Mundas, Santhals and Oraons within the Jharkhand Party was one of the main reasons for its demise (Panchbhai, 2006).

Alawa is aware of the problem and the organization has attempted to overcome this challenge:

"*Bhilala hai to wo apne alag rahegi. Sab apne difference main rahenge. Aapas main shadi nahi karenge, ladai jhagde bahut chalte hain. Toh humne kaha ki ek aisa platform diya jaye aur sabko joda jaye. Humne Bhil, Barela aur Bhilala sabko jodna start kiya. Ab hamare liye badi chunauti thi ki Gond community ko kaise jode? Kyunki Bhil aur Gond toh uttar dakshin wala masla hai... Haan unme takrav tha. Toh humne 'Jai Bada Dev' bolna shuru kiya. Jabki hamare kshtera main ye prachalan nahi hai per Gondwana main laga ki arey ye log hamare jaise hain aur isse wo dheere dheere jude. Jaise peela gamcha wala dekha hoga? Jaise Gondawana khatm ho gaya lekin phir bhi ye chalta hai. Unko ye lagta hai ki ye adivasiyon ka ek gamcha hai. Phir aise judne lage. Phir 5th schedule wala issue aa gaya. Humne usko raise kiya aur use jude jo 10 rajya the Rajasthan, Chattisgarh, MP, Maharashtra aur Himachal Pradesh aur jo bhi 5th schedule area the unke youth jude 5th schedule ke naam pe. Phir PESA kanoon aur job hi problem thi toh wo judte gaye dheere dheere.*" (Alawa, Interview of Hiralal Alawa, 2019)

The fragmentation is sought to be overcome through symbolism like sporting the yellow scarf which was used by the Gondwana Gana Parishad, including and recognizing the religious figures of different tribes like Bada Dev of the Gonds, coining new slogans of the movement '*Ek teer, Ek kamaan / Adivasi, Ek Samaan",* and most importantly by foregrounding the provisions of the fifth schedule.

The second function of the Adivasi identity is that it instills a sense of pride among the Adivasi communities as it positions them as the original sons of soils as opposed to the coinage of Vanvasi:

"*Vanvasi matlab van ke andar rahne wala. Adivasi matlab aadi kaal se rahne wala. Desh ka asli malik, asli nivasi, moolnivasi. Vanvasi matlab jangal me rahne wala.*" (Khadia, 2019)

While earlier the provisions of the fifth schedule were looked at as protections, they have been resignified in the discourse of JAYS to assert ownership. Adivasi, then, is portrayed as the ruler of the region. This imbues a hitherto stigmatized identity with a sense of power, and is the main reason why JAYS opposes the label of Vanvasi.

Interestingly, a former RSS chief Sudarshan had appealed to address only those tribals as Vanvasi who still stayed near the forests, while urging to call those who had migrated

to the cities as *Nagarwasi* or city dwellers thereby, completely resignifying the tribal identity. According to Kanungo and Joshi, this nuance was a significant one as those tribals who had achieved a modicum of upward mobility and migrated to the ciites did not like to be addressed either as Adivasi or Vanvasi but wanted to become part of the mainstream Hindu society (Kanungo & Joshi, 2009). On the contrary, in the case of JAYS, the educated youth which is part of the emergent elite are asserting their Adivasi identity and challenging the Hinduization of the tribals to attain political power and ensure upward mobility through it.

In fact, for the proponents of the Adivasi identity, the identification of the tribal communities with the forest, as in the case of Vanvasi, is considered a reminder of the oppression and violence meted out to them, and of the imposition of "backwardness" by the dominant non-tribal communities. Therefore, this term is also considered demeaning and offensive:

"*Vanvasi kyun kara iska batata hun main apko history - jab hum sabse pehle yahan ke niwasi the, uske baad jo log aate gaye wo hamari zameen cheente gaye aur humko vano ki taraf dhakel diya gaya, toh jab bhi aap vanvasi bolenge toh jo hamara shoshit itihas hai uski yaad dilate hai. Hamara shoshan hua tha aur hamein vano mein jane ko majboor kiya gaya tha. Agar humein koi vanvasi bolega to wo hamare liye gaali thi aur rahegi.*" (Bhuria, 2020)

The third and final function of the assertion of the Adivasi identity is that it sets the political discourse in terms of the language of rights guaranteed in the Constitution. The Adivasi is a citizen with certain special and inviolable rights which need to be recognized by the state. This helps JAYS to operationalize the identity at an everyday level in their dealings with the petty officials whose attitude towards the ordinary tribal remains high-handed even today. Further, invoking the language of rights constantly poses the state as the other, opening up space for constant political mobilization; for this purpose, politically educating the tribal masses about their rights and privileges is one of the major tasks taken up by JAYS and done through cadre-training and leadership programmes and holding Mahapanchayats.

The JAYS has styled itself as the defender of authentic tribal culture. This leads them to adopt equidistance from all religions and stressing the Constitutional definition of tribes. The VKA and the other forces of Hinduization, in this narrative, are intruders

who are desecrating the original culture and religion of the tribals. As a result, there is an opposition to the missionaries and their proselytizing projects as well because anything which leads to an erosion in the authentic identity of the tribals needs to be countered, even though there is a common consensus that the rates of conversions have gone down now:

"*Dekho abhi toh conversion itni zyada sankhya main nahi hai ye log jaise tribal area main Christian log kyunki politically ye effect kar sakte hain. Ye kuch hi jagah main jaise Jhabua main jahan ye politically effect kar sakte hain... Agar tribe Christian ban rahe hain toh ye bilkul galat hai. Dekhiye isme tribal jab Christianity ko follow kar raha hai toh wo apni identity or culture ko door kar raha hai toh wo bilkul galat hai...*" (Alawa, Interview of Hiralal Alawa, 2019)

The Church, on its part, argues that it has undertaken an exercise to prevent erosion of tribal culture by reinterpreting tribal practices to synthesize them with the teachings of the Bible:

"*You do shradh, tribal log nukta karte hain, ye dono equal hain kyunki dono apne purvajon ke liye hain. Nukta aaj bhi hota hai father log nukta karate hain. See usme studies ki gayi. Nukta mein hota kya hai ki apne purvajon ko yaad kiya jata hai, Catholic Church bhi purvajon ko yaad karta hai, toh jaise mass hoti hai bhajan hoti hai - dono ko combine kar diya gaya hai... Haan ye sab Biblical hai. In sabko accept karne mein church ko koi problem nahi hui. Aur unhi reeti-riwazon ke sath prayers. nandru-jatar, moti-jatar. Moti jatar main bhutte aayenge, bhindi aayenge, jab tayyar ho jati hai ye fasal, toh ye fasal chadhti hai aur ye har tribal karta hai. Gaon ke hisab se, colony ke hisab se, they come together and offer it. They hold prayers, do dance.*" (Shah F. R., 2020)

However, despite these tactics of Biblical reinterpretation, the Church is considered an alien force and conversions are opposed by JAYS. It has adopted the tactic of remaining equidistant from both the big religious traditions. This is also a ploy to prevent the fragmentation of the prospective tribal bloc on religious lines. That is why rather than religion, the tribal identity is articulated in terms of cultural traits like language, customs, and rituals:

"*Adivasi chahe Christians ki taraf badhe ya Hindu ki taraf uski samvaidhanik identity dono taraf se khatre mein hai. Uski apni identity uski boli mein hai, language mein hai.*" (Alawa, Interview of Hiralal Alawa, 2019)

However, although JAYS claims to be equidistant from both traditions, the cultural entrenchment of Hinduism makes its summary rejection much more difficult. This is reflected in the positions that leaders of JAYS take on the inclusion of Adivasis in a Hinduized past:

"*Dekho adivasi Ramayan ka hissa toh rahe hain. History main bhi mention hai ki Shabari Bhil thi aur ye bhi hai ki Ram ke sath jo vanar sena thi wo bhi sab Bhil hi the. Toh kahin na kahin in logon ke sath prabhavit toh rahe hain. Toh isilye ye mana jata hai ki jab Ram Bhil area mein aaye the, toh jinko vanar sena kaha jata hai wo sab Bhil community ke hi log the. Actually naam vanar de diya lekin the wo Bhil log hi.*" (Alawa, Interview of Hiralal Alawa, 2019)

This simultaneous affirmation and rejection of cultural Hinduism is not restricted to Alawa. Such a contradiction is present in other members of the JAYS as well. The reason for this is the century old presence of the motifs of diffused Hinduism and the cultural hegemony it now enjoys owing to the intervention of the RSS-VKA, discussed earlier. Rakesh Parate, Secretary of the Madhya Pradesh Congress Committee of the Adivasi Department, and a member of JAYS, shares a similar view:

"*Sabse pahli baat, matlab maryada purushottam Ram ko jab vanvas hua to kitne saal ke vaas rahe, 14 saal, to kya maryada purushottam Ram ji jo hamare bhi aaradhya hai, vo pure vishwa ke aaradhya hai, kya unko aur un logo ko kya vanvasi kaha jata tha kya, pahli cheej, to vanvasi shabd aadivasiyo ko bola jayega to vah hamara apmaan hai.*" (Khadia, 2019)

Those Bhils who are not part of any political project identify themselves through the dual axis of culture as well as religion; culturally they identify as Adivasi while religiously they identify as Hindu. Both these identities remain intertwined with each other. As discussed in the previous chapter, the popularization of the Hindu Gods among the Bhils of the region is a recent phenomenon while the presence of cultural symbols of Hinduism has a long history.

