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Christianity and the Adivasis of Gujarat

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Christian missionary work amongst the adivasis of India has today become a highly controversial issue. The influential leader of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Ashok Singhal, has asserted that India is in danger from 'Christian conspiracies', with evangelical missionaries who are financed by American fundamentalists preying on the sentiments of weak and gullible 'tribals'. A strident demand is made for Hindus to rally to root out this 'anti-national' evil from within. This provocative stance has led directly to a wave of vicious attacks on Christian adivasis. Particularly notable were those carried out in the Dangs District of Gujarat, where there had been a wave of conversions during the 1990s.¹

What the sinister bombast of the Hindu right obscures is that the fact that they themselves are engaged in a programme of hegemonising adivasis, involving in this case the inculcation of loyalty to a nation state which is defined in terms of a monolithic, syndicated form of Hinduism.² In this, they are competing with a whole range of social reformers, government officials, non-governmental workers and a variety of religious proselytisers who are trying to win the allegiance of adivasis to their own ways of thought. These 'concerned citizens' are in almost all cases moved by an agenda which defines the adivasi in terms of a 'backwardness' and 'wildness' which can be overcome only through a conversion to the values of the 'civilised' (however variously undertaken and defined).³ This struggle for hegemony is engaged in within a situation of commercial exploitation, underemployment, poverty, ill health and gender-based oppression for the subordinate adivasi, and it generates complex configurations of accommodation, selective appropriation, as well as resistance from the latter. At times it can create discord and hatred between groups, at times social renewal, a spirit of assertion and strength.⁴

Furthermore, the tirade by the Hindu right ignores the fact that Christian missionaries have been working in the adivasi tracts of western India for over a century, with, until the 1990s, very little success. Far from being the innocent dupes of the missionaries - condemned by their 'primitivism' to a naïve gullibility in the face of the blandishments of these agents of a dazzling foreign culture (as the Hindu right

¹ Satyakam Joshi, 'Tribals, Missionaries and Sadhus: Understanding the Violence in the Dangs', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 11 September 1999, p.2667.

² As defined by Romila Thapar, 'Syndicated Moksha?', *Seminar*, 313, September 1985.

³ For a discussion of the ways in which the quality of 'wildness' - as an opposite to those of the 'civilised' - is attributed to adivasis, see Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1999, pp.v-xii.

⁴ Gauri Viswanathan tends to emphasise the latter quality - of conversion as a process of self-renewal - in her, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1998, p.176.

assumes in their demonology to have been the case) - the adivasis appear to have resisted their overtures for the most part. This was despite the fact that by the late nineteenth century many of them had become anxious about the efficacy of their existing systems of belief.

In this paper I shall examine missionary encounters with the adivasis of western India in the period after about 1880. The missionaries will be situated as one amongst several elite groups competing to control and subordinate adivasis and win them to their own agendas. The colonial officials, with their 'civilising mission', Indian nationalists, Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists, and even certain elite groups amongst the adivasis themselves were all engaged in such an activity, and the responses of the subaltern were in each case selective and uneven.

The Adivasis of Gujarat

The peoples who are focussed on in this paper tended to be defined in nineteenth century vernacular languages in terms of their 'wild' quality - as *janglijati* (literally, 'wild types'). Their 'wildness' consisted in a number of qualities. They lived largely outside caste society and they did not follow Brahmanical forms of worship in any central way, having their own ritual specialists - shamanistic exorcists. Some were organised in clan-groups around a chief, being typically engaged in internal conflicts and vendettas and plundering raids on nearby areas of settled agriculture. Others lived as peaceful cultivators in areas which were mostly forested, paying a light plough-tax to their rulers. The British deployed an anthropological terminology to classify these disparate peoples. The concept of *janglijati* was mistranslated into the term 'jungle tribes', so that they became defined in terms of their habitat - the jungle (which in English meant forest rather than 'wild') - and their kinship organisation - that of the clan-based 'tribe'. In some cases, they were defined by the colonial rulers in terms of their 'primitive' religiosity - as 'animists'. In the twentieth century there were given the bureaucratic label of 'scheduled tribes'. In reaction to all of this, many of them have claimed, assertively, to be *adivasis*, or 'original inhabitants'. Although none of these terms is entirely satisfactory, in this paper I shall use the latter term, as it is at least sanctioned today by the people so described.⁵

