



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 Salom 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 in Banswara district summed up the relationship between Hindu extremists and the official machinery.

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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 VKP-run hostel at Timerabara in Kushalgarh 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 VKP, 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 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 fan-fare. 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,

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writing off all their sins. To start with, the government withdrew five cases against those accused of indulging in arson, attacks and looting against the minority community and damaging a mosque in a Banswara township near Gujarat in September 2002.

In the six FIRs registered at Kalinjara police station after the incident, five were against more than a hundred people of the Hindu community while one counter-FIR was against Muslims. The state home department only withdrew the five cases involving Hindu accused.

Even before the government order was presented in the additional district judicial magistrate (ADJM) fast track court-II, Banswara, on July 22, the court had already ordered conviction in one of the cases. Trial was on in the government versus Nathu case, in which 35 people were *challanged* for attacking Muslims and damaging the mosque in

Kalinjara; the case was withdrawn following the government order. The court had earlier acquitted the accused in the other three cases.

The state home department ordered withdrawal of the cases more than a week before the court had passed a ruling in any of the five cases naming Hindus as offenders. The Banswara district collector had communicated the order to the public prosecutor on July 19 but the PP only received it on July 22. "As a result of the government's order, one very serious case has been withdrawn. There could be no appeal against the ADJM court's ruling, even in the four other cases. Muslims have nowhere to go for justice now," according to Abdul Gaffar, a Muslim leader in Kalinjara who was one of the victims in the September 2002 attacks.

On September 8, 2002, a person belonging to the scheduled caste had died in a truck accident but *sangh parivar*

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,

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medical & health, Bhawani Joshi, who had been *challenged* for slapping a sub-inspector in Banswara, home minister Gulab Chand Kataria, who had barged into the Rajsamand 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.

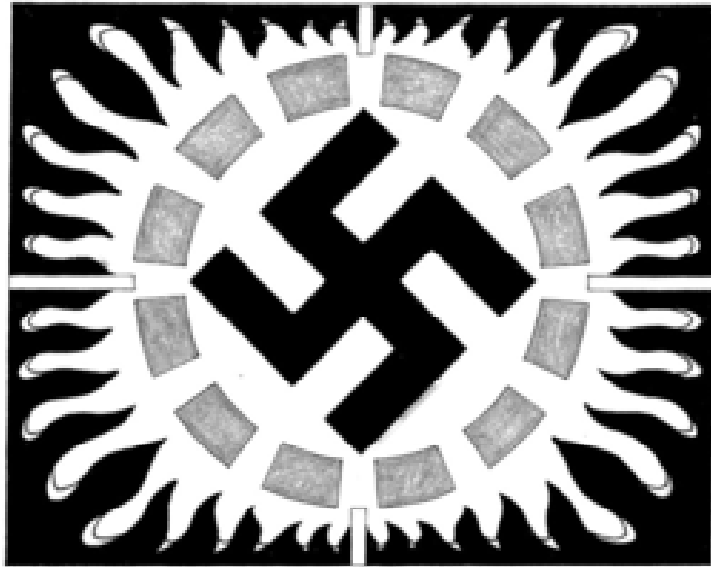
But the so-called secular parties kept mum. As did the civil rights organisations, which had first raised an outcry in the media.

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 *Vande Mataram*. 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 '*Sanskar 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, Sukhas Chandra Bose, Rani of Jhansi, Pannadhai, and Chandrashekhhar Azad. The hostels attached to these

schools would be named after Pandit Deen Dyal Upadhyay 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 Katara 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 appeared 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 *sargh 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 *sargh*'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 *sargh* amongst tribals. "We want to discuss development issues to bring them back to the party fold. Issues like religious conversion or religion-based prosecution 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.

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Propaganda as weapon

The *sangh parivar* does not constantly look to Nazism for inspiration. Hindutva ideologues are always adopting and adapting their propaganda methods to denigrate 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 imprint 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 Varwasi 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 a

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 worship-ping statues.