On the other hand, the pulls of tribal culture remain strong. Even the Church has had to reinterpret and include tribal practices and root Christianity within the tribal cultural matrix. This is necessitated because despite all the cultural and economic penetration of the outside world, life in the villages is still governed by tribal customs and cultural practices. Even today, issues like marriage and dispute resolution are governed by the communitarian ethos of tribal life; practices like collectively negotiating bride price and resolving matters of 'elopement' are still alive, reinforcing the tribal identity's difference from mainstream Hinduism. In other words, they possess a living culture which orders life in the villages, making it a strong ground for identification.

The 'religious' tenets of the Bhils are subsumed within the 'cultural' aspect because of the lack of a written text. For example, the foundational myths of the Bhils, distinct from the Hindu myths, are orally performed during their ceremonies. However, Hindu values and symbols, seep into consciousness because that is the dominant cultural force. Therefore, there exists a constant tension and overlap between the Hindu and the Adivasi identities.

This is brought out most clearly in my conversation with Sajma Bhai, the Sarpanch of a village near Phoolmal. I interviewed him when he was participating in a panchayat between two villages to resolve an issue of elopement and the concomitant settlement of bride price:

A: Sir kya ho raha hai yahan?

S: Woh shadi ka jhagda hai toh len-den ki baat kar rahe hain.

A: Kya hua hai masla?

S: Ye bhage the aur shadi nahi hui thi toh wo len-den ki baat kar rahe hain ki aisa kar lo.

A: Toh ye kaise hota hai?

S: Sab aapas main baith ke baat karte hain. Aur jaisa Adivasiyon ka chalta hai vaise hi lete hai. wo guna ka jo rate hai wohi lete hain.

A: Achcha toh ye gaon ke log hain sare?

S: Do gaon ke hain jahan se ladka hai aur ladki hai.

A: Achcha jab ye ho jayega toh phir court main nahi jana padega?

S: Nahi jana padega, apne hi baat ho jati hai, gaon ke gaon main hi reh jata hai.

A: Toh ye adivasi pranali bahut pehle se chali aa rahi hai kya?

S: Haan baap-dade ke samay se chali aa rahi hai, purani hai.

A: Achcha par sheher mein jo log hote hain wo toh court jate hain…

S: Nahi gaon main aisa nahi hai. Gaon main baith ke baat karte hain, len-den dekhte hain, khula soch rakhte hain.

A: Ye ho jayega iske baad shadi hogi?

S: Iske baad ye mana jayega ki shaadi man gayi.

A: Achcha toh phir jab yahan faisla ho jayega toh kya hoga uske baad?

S: Kai ni hoga, len-den ki baat hogi aur fir faisla ho jayega.

A: Toh phir aise koi puja nahi hoti?

S: Nahi aisa nahi hota. Niyam se shadi hoti toh puja path hota lekin ab ye bhag gaye the toh koi puja nahi hogi. Bas ab toh paise deke khatam karenge.

A: Nahi yahan pass mein koi mandir ho, Ram ka ya Hanuman ka…

S: Nahi Adivasi mein aisa nahi hota hai.

A: Aap Hanuman mandir nahi jate?

S: Nahi jate. Agar reeti se shadi hoti toh Hanuman mandir jate per isme bhag gayi toh kahin nahi jate. Len den karte hain phir hum apne gaon chale jate aur wo apne.

A: Aur ye dono ladka-ladki Hindu hain?

S: Haan Hindu hain.

A: Aur agar inme se koi ek Christian hota toh?

S: Nahi aisa nahi hota, Christian bhi hoti to bhi aise hi baith ke baat hoti khane-peene ki.

A: Toh koi farak nahi padta Christian hone se?

S: Nahi koi farak nahi padta.

A: Toh ye aise karne ki padhtati Hindu hai ya Adivasi?

S: Adivasi hai.

A: Adivasi aur Hindu main farak nahi hai?

S: Nahi. (Sajma, 2020)

Throughout the conversation, he keeps differentiating and collapsing the two identities. It doesn't matter whether the boy and girl are Hindus or Christians, he asserts that the resolution of the problem was going to be governed by Adivasi and not Hindu customs. Despite this clear distinction, in the end, he conflates the two identities. It is on such a nebulous and entangled terrain that various projects of hegemonic identity construction take place. The RSS attempts to amplify the Hindu axis among the tribal communities, while formations like JAYS attempt to foreground the Adivasi axis, in the ongoing culture wars.

Given the nebulous and intertwined nature of the Hindu and Adivasi identity, the rejection of the 'imposition' of the Hindu identity is couched in the discourse of revival of authentic Adivasi culture. It is painted as an attempt to go back to their roots. Here cultural symbols are used to assert the tribal identity; this is done both at an individual as well as collective level. At the individual level, Adivasi identity is asserted by reviving the culture of wearing traditional dresses, using new technology to propagate Adivasi songs, or elevating certain symbols of Adivasi culture.

Banerjee has observed how technological advancement and the internet has made the popularization of the Adivasi songs and culture cheaper and hence, easier. For example, although traditional instruments have now been replaced by the DJ in social gatherings and weddings, the songs that are sung are still the original Bhil-Bhilala songs:

"Aur ek bahut achchi cheez hai jo humne hi shuru kiya tha wo pakad liya ki inki jo culture hai wo bahut sare aur adivasi culture ke sath bollywood culture main dab gaya hai. Toh hamara kareeb 20 saal pehle se ek prayas tha ki inka culture nahi dabna chahiye. Oral culture hai toh wo achche se maintain hona chahiye, toh wo ho gaya hai. Toh abhi kya hai ki inke jo geet hai, ye bahut popular hai, kuch toh matlab bazaar ke log bhi gaate hain, jaise wo kaka-baba ka hai na aise geet general public mein bhi popular hain. Lekin inki shadiyon aur sab me total inke geet wo modernise ho gaya hai. Inke jo geet the jaise powri, shehnai, local shehnai tha wo, wo sab bajate the inke jo dhol the. Ab usme synthesiser aa gaya hai aur ab studio aa gaye hain. Aaj kal toh matlab, pehle studio banana kathin tha na. Matlab aapko record karna hai toh studio, per ab studio hai nahi, aap kuch samaan le aye aur apne mobile pe hi record kiya aur usko Youtube pe chadha diya ar wo popular ho gaya. Aisa matlab ye technology se bahut fayda ho gaya hai. Toh ye jo inka traditional culture hai, music hai, naatak hai, wo sare cheezein bahut popular ho gaya hai. Bahut views ho gaye, kahin kahin to million views ho gaye. Inke jo khud ke Bhil Bhilala ke jo gaane hain, aur abhi shadi ka season shuru ho gaya hai toh kabhi bhi shadi mein jao aur dekho kya ho raha hai. DJ zarur lagte hain. Aajkal wo traditional baaja khatam ho gaya hai, lekin DJ se gaana kaun sa aa raha hai? Gaana sab inhi ke aa raha hai. Aur nach bhi sab inhi ke rahe hain. Wo daba nahi pa raha hai, wo hinduisation nahi ho pa raha hai. Wo ek bahut achchi cheez ho gaya hai. Wo ab dabega bhi nahi kyunki jis tarah se wo itna popular ho gaya hai aur ye jo adivasi ekta parishad aur sab prayas kar rahe hain, isme wo ho gaya hai." (Banerjee, Interview of Rahul Banerjee, 2020)

Another such example of foregrounding of Adivasi identity is of Chetan Patel, the young activist of JAYS, who belonged to the Barela tribal community. He had two tattoos on his hands. The first one was of the Hindu symbol 'Om', and the second one was that of Birsa, the icon of Adivasi resistance. The story behind the two tattoos brings out interesting ways through which Adivasi culture and identity is being claimed and foregrounded by the Adivasi youth today.

Figure 4: Tattoos on the hands of a tribal leader. On the left traditional Hindu symbol Om and on the right tattoo of Birsa Munda.

His mother got him the first tattoo at a fair near his village when he was in the fifth standard, in accordance to a widely-held belief that if one got a tattoo on their body somewhere, they would get a plot of land in heaven in the afterlife. So, the tattoo artist at the local fair made this Hindu symbol on Patel's hand.

Two years ago, he got the second tattoo celebrating Birsa Munda, because for the first twenty-five years of his life he did not know about the freedom fighters, warriors, and Gods from the Adivasi community. It was only recently that he got to know about 'his' warriors – Birsa Munda and Tantya Mama. It must be borne in mind that he belongs to the Barela tribal community, therefore, the tattoo does not represent narrow communitarian concerns. After all who would his *Samaj* consider their warriors, heroes or leaders like the Hindus have Ram, Muslims have Allah, Christians have Jesus and Sikhs have Guru Nanak. Therefore, he considers it to be his responsibility to educate the younger generation about them. Now whenever someone asks about the tattoo of Birsa, he asks them to 'google' him on the internet, thereby, educating the masses about the great Adivasi icons! (Patel, 2020) This is an example of the conscious political act of rejecting the received dominant culture and reflexively replacing it with the Adivasi cultural symbols.