In the Indian subcontinent, one of the largest concentrations of adivasis are found in a three hundred and fifty mile-long belt of mountains and forests which stretches from Rajasthan in the north to near Bombay in the south. These areas lie either within Gujarat State, or are in districts which adjoin directly on Gujarat in neighbouring states. The adivasis of this belt belong to a number of different communities, the largest of which are the Bhils, followed by communities such as the Varlis, Chodhris, Dhodiyas, Gamits and others. The Bhils are best known, as in the past they were organised in warlike clans which prevented outside rulers from extending their control over the mountains. The British only managed to subjugate the Bhils with great difficulty during the first half of the nineteenth century. Even afterwards, there were

⁵ For a fuller justification of my usage in this respect see my book *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1987, pp.11-16. In using this term, I do not imply that this identity has any great historical depth. In fact, it is a relatively recent construction.

several Bhil revolts. During the British colonial period, the majority of Bhils and other western Indian adivasi groups were found in areas ruled by Indian princes, rather than directly by the British. The British, however, took overall responsibility for maintaining law and order in this belt, and they maintained a number of special armed 'Bhil Corps', composed of loyal Bhils commanded by British officers. In many respects, these militias mirrored the older clan-structures of power, with a benevolent patriarchal officer commanding the loyalty of his own band. Being better-equipped and trained, the Bhil Corps were able to impress their authority on the warring clans. Once subjugated, a process was set in being in which adivasis were encouraged to cultivate their land in a more intensive way and rely less on hunting, gathering and the collection of forest produce. In many cases, they were excluded from large tracts of forest which they had previously controlled, so that state foresters could exploit the timber wealth of the woodlands.⁶ Those who became settled were then exploited ruthlessly by landlords, usurers and liquor dealers, all of whom were protected by the colonial and princely states.⁷ In many cases, this created a crisis of confidence amongst adivasis in their own cultures, leading them to look for alternative and more efficacious cultural models. It was at this juncture that the missionaries stepped in.

The Advent of the Missionaries

In the late nineteenth century, British colonial officials encouraged missionaries to work amongst the adivasis for pragmatic and instrumentalist reasons. Christianity, it was argued, could further the overall colonial 'civilising mission', which in this context involved the acculturation of adivasis into a peaceful and subordinate subjecthood.⁸ As Sir Lepal Griffen stated in 1883 in regard to the Bhils:

I believe that it would be an immense advantage if the Bhils could be converted to any form of Christianity by missionaries, either Catholic or Protestant... It is obvious that the inconveniences and even danger which attend proselytising enterprises in Brahmanical and Muhammadan States, which possess a creed as dogmatic and systematic as Christianity itself, do not exist with reference to a people like the Bhils, who have no dogmatic theology, and who would accept with very little difficulty the civilising creed which would be offered to them.⁹

⁶ On this, see in particular David Hardiman, 'Power in the Forest: the Dangs, 1820-1940', in David Arnold and David Hardiman (eds.), *Subaltern Studies VIII*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1994; and Ajay Skaria, 'Timber Conservancy, Desiccationism and Scientific Forestry: The Dangs 1840s-1920s', in Richard Grove, Vinita Damodaran, Satpal Sangwan (eds.), *Nature and the Orient: The Environmental History of South and Southeast Asia*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1998.

⁷ On usurers see David Hardiman, *Feeding the Baniya: Peasants and Usurers in Western India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1996; on liquor dealers see David Hardiman, 'From Custom to Crime: The Politics of Drinking in Colonial South Gujarat', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1985.

⁸ For an analysis of how the British conceived of this 'civilising mission' in regard to the adivasis of western India, see Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*, pp.154-5 and 192-200

⁹ Sir Lepal Griffen, 17 March 1883, National Archives of India, Foreign Department, Political-I, 212-258, June 1883.