5. Evil attempts are made to hurt the faith of Hindus by getting false stories published.

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 tribals."

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 popula-

tion, 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-

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ble of so criticising God. There should be some arrangement to punish them. Leaving them unpunished is not liberalism..

4. There should be a ban on Christian educational and health related services that are used for conversion.

5. Propagation of religion by foreign priests should be banned.

6. Government should make arrangements for orphan children and elderly people so that they could not be exploited by institutions engaged in conversion activities.

7. A clear and stringent law should be enacted to stop conversion.

8. Government officers should inquire 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 conversion.

11. There should be an intensive survey of Christian families and agencies by the police who should look into the number of converted members, the circumstances in which they were converted and the agencies which were involved in it.

12. We should guide our own conduct and also create an atmosphere in the society to ensure that our children are not enrolled in Christian schools.

13. Missionaries convert tribals by force and enticement; by encouraging separatism they want to create a situation like 'Christian Homeland' as had happened in case of Pakistan; they refuse to give Hindu names to converted children; and, they declare Hindu gods as 'Stan'."

And, this was just one chapter of *Bapparawal*! Given the sheer ludicrousness of what was presented as the supposed results of interviews (as mentioned above) one need not discuss this further. But these extracts do help in understanding how much the *sangh parivar* is indebted to Nazi ideology and operational strategy.

Conversion may not be an issue for poor tribals, but such slanderous allegations against the Church are apt to create doubts in impressionable minds,

especially when they came from people who have been running schools, providing seeds, digging anicuts and who are with them on all occasions, be it birth, marriage or funeral.

Slander campaign aside, the Hindutva brigade seems to have no qualms about attributing their own ideas to tribal icons who are no longer around to refute or rebut them. Take for instance the appropriation of the late Baleshwar Dayal, a much-revered socialist leader in the tribal belt. Popularly known among tribals as Mama, Baleshwar Dayal played a great role in the political awakening of the masses after Independence. He mobilised the Bhil tribals to rise against exploitation, encouraged 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

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swear by his name. The Janata Dal, inheritor of his political legacy, has remained a formidable force in tribal Rajasthan.

Given the tremendous respect and influence Mama Dayal enjoyed among tribals for his commitment to their uplift, the *sangh parivar* has now set out to appropriate him, while the alliance between the BJP and the JD (United) accords some sort of legitimacy to *sangh* claims. The Hindutva family has suddenly become an ardent admirer of Mama Baleshwar, who had opposed all sectarian philosophies throughout his life. They are now making blatant attempts to cash in on his popularity among tribals, claiming that he was opposed to the conversion activities of Christian missionaries.

Father Narsing Nagu, 80, one of the first missionaries to set foot in Banswara in 1948 and a bitter critic of today's "money-driven" missionaries, recalls how Hindu Mahasabha and Arya Sama j ac-

tivists had attempted to create trouble for him. "But Mama Baleshwar Dayal never opposed us. Once, I had the opportunity to spend a few hours with him at Bamandia. 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 Nagu.

But, the Hindutva brigade continues 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, citing his name to garner votes and making no efforts to counter the *sangh parivar*'s claims about this tribal icon. The *sangh* propaganda seems to be working with a large section of tribals, especially youth, who have inherited loyalty 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 socialist thinkers, superimposing Hindu myths and legends onto tribal landscape and history.

About 30 km from the Banswara district headquarters is Ghotia Anba Dham, a temple with statues of two women and five men – said to be the five Pandava brothers and their mother and wife, protagonists 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 history book or in the rich tribal mythology. 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,

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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 ex-

plained 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

Mughals, and the fair is held at Rana's birthplace, Panarwa in Udaipur, to remind the Bhils of their glorious past. Events like archery, war-dancing and different 'games of chivalry' like the spear throwing competition have been a huge draw in the tribal fair, says Shukla. Then there are speeches glorifying Maharana Pratap and Rana Punj for their fight against the Mughals.