Another interesting instance of assertion of Adivasi identity came up in one of the leadership programmes held in Bhopal. According to the Mukhyamantri Kanya Vivaah Yojana, the Madhya Pradesh Government gives 51, 000 rupees for the marriage ceremony of poor girls (Navbharat Times, 2019). This had led some in the tribal

community to take part in *saamuhik vivaah samaroh* or community wedding ceremonies organized by the government where they got married as per Hindu rituals. A public exhortation was made in one of the activist meetings to boycott such ceremonies and it was mooted whether JAYS should organize similar community wedding ceremonies so that they could preserve their culture.

At the collective level, this rejection of the 'imposed' Hindu identity is most clearly reflected in the demand for a separate Adivasi Religious Code, in the upcoming census (2021). Under conditions of modernity, the state becomes an important site of construction of identity through the process of enumeration; now various Adivasi communities have begun to mobilize opinion to be enumerated on their own terms. From the times of colonial practice of census taking, there has been considerable debate about the enumeration of the tribes, especially since the colonial state had defined them in a residual fashion.[8] It was not until 1941, that tribes were defined in terms of their origin and not merely their religious practice (Maharatna, 2011). However, in the enumeration of 1952, all the tribes were enumerated as Hindus and the categories of animism or tribal religion were discarded altogether. Taken together, these communities are numerically significant enough to stoke demographic anxiety within the ranks of the practitioners of Hindutva (Poyam, 2020). JAYS has not taken an official position on the matter, although a section of its rank and file definitely favours the provision of a separate category for the Adivasis in the upcoming census:

"*Ye hai adivasi dharam code alag ho. Adivasi dharam ko, matlab Hindu Personal Code ki tarah adivasi dharam code ho…Agli jangadna jo 2021 mein hogi, usme ham alag se dharam code ki maang karenge.*" (Khadia, 2019)

However, here the internal fragmentation of the tribes has precluded the possibility of forging a consensus on the issue as there are already strident movements in parts of Jharkhand to recognize particular belief systems within Adivasis like the Sarna Dharam (Poyam, 2020). This debate is unresolved but the option of enumerating Adivasis in the category of 'other' as opposed to the Hindu and Christian religions, until the debate is settled, is a rather popular opinion among the leaders and activists of the movement.

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[8] This aspect has been discussed in detail in the second chapter.

To sum up, the language of the Constitution and the narrative of revival are the two most important instruments of the articulation of Adivasi identity. This is an indispensable aspect of the politics of JAYS, which is attempting to develop the Adivasis as a unified electoral bloc. Till the period of fieldwork undertaken for this thesis, these initiatives are taken mostly at the individual level or by those who are the most politicized due to their involvement in the movement. However, this ideology and politics has not yet permeated among the masses – a process which is gathering pace slowly but surely.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to analyze the politics of foregrounding the Adivasi identity through the emergence of JAYS, an organization of tribal youth, which has made a noticeable impact on the political discourse of western Madhya Pradesh. The tribal movements hitherto have been looked at from various lenses owing to the disagreements regarding the multiple definitions of the concept of tribes. Therefore, tribal movements have been subsumed within the categories of peasant movements or as part of the national movement. However, as this chapter has demonstrated, these are inaccurate lenses to analyze these movements because although elements of agrarian unrest or opposition to the British were part of tribal movements, the tribes rebelled and protested as tribes and not as peasants or nationalists; this much is apparent from the ideological motivations underlying these movements.

This chapter has argued that tribal movements should rather be analyzed from the perspective of their relationship with the state and the nature of capital in the given historical context. If we employ this lens, then tribal movements can be divided in to four phases – the first phase was characterized by the rebellions of the tribes against the claims of sovereignty by the 'aliens'; the second phase, which lasts roughly from the beginning of the twentieth century to the adoption of the Constitution, is the period of marginal assertions, where the tribal communities engaged with the national movement, used its symbols and ideology for their own purposes, but remained on the margins of the movement. The tribal movements were still triggered by their immediate local context and the interests of their particular tribe. The nationalists' call for non-cooperation and civil disobedience did not find any resonance among the tribal communities of Jhabua or Alirajpur. The formation of the Adivasi Mahasabha and the

constitutional provisions of the Fifth and Sixth Schedule at the time of independence enabled the emergence of a 'tribal' identity and it is through this articulation that the tribal communities belatedly entered into the terrain of demographic politics.

The third phase of the tribal movement saw the tribal communities participate and protest against the structures of a developmental democracy. The utilitarian model of development led to large-scale displacement, impoverishment and proletarianization of the tribal communities in the post-independence era. Although this phase saw the mobilization of the tribals for autonomy by the creation of separate states like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh; in western Madhya Pradesh, the biggest tribal mobilizations took place against the Sardar Sarovar Project. Such movements decided to shun electoral politics and practice 'politics from a distance' by mobilizing the civil society. Moreover, rather than focusing on the issue of displacement of the tribal communities, they expanded the focus to critique the entire model of development, thereby framing the debate in ecological terms and assimilating the tribals into a politics of resistance. This ideological dimension was championed by the activists of the movement who were predominantly non-tribals. There was a discernible hiatus between the motivations of those who were actually affected by the project, i.e., tribal communities and farmers belonging predominantly to the Patidar caste, and those who were leading the movement. However, while there were marginal assertions of being misrepresented by the outsiders, these could not develop at the time. This movement against the SSP came to an end after the Supreme Court's judgement allowed the construction of the dam.

The present and the fourth phase of the tribal movement in the western belt is being led by the JAYS, which has shifted the discourse of tribal politics from resistance to representation. This has been enabled by various factors like the emergence of an educated, urban, middle-class among the tribes, the unprecedented penetration of social media and a growing resentment against the existing tribal leadership. The movement ascribes centrality to capturing power and ensuring representation because seven decades of petitioning on the part of the tribals has yielded negligible results. Therefore, even to ensure that tribal rights are not violated and the various laws to protect the forest and land rights of the tribal communities are implemented, the Adivasi needs to become the ruler.

The centrality of capturing power and ensuring representation necessitates the development of the tribes into an electoral bloc. This requires the foregrounding of the identity of the Adivasi. Both the Congress and JAYS employ the category of 'Adivasi', as opposed to the RSS's use of the term Vanvasi. The employment of the term Adivasi opens new avenues of mobilization cutting across various tribes. However, although Congress deploys this category, it refuses to invest it with a positive content; rather it practices a policy of non-interference with regard to questions of the tribal and gives space to its tribal leaders to use various narratives available for mobilization driven by the exigencies of their local context.

For the JAYS on the other hand, the deployment of the Adivasi identity is indispensable for the construction of the electoral bloc. The category of Adivasi performs three very important functions for its project – first, it counters internal fragmentation; second, it projects the tribal as the owner of the region, imbuing the hitherto marginalized identity with a sense of power and making a first claim on resources; finally, by linking the Adivasi identity with the Constitution and employing the language of rights, it makes the state accountable, which opens up space for constant mobilization and operationalization of the Adivasi identity at the everyday level.

The fragmentation of tribes is sought to be ended by symbolic acts – like wearing the yellow scarf and elevating the religious symbols of other tribes; however, the most important tool of unification is the invocation of the Fifth Schedule which opens up the discursive space to assert the Adivasi identity. Here, Constitution does not only remain a guarantor of rights but becomes a symbol and instrument of mobilization as well. The assertion of the Adivasi identity also requires the policy of equidistance from both the Christian and Hindu religious tradition. Therefore, JAYS has taken an open position against conversion, which, the organisation argues, leads to the erosion of the tribal culture.

While opposing proselytization and resisting Christianity is a rather simple task, to maintain a distance from Hinduism is much more difficult given the hegemony of Hindutva in a traditionally conservative state like Madhya Pradesh, and the long history of cultural diffusion and entrenchment of Hinduism in the region. The identity of the common Bhil is structured by the twin axes of culture as well as religion. It must be borne in mind that the popularization of Hindu Gods and imparting them with a

religious meaning is a rather recent phenomenon in the region. On the other hand, despite considerable penetration of the market and the integration of the tribal tracts with the mainstream of the polity, village life is still ordered by tribal customs and traditions. In other words, it is a living culture which makes it a conducive site for constructing the Adivasi identity.

Therefore, the proponents of the Adivasi identity articulate their rejection of Hinduism in the language of cultural revival and going back to the roots. This is done through interventions at the individual level by lionizing Adivasi figures, educating the masses about Adivasi history, propagating Adivasi music and songs by using social media. At the collective level, the demand for a separate Adivasi Religious Code is the most strident manifestation of this rejection. However, due to internal fragmentation and the existence of movements for the recognition of specific tribal faiths in the census, consensus has eluded them thus far. To sum up, it can be argued that Adivasis are classic examples of 'bivalent collectivities' and JAYS is using the politics of recognition by elevating and affirming a stigmatized identity to enable mobilization to ensure chances of fair redistribution by capturing state power (Fraser, 2008). Therefore, both recognition and redistribution are inextricably interlinked in this case.