Under pressure from the colonial state, the princes who ruled most of the adivasi area agreed to allow missionaries to enter their territories so as to provide such a 'civilising' presence. This involved the inculcation of new morals and the provision of schools and medical facilities. Most of the princely states were very deficient in modern forms of education, and they were prepared even to provide subsidies if the missionaries opened schools in adivasi villages ruled by them.¹⁰ They also valued access to modern forms of medical treatment.¹¹

The missionaries who came in response were moved by a belief that their own path to salvation lay through dedicated social work which would pave the way for the saving of 'heathen' souls. Their efforts in India towards this end had involved a hard struggle, which had frequently yielded poor results. Often, the dominant castes would refuse even to allow subordinate caste people to attend mission meetings. I.S. Long found this when he tried to preach in the area around Jalalpur in South Gujarat, where Anavil Brahmans treated the subordinate Dubla agricultural labourers like serfs: '...the caste people are like the dog in the manger. They will not accept themselves nor will they let the common people, who would gladly take to something better and nobler, even congregate to listen long enough to get an idea of what Christianity is.'¹² Adivasi society, by contrast, was seen as being free from the stranglehold of caste. As one missionary wrote in 1906: 'Caste has not found its way into the Dangs as yet, and if we get in before caste ideas do, we do well.'¹³ Encouraged by such sentiments, the missionaries entered these areas confident that their labours would bring a swift reward. They saw the adivasis as a kind of *tabula rasa*, so-called 'lost souls' mired in primitive beliefs, who would respond with enthusiasm to their preaching once they understood the superiority of the Word of the Lord. Like so-called 'animists' all over the globe, the adivasis were seen as ripe candidates for successful proselytism.¹⁴

The Church Missionary Society (CMS), an Anglican body based in London, was the first to begin such work, starting in 1880 at Kherwara in Mewar State. In the following years, mission stations were opened at Lusadia and Biladia in Idar State, and Kotra in Mewar. The Jungle Tribes Mission of the Irish Presbyterian (IP) church began work in the eastern Panchmahals in 1892, and had its chief bases at Dahod, Jhalod and Sunth. The Church of the Brethren (CB), an American mission, established its first base in South Gujarat at Valsad in 1895, moving inland from there to the adivasi areas over the next decade, with bases at places such as Rajpipla, Jhagadia, Sagbara, Vuli and Umalla (Rajpipla State), Vyara (Baroda State), Dahanu and Vada (Thana District), and Ahwa (the Dangs).

¹⁰ C.S. Thompson to G.B. Durrant, Baulia 14 March 1893, Church Missionary Society records, University of Birmingham, G2 I6/0 1893.

¹¹ Interview with Captain Stockley (Mewar Bhil Corps), 20 May 1914, CMS Records, G2 I 8/0, 1914.

¹² 'Annual Report of the Church of the Brethren for the Year ending 31 March 1910', *The Missionary Visitor*, June 1910, p.17. The seminal study of this relationship of exploitation is by Jan Breman, *Patronage and Exploitation: Changing Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat, India*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1974.

¹³ Report from Valsad Mission for 1905, *The Missionary Visitor*, June 1906, p.7.

¹⁴ This continues to be the case with certain evangelical groups today which keep detailed information on the so-called 'unreached peoples' who are their prime targets for conversion. These include Indian *adivasis*; see evangelical websites such as www.bethany.com/profiles/c_code/india.html (March 2000). I am grateful to Chetan Bhatt for this reference.

As soon as resources were available, the missionaries constructed substantial mission buildings in their centres, clustered around a church, which they sought to make as imposing as possible. It was believed by missionaries that a grand church raised their status in an area.¹⁵ The surrounding adivasis were reached in part by regular tours - known as 'itineration' - which were carried out normally during the cold season, from November to March. The missionaries would establish a camp, and go out from there each day preaching.

