COMMUNALISM COMBAT
OCTOBER 2004

COVER STORY

Lost tribes

Draw Adivasis into the Hindu fold, then poison their minds against the minorities. With the groundwork thus completed, and the State under saffron sway, is Rajasthan heading for a replay of Gujarat?

BY DK SINGH

Government and Hindutva

‘Compromise’ has become a key word to survival for the minority Christians and Muslims in tribal Rajasthan. They no longer attempt to fight Hindu extremists. Legal recourse is hardly a remedy any more. Pushed to the wall by aggressive Hindutva and abandoned by law enforcement agencies in a secular, socialist, democratic republic, they have resigned themselves to fate. Go to any part of tribal Rajasthan and the story is the same.

Nathu Dindor, principal of Salon Mission Primary School at Rohaniya Laxman village in Banswara, was ambushed by some Hindu extremists in July 2002. They caused his motorbike to skid on the road, leading to fractures in Dindor’s leg. “I reported it to the police but nobody was arrested. Later on, I made a deal with the two assailants from the VHP because I have to pass by the same road daily and cannot afford to have enmity with them,” said the teacher.

In the case of Gautam Pargi from Nal Dhibri village, the police have been refusing to help him get possession of his land occupied by some members of the VHP, despite a court order in favour of Pargi.

Currently, over a dozen Muslim families live in makeshift tents at Kotra in Udaipur district. They have been driven out of their villages by Hindu extremists over the past three or four years. But the administration is keeping quiet about it.

“Cops are completely biased against Adivasi Christians. There have been several incidents of attack against Christians here but people don’t report them to the police any more. The cops either don’t register the FIR or don’t act at all.” This statement of helplessness from Father Walling Masih of Bijalpur village summed up the relationship between Hindu extremists and the official machinery.

The State as an institution is becoming a tool in the hands of the sahgh parivar. In fact, the Rajasthan govern-
ment has been allocating up to Rs. 50 lakh per annum to the Vanwasi Kalyan Parishad, an NGO affiliated to the sangh parivar, to run hostels for tribals, which are nothing but training camps for Hindu extremists. (A Bangalore-based weekly maintained that ironically, this budgetary allocation continued through the years of Congress rule.)

Take a look at one such WP-run hostel at Timernara in Kishangarh block of Banswara. The single room hall is made of mud and roofed with tiles. Pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses adorn the walls. A large carpet spread out on the floor serves as a bed for poor tribal students. This "hostel", aided by the state social welfare department, has 25 inmates studying in different classes – from Class VI to X. The department pays Rs. 1.5 lakh per annum to this travesty of a hostel.

Although the money was to be utilised for students' food, uniforms, soaps and beds, there was nothing in the room to suggest it. Bharat Kumawat, who introduced himself as in-charge of the hostel and district organisation secretary of the WP, escorted probing visitors out when questioned about the source of funds and their utilisation. "It is none of your business," he said.

Meanwhile, so-called secular parties like the Congress, the Left and the Janata Dal have all chosen to remain detached from the sangh parivar's "business".

On August 14, 2004, a day before India was to celebrate its 58th Independence Day, the Pink City of Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan, resounded with slogans of "Jai Shri Ram". The VHP, having decided to thumb its nose at law enforcement agencies, organised a trishul deeksha (distribution of tridents) programme barely a kilometre away from the state secretariat. Similar trident-clubbed tridents had been used to kill many a hapless Muslim during the Gujarat carnage of 2002. Alarmed by the possible fallout of the open distribution of this weapon among frenzied Hindu youth, the then Congress-run state government had banned trishul deeksha in early 2003.

The VHP decided to make a mockery of this ban after the BJP took over the reins of the state. About a year ago, with the Congress at the helm in Rajasthan, VHP leader Praveen Togadia had been arrested for participating in a similar programme. But in August 2004, the BJP government was already nine months old. As the programme began in the afternoon, senior police officials either switched off their cellular phones or feigned ignorance about events. Uniformed men from the local police station were posted outside the venue where the law of the land was being violated amidst much fanfare. Following a public outcry over this flagrant mockery of law, the state home minister, Gulab Chand Kataria announced a lifting of the ban on trishul deeksha.

There were press releases from opposition parties against this on the first day but they were not heard thereafter. Secular voices were too exhausted to question government action any more. Earlier, in July 2004, the government had made its intentions clear: it would provide asylum to all Hindu extremists, providing them with Rs. 1.5 lakh per annum to this travesty of a hostel.

The State as an institution is becoming a tool in the hands of the sangh parivar. In fact, the Rajasthan government has been allocating up to Rs. 50 lakh per annum to the Vanwasi Kalyan Parishad, an NGO affiliated to the sangh parivar, to run hostels for tribals, which are nothing but training camps for Hindu extremists. Activists spread the rumour that Muslims had killed him, Gaffar recounted. The next morning, scores of people from adjacent villages had gathered and attacked Muslim houses, burning their properties, and damaging a mosque and scriptures, following which the FIRs were lodged.