JAYS has been successful in popularizing a new political discourse within Madhya Pradesh. It has used the new tools like social media to mobilize support and popularize its narrative, making it a distinctly new age movement. However, lack of resources and factionalism within the movement has meant that in the 2018 assembly elections it could not emerge as a third force as an autonomous Adivasi formation, which is a difficult task in such a fragmented polity (Forward Press, 2018). Hiralal Alawa, the leading figure of the movement, decided to join the Congress and contest in the 2018 state assembly election. He won by a huge margin and is currently serving as an MLA in from the Manawar constituency. Whether JAYS will be co-opted by the intransigent two-party system, or will grow sufficiently to drive a hard bargain to restructure the system is yet to be seen. What can be said, with a certain degree of surety, is that the genie is out of the bottle as far as Adivasis taking up the language of representation and Constitution to fight their battles, is concerned.

This poses a formidable ideological challenge to the RSS-VKA's project of Hinduization among the tribals because while the principle 'other' in their framework

are the Christian missionaries; the other as per the framework of JAYS is the outsider, or the upper caste Hindu living in the tribal tracts. This dislocates the entire ideological discourse of the RSS. It would be interesting to see how this contradiction plays out over time.

7. Conclusion

This thesis was written over a period of rather tumultuous seven years and two general elections during which, many of the assumptions and surmises whence it emerged, were borne out. It was born out of a certain exasperation with the limitations of existing explanations for the rise of Hindutva and the antidote being prescribed by the progressive sections of the intelligentsia. The questions which finally formed the basis of the thesis had been germinating in my mind, in one form or another, since early 2014, when it became apparent that the Narendra Modi led BJP was going to romp to power. What was unexpected, however, was the scale of victory that he managed to secure. It was unexpected because the prevailing consensus among the intelligentsia made it seem that, in India, one did not win elections by polarizing the electorate; so, while Modi would unite the rank and file of the Hindutva camp, it would be well-nigh impossible to obtain power through a simple majority. The famed diversity and heterogeneity of the Indian republic was surely going to stop Hindutva juggernaut. However, all the predictions fell flat in the face of reality.

The expansive social sweep of the BJP notwithstanding, most progressive intelligentsia viewed the 2014 election result as an anomaly or aberration. Once again simplistic explanations of division of votes and temporary setbacks were proffered, especially by votaries of Ambedkarite and Mandal politics – Bahujan politics, for short - while scholars espousing Left and Liberal politics seemed completely shell shocked by the results. The former refused to accept that something had fundamentally changed in Indian politics. The explanations from both these vantage points were proving to be inadequate because while, the ontological tools available to the Left and Liberal scholars were proving to be insufficient to grasp the rapidly evolving political reality; the advocates of Bahujan politics, unencumbered by the same limitation, were, nevertheless overestimating the ideological entrenchment of their politics within the masses or underestimating the appeal of Hindutva among the sections on the margins.

These inadequacies cropped up because of two major reasons; firstly, it is the result of failing to understand Hindutva on its own terms, i.e., through the discourses of its practitioners and adherents on the ground. Secondly, and most importantly, is the

omission to account for the changing nature of structures like caste, class and religious identities within a rapidly transforming economy and polity.

The given binaries of Brahminism against Non-Brahminism or Liberalism against Conservatism or Secularism against Communalism or Resistance against Development do not capture the social reality in vast parts of India. While such simplistic binaries like 1 percent against the 99 percent and bourgeoisie against the proletariat have been unpacked and problematized; somehow the aforementioned binaries have not been put under similar critical scrutiny; for if any of these frames held, the turn of events witnessed in the past six odd years, would not have come to pass. For example, the inadequacy of the liberal frame is brought out by the fact that the BSP supported the revocation of Article 370 and the complete lockdown that followed in Kashmir (India Today, 2019). Given this fact, where does one place the BSP on the political axis? Similarly, a simple question brings out the limits of the Non-Brahmin frame - If the society is divided into camps of fifteen percent (upper castes) and eighty five percent (oppressed castes) then how is it that parties led by the oppressed castes are not the dominant force and the perpetual party of governance in India? A case like this definitely holds in post-apartheid South Africa.

On the contrary, in the 2014 general elections, the BJP secured a victory in all but 2 parliamentary seats in the State of Madhya Pradesh including all the seats reserved for the Tribals and Dalits – constituencies which have which have a sizeable population from those sections and championing whose interests is the raison d'être of Bahujan politics. To prove that this was not an aberration, the BJP not only repeated its performance in the 2019 general elections but improved on its vote and seat share in the State. Rather than an unreflexive opposition to Hindutva, what was required was to understand and explain the support among the oppressed sections for the Hindutva project. This is important, especially insofar as it has been postulated that the traditional support base of the BJP and the RSS have comprised the so-called upper castes of society.

The primary objective of the thesis was to investigate the reasons for the entrenchment of the politics of Hindutva among the oppressed sections, namely the tribal communities; a tangential task was outlining the challenges that the Bahujan project faces . The fundamental research questions of the thesis were as follows – What were

the strategies employed by the RSS to popularize the discourse of Hindutva among the tribal population; what are the consequences of their entrenchment? What are the counter narratives to the project of Hinduization by the RSS; and what are the reasons for the adoption of Hinduism among the tribes if it is humiliating?

This investigation was undertaken in the theater of the tribal belt of western Madhya Pradesh. This region had been undergoing some of the most significant socio-political changes in the last decade and a half. It is in the districts of Jhabua and Alirajpur that the Bhils and Bhilalas were negotiating the overtures of various forces – the RSS, Christian Missionaries, Congress, and the JAYS.

For this purpose, the thesis was divided into five core chapters. The first chapter, titled, "Who is a Hindu? Tracing the Construction of the Modern Hindu Identity", attempted to bring out the limits of the Marxist framework to understand Hindutva and outline the theoretical approach to be followed through the course of the argument. As per the Marxist approach, Hindutva is a form of fascism. However, the debate about whether it is, in fact, fascist, while important, does not give us the perspective necessary to understand the varied dynamics of the politics of Hindutva. On the other hand, it spawns another unresolved debate about what constitutes the fascist minimums, which in itself is an important debate but is not the focus of our inquiry. It is sufficient for us to acknowledge that Hindutva undoubtedly shares an intellectual and philosophical space with fascism without having to establish whether it is definitively fascist. Moreover, the basic characteristics that are explicated to make the case for treating Hindutva as fascism of our times like – constructing a politics in terms of 'us' versus 'them', invoking a glorious past, reinterpreting history in exclusively those terms and harbouring a deep sense of civilizational crisis are present in all forms of identity politics across the political spectrum in India. These tropes are employed even by the practitioners of Bahujan politics and its kernel is visible even in the articulation of formations which practice Muslim identity politics. What are being outlined under this framework, then, are necessary but insufficient conditions of fascism; a condition which obtains when old concepts are forced to grasp the new reality, invariably coming up short.

The Gramscian lens, does overcome some of the shortcomings of the previous approach and attempts to define fascism by employing the concept of 'hegemony' which provides

rich insights into the cultural aspects of Hindutva. It conceptualizes the project as an attempt to establish hegemony over the social sphere with a grand ambition to refashion Hinduism as part Brahminical and part plebeian order. However, while it apprehends the telos of the project with great precision, it pays too much attention on the external dynamic of Hindutva – its approach towards the religious minorities – at the expense of the internal dynamics of the Hindu fold which play an equally important role in the project. While the former is informed by domination and exclusion the latter attempts to hegemonize and include. Both these dynamics are to be taken into consideration if we are to arrive at a proper understanding of Hindutva.

The other framework looks at Hindutva as a project dedicated to the creation of the "New Hindu Man", or as a project of identity formation. The Post-Marxist frame posits that all identities, words, or actions derive their meaning by virtue of their difference from other identities within a certain context. All such differences come together within a relational complex to construct a discourse. The task of hegemonic identity construction, the political task, is to bring all these differences together into a chain of equivalence which is totalized by the employment of an empty signifier lending a tentative closure to the identity. This precarious totality, in turn, only derives its meaning through a radical exclusion of a certain difference or identity thereby, simultaneously defining the self and the other. This approach provides us the necessary tools to analyze both the internal and external dynamics of the Hindu fold and thereby, develop a deeper understanding of Hindutva.

Hindus had not always been a self-conscious community; they were a community of communities with hazy boundaries. Modernity, brought under the aegis of the colonial state, dislocated the discourse of Hinduism. Its philosophical and political underpinnings were subjected to criticism as part of the 'civilizing mission' of the colonialists thereby, decisively ending the 'evaluative isolation' of the Hindu discourse.

In such a context, the rearticulation of the Hindu identity and its traditions became a political task of 'cultural defence', which was undertaken by the modernizing elites leading the anti-colonial movement. This cultural defence took three major forms – 'revival' theorized by Savarkar, 'renegotiation' championed by Gandhi and 'rejection' advocated by Ambedkar. Each of these three responses unleashed their own political expressions. Revivalism, born out of the Arya Samaj Movement in the late 19th century,

became the guiding ideology of the present-day Hindutva movement. Rejection of Brahminical Hinduism and the adoption of Navayana Buddhism became the philosophical kernel which animated the Bahujan project. Renegotiation championed by Gandhi, however, formed the ideological mainstream of the National Movement.

It is within the matrix of these responses that we need to anchor ourselves if we are to develop a comprehensive understanding of the project of Hindutva. While Bahujan politics grounds itself ideologically in the stream of rejection it has not become the dominant idiom of politics across the country in the post-independence era. The site of democratic contestation, privileges renegotiation rather than rejection of traditions. This is so because democracy is a process wherein one cannot altogether do away with the 'other', and therefore, a certain interaction or dialogue with the 'other' is perpetuated – even forced – leading to a reconstitution of both through a very tortuous process. Moreover, the RSS, the champions of the revivalist strain, recognized the potential threat of the politics of rejection for the Hindu fold and accordingly devised strategies to counter it; which included undertaking reforms within Hinduism and reinventing traditions to enable, at least, a symbolic inclusion within the Hindu fold. However, they were also aided by the far-reaching socio-economic changes that the Indian polity has undergone during the recent decades.