The missionaries also established networks of schools. There were secondary schools at their mission centres, often with boarding facilities for pupils who came from a distance. Primary schools were set up in villages which were staffed by Indian Christians from outside the area. For example, by 1925 the CB Mission had organised 114 such schools in southern Gujarat and adjoining areas of Maharashtra.¹⁶ The schools provided a focal point for mission activities in an area, as described by a missionary writing in 1920:

...the Christian teacher not only teaches the children in school, but he also teaches the parents in the evening as they assemble in the schoolhouse for night school and a prayer service; and the teacher with his family as he lives a daily example among the villagers, shows them how to live, and so is instrumental in building up a Christian community.'¹⁷

There was a strong emphasis on medical work. Healing was considered to be Christian duty, and it had the practical advantage of providing a means for winning the sympathy of adivasis, and also provided a vivid demonstration - so the missionaries believed - of the superior power of Christian civilisation. The missionaries always carried medicine on their itinerations, and gave as much help as they could to the sick.¹⁸ In time, large numbers of adivasis began coming to the missionaries for treatment. For example, the CMS mission hospital and dispensary at Lusadia treated nearly 13,000 patients in 1919.¹⁹ Missionaries on tour similarly attracted large crowds demanding treatment. As one accounts of such a tour stated: 'As soon as the news spread that we had come, we were simply besieged on all sides for medical help, and sicknesses of all kinds were brought to us.' Although the medicine provided was rudimentary, it was reported to have cured many.²⁰ By this means, according to one missionary, they acquired a reputation amongst Bhils as *akkalwala*, or men of wisdom.²¹

¹⁵ 'Annual Report of the Church of the Brethren for the Year ending 31 March 1910', *The Missionary Visitor*, June 1910, p.14.

¹⁶ *The Missionary Visitor*, June 1930, p.255.

¹⁷ J.M. Blough, 'Why and How Educate the Depressed Classes', *The Missionary Visitor*, January 1920, p.6.

¹⁸ Anonymous, *Battling and Building amongst the Bhils*, Church Missionary Society, London 1914, pp.17 and 69-70. The author of this book was in fact a woman missionary who worked in the Bhil mission for many years, Miss Carter.

¹⁹ *Church Missionary Society: Report of the Mission to the Bhils for the Year 1919*, IP Mission Press, Surat 1920, p.6.

²⁰ *Church Missionary Society Report of the Mission to the Bhils for the Year 1914*, IP Mission Press, Surat 1915, p.16.

²¹ G.W. Blair, *Station and Camp Life in the Bheel Country: A Brief History of the Origin, Aims, and Operations of the Irish Presbyterian Jungle Tribes Mission, with an Account of the Bheels: Their Manners, Customs, Religion, &c.*, Belfast 1906, p.85.

The missionaries were not as a rule trained doctors, and although they sought to provide basic cures to the best of their abilities, they were well aware of their inadequacies in this respect. Their financial resources were extremely limited, so that whole areas of western allopathic medicine were beyond their reach. They could afford only the most basic drugs, and surgery was largely impossible without sterile and well-equipped operating theatres. They were particularly helpless in the face of serious epidemic disease, such as the great plague of 1896-98 and the influenza pandemic of 1918. There was little that they could do to help the people at such times. Converts, and even some of the missionaries themselves, died at such times.

Opposition from Dominant Elites.

Although the rulers of the princely states had for the most part agreed to allow missionaries to work in their territories, their officials and high-caste subjects were often hostile to a process which they feared might provide the grounds for a challenge to their domination over the adivasis. According to the CMS missionary, A.I. Birkett: '...all the higher castes feel that if they [the Bhils] can read and keep accounts their chances of making them work and getting money out of them are much diminished.'²² In some cases, as in Dungarpur state, the opposition was so great as to prevent the establishment of any mission schools.²³ In other cases, initial support for mission schools gave way to hostility, as was the case in Idar State in the early twentieth century. Already-established schools were allowed to continue, but no new ones could be opened. The state authorities also hindered the missionaries in whatever way they could.²⁴

Similar sentiments were found in British-controlled areas, such as the Dangs, where Parsi liquor sellers used their influence to dissuade adivasis from converting, as they believed that they would renounce liquor, and this would undermine their power.²⁵ Although the missionaries had been encouraged to come to the Dangs by the British administrator E.M. Hodgson, his immediate subordinate, the Dangs Dewan, a Rajput by caste, was strongly opposed to Christian proselytism. In public he acted towards them with apparent civility, but behind their backs he was heard to be '...speaking most vilely of Christians, their work and their influence upon the people of India.'²⁶

Many high-caste Hindus of this sort were by the early twentieth century coming under the influence of Hindu revivalist organisations, such as the Arya Samaj, with strongly anti-Christian agendas. People of this persuasion viewed the missionaries as rivals who were winning support for a foreign, 'non-Hindu' religion. As one missionary wrote: '...there is a strong sentiment for reformation by the Arya Samaj, which is most bitter against the missionary and his work, seeking at every turn to thwart our purpose and plans and to turn back those who have become Christians.' Some

²² A.I. Birkett to Waller, 25 September 1913, CMS records, G2 I 8/0, 1913.