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, tribals 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."

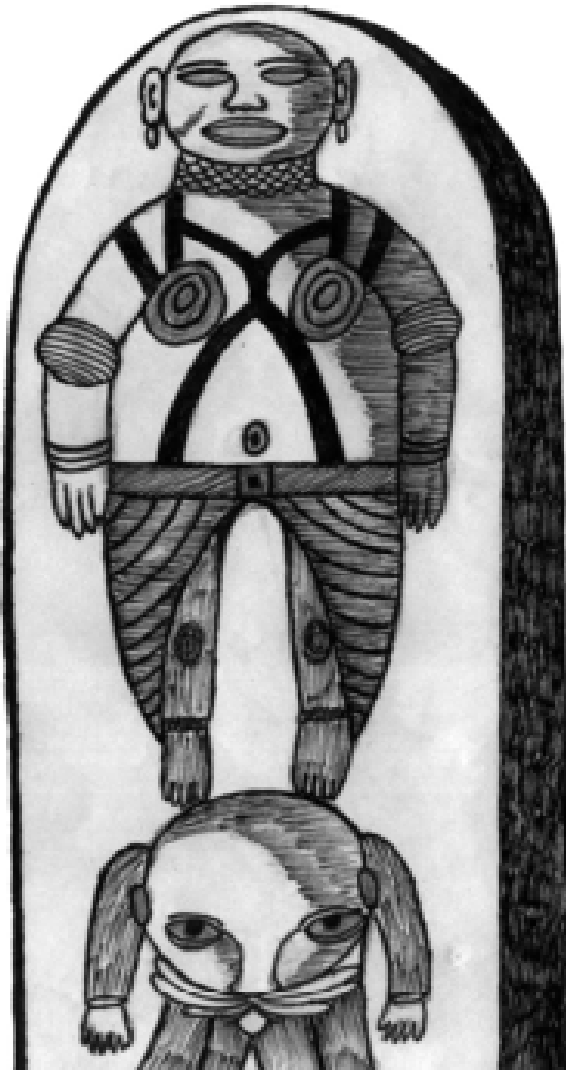
The *sangh* has apparently been preparing the ground and playing catalyst to encourage this process, as is evident above. Propaganda though misleading representation of history has been an effective tool to this end.

Interaction with RSS activists and field visits also revealed a shocking disregard for all norms of morality and propriety when it came to propaganda about Christian missionaries. The following are some extracts of conversations between RSS volunteers and villagers:

"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 Pratishthan (BJSP), a Vishwa Hindu



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

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Parishad (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 Bhawanikhhera in Ajmer district recently: the *parivar'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 strangulated to death.

The day the news spread, *sangh* volunteers in adjoining Banswara district were restive, discussing it over phones in agitated voices, seeking permission from their superiors to "teach these Christians" a lesson and spread out in rural areas to 'inform' the people about the 'misdeeds' of the Church. What was shocking was the mirth and delight of these guardians of Hindutva - bristling eyes, broad grins and conspiratorial discussions in small groups sending them all into guffaws intermittently.

While the sheer brutality and inhumanity of this incident had the common man reeling in shock and horror, here was a bunch of RSS volunteers who were absolutely thrilled at the opportunity to indulge in Christian-bashing. Humanity had taken a back seat in a make-believe world where people were more committed to the Hindutva ideology. By the next day, news spread that the police had arrested a Hindu as one

of the suspects. The *sangh parivar* was not very happy with this development but with a BJP government in power in Madhya Pradesh they had to control their aggression.