These socio-economic changes are of utmost importance because it is owing to these changes that the category of the 'tribe' and its encounter with mainstream Hindu society has been misapprehended. The second chapter titled, "Who is a Tribal? Situating the Tribal Question", attempts to clear this misapprehension which arises out of the dissonance between sociological definitions and the political imaginations of the tribe. The idea is to stress on grasping the political subjectivity of the tribe, at present, rather than impoverish our analysis due to a definitional straitjacket.

Traditionally, tribes have been defined in opposition to civilization. In the west, one could be effortlessly demarcated from the other. This was called the evolutionary perspective which laid emphasis on successive social formations over a long period of time and considered survivals from the past as anachronistic. However, in the Indian context, there exists a long history of the co-existence of tribes with civilization. Moreover, tribes and castes share many characteristics, for example, the observance of strict endogamy, making it very hard to demarcate their respective boundaries. Even

contact and isolation as parameters to identify tribes do not hold in our context as both these took place to varying degrees with different tribes. Given these complications, two features which help us identify tribes and distinguish them from castes, with some certainty, are the prevalence of a distinct language and a homeland or a territory. However, even these are insufficient parameters, by themselves.

The only way to understand tribes as political actors is to understand their subjectivity or self-image which is shaped by their historical experience. The history of the Bhil and Bhilala tribes over the past two centuries in western Madhya Pradesh can be described as a journey from being a self-sufficient society to a peasant community loosely integrated with the Hindu mainstream. It can be divided into two phases; the first phase from 1818 to 1909 during which the tribal communities were sedentarized by force, making them susceptible to forces of acculturation, unleashed by modernity through the colonial state.

The pre-colonial era was a period when the tribes enjoyed extensive political autonomy because the local rulers did not need to encroach upon the territories and forests of the tribes as the population density remained low and fertility in the plains remained high. Accordingly, there was an arrangement whereby sovereignty was shared between the rulers and the tribes. This arrangement was irrevocably disturbed with the establishment of colonial rule.

The British did not accept the existing system of 'parcelized sovereignty'. Moreover, they intended to fully exploit the economic potential of the forests. The forest, which, for the tribes, had been a site of provision and sustenance, began to be viewed as a site of profit by the colonial state. Towards this end, they waged military reprisals against the tribes, disarming and subjugating them over time which led to significant changes in the political economy of the region and had profound consequences for the cultural universe of the now sedentarized tribes.

The process of Hinduization of tribes predated the arrival of the British. The Bhilalas of the plains were nearly indistinguishable from the rest of the Hindu peasantry with whom they lived. Even the Bhils were a differentiated community, which meant that different sections of the Bhils were integrated with the mainstream Hindu society to differing degrees. The end of shifting agriculture increased the rate of acculturation among the Bhils. They had been transformed into a sedantary peasant community which

was easily accessible to the Hindu social reformers as well as the proselytizing designs of the Christian missionaries.

If we begin to cull their self-image from the ballads of the time, it is clear that they saw themselves as kings who had been dispossessed and whose people had been exploited. Therefore, the 'other' in their discourse has always been the Baniya and the landlord rather than the Brahmin because their subjectivity is not defined by the experience of purity and pollution like the Dalits but by dispossession. This is important to note because this points towards a possible cause of fragmentation of the social sphere which is one of the reasons behind the failure of a consolidated Non-Brahmin identity to emerge especially in Madhya Pradesh.

The second phase can be traced from 1909 to the present which was inaugurated by the "politics of demography" due to the colonial state's decision to grant communal representation under the Morley-Minto Reforms. Suddenly, numerical strength became a very important element in bargaining with the colonial state. This led to strident calls by the revivalists to include the tribal communities within the Hindu fold for the purpose of enumeration to bolster numerical strength of the Hindu community, vis-a-vis other religious communities, leading to far reaching changes. The exercise of conducting the census transformed the hitherto fuzzy entities into ossified categories.

Ever since the War of Independence of 1857, the colonial state had assigned the anthropologically-minded administrators to collate as much information and knowledge about this 'alien' society as possible, as it moved towards taking direct control of affairs of the State. The anthropologically-minded administrators, seeped in Orientalist ideology, drew heavily upon the Darwinian theories in vogue at the time and the classical texts of Brahminical Hinduism in this endeavour. As a result, the tribes were subjected to a 'conceptual denigration', which placed the tribes at the bottom of the hierarchy which was constructed on the basis of racist and Brahminical prejudice.

It was in this historical and intellectual context that the inaccurately titled isolation versus assimilation debate on the tribal question took place in the late colonial period. This debate had a determinative effect on the attitude that was adopted by the Indian state towards the tribes in the post-independence era. While the so-called position of 'isolationism' of Verrier Elwin was reflected in the Sixth Schedule implemented in the NEFA or the North-East region, G. S. Ghurye's assimilation formed the basis of the

Christian Missionary Activities Enquiry Committee, more popularly known as the Niyogi Committee Report, which had a profound impact on the politics of the tribal region across the country but more so, in the Fifth Schedule areas.

Elwin inherited the orientalist gaze with regard to the tribes when he came to work as a Christian missionary. His views underwent a transformation after a brief spell with Gandhi at his Ashram at Sabarmati. Eventually he broke away with the Church; settled with the tribes and became a self-taught anthropologist and a passionate advocate for the cause of the tribes. His early work most definitely had romanticist underpinnings; however, some of his views were misrepresented as well. He was labelled an isolationist based on the positions he espoused in a book on the Baiga tribe which he wrote in 1939. He advocated demarcating those areas inhabited by the tribes as 'national parks', where there would be devolution of power to village councils, a ban on all missionary activities, restrictions on the settlement of non-tribal population in those areas and the educational system and economy would be structured to cater to the needs of the tribal population.

These prescriptions created an outrage amongst the nationalists of the time. The opposition to these prescriptions increased in the aftermath of the trauma of partition. They considered such measures as hurdles in national integration. In the intellectual sphere, this position was championed by G. S. Ghurye, which came to be known as the assimilationist view. He privileged the religious aspect of the tribal identity and used the existing cultural and religious overlap among the Hindu and tribal traditions, owing to a long history of interaction and therefore, acculturation, to argue that the tribes were improperly integrated or Backward Hindus.

Ghurye took exception to them being called aborigines or the original inhabitants of the land because for him, ancient Vedic culture formed the fountainhead of the Indian civilization. The possibility of an older cultural survival unsettled this discourse as culture, religion and national identity seamlessly coalesced into one another in his framework. He arrived upon his judgement about the traditions and practices of the tribes by according normative primacy to Brahminical Hinduism. In his entire argument, he completely ignores the questions of domination and exploitation within the cultural traditions of Brahminical Hinduism. There is only a passing reference to the economic exploitation of the tribes as those are peripheral concerns for him. These,

Backward Hindus, according to him, needed to be integrated into the mainstream rather than be isolated through various protectionist measures.

However, while Ghurye's work was based on rich anthropological data and did bring out the cultural overlaps between tribal and Hindu traditions, it was premised on a fundamental misrepresentation of Elwin's position. For Elwin, the question was never about whether or not the tribes should be integrated into the mainstream rather it was about deciding on what terms the integration would take place. He was acutely aware of the limits of modernity, given that the world had seen unprecedented levels of violence, rise of totalitarianism and bureaucratization of democracy, during the first half of the twentieth century. The experience of the interaction of the tribes with civilization across the world had been disastrous without exception.

In the post-independence period, the tribal homelands of Central India were brought under the Fifth Schedule which had provisions that restricted the transfer of land among the Scheduled Tribes (ST) only. Apart from that, the principle of universal adult franchise and policy of reservation for members of ST community were also adopted.

The Indian state adopted the strategy of heavy industrialization and a utilitarian welfare model which led to large-scale dispossession, displacement, and impoverishment of the tribal population. However, what was decisively ended was the so-called isolation of the tribes, especially in western Madhya Pradesh. The tribal population was subsumed by the state under the system of a mass democracy as unequal citizens and over time, by the market as impoverished consumers. Scanty irrigation facilities led to low yields and, hence, a problem of distress migration of massive proportions which, perforce, increased cultural interaction even further. The provision of reservations created a very small middle class as well. All these changes cumulatively led to the transformation of the Bhil and Bhilalas into just another peasant community with a long history of Hinduization.

The earlier process of Hinduization was based on absorption or emulation. The absorption of tribes within the Hindu fold took place because caste-based society ensured that the productive activity of various castes was protected under this system, while emulation enabled the upward mobility of the tribes in the hierarchical system of the Hindu fold. This latter process is also called Sanskritization. The imposition of this paradigm to understand the process of Hinduization among tribes has been questioned

because although there was definite emulation, the tribes continued to remain outside the pale of Hinduism. What occurred, then, was emulation without elevation. However, in both these frameworks, there was no outside intermediary that facilitated the process; with the entry of the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram this process was decisively changed. The third chapter titled, 'Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram: Synthesizing Savarkar's Imaginary with Gandhi's Method', attempts to analyze the ideological and organizational structure through which this process was carried out.