²³ *Battling and Building amongst the Bhils*, p.73.

²⁴ W. Hodgkinson, Biladia, 15 January 1912, in *Church Missionary Society Report of the Mission to the Bhils for the Year 1911*, I.P. Mission Press, Surat 1912, p.9.

²⁵ *The Missionary Visitor*, May 1910, p.160.

²⁶ J.M. Pittenger, 'Recent Political Events in the Dangs', *The Missionary Visitor*, January 1912.

converts were as a result persuaded to renounce their conversions.²⁷ Amongst these Arya Samajists there was also great sympathy and support for the Indian nationalist movement. For them, the missionaries were strongly associated with British colonialism. This provided an additional cause for antipathy, especially as the missionaries were frequently fulsome in their praise of the British and strong in their condemnation of the nationalist movement.

From 1920 onwards, Gandhian nationalists began to go into the adivasi areas to win the people to their cause. In most cases they were banned from princely states, so that they had to establish their ashrams in areas ruled directly by the British. In many important respects, these Gandhians can be seen as rivals to the missionaries, especially as they sought to inculcate a new morality which was essentially that of high caste Hindus. They encouraged the adivasis to give up eating meat and fish, to stop drinking liquor, and to cultivate the land and spin and weave in peaceful ways.

The missionaries clearly saw them as rivals, as can be judged by the vehemence with which they condemned Gandhi and his movement. As one wrote in early 1922, speaking of 'Gandi-ism' [sic]:

We feel sure that his element will lose out as time goes on. A splendid number of sensible Indians stand loyal to the British Government and are not afraid to give their reasons why India is not yet ready to rule herself.²⁸

The outstanding figure in Indian anti-government agitation is Mr. Ghandi [sic], a religio-political leader, who has won his position of unequalled influence by playing on the religious susceptibilities of the masses and turning them in the direction of unthinking patriotism.²⁹

The missionaries very quickly lost this struggle, as Gandhi was taken up as a popular symbol for self-assertion by many adivasis in a way that the missionaries had never been able to achieve.³⁰

Opposition within Adivasis Communities.

Amongst the adivasis themselves, there was considerable suspicion of the motives of the missionaries. They were associated with the white sahibs of the colonial bureaucracy, who were notorious for demanding corvée labour and acting in other

²⁷ *The Missionary Visitor*, June 1910, pp. 12 and 25.

²⁸ *The Missionary Visitor*, January 1922.

²⁹ E.H. Eby, 'Mr. Ghandi [sic] and Home Rule in India', *The Missionary Visitor*, January 1922.

³⁰ Ironically, the fact that missionaries were likewise 'using' religion seems to have been lost on Eby. For South Gujarat see David Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi*, pp.166-76. For the Bhils and the powerful movement of Motilal Tejawat of 1921-22, with its Gandhian inspiration, see Denis Vidal, *Violence and Truth: A Rajasthani Kingdom Confronts Colonial Authority*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1997, pp.113-56. It should be noted that from around 1920 onwards, some missionaries sought to respond to Gandhi by adopting a more vernacular approach which was not in conflict with Indian nationalism. For the work of the Christa Seva Sangh in Maharashtra in this respect, see Ramachandra Guha, *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India*, University of Chicago, Chicago 1999, pp.25-52. There were, however, no such initiatives in the adivasi belt of Western India at that time.

oppressive ways. Such confusion was understandable, given the way of life, dress and demeanour of the missionaries. A photograph in G.W. Blair's *Station and Camp Life in the Bheel Country* shows a missionary, wearing a solar *topi*, jacket, breeches and riding boots, standing preaching to a collection of Bhil men who are squatting before him on the ground. In the text Blair commented that the Bhils often passed the hookah-pipe as the missionary preached, and that: 'In the early days the pipe was sometimes offered to the missionary for a whiff, but always declined.'³¹ Clearly, this was a *sahib* before subordinates, and one moreover who was not prepared to engage with the social world of those whom he sought to convert by sharing a pipe.