"The order exposed the BJP government's communal agenda. It was like giving a green signal to communal elements to attack the minority community," said Congress MLA Sanyam Lodha. Lodha had raised the issue in the state assembly but there were not many Congressmen on his side. The issue was left to die, as his party colleagues refused to speak on the matter outside assembly precincts.

But this was only the beginning. The government went about withdrawing the cases against BJP ministers and MLAs. Among these were minister of state,
medical & health, Bhawani Joshi, who had been challaned for slapping a sub-inspector in Banswara, home minister Gulab Chand Kataria, who had barged into the Rajasmand district collector’s office and grabbed his chair, and BJP MLA from Ghatol in Banswara, Navneet Neenama.

Around 150 cases had been withdrawn by mid-September 2004 and the process continued despite vociferous protests from civil rights organisations. The government steadfastly refused to provide details about the nature of these cases and the accused involved. But it was obvious from the cases that came to light that it was the Hindu extremists whose past deeds were being written off by the executive organ of the state.

But the so-called secular parties kept mum. As did the civil rights organisations, which had first raised an outcry in the media.

From August 2004, following orders from the state social welfare minister, Madan Dilawar, over 21,000 scheduled tribe and scheduled caste students staying in the 527 government-run hostels started chanting mantras before meals and reciting the Vande Mataram mantra. Spiritual reasons aside, the purpose behind introducing the mantra was that all children should eat together, the minister explained. The hostels would be converted into ‘Sanskari Kendras’ as part of the hostel improvement programme. Students from Class VI to Class XII would be given a “model and patriotic” education.

Bal Sabhas would be organised in the hostels twice a year, where religious heads, local saints, inspiring men and subject specialists would give sermons to the students. The hostels would have pictures of goddess Saraswati, Swami Vivekanand, Maharana Pratap and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. Residential schools would be named after Shivaji, Maharana Pratap, Subhas Chandra Bose, Rani of Jhansi, Pannadhay, and Chandrashekhar Azad. The hostels attached to these schools would be named after Pandit Deen Dyal Upadhayay and Dr. Shyama Prasad, the minister announced. There were no protests against the minister’s plans. Nobody seemed to care.

A few weeks after the BJP came to power in Rajasthan, the state tribal area development minister, Kanak Mal Kataria, issued a press statement that a survey would be conducted to identify Christians. Following an uproar over this by some NGOs, he backtracked. But the government seemed to have made up its mind. In the first week of August 2004, Christian missionaries and NGOs in Banswara district came under the scanner.

District collector Gayatri Rathore ordered an inquiry into the sources and utilisation of their funds and their activities. She justified her action saying that she had received a delegation complaining against these (Christian) institutions for “misutilising” the funds given by the government of India and agencies from abroad. She did not remember the name of the organisation that led the delegation.

“As per the directions of the government of India, I am supposed to be looking into the utilisation of funds by organisations registered in my district,” Rathore explained.

According to VHP leaders in Banswara, the memorandum was submitted to the DC by an organisation called ‘Adivasi Ekta Chhatra Sangh (AECS); the delegation included VHP activists as well. Christian organisations were “misutilising” the funds to convert innocent tribals, they are said to have complained.

Christian community leaders remained unfazed, however. “It’s good that an inquiry has been ordered into the funding of Christian organisations. The final report would shut the mouth of the sangh parivar for ever,” said Udaipur-based Father Jaswant Singh Rana, founder patron of the Tribal-Christian Welfare Society of India and joint secretary of the Philadelphia Fellowship. “The district administration’s action is in keeping with the sangh’s strategy to marginalise and prosecute Christians,” believes Dr. Narendra Gupta, a social activist based in Rajasthan.

Activists questioned the administration’s action, saying that if utilisation of funds had to be inquired into, all organisations, regardless of the religious affiliation of their managers, should have been put under the scanner and not Christian institutions alone.

But these protests remained little more than mere press statements, as political parties showed little interest in taking up the issue. This despite the fact that the Congress had completely lost its base in the tribal belt, a Congress stronghold prior to the assembly elections of December 2003. A senior Congress leader confided that the party leadership saw no point in trying to challenge the sangh amongst tribals. “We want to discuss development issues to bring them back to the party fold. Issues like religious conversion or religion-based proselytisation is like fire. If you try to touch it, you will get your fingers burnt,” he said. Communists argued that they had no presence in the tribal belts but they continued to fight against communal forces in other areas.

There was apparently no individual or party in Rajasthan to protest against this saffronisation of the official machinery. And this was largely a result of their non-chalance rather than the lack of means.
Propaganda as weapon

The sangh parivar does not constantly look to Nazism for inspiration. Hindu ideologues are always adopting and adapting their propaganda methods to demoralize and prosecute the Christians in tribal Rajasthan. From slanderous whispers to blasphemous literature, the sangh reels out spools of half-truths and blatant lies to expand its network and influence among the largely illiterate masses.