The VKA was setup in 1952 under the leadership of Balasaheb Deshpande, a trained Swayamsevak, of the RSS. The primary motive of the VKA was to check the conversion of tribal communities at the hands of the Christian missionaries, who were seen as encouraging separatist tendencies. In India, conversion had always been a very sensitive issue because, Hinduism, the major religion of the land, was non-proselytizing in nature. Historically, the oppressed sections had used the method of conversion to escape the indignity they had to face within the caste system. However, with the advent of the modern state and the politics of demography under the British, numerical strength became a very important factor to bargain with the state. This made the act of conversion politically inconvenient for the upper caste Hindu traditionalists. The attitude towards conversion was informed by the three streams of politics vis-à-vis the Hindu social order mentioned earlier – revival, renegotiation and rejection.

Savarkar enunciated the revivalist position by redefining what it meant to be a 'Hindu'. Being an atheist and a militant modernist, he did not have patience for the traditions and orthodoxies inherent within Hinduism, more crucial were the immediate political exigencies, and therefore, Savarkar redefined Hinduism in cultural, civilizational and racial terms.

By defining a Hindu as someone who considers India to be their fatherland as well as Holy land, he gave an ethnic quality to it. Moreover, by racializing the Hindu identity, he sought to resolve the contradictions emerging out of the hierarchies of the caste system. For this very reason, throughout his argument, Savarkar is at pains to emphasize the incommensurability between Hindutva and Hinduism. It must be underlined that although he did not care much for the orthodoxy within Hinduism, he accorded normative primacy to Brahminical Hinduism, its symbols and resources.

As per this framework, only the non-Semitic religions, i.e., Islam and Christianity were to be excluded from the membership of this imagined community of 'Hindu Rashtra'. This articulation made the act of conversion outside the fold of Hinduism, an act of endangering the sovereignty of the nation itself. On the other hand, this made reconversion an important political task for the preservation and protection of the Nation. The positions of the RSS and VKA are informed by this ideological framework.

Gandhi, on the other hand, represented the position of renegotiation of tradition. He, too, shared the revivalist discomfort with conversion; however, while his worldview was morally and ethically anchored within Hinduism, he did not define the nation ethnically. Moreover, his definition of Hinduism was inextricably intertwined with the concepts of truth and non-violence. As per this framework, conversion was not considered an atrocity but a challenge to be overcome by reworking traditions and fighting orthodox structures within Hinduism to make it more inclusive. The concept of conversion itself was alien to him and therefore, he opposed the idea of reconversion as well. To combat the appeal of conversion to the oppressed he initiated reforms within the caste system, which could be considered radical at the time but were limited in their scope, in retrospect.

The position of rejection of tradition was articulated by Ambedkar, which serves as the primary justification for the political act of conversion. Given his subject position, reform for him was not a matter of moral upliftment like Gandhi, but a question of recognition and dignity. However, he did not arrive at the position of rejection of tradition in haste. It was born out of his experience with reforms within the Hindu religion. He supported various measures like temple entries and led many Satyagrahas to reconfigure the boundaries of caste to transform Hinduism into a more inclusive order. However, the orthodox upper caste Hindus proved to be morally and ethically intransigent. Therefore, he recalibrated his political strategy from gaining recognition from the orthodoxy to getting recognition by the State. Through various petitions and representations, he ensured that the depressed classes got their fair share of representation and advocated modernization rather than Sanskritization as a formula for their emancipation.

He was convinced that these measures were insufficient. For the depressed classes to be truly emancipated they needed to be unanchored from Brahminical morality, values,

and culture altogether and this required the rejection of Hinduism. Importantly, he did not merely reject Hinduism but embraced a reinterpreted Buddhism based on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

However, the question of members of the tribal communities converting to Christianity cannot be addressed in its entirety within the frameworks mentioned above. This is because the tribes were outside the civilizational pale of Hinduism and so, ritual humiliation was not the trigger which led to their conversion to Christianity. As per the discourse of the VKA, the simple tribal communities were duped into embracing Christianity by the scheming missionaries through material incentives. At the outset, it must be stated that denigration of Hinduism and tribal religion and providing material incentives to convert the tribal communities are indisputable facts; the latter being borne out by government reports.. However, the process of popularization of Christianity among tribes is not so simplistic. Tribal communities used Christianity as a medium of negotiating with the colonial state and opposing the landlords and outsiders who were their principal exploiters.

The missionaries began assisting tribals to represent themselves in the courts of law in cases of land alienation and undue exactions of the landlords. This was one of the key factors that led to conversion; of course, measures of seva or service like health and education also did play a part in this, but they were not the primary factors. This led to friction between the colonial state and the missionaries because the colonial state had adopted the policy of upholding the local configuration of power which was being challenged by them. The landlords and the local rulers, in response to the activities of the missionaries, began patronizing various revivalist movements to counter them. The VKA was also patronized by Vijay Bhushan Singh Judeo, the ruler of Jashpur. The interest of the feudal lords to uphold the structure of Brahminical Hinduism and the VKA's anti-missionary agenda aligned seamlessly with each other.

The VKA carries out the process of Hinduization by the supposedly apolitical task of 'Seva'; they run hostels, medical camps, single-teacher schools to mobilize the tribals. Within these hostels, they run *Shraddhajagaran* programmes with the ostensible aim of 'reawakening' the true faith of the tribals. However, these are everyday processes of Hinduization where through the repetition of a certain regime - Hindu Gods, myths,

cultural practices, and values are normalized among the tribal students during the most impressionable years of their lives.

Along with these hostels for the students of tribal communities, the RSS also intervenes in the social sphere by filling in the vacuum wherever the state fails to perform its duty of ensuring inclusive development. One such initiative is the Shivganga project which trains tribal youths in the villages to construct ponds and check dams to ensure water conservation to address the acute water shortage in the region. However, this developmental intervention is only an instrument to further the agenda of Hinduization of the public sphere and propagation of the Hindu nationalist ideology. This is carried out by encouraging teams of tribal youths involved in developmental work to take up initiatives like *Kaanwar Yatra* and organizing Ganesh festival in their villages. This tactic enables electoral as well as ideological mobilization when required.

This method of Seva enables the VKA to fulfil three objectives – firstly, countering the missionaries with regard to schools, health projects etc; secondly, the establishment of these institutions become the primary sites of dispensing Hindu Nationalist ideology, thereby, creating a Hindu public sphere and finally, the provision of 'targeted service', helps them win the goodwill of the local tribal population as these areas usually lag behind in terms of such infrastructure. This intervention has fundamentally transformed the process of Hinduization among the tribal communities which had hitherto been unmediated.

The fourth chapter titled, 'Hinduization and Construction of the Vanvasi Identity', attempts to explicate the reasons and process by which Hinduization of tribal communities is taking place. The reasons for the rapid Hinduization among the tribes are the secularization of the traditional social structure. Under conditions of modernity the social significance of religion diminishes due to the processes of social differentiation, societalization and rationalization. This process has the most important bearing on the caste system as it breaks the nexus between caste, ritual hereditary status and patterns of occupation. This de-ritualization leads to the creation of a 'disenchanted caste system', where castes do not relate to each other based on ritual hierarchy but as kinship-based communities. Moreover, the system of mass democracy leads to politicization of caste. This gives castes and tribes a certain homologous quality with regard to political mobilization.

This is borne out by the common term *Samaj*, used to denote various social groups like tribes, castes, sub-castes, linguistic or ethnic communities or even religions in *vox populi*. These are identities anchored within their communities but which flexibly forge alliances within a given discursive context to achieve their political ends. It is within such a context that we must situate the process of Hinduization.

However, since Hinduism is not a Semitic religion, here conversion takes place as a process and not a moment, where the new is added without dispensing with the old. There are no radical discontinuities but a long process of small changes which amalgamate to effect a major change over time. In Western India there had been a history of Hinduization through the movement led by Govind Giri, the Devi Movement among the Warlis and the movement against bonded labour led by Mama Baleshwar Dayal among the Bhils. These movements introduced a diffused Hinduism in the region. The Bhils used Hinduism instrumentally to fight against their exploitation. This normalized Hindu symbols, cultures, and values within the public sphere.

It is based on this history of reform movements that the RSS and VKA bases its project of Hinduization called *Samrasta* or Harmony among the oppressed and marginalized communities including the tribals. The RSS wants to unite the hierarchically arranged Hindu order into a harmonious whole; in fact, any autonomous political mobilization of the oppressed sections is considered a threat to the well-being of the society. This harmony is sought to be built through the dual process of symbolic inclusion of the oppressed within the system and the exclusion of the Semitic others. Within the political sphere this inclusion takes place by the strategy of giving representation to the oppressed castes within the party and various electoral bodies.

However, the RSS, through its various affiliates, takes up the construction of the Vanvasi identity on the sites of history, ritual, and the state. On the site of history, the RSS attempts to create a singular Hindu past by blending mythology with history and invoking figures like Shabri and including her within the pantheon of Hindu Gods or popularizing narratives of alliance of tribals with non-Muslim kings to assimilate them within the Hindu past.