Because of this strong association with the white officials, the adivasis often fled into the surrounding forest as soon as missionaries were sighted. There were other damaging beliefs, which related to the missionaries' attempts to encourage adivasi children to attend schools. These appear to have been spread in a motivated way, for families did not want to lose the labour of their children - boys, for example, herding cattle and girls doing housework. It was thus rumoured that the missionaries had designs on adivasi women and children, whom they sought to kidnap to use for sinister purposes.³² Some said that their aim was to take the children off to England as soon as they were sufficiently educated. There was talk that those who saw the lantern slides being shown in the schools would die within a year.³³ In many cases village elders were unwilling to allow schools to be established in their villages, and in cases where they were established, they would prevent children from attending.³⁴

The missionaries were also seen to provide a threat to the social status of those whom they sought to convert. The missionaries had gone to the adivasi villages with the belief that 'tribals' did not rank their various communities in terms of status or purity, as was the case with castes in the society of the plains regions. This was a miscalculation, for there were in fact strong hierarchies, with certain communities being judged higher and purer than others.³⁵ Particular groups, such as the Katkaris and Kolghas, were even considered to be 'untouchable' by other adivasis. What this meant was that most adivasis had before them a model of what they did *not* want to become, and individuals feared that conversion to Christianity would lead to their being put out of community and condemned to such a status. One consequence of this was that it was often the adivasis of lowest status who proved most amenable to the missionaries. In the Vyara area of South Gujarat, for example, it was reported in 1920 that non-Christian adivasis considered themselves to be of 'better caste' than the Christians.³⁶ The large majority of converts in this tract were from the Gamit community, which was considered inferior in the hierarchy to the larger Chodhri and Dhodiya communities.³⁷

³¹ Blair, *Station and Camp Life in the Bheel Country*, p.82.

³² *Jungle Tribes Mission: Quarterly Magazine*, April 1925, pp.29-40.

³³ Blair, *Station and Camp Life in the Bheel Country*, pp.86-87.

³⁴ Blair, *Station and Camp Life in the Bheel Country*, p.87; 'Annual Report of the Church of the Brethren for the Year ending 31 March 1910', *The Missionary Visitor*, June 1910, p.29.

³⁵ Status and purity did not always coincide. For example, the Bhils of the Dangs were considered rulers, and thus superior to other Dangi adivasis; however, the Dangi Konkans considered themselves to be ritually purer than the Bhils. See David Hardiman, 'Power in the Forest', pp.101-05.

³⁶ Elizabeth Kintner, 'Two Side-Lines to the Study of Gujarati', *The Missionary Visitor*, January 1921, p.16.

³⁷ In 1931, of the 523 adivasi Christians recorded in the census, 503 were Gamit, 17 Chodhri and 3 Dhodiya. *Census of India 1931*, Vol. XIX, *Baroda*, pt.1, *Report*, Bombay 1932, p.127.

Because of this general suspicion and antagonism towards the Christians, the adivasi elites tried their best to undermine missionary activities. For example, the village headman of Ahwa in the Dangs - an important CB mission base - accused the Christians of being bad people who wanted to bring harm to the people.³⁸ In the Panchmahals in the early 1920s, the Police Patel of Parewa harassed Christian converts by taking out law suits against them. The missionaries sought the help of the authorities, who forced him to apologise, which no doubt angered him still more.³⁹

The missionaries, with their medicine, were also seen as a threat by adivasi healers and exorcists. Healing and healers were in strong demand amongst adivasis, for they suffered from many diseases. British reports written soon after their subjugation in the early nineteenth century speak of their emaciation from poor and inadequate diet and the prevalence of 'fever' - by which it seems is meant malaria. Many were observed to suffer from a 'tumid spleen', which was seen to be a consequence of chronic 'fever'.⁴⁰ It is likely that many suffered also from sickle-cell anaemia, which, though debilitating, provided protection against malaria.