There are pamphlets, leaflets, calendars and magazines to impart their version of truth on impressionable minds in a region where the literacy rate is yet to cross 50 per cent and life is an endless struggle against abject poverty. Without modern day scepticism, hearsay carries tremendous credibility.

Let’s take a look at Bapparawal, a bimonthly Hindi magazine published by the Rajasthan Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad (RVKP) and freely circulated in tribal Rajasthan. Bappa Rawal was the name bestowed on Rawal Kalbhoj (AD 734–753), founder of Rajasthan’s Mewar dynasty. In its January-February 2004 edition, Bapparawal carried an article titled “Misuse of the Innocence of Tribals and Endeavour Required to Awaken One’s Self”, by Dr. Kashyapnath. Here are some extracts from the writer’s conclusion about Christian missionaries, supposedly drawn from interviews of ‘converted tribals’:

1. Missionaries convert tribals (to Christianity) forcibly and by exploiting their greed and temptation.
2. The basic objective of education and health-related Christian institutions, which they term as welfare services, is conversion.
3. By instigating separatism, Christian missionaries want to create a separate Christian Homeland like Pakistan.
4. Conversion of religion leads to conversion of the nation — meaning that a person gets away from the culture of the country because after conversion —
   a. Christian children are forbidden to have Hindu names.
   b. Wearing mangalsutra (a thread worn by a married Hindu woman around her neck as a sacred representation of her marital status and loyalty to husband) is prohibited.
   c. Rangoli (a ritual) in the house is banned.
   d. Prohibition on (consumption of) beef (of the cow) is exempted.
   e. Taking bath before going to a temple is discouraged but going for prayers/churches encouraged.
   f. Visiting astrologers is forbidden.
   g. Taking part in Hindu festivals is forbidden.
   h. The custom of marrying in the courtyard of one’s own house is discouraged and marriage at churches encouraged.
   i. Following customs like piercing ears, wearing garlands in hair, is discouraged.
   j. Beliefs in reincarnation… salvation termed baseless.
   k. Hindu gods are declared ‘Satan’.
   l. Priests preach against worshiping statues.
   m. Evil attempts are made to hurt the faith of Hindus by getting false stories published.

5. Christian girls are deployed to get a job, become a Christian, or quit the job.
6. They talk like ‘if you want to do a job, become a Christian, or quit the job’.
7. Christian girls are deployed to entice good and intelligent Hindu youth.
8. They spread propaganda like in Christianity lies your salvation, sins can be gotten rid of only with the mediation of Christ and all your good works are futile without coming under Jesus.
9. They blend superstition to convert innocent tribes.”

Any rational individual with even a rudimentary knowledge of the Christian faith would wring his hands in despair at the slanderous contents cited above. These nine points are, of course, not meant to address the Christian population, against whom they apparently use direct threats, boycott, blackmail, physical assaults and other intimidating tactics. They are, rather, aimed at potential converts, the fence-sitters and the disinterested masses. Dr. Kashyapnath’s presentation of what happens after conversion addresses the section of people who have already been initiated into Hindutva—and broadly, at a society that is slowly giving way to the all-pervasive phenomenon of urbanisation and Sanskritisation. The assumption about their likely target audience gets credence from the following set of instructions given by the writer:

1. There is a need for a system to cleanse Christianity of its criminal tendency to make sinful and intolerable interference.
2. A law should immediately be enacted in India according to which there should be freedom to be an atheist at personal level, but criticising the god worshipped by others should be a punitive crime.
3. Christian missionaries are culpa-
ble of so criticising God. There should be some arrangement to punish them. Leaving them unpunished is not liber-

5. Propagation of religion by for-
eign priests should be banned.
6. Government should make arrange-
ments for orphan children and elderly people so that they could not be ex-
ploited by institutions engaged in con-
version activities.
7. A clear and stringent law should be

enacted to stop conversion.
8. Government officers should in-
quire into the grants given to Christian
missionaries by the government.
9. Donations from foreign countries
should be banned.
10. Our educational institutions
should be shielded from the dominance
of foreign missionaries. Schools should
never be allowed to be a means for con-
version.