For any collective identity to be sustained, it is imperative that it is performed repeatedly so that it becomes part of the collective imagination. Rituals play this important performative function so that the identity becomes routinized and part of the

collective consciousness. Towards this end, the RSS, through Sewa Bharti, organizes Kaanwar Yatras or pilgrimage among the Bhils to popularize and sustain the Hindu identity within the tribal community. This leads to overwriting the existing rituals and memories of the tribal communities which are different from mainstream Hinduism. It must obviously be borne in mind that this is not occurring in a vacuum and due to the long interaction of the Bhils and Bhilalas with the Hindu society, certain cultural motifs and practices have permeated into the tribal life-world as well.

This is reflected in the subtle hierarchization between the Bhils and the Bhilalas and the distinction of purity and pollution among tribes based on beef-eating. However, even though such practices are prevalent, the impact of Hinduism was much more cultural than religious. This was changed by the concerted intervention of the RSS from 2000 onwards by the campaign of *Hindu Sangam* in which mass distribution of images of Hindu deities like Ram, Ganesh and Hanuman among the tribal communities were undertaken. This helped to increase the scope of the Hindu public sphere and aide in Hinduization of the tribes.

Finally, under modernity, the state has become the most important arbiter of morality and hence, a site of identity construction; for recognition of an identity by the state is imperative for its stabilization today. The VKA adopts various strategies to bestow the Vanvasi identity with the legitimacy of the state. While on the one hand, it poses as the protector of indigenous culture and takes up demands like beautification of tribal places of worship and honouring the priests of various tribal communities, aimed at co-opting them; on the other, the RSS and the VKA mobilize opinion to marginalize the Christian tribal minorities by canvassing for imposing a ban on religious conversions and for revocation of reservation for those members of the tribal community who have embraced Christianity.

Even though there is a consensus among even RSS functionaries that the rate of conversion among the tribal communities in western Madhya Pradesh has gone down, consistent propaganda portrays it as an immediate threat and the narrative is sustained by intervening into local conflicts and instrumentally communalizing them to otherize the Christians and re-emphasize the boundaries of both the identities. It is through this sustained intervention into everyday life in the tribal tracts that the RSS constructs and popularizes the Vanvasi identity and otherizes the Christians.

However, the same changes within the traditional social structure which aid the process of Hinduization or de-tribalization, enable the politics of foregrounding the Adivasi identity through the rejection of Hinduism. The most strident articulation of the Adivasi identity is being undertaken by the Jai Adivasi Yuva Shakti (JAYS), which is a movement of tribal youth that has swept across western Madhya Pradesh. The fifth and final chapter, 'The Politics of Foregrounding Adivasi Identity', attempts to analyze this politics of rejection by the tribal communities.

The persisting confusion over the definition of tribes has also had an impact on the analysis of tribal movements. There have been attempts to subsume them within peasant or nationalist movements; however, these approaches are flawed because the tribal communities revolted by foregrounding their tribal identity, which is borne out by the ideology and objectives which animated those movements. Similarly, some elements of reform – like giving up alcohol – are prevalent in many mobilizations; that is why these frameworks do not capture the multiple forces at play during a tribal movement.

A more suited tool to analyze the tribal movements is in the context of their political economy, viz. the nature of capital and the state and the interaction of the two. If we adopt this frame, then tribal movements can be divided into four phases – first, movements against alien claims of sovereignty; second, marginal assertions within the national movement; third, participation and protest within developmental democracy and finally, the present phase, from resistance to representation.

The first phase of the tribal movements among the Bhils in western India were motivated by resisting alien claims of sovereignty as they had a sense of identity distinct from the colonial state as well as the local rulers of the region. There was constant confrontation between state and the Bhils since the medieval period which led to the emergence of a system of parcelized sovereignty. The onset of British rule disturbed this arrangement between the local rulers and the Bhils who enjoyed a high degree of political autonomy hitherto. The conflict led to the forced sedentarization of the Bhils, which, compounded by exploitative new tax regimes, triggered constant revolts by the Bhils that took the form of raids, depredations and looting. The most important movements of this period were led by Khajya Naik, Bhima Naik, Tantya Bhil and Chitu. Although these movements were spurred by the immediate context; they are important components of the present-day Bhil subjectivity which looks up to them as icons.

The end of the 19th century saw the Bhils being disarmed and forced to take up peasant agriculture. By the 20th century, the nationalist movement had also started to gain momentum and attempts were made to organize the peasantry. By the beginning of the third decade of the century, the nationalist movement had entered the Bhil tracts as well. This phase saw the Bhils being mobilized as peasants against the colonial state; however, they remained on the margins of the movement. Although they used the symbols, slogans and discourse of the national movement, these movements were still shaped by the immediate context and regional political contingencies. The idea of a tribal identity had not concretized by then.

However, by the time of independence, under the leadership of Jaipal Munda, the tribal communities had also belatedly entered the politics of demography and the provisions of protections provided under the Fifth and Sixth Schedule paved the way for the emergence of a unified tribal identity. A brief excursus into Munda's construction of the Adivasi identity is in order here. Jaipal Munda was the sole spokesperson of the tribals in the Constituent Assembly. He presciently made a case for the need for acknowledging the difference of the Adivasis while attempting to include them within the emergent modern nation – state. After getting an education in Oxford, clearing and resigning from the prestigious ICS and captaining the Indian national Hockey team in the Olympics, Munda returned to Chotanagpur in 1938 with a daunting reputation. He was immediately embraced by the tribals of the Chotanagpur region as their leader (Kiro, 2008).

Although he accepted Elwin's claim that contact with the outsiders had led to a loss of nerve in the case of the tribals, he did not agree with his prescription of isolation but instead advocated a mechanism of humane inclusion into the mainstream. He argued that the major problems of the tribals were indebtedness, ignorance and poverty. The state needed to design policies to alleviate their living standards by paying special attention to their problems (Kiro, 2008).

The colonial government had recently conducted the 1937 elections and the Congress had swept them in the area. The various local leaders of Jharkhand came to the conclusion that it was their internal division which led to such a result. Therefore, a united front of the tribals was required if the issues of the region were to be voiced effectively. This realization led to the formation of the Adivasi Mahasabha which aimed

at putting up a joint front of all the tribal communities of Jharkhand; an event which Munda described as unprecedented in the annals of tribal history. He was the first person to popularize the demand of a separate state of Jharkhand to ensure the adequate development of that historically and culturally distinct area, which he opined was suffering from the dominance of the Biharis. While the Congress paid lip – service to the problems of the tribals, in reality, it ended up reinforcing the dominance of the Biharis in the area. In his view, this issue could only be addressed through an autonomous and united mobilization of all the tribes in the region. In the initial period the Adivasi Mahasabha got great electoral results. However, after independence, the movement for a separate Jharkhand state subsided and Munda decided to merge the Mahasabha with the Congress (Kiro, 2008).

Munda articulated the Adivasi identity in ethnic terms. The Adivasis, despite their interaction with the mainstream Hindu society, remained a distinct people. He described them as the 'ancient aristocracy' of India; the original settlers of India who were forced to flee to the jungles because of the Aryans who he called 'intruders' into this land (Kiro, 2008). He called the Hindu Mahasabhaites as representatives of the marauding Aryans who wanted to convert Adivasisthan into Hindusthan (Pankaj, 2020). He pointed out that despite some measure of Hinduization, the Adivasis retained their identity as indicated by the complete absence of the caste system within their society. This again reinforces the vast difference in the self-image of the Adivasi with the Dalit and Non - Brahmin sections of society.

In matters of religion, he clubbed Hinduism with the proselytizing religions of Islam and Christianity and argued that they were all out to 'convert' the Adivasis. Despite having great faith in the leadership of Nehru, he was skeptical of the Gandhian social workers and did not like their attempts to impose Hindu values on them. In fact, he opposed the motion to include prohibition in the Directive Principles of the Constitution by arguing that this interfered with tribal religious beliefs as liquor was used in all the religious ceremonies of the Adivasis. Moreover, he brought out the organic link between nature and Adivasi culture when he pointed out the need to resettle and adequately compensate the Adivasis in cases of displacement owing to the construction of big dams. Further, he pointed out that apart from the economic aspect, displacement would entail a cultural genocide for them as they consider nature sacred (Kiro, 2008).

The fluid nature of the Adivasi identity was brought out during his cremation. Munda was the only person in his family to convert to Christianity. So, when he died there was a dispute with regard to how he should be cremated. Finally, the Christian priest and the Munda Pahan took turns to perform the last rites as he had always upheld Adivasi cultural and religious symbols and practices in high regard.

The overlap among these identities is still quite prevalent among the Adivasis even today. However, it is interesting to note that despite being one of the earliest and most effective articulators of the Adivasi identity and laying out the intellectual framework which informed all future political articulations of the Adivasis, his name was completely absent during the mobilizations of the tribes in western Madhya Pradesh, reinforcing the fragmentation within the tribes.

The third phase of the tribal movements saw them participate and protest against the structures of a developmental democracy. The Indian state adopted a utilitarian model of development of heavy industrialization. The tribal communities, located as they were in the most mineral and energy rich areas of the country, had to face the brunt of it. Over the period of seven decades they were displaced, impoverished, and evicted from their lands on a massive scale. This led to multiple protests but the most iconic movement against this model of development which took place in western Madhya Pradesh was the protest against the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP); a hydroelectric project on the banks of river Narmada which would displace lakhs of tribals and submerge their villages. The protests were led by a coalition of civil society organizations or NGO's under the rubric of the Narmada Bachao Andolan. The responsibility of mobilizing tribals against the dam in Alirajpur was shared by another civil society group by the name of Khedoot Mazdoor Chetna Sangath (KMCS).