It was in such a tense atmosphere that this writer accompanied a full-time *sangh* volunteer on a visit to a middle school run by the BJSP at Mohkampur, about 40 km from Jhabua. Here, this full-timer divulged the "misdeeds" of Christians at Jhabua to 500-odd boys and girls. Very conveniently, he skipped any mention of the suspect arrested by the police. A similar exercise was in progress at other centres. The episode only reiterates how the misrepresentation of facts can sow seeds of hatred in young and impressionable minds. When this writer confronted the RSS activists asking them how they could

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

skip the most crucial point in the incident, especially if they had chosen to relate all the ghastly details to such young people, they shrugged, "We will find out the truth, no matter what the police say."

In Jhabol block in Udaipur district, there lives the much-vilified Father Philip Prashant, a Roman Catholic who runs a school and hostel called Nirmala Niketan. Meet any RSS or VHP activist in the area and they are sure to come up with the story about how, in 1997, Father Prashant had poisoned three children when they refused to convert. For them, it was irrelevant that in 2000 a local court acquitted the Father and other staff at Nirmala Niketan after it found no evidence to substantiate the allegations against them. In the alleged incident of poisoning, one child had died while two others had survived. The two survivors had categorically stated that they had been bitten by a snake while they were sleeping. The allegation of food poisoning was never substantiated. Yet the Hindutva brigade's propaganda continues.

Recounting the incident, Father Prashant said that on that fateful night

in 1997, he was away in Udaipur. Three inmates of the hostel had developed stomach pains and were taken to the local hospital where one of them died. 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 Danor of Palawara in Jhabol block re-converted to Hinduism after an 18-year association with the Church. Joining hands with the *parivar*,

he levelled a string of allegations against the Church and is now being projected as a hero by the *sangh parivar*. The Church has a different version, though. Father Jaswant Singh Rana, joint secretary of the Philadelphia Fellowship, said, "Ruben studied in our Bible College here and was with us for 18 years. He was married. When we learnt that he was having an affair with another woman, we fired him. Then he joined another denomination and was fired from there also due to his involvement in financial irregularities. It was then that he joined the VHP." The *sangh parivar* is, however, going gaga over this prize catch, quoting Ruben's allegations in their literature, speeches and mass contact programmes.

And, as if locally generated propaganda were not enough, the *sangh* is now organising tours of visitors from the north-eastern states to recount "horror tales" of Christian atrocities. Needless to say, the poor tribals have no way of verifying what they are told about the north-east. In January 2004, two groups of people from the north-eastern states came to Rajasthan and visited different parts of the state telling people about Christian atrocities

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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 Mohkamura school in Banswara district. These girls are now being showcased in the interior areas of Rajasthan as proof of Christians' atrocities against 'Hindu' tribals.

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. Goaded 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 Mohkamura 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 tribals 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, Karak Mal Katara issued instructions that some steps had to be taken to exclude the converted

Christian tribals 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 Giridhar.

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 *janmapatris* (horoscopes) for which *pandits* 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); *badki* (Wednesday), Budiya (m) and Budaji (f); *vetvar* (Thursday), Vaisaram (m) and Vaisli (f); *hakkarbar* (Friday), Hakra (m), Hakri (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 Bhairulal (m) or Preki (f); one believed to have been born from the blessings of

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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.

Laxmilal Dantor, *sarpanch* of Makradar *gram panchayat*, cited several other changes in his community's system of nomenclature and in other aspects of life during the last ten or so years. "Long back, we had shifted from cattle dung to urea to increase the fertility of our land. We have now resumed using more cow dung, thanks to advice from activists of the Rajasthan Vanwasi Kalyan Parishad (RVKP)," he said.

The *sarpanch* had no explanation for the other changes, although he surmised that the *gamitis* (*mukhiya* or village headmen) could be partly responsible for this, as they had started sending people to *pandits*. For long, the *duski* (small black bird) had been thought of as a good or bad omen amongst the tribals. If it flew by their right side when they came out of their houses it meant they had a good chance of success in whatever project they were going for but if it flew past them from the left, it was considered a bad omen. If they came out of their houses and saw a woman approaching with an empty pitcher, it was a bad omen. But if the pitcher was filled with water, it meant good luck. Sighting a widow at the start of the journey was again a bad omen.