11. There should be an intensive
survey of Christian families and agen-
cies by the police who should look into
the number of converted members, the
circumstances in which they were con-
verted and the agencies which were in-
olved in it.
12. We should guide our own con-
duct and also create an atmosphere in
the society to ensure that our children
are not enrolled in Christian schools.
13. Missionaries convert tribes by
force and enticement; by encouraging
separatism they want to create a situa-
tion like ‘Christian Homeland’ as had
happened in case of Pakistan; they
forcibly and entice them to give up drinking
and discouraged superstition, polygamy
and bride price. It was thanks to his
tireless and selfless endeavours that
tribals were drawn to the Socialist Party. He
made such an indelible mark on tribal
consciousness that more than a decade
after his death, political parties still
usurped several tribal heroes and socialist thinkers,
superimposing Hindu myths and legends onto
tribal landscape and history

The exponents of Hindutva have thus
taxivists had attempted to create trouble
for him. "But Mama Baleshwar Dayal never
opposed us. Once, I had the opportu-
nity to spend a few hours with him at
Barandia. He was so cordial with me.
He asked me to teach people. He always
respected us for our efforts in the fields
of education and health. Who says he
was against Christian missionaries?" says
Father Nagy.

But, the Hindutva brigade continu-
es to cite Mama Baleshwar to confuse
the largely illiterate and apolitical
masses. The JD, the Congress and all
other smaller parties have only been
paying lip service to Mama’s cause, cit-
ing his name to garner votes and mak-
ing no efforts to counter the sangh
parivar’s claims about this tribal icon.
The sangh propaganda seems to be work-
ing with a large section of tribes, es-
specially youth, who have inherited loy-
alty to and respect for the socialist
leader from their elders.

And it is not Mama Baleshwar alone.
The exponents of Hindutva have thus

usurped several tribal heroes and social-
list thinkers, superimposing Hindu myths
and legends onto tribal landscape and history.

About 30 km from the Baraswara dis-

trict headquarters is Ghotla Anba Dham,
a temple with statues of two women and
five men — said to be the five Pandava
brothers and their mother and wife, pro-
tagonists of the Hindu scripture,
Mahabharata. Annual five-day fairs are
held here, in which Bhils gather to take
a holy dip in a tank near the temple.
The place finds no mention in any his-
tory book or in the rich tribal mythol-
gen. The temple structure does not look
more than a few decades old and the
statues of the two women and five men
also look fairly recent.

But over the past decade the temple
and its environs have come to be known
as the place where the Pandava family
spent one year, incognito, following
their agreement with the Kauravas, as
described in the Mahabharata. However,
according to popular belief and available literature, the legendary Pandavas had, in fact, spent the thirteenth year of their exile (incognito) in the city of Virat in ancient Matsya Desh, which fell in Alwar district, a few hundred km from Ghotia Amba.

The temple priest, Hiragiri Maharaj, 70, says it used to be a small structure built by local people when he joined his guru (teacher) here about 40 years ago. The other structures, including a dilapidated guesthouse, came later.

Although in the old days the fairs used to be quite small, their popularity has grown over the past two decades. Incidentally, this was around the same time that the RVKP also started actively participating in the fair, providing drinking water facilities, putting up a makeshift medical centre and organising bhajan mandalis (singing religious hymns).

"It was because of these people (RVKP) that the influence of Hinduism increased in this area," says the Maharaj, an active participant in sangh programmes. The Maharaj is also a bitter critic of Christian missionaries and hopes that their activities will be checked once the BJP has a clear majority at the Centre.

Hiragiri Maharaj has nominated 20-year-old Ram Giri to be his successor as temple priest. Ram Giri spent four years at the Bharat Mata Mandir, the RVKP headquarters in Banswara, where he received preliminary education.

In the recent past, the sangh parivar as also the state government have demonstrated an increasing interest in Ghotia Amba. The official state government website has even started detailing the caves where the Pandavas might have stayed. As mentioned earlier, Ghotia Amba’s connection with the Pandavas finds no mention either in history books or in local folklore. The sangh’s recent interest in the Ghotia Amba temple could be explained by their subtle strategy to Hinduise tribals by linking their history, culture and geography to Hindu myths and legends.

With obvious attempts to superimpose Hindu symbols on the tribal landscape, the sangh is also glorifying tribal heroes and their association with Hindu kings and warlords. For instance, they have been organising a weeklong tribal fair every year to celebrate the birth anniversary of the legendary Bhil chieftain Rana Punj, who, as legend has it, helped Hindu ruler Maharana Pratap in his fight against the Mughals. According to Anil Shukla, an RVKP office-bearer involved in organising the fair, Rana Punj Bhil and other tribesmen had launched guerrilla warfare against the Mughals, and the fair is held at Rana’s birthplace, Panana in Udaipur, to remind the Bhils of their glorious past.

In the next section, we will deal with the sangh parivar’s attempts to promote Hindu gods like Ganesh and Hindu festivals.

According to Dr. Narendra Gupta, who has been working in the tribal belt of Rajasthan for about two decades, with the spread of education and exposure to urbanisation, tribes have now started aping what they think gives them a bigger identity – i.e. prevalent Hindu customs and practices. "This is what you call the process of Sanskritisation in which the backward, oppressed and illiterate community of tribals starts aping the practices of supposedly superior Hindus for upward social mobility."