The movement was run predominantly by non-tribal activists or outsiders and its leadership decided to pursue the politics from a distance. These activists articulated the critique of the state in ecological terms rather than in the language of rights by privileging the issue of displacement, leading to the assimilation of the tribals into a false binary of resistance versus development. The perception of the tribals was never as pristine or idyllic as was made out to be in the discourse of the movement which employed the tactic of strategic essentialism, thereby, leading to a certain misrepresentation of the tribals. Finally, the movement was dealt a body blow when the

Supreme Court allowed the construction of the dam which opened the discursive space for new articulations.

The present movement led by JAYS is based on these historical experiences. It has decisively shifted the discourse of tribal politics from a politics of resistance to a politics of representation. This shift has been enabled by the structural changes in the social and political structures mentioned earlier which led to the creation of a small, politically articulate middle class, urbanization and the penetration of social media which opened new avenues of tribal mobilization. The movement has jettisoned 'politics from a distance' and has instead made capturing power its central concern because seven decades of protest movements had only led to further marginalization of the tribal communities. Therefore, rather than resisting development, the demand now is to obtain a fair share in the fruits of development.

This imperative of capturing state power requires the congealing of the tribal communities into a unified electoral bloc which entails the construction and assertion of an Adivasi identity. The immediate trigger for the movement was the crisis of representation faced by the tribal communities in a deeply fragmented polity with a responsive elite within the Congress system. While both the Congress and JAYS employ the category of Adivasi the VKA rejects it, though both articulate it differently.

The Congress's approach is to anchor the Adivasi identity within exploitation and define it through Constitutional provisions. Although, as a party, Congress invokes the category of Adivasi it refrains from investing it with positive cultural content; rather its position is dictated by the principle of non-interference. Individual Congress leaders, on the other hand, employ the Adivasi identity within the Hindu fold but invoke the Non-Brahmin discourse to distinguish themselves from the Hinduism of the RSS.

However, the project of JAYS requires the construction of Adivasi identity untethered from Hinduism. The Adivasi identity performs three very important roles – first, it counters the internal fragmentation within the tribal communities; second, it transforms the Adivasi from the role of petitioner to a ruler of the region and finally, the articulation of the Adivasi identity invokes the Constitution projecting the Adivasi as a rights bearing citizen which can hold the state responsible; this aids the constant local level mobilizations of the organization.

Fragmentation is sought to be overcome by symbolic acts of recognizing deities and cultural practices of various tribes, using the yellow scarf used by Gond political activists in the east. But more importantly, it is through the invocation of the Fifth Schedule to lend the fragmented tribes a sense of common purpose and identity for political mobilization. The articulation of the Adivasi identity has also meant that the organization has maintained a studied equidistance from both the big religious traditions – Hinduism and Christianity. This has led them to adopt a strident anti-conversion position as well. However, to maintain a distance from Hinduism is a much more difficult task as it is deeply embedded within the social structures and commonsense of the region.

The tribal identity is divided into two axes – the religious and the cultural. While the predominant religious identity of the tribes is Hindu; the cultural identity is still governed by tribal customs, laws, and practices. This living culture makes it an important resource of identity construction. Therefore, the rejection of Hinduism is articulated in a revivalist idiom of going back to their authentic culture. This cultural assertion is carried out both at the individual as well as the collective levels. While at the individual levels, tribal songs, culture, dresses and icons are being promoted with the help of new technology and social media; on the collective level there have been demands for the provision of a separate Adivasi Dharam Code in the next census. However, due to the internal fragmentation within tribes, the consensus seems to be to demand enumeration within the category of the 'other' as of now.

This is a quintessentially new age movement as it began from a social media platform and is led by urban, educated, and middle-class tribal activists. The anchors of Adivasi identity have also changed from environment and ecology to self-respect, dignity, and rights. The demand is not for any new laws but for the implementation of the existing laws and the political mobilization is to ensure it. Moreover, issues like reservation and employment opportunities have also come to the forefront given the changing nature of the economy. Right now, the movement has a predominantly urban base among the youth but it is gradually permeating into the villages as well.

This assertion of the Adivasi identity is a huge ideological challenge for the RSS and VKA because it constructs the outsider as the principal other rather than the Christian. Moreover, the claim of being the original inhabitant of the land unsettles the narrative

of India deriving its identity from the Vedic period. However, factionalism and infighting have hampered the growth of the movement and how this challenge is overcome is the biggest task in front of the leadership.

To sum up, the oppressed sections have been forced to carry a certain 'normative burden' to be ready radicals due to their appropriation into a political narrative of protest. However, the reality on the ground is that there is no overarching binary to sustain a monolithic tribal identity and this democracy does not provide a resolution to their problem but forces them into an unjust negotiation with their exploiters and oppressors which is structured by contextual and local contingencies. It is within such a matrix that they make difficult choices guided by self-interest like any other social group. Therefore, we must jettison the romantic assumptions underlying the tribal question. The frames of assimilation and isolation do not hold today; the tribal communities are already assimilated into the structures of the state and the market and this process will only be hastened in the time to come.

On the other hand, the processes of de-ritualization, the stagnation within the Bahujan project and the absence of anything substantively different in terms of cultural or political discourse by other mainstream political formations has made Hindutva an option worthy of exploration by the oppressed sections. It must be borne in mind that the ambition of Hindutva is to refashion Hinduism itself and appoint itself as the sole spokesperson of the Hindu religion. As forces of homogenization are unleashed by the modern state and market, the project of Hindutva will gain impetus as well.

We would do well to remember the limits of the politics of rejection as well. Although Ambedkar's rejection was a radical move towards emancipation, it was predominantly limited to followers within his own caste and has since, not caught the fancy of other Bahujan projects which have focused on articulating demands for modernization and representation rather than exploring the possibilities afforded by the politics of rejection. The threat of conversion is a lot more potent than the act of conversion today, given the marginalization the other Semitic religions are facing in the times of ascendant Hindutva.

Here, a small detour to clarify the usage of the terms tribe/tribal and Adivasi in the argument is warranted. The term tribe originated from anthropological literature used to describe groups with 'primitive' societal characteristics. Over the years, this term has

become discredited among the scholars and policy-makers across the world. However, in India the term 'tribe' has been used as a politico-administrative category in the post-independence period. It is in this latter sense that term has been employed throughout this work. On the other hand, the term Adivasi, the Indian equivalent of indigenous emerged in the late nineteenth century to differentiate Europeans and non-Europeans. However, over time it was resignified to denote those people who had lived in a particular country before its colonization. In India, the emergence of the term Adivasi is traced to the early twentieth century. It signifies a consciousness born out of an adverse interaction with the outsider characterized by their exploitation and domination. Although, the Indian government officially keeps on denying the existence of indigenous communities or Adivasis, the term has caught the popular imagination of the members of the tribal communities themselves. It is not an imposed category but one which is owned by the tribal communities for the sense of dignity and political capital that it provides (Xaxa, Formation of the Adivasi\IndigenousPeoples' Identity in India, 2016). Therefore, while the term tribe has become a static poltico-administrative term; Adivasi is a political term with transformatory potential which provides resources to weave counter-hegemonic discourses.

What is required most desperately is to discard the cultural framing of the Adivasi identity; instead, we must look at the Adivasis as rights bearing citizens and culturally embedded communities involved in the democratic process of negotiations as equal members. They are principled enough to resist the corporate onslaught in Niyamgiri while at the same time Machiavellian enough to employ the instrument of Hindutva to ensure upward mobility within certain contexts in central India. No blanket statement can be made about a diverse population ranging into the millions, comprising of groups with different histories and contexts, without great risk of embarrassment.

Is it not time to relieve the Adivasi from the burden of being radical?

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Appendix

Pamphlets of Organizations:

Figure 5: Shivganga Project Pamphlet

Figure 6: Backside of Shivganga Pamphlet depicts Dhrama as the basis of Development.

Figure 7: Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad Pamphlet with the slogan, 'Rashtra hi hamara ek maatr jaagrat Devta hai", sacralizing a secular category like the nation.
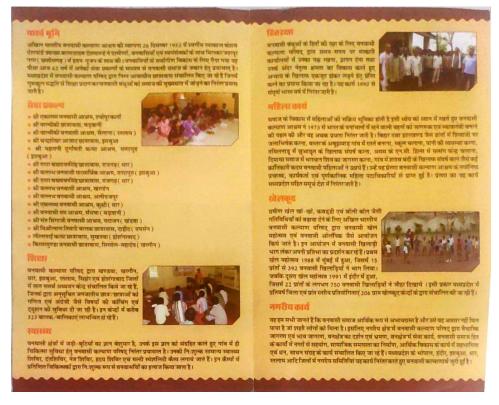

Figure 8: Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad pamphlet showcasing their 'Seva' projects in Madhya Pradesh.

Figure 9: Halma, an annual event organized by Shivganga of collective village labour. Halma is an old Bhil tradition of community labour which has been rearticulated for tribal mobilization by RSS.

Figure 10: The Halma pamphlet inviting participation of common citizens and showcasing its work.

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