Earlier, socio-economic factors determined the marriage of two persons, now *pandits* matched their stars and horoscopes. "It is the *pandits* who tell us what time to see our daughter's would-be bridegroom or when and how to put our plough to the field. They have started fixing *muhurats* (auspicious times) for marriages and any other important event in our lives," said Nathulal Dantor of Palwara village.

Not all Brahmanical influences on tribal life are recent. It has been happening since the time a section of tribals shifted from hilltops to plains and when plains people made inroads into forests and hills. In fact, 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'. As tribals started interacting with plains people, they also started inculcating Brahmanical traits.

With tribal migration to the plains and the arrival of plains people into the hills and forests, there emerged a reform movement among the tribals. In 1911, Govind Giri, a member of a nomadic tribe in Dungarpur who had been influenced by the founder of the Arya Samaj, Dayanand Saraswati, started a 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

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Hindu practices, namely, devotion to Hindu deities and observance of Hindu festivals, rituals and manners. 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, tribals had remained faithful to their core identity marked by kinship and clan. The Hindutva family is now striving to cut out these core features. They are promoting and reinterpreting 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, tribals 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 Ganesha) whom they had been worshipping. Many tribal houses have been given statues of Ganesha and people are instructed in his worship. But the Ganesha 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 Ganesha. According to Ram Swaroop, a Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) leader cited in an article in the magazine, Ganesha has played a vital role in the '*swadhama 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 re-converted 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 Ganesha) worship there. "Consider this. Only ten years back, Ganesha 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 Ganesha 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 Ganesha 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

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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 RVKP is conducting 1,000 *satsang mandals* (groups of *bhajan* singers). "The results of all these efforts are clearly visible in tribal life," he said.

The *sangh 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 *sangh* 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 Govind Giri Panth, originating in the early 20th century, the Kabir Panth, Ramdeo Panth and Nathji Panth, are today indirectly or directly associated with the *sangh*

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, Mahadev and Parvati are worshipped.

The Hindutva family has been trying to bring all sects together on one plat-

form and propagate Hinduism through *bhajan mandalis*, an assembly of Bhagats, the practice of which is attributed to the Baneshwar Dham sect. They call this *Shradha Jagaran Kendra/ Satsang Kendra* (literally, faith-awakening centres). The Akhil Bhartiya Varvasi Kalyan Ashram, an RSS affiliate, runs over 4,100 such centres that organise weekly or fortnightly *bhajan mandalis*.

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 *bhajan mandali* at

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, *tamboora*, *manjira* and *chinta* 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 baraabar 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 refilled, *sangh* 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 *bhajan mandali*) is the least developed and the number of Christians here is rising because there are fewer Bhagats here," says an RSS functionary.

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With the *chillums* going around and the audience becoming more animated, Thawaria resumes, this time borrowing a theme from the *Ramayana*:

*"Duniya mein kisi ka koi nahin,
Duniya mein hamara koi nahin,
Hanuman ke saath hazaaron the,
Jab Lanka gaye tab koi nahin;
Duniya mein kisi ka koi nahin,
Duniya mein hamara koi nahin,
Sita ke saath hazaaron the,
Jab Lanka le gaye tab akeli 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 chipping 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 Hindutva 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 Gotmeshwar Dham (in the same district). They actually start from home, determined to give up drinking after vows to God Shiva at Gotmeshwar 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 *sargh parivar* intensifies its efforts to penetrate tribal culture through the Bhagat movement, some scholars are concerned about the impact of this movement on homogeneous 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, specially of the twice-born ones. But with all this, they are not being accepted at par with higher Hindu castes by the

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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 *sargh 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 LP Vidyarthi and Binay 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 by 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 charms, 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. ■

(DK 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.

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