"Every day, Christian girls are committing suicide, as they find it difficult to hide their pregnancy forced by Christian Fathers and Brothers. Many Fathers have eloped with Sisters, as they were not allowed to marry. Many girls in missionary schools have run away with Brothers and other boys. Fathers, Brothers and Sisters drink, smoke and eat non-vegetarian food. In the Protestant Church, there is at least one murder over these issues every year."

A ‘full-time’ volunteer of Bhartiya Jan Seva Pratisthan (BJSP), a Vishwa Hindu
Parished (VHP) affiliate, Narendra Singh (name changed) had several such 'details' that he 'confided' to this writer. He shared the same information with villagers and children who could understand.

"Everybody knows about this but all these incidents are hushed up. Nothing comes out of these high premises of the Church but we learn about them through our sources inside," said Singh.

A senior RSS functionary adds more in-puts: the Church encourages girls to lure RSS boys and once they get pregnant and confess, the Father blackmails them.

More often than not, villagers seemed too credulous to seek evidence as they listened to all the gibberish. Besides, there are always some stray-though-much-publicised incidents like the allegation of sodomy of six boys by a Father at Bhawanikhera in Ajmer district recently: the parish's propaganda seeks vindication through such incidents. A similar propaganda campaign was unleashed by the RSS brigade following the January 2004 incident in Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh, when a girl's body was found half-naked in a mission compound. She had reportedly been raped and strangled. Although it turned out to be a result of snakebite, the VHP spread the rumour that the children were poisoned because they had refused to convert. "The VHP organised demonstrations and sit-ins in the township, sloganeering against us and asking the people to throw us out. They knew the truth but they were not ready to hear reason. They just want to trouble us with falsehood," he said.

In 2000, the sangh parivar was overjoyed when a Christian pastor named Ruben alias Ramlal Damor of Palasara in Jhabua block re-converted to Hinduism after an 18-year association with the Church. Joining hands with the parivar, RSS activists revealed a shocking disregard for all norms of morality and propriety when it came to propaganda about Christian missionaries.

RSS activists revealed a shocking disregard for all norms of morality and propriety when it came to propaganda about Christian missionaries.
COMMUNALISM COMBAT

OCTOBER 2004

COVER STORY

back home, showing them slides and distributing CDs. In 2000, the RSS admitted 13 girls from different refugee camps in the north-east to its Mohkampura school in Banswara district. These girls are now being showcased in the interior areas of Rajasthan as proof of Christians’ atrocities against ‘Hindu’ tribes.

The teenagers are often made to describe, to visitors as also local students and parents, how their houses were destroyed and families attacked just because they worshipped Hindu gods. “About nine years back, one evening, 60 to 70 people came, burnt the temple in our house, beat the family members and warned that we should evacuate the village because we were Hindus. It was then that we came to the refugee camp at Ghosiram, about two days’ journey from our Kolaliyan village. We stayed in the camp for about eight years before we got the opportunity to come here and study,” said Class VII student, Krishna, 17. Goading by the schoolteachers notwithstanding, it appeared to be a brilliant show of retention from a girl who was just eight years old when the incident allegedly happened. Thirteen-year-old Devaki, a Class VIII student at Mohkampura school also recounted similar experiences before coming to the refugee camp. She wanted to become a police constable “to beat the Christians”.

The BJP regime in Rajasthan, which took over in December 2003, has been of great help to the Hindutva brigade. Shortly after it took over, the ministers in the new regime were shooting their mouths off, declaring their intention to hold yet another inquiry into the activities of the Immanuel Mission in Kota, making Vande Mataram mandatory in prayers at hostels run by the state social welfare department and vowing to further the Hindutva agenda. A declaration concerning tribal was bound to be in the offing. And it came barely a month after the BJP took charge. Presiding over a meeting with senior government officials, state tribal area development minister, Kanak Mal Katara issued instructions that some steps had to be taken to exclude the converted Christian tribes from the list of Scheduled Tribes. An official press release stated as much.

With the civil rights organisations up on their feet against the move, which threatened to snowball into a major controversy, the minister made a U-turn and official release notwithstanding, claimed that he had issued no such instructions. All that he had asked for, he later told the media, was to devise some way to ascertain the population of Christian tribals. Katara, however, maintained that the converted Christians should be excluded from the ST list because they were trying to get the best of both worlds - as Christians and as ST.

Although the government move had been pre-empted, it had already provided fuel for the sangh parivar’s propaganda machine to start rolling. Sangh activists went around threatening the Christians, saying it was high time they re-converted or else they would be deprived of their ST status. And though the move created a sense of insecurity among Christian tribals - as voiced by several civil rights organisations - there was no attempt by the government to allay their apprehensions.