The adivasis had a reputation for knowledge about herbal remedies which they were skilled in finding from the forest. They also cauterised sick people with hot irons.⁴¹ Much disease was believed by them, however, to be symptomatic of a wider malaise in the social order which was brought about when a spirit gained control over a human or when a female witch cast an envious and evil spell. In this case the service of a male exorcist was required, either to propitiate the spirit, or to discover the witch. Alleged witches were often tortured to force them to relinquish their spells, and they frequently died as a result. As a rule, it was more marginalised women who tended to be so accused, in particular the aged and widows of poorer families. The exorcists were supported in this by the wider society, led by the adivasi elders and patriarchs. In this way, illness and the anxieties to which it gave rise provided means by which a patriarchal elite maintained a peremptory control over the subordinate and marginal peoples of their own society.

The British, after their conquest of India, sought to outlaw the persecution of witches, a practice seen as barbaric.⁴² Those accused of killing witches were considered to have committed murder, and were punished accordingly. This was resented by the adivasi patriarchs, and as the belief in witchcraft continued to be maintained strongly, it tended to drive such practices underground rather than suppress them.

Because of the association between local social control and exorcism, the missionaries' provision of an alternative form of healing was perceived by the adivasi elites as a threat to their power. They accordingly did their best to prevent their fellow villagers from taking such treatment. In their view, an individual adivasi had

³⁸ Though later, on his deathbed, he asked the missionaries for medicine, but died soon after. J.M. Pittenger, 'Bits of Life in the Dangs', *The Missionary Visitor*, February 1908, p.83.

³⁹ *Jungle Tribes Mission: Quarterly Magazine*, April 1923, pp.74-5.

⁴⁰ Report by G. Jervais, 9 September 1844, Maharashtra State Archives, Bombay, Revenue Department 81/10, 1844.

⁴¹ O.H. Yereman, 'Is the Doctor Needed in the Mission Field?', *The Missionary Visitor*, January 1906, pp.18-19.

⁴² Ajay Skaria, 'Women, Witchcraft and Gratuitous Violence in Colonial Western India', *Past and Present*, No. 155, May 1997.

no right to a personal choice of treatment when sick, for the body of the individual was no more than a part of a wider kin group - a family or clan - and thus had to conform to the wishes of this wider group above all. Failure to do so would both offend and bring misfortune to both living relatives and the spirits of the ancestors.

Therapy thus became a battleground between the missionaries and the exorcists, who were supported by the adivasi elites. For example, Dr. John Brand of the CMS reported in 1913 of a great spiritual battle he was engaged in with Bhil healers over the treatment of an Indian lay preacher, Premji Hurji. Many of the local converts believed that Premji was the victim of sorcery, and they tried to persuade him to combat the evil power in the traditional way. Brand reassured him that he would recover through a combination of his treatment and the power of prayer to God. Premji remained steadfast to his Christian faith, and when he eventually recovered, Brand interpreted it as demonstrating 'the power of God to heal' - a revelation of the superior power of Christ compared to local 'wizards'.⁴³

The mission records are full of accounts of such battles, and the missionaries by no means always won the day, for some converts resorted to exorcism, and many died despite their prayers. In one such case the IP missionaries of the Panchmahals managed to convert a Bhil called Mala. When he fell very ill, he appealed to Christ to cure him, but failed to get any better. He was then cured by an exorcist and subsequently rejected Christianity.⁴⁴ Even Christians who were sick were often prevented by relatives from seeking help from the mission hospitals, lest their families suffer from the wrath of the elders.

In these respects the missionaries were engaged in a very hard struggle on what was for them a very difficult terrain. Adivasis who sought medical treatment had to brave the displeasure of the exorcists. As a result, many adivasis would not go to them for treatment, even when seriously ill. Medical activities did not therefore break down barriers to the extent that had been anticipated.