Appropriation of tribal identity

Until the 1980s, they were Nakma, Budiya or Naru. Now, about two decades later, their children are Shivaram, Nathulal and Girishar. For the tribals in Rajasthan’s Udaipur district, the assimilation of their ethnic identity, once reflected by their names, into a broader Hindu identity is just a reflection of changing times. A section of them would rather believe the change in traditional nomenclature is a positive trend signifying ‘urbanisation’ and to some extent, ‘Sanskritisation’ in their society.

However, community elders are a little disturbed. Why should they need a pandit (temple priest or some Brahmin) to name their children? They cannot understand why the new generation was becoming so particular about jaanampatra (horoscopes) for which pendants charged a hefty amount.

Somehow, the ankora - a certificate given by priests about a person’s name, parents’ name and details of birth including time, day and date - has slowly crept into the post-natal rituals in tribal society. The names, as given earlier, had their roots in the tribal terms for the day of the week a child was born. They were taken from the season of the year or the names of shrubs. An infant could be called by the equivalent term for gold or silver in the tribal language or by some term of affection.

For instance, a child born on soma (Monday) would be named Somaram (male) and Somli (female); on mangal (Tuesday), Mangla (m) and Mangli (f); bhadki (Wednesday), Budiya (m) and Budiji (f); vetwar (Thursday), Vaisaram (m) and Vaisali (f); vakzar (Friday), Vakra (m), Haksi (f); thavar (Saturday), Thavaro (m), Thavri (f); and, ditwar (Sunday), Ditla (m), Ditli (f).

But for about a decade now there has been a noticeable change in nomenclature. A child believed to have been born through prayers at the temple of the deity Bhairoji is named Shainulal (m) or Prekhi (f); one believed to have been born from the blessings of
The primordial primitive traits that provide ethnicity and identity to a tribal group have been undergoing a systematic and irreversible change through what social anthropologists would call the 'Hindu method of tribal absorption'.

Hindu practices, namely, devotion to Hindu deities and observance of Hindu festivals, rituals and ceremonies. All the Bhagat cults condemn the Bhil traditions of magic, witchcraft, theft, adultery, alcoholism and meat eating.

Through well planned, systematic and insidious methods, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliates are now promoting the Bhagat cults to subjugate tribal identity. Despite recently emerged differences in their customs and beliefs, tribes had remained faithful to their core identity marked by kinship and clan. The Hindutva family is now striving to cut out core features of Bhil identity. They are promoting and re-interpreting the commonality between Hinduism and animism to accelerate the already existing process of Sanskritisation.

Before they started ploughing the field at the start of the agricultural season, tribes used to worship a deity they called 'Gajanand'. They did this without any physical image of the deity; they had no idea who Gajanand was; they had been doing it for ages. 

Lord Shiva is named Shankarlal/Shivaram (m) or Savita (f); and Ambalal (m) or Ambabi (f) if the parents had visited the temple of the deity Amba. Meanwhile, hundreds of such temples have mushroomed in the tribal heartland of Rajasthan over the same period.

 Recently, a number of Bhagat cults have been working among the Bhils. All these cults teach Bhagat movement and managed to attract a large number of converts. A number of Bhagat cults have been working among the Bhils. All these cults teach hindu deities and observance of Hindu practices, namely, devotion to Hindu deities and observance of Hindu festivals, rituals and ceremonies. All the Bhagat cults condemn the Bhil traditions of magic, witchcraft, theft, adultery, alcoholism and meat eating.

Through well planned, systematic and insidious methods, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliates are now promoting the Bhagat cults to subjugate tribal identity. Despite recently emerged differences in their customs and beliefs, tribes had remained faithful to their core identity marked by kinship and clan. The Hindutva family is now striving to cut out core features of Bhil identity. They are promoting and re-interpreting the commonality between Hinduism and animism to accelerate the already existing process of Sanskritisation.

Before they started ploughing the field at the start of the agricultural season, tribes used to worship a deity they called 'Gajanand'. They did this without any physical image of the deity; they had no idea who Gajanand was; they had been doing it for ages. Now, thanks to the RSS family, they 'know' it was actually 'Gajanand' (the elephant-headed Hindu deity Ganesh) whom they had been worshipping. Many tribal houses have been given statues of Ganesh and people are instructed in his worship. But the Ganeshas some of them have started worshipping now is only about a decade old as compared to the centuries old oral tradition of Gajanand.

A magazine brought out by the RSS explains why they are popularising Ganeshas. According to Ram Swaroop, a Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) leader cited in an article in the magazine, Ganeshas have played a vital role in the "swadharma wapsi" (return to original religion) of tribals (implying their re-conversion from Christianity to Hinduism). The RSS claims that in the past ten years about 35,000 Christian tribals have reconverted to Hinduism. A large number of tribals from Rajasthan go to Gujarat and Maharashtra to work as labourers and are influenced by the tradition of Ganapati (or Ganesh) worship there. "Consider this. Only ten years back, Ganesh Chaturthi was started in 50 villages. It is now a mega festival in Banswara district. Such is the situation now that no organisation (read VHP) has to take any initiative for this festival today," says Ram Swaroop.

During the weeklong festival, people fast, abstain from liquor consumption, worship Ganeshas and participate in nightlong bhajan programmes (singing devotional songs). Needless to say, the VHP or other RSS affiliates are involved in all these events, from the installation of statues to organising bhajan programmes till the statues are immersed in water. The sangh parivar now plans to install statues of Ganeshas at the entrance of about 55,000 houses in 316 villages of Kushalgarh block in Banswara district alone. The sangh has already facilitated the setting up of
at least 25 to 30 groups of youth called Ganesha Navyuvak Mandal in Banswara town.

According to Bhagwan Sahai, general secretary (organisation) of the RVKP, programmes to install Ganesha statues and for Ganesha immersion were organised in 885 villages last year. Besides this, the RVK is conducting 1,000 satsang mandals (groups of bhanjan singers). "The results of all these efforts are clearly visible in tribal life," he said.

The sanyog parivar has emerged as a great promoter of various Hindu sects, which have had a great influence on the tribals' traditional belief system. The Bhagat movement, propagating the "higher social and religious ideals" of caste Hindus, has provided an impetus to the sanyog campaign aimed at the appropriation of tribal distinctiveness.

Diverse Hindu sects under the Bhagat movement like the Vaishnavite Baneshwar Dham sect, originating in the 18th century, the Godvn Giri Panth, originating in the early 20th century, the Kabir Panth, Ramdeo Panth and Nathji Panth, are today indirectly or directly associated with the sanyog parivar. Though the various sects have their own philosophies and social sanctions, there is an underlying commonality in them. They denounce faith in their traditional religious beliefs and borrow their philosophies from wider Hinduism. They denounce faith in traditional tribal belief in animism and instead believe in karma, reincarnation, an omnipotent and omnipresent God, fasting, non-alcoholism, and vegetarianism. Hindu gods and goddesses like Brahma, Vishnu, Krishna, Vishadev and Parvati are worshipped.

The Hindutva family has been trying to bring all sects together on one platform and propagate Hinduism through bhanjan mandals, an assembly of Bhagats, the practice of which is attributed to the Baneshwar Dham sect. They call this Shyachha Jagaran Kendra/ Satsang Kendra (liberally, faith-awakening centres). The Akhil Bhartiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, an RSS affiliate, runs over 4,100 such centres that organise weekly or fortnightly bhanjan mandals.

In a society where village assembly provides the only means of entertainment and relaxation from hard and monotonous routine, these nightlong programmes of singing are fast gaining popularity and slogans like "Jai Shri Ram!" shouted by the RVKP activists in between the religious songs are rather well received by the ganja-smoking audience.

I visited one such bhanjan mandal at Naka Sarva village, about 80 km from the Banswara district headquarters. The nearest road to the village is about eight km away and in the dark of night it is quite common to see people carrying an ill person on a cot to the nearest medical help, at least 15 km away. Death on the way to a medical centre is not unusual in these areas, which have failed to figure in the development module of successive governments.

Around 10 p.m., as we reach the village, shrouded in darkness due to the lack of electricity, there are just three or four persons waiting in the dim light of kerosene lanterns. Within half an hour, groups of men and women start emerging out of the darkness, traversing treacherous terrain infested with snakes and thousands of dangerous animals and insects.

As Thawaria Bhagat (from the Giri sect) starts filling chillums with ganja, and musical instruments like harmoniums, cymbals, tamburas, marjins and chintas are put in place, animated villagers discuss their good fortune on the purchase of a jeep in the nearby village, which was likely to make their lives so much easier.

Thawaria’s chants slowly grow louder, building with the tempo of the musical instruments:

"Shri Ram kaho, Shri Krishna kaho,
Dono ka naam barabar hai,
Shri Ram ki patni Sita hai,
Shri Krishna ki patni Radha hai."

(Call him Shri Ram or call him Shri Krishna,
Their names are the same,
Shri Ram’s wife is Sita,
Shri Krishna’s wife is Radha.)

As the chorus ends, visiting RSS activists from Banswara shout "Ram Janmabhoomi (Ayodhya) ki jai!", "Bharat Mata ki jai!", "Jai Shri Ram!". So musically surcharged is the ambience that everybody including elders, women and children, repeats the slogans as if in a hypnotic state. While the chillums are re-filled, sanyog volunteers begin a pep talk, trying to convert the audience’s temporary exuberance into permanent loyalty to the Bhagats.