The Bhagat Movements

Perhaps the most important reason for the limited success of these missionaries was that they had in many cases been preceded by indigenous movements for social and religious reform which proved to have far greater resonance among the people. The most important of these was that of the Bhagats. These were adivasis who had developed a faith in Vaishnavite or Shaivite deities, and had reformed their lives accordingly. Commonly, they gave up meat, fish and liquor. They generally followed the *bhakti* path of worship, singing *bhajans* which celebrated their devotion to their deities. They normally lived from the peaceful practise of agriculture and rejected the violence and thieving which was associated stereotypically with adivasi life. These were in other words adivasis who had already been converted to an alternative system of ethics.

⁴³ Report by Dr. J. Brand, in *Church Missionary Society Report of the Mission to the Bhils for the Year 1913*, document 27, CMS records, University of Birmingham, G2 I8/0, 1914, pp.8-10.

⁴⁴ *Jungle Tribes Mission: Quarterly Journal*, October 1926, p.60.

The Bhagat movements amongst the Bhils went back to at least the early eighteenth century, when a Brahman Vaishnavite mystic called Mavji had won many Bhil converts in the Banswara and Dungarpur regions.⁴⁵ Followers became vegetarians, they refused to accept bride-price (as was the general practice among Bhils), and avoided remarriage. They wore white robes, symbolising their simplicity and truthfulness.⁴⁶ Another such leader, who emerged in the late nineteenth century, was called Surmal Das. He was a Bhil of Lusadia, which was in Idar State on the border between Gujarat and Rajasthan. In early life he had lived by robbery, but he later repented and spent thirteen years redeeming himself through hard penance, which it was believed gave him miraculous powers. He demanded that his followers give up killing animals, drinking liquor and practising witchcraft, abjure robbery and violence and live by tilling the land. He told them to worship the god Ram. By 1880 he was reported to have had about eight hundred followers.⁴⁷

The Reverend Charles Thompson of the CMS believed that the Bhagats were ripe for conversion to Christianity. He adopted a head-on approach by establishing a mission school at Lusadia in 1887. He had a low opinion of Surmal Das, whom he believed to be an impostor and a trickster who faked his 'miracles'.⁴⁸ The antipathy was mutual - the Bhagats of Lusadia strongly rejected Christianity, though some did take advantage of the mission school to educate their children. This situation changed as a result of the great famine of 1899-1900. Surmal Das had himself died in 1898. The suffering and terrible mortality of the famine years seems to have shaken the faith of the Lusadia Bhagats, and in 1901 twenty-two of them converted to Christianity and were baptised. They claimed that they were heeding a prophecy made by Surmal Das just before he died, that a terrible famine was coming and that teachers would come from the west and teach them from a book about 'the True God', and a sinless incarnation born of a virgin. They would build a temple in Lusadia to worship this God. When the famine indeed came, they became more open to the teachings of the missionaries and were astonished to find that the scriptures accorded closely with the precepts of their mentor. They realised that 'the True God' was in fact Jesus Christ. These conversions provided the nucleus for a flourishing congregation at Lusadia. Soon after, a large church was built.⁴⁹

The success at Lusadia was not repeated again elsewhere. The large majority of Bhagats continued to be hostile towards the missionaries and Bhil converts. The most serious setback for the missionaries in this respect occurred in 1913, when there was a major movement amongst the Bhils led by a charismatic member of the Banjara caste called Govindgir. Born in 1858 in Dungarpur State, he became a Bhagat and around 1911 began to preach to the Bhils, telling them not to commit theft, deception and adultery, to stop drinking liquor, to give up their arms and live by agriculture and in peace with others, to abandon their exorcists and spirit mediums, to wear a yellow turban and *rudraksh* beads around their neck, and to fly a special flag over their

⁴⁵ G.N. Sharma, *Social Life in Medieval Rajasthan (1500-1800 AD)*, Lakshmi Narain Agarwal, Agra 1968, pp.237-8.

⁴⁶ R.S. Mann, 'Structure and Role Dynamics among the Bhils of Rajasthan: A Case of the Bhagats', in K.S. Singh, *Tribal Movements in India*, Volume 2, Manohar, New Delhi 1983, pp.315-6.

⁴⁷ *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, Vol. V, *Cutch, Palanpur and Mahi Kantha*, Government Central press, Bombay 1880, p.366.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.25.

⁴⁹ *Battling and Building amongst the Bhils*, pp.24-31.

houses.⁵⁰ The movement escalated suddenly