"Have you people noticed why there are so many Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and Indian Police Service (IPS) officers in Anandpuri area? That is because there are more Bhagats in that area. Kushalgarh area (the venue of the bhanjan mandal) is the least developed and the number of Christians here is rising because there are fewer Bhagats here," says an RSS functionary.
With the chillis going around and the audience becoming more animated, Thawaria resumes, this time borrowing a theme from the Ramayana: “Duniya mein kisi ka hai nahi, Duniya mein hamara koi nahi, Hanuman ke saath hazaar on the, Jab Lanka gaye tab koi nahi; Duniya mein kisi ka koi nahi, Duniya mein hamara koi nahi, Sita ke saath hazaar on the, Jab Lanka le gaye tab akele thi.”

(Nobody is yours in this world, Nobody is mine in this world. There were thousands with Hanuman, But when he stormed Lanka, there was none; Nobody is yours in this world, Nobody is mine in this world. There were thousands with Sita, But when taken away to Lanka, she was alone.)

The programme continues, with some girls chiming in with devotional songs in the local dialect as well, and more slogans from the RSS activists. When we left around midnight, the bhajan mandali was still in progress.

This was just a glimpse of the series of programmes facilitated and organised by the Hinduva family in tribal villages. In 2003, the RSS took 11 busloads of Bhagats to participate in the Dharma Sansad (Parliament of Religion) in New Delhi – a visit that ended up being their introduction to Hinduism. The organisers took the tourists to several famous centres of Hindu pilgrimage, including temples in Jaipur, Mathura, Hardwar and Rishikesh. The trip was a big hit with the villagers, many of whom had never gone beyond Banswara district.

Under the influence of the Bhagats, many people were also said to have quit drinking. “You will see people falling off bicycles and starting again for Gotmewar Dham (in the same district). They actually start from home, determined to give up drinking after vows to God Shiva at Gotmewar Dham. But they want to drink their fill before they reach Shiva’s place,” said a proud young man. It was another matter that many such well-intentioned drinkers were said to have lost consciousness on the way, trying to take their last possible draughts before they reached Shiva’s place.

The Bhagat movement, following as it did centuries’ old cultural interaction between tribals and caste Hindus in Rajasthan, has given rise to new symbolic representations of Hinduism in tribal culture – the marking of forearms and forehead, wearing the rosary, sacred threads and saffron clothes as also in the people’s mode of greetings.

As the sangh parivar intensifies its efforts to penetrate tribal culture through the Bhagat movement, some scholars are concerned about the impact of this movement on homogeneously tribal identity leading to ‘social stratification’ and the concepts of ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’ on the one hand, and ‘touchability’ and ‘untouchability’ on the other. “The tribals are becoming second rate copies of caste Hindus, especially of the twice-born ones. But with all this, they are not being accepted at par with higher Hindu castes by the members of the latter... People of the higher Hindu castes are, by and large, even now reluctant to visit their houses and do not even accept water from them,” said RS Mann in Culture and Integration of Indian Tribes.

Interestingly, the sangh parivar also quotes scholars to prove the ‘Hindu’ origin of tribals. A senior RSS ideologue in Banswara seemed to be a great fan of The Tribal Culture of India, written by anthropologists IP Vidyarthi and Biray Kumar Rai. What he seemed particularly impressed with was a chapter in which the authors said, “Now, broadly speaking, the tribal in India is practically religion a Hindu. It is well known that Hinduism is a product of many cultures. Every kind of religious act, from the sacrifice of the Vedic Aryans to the rituals of primitive people can be observed in the main body of Hindu religion.”

But Adityendra Rao disputed this in Tribal Social Stratification, in which he dealt so comprehensively with the differences between tribal religion and Hinduism. “The concepts of Karma and Dharma are foreign to the Bhils. They are this worldly. For them there is no existence of heaven and hell... The notions of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are not religious in essence...” said Rao, a lecturer in sociology at the Government College, Nathdwara, Rajasthan.

Bhils do not enter Hindu temples nor do they have any images or idols in their houses. They do not employ Brahmin priests for any of their ceremonies, such as births, marriages, and deaths, but employ their own Bhopas and Jogis who are Bhils. They believe that they become spirits after death, but they do not believe in rebirth into human or animal form. Even today the animist Bhils are fond of eating beef and do not show any special regard for the cow.

Bhils do believe in witchcraft, ghosts and magic charmers, but this belief is not otherworldly. Their only notion about the human soul is that after death it wanders in the recesses of the world; the concept of moksha (salvation) is totally absent among them. The Hindu concept of virginity or pativrata is non-existent for a Bhil woman. Illicit sexual relations are a matter of concern only if the woman is married; when it is considered to be a violation of social norm. Tribal logic is rudimentary: When a woman has been paid a bride price by one man, how can she have sexual relations with others? Hindu notions of sanctity associated with the female sex are totally absent among animist Bhils.

(En Singh, a journalist with The Hindustan Times, is based in Jaipur. This report is part of a collaborative research project and forthcoming publication jointly commissioned by Xavier Institute of Communications and Sabrang Communications and Publishing Pvt. Ltd., Mumbai).
Airfreight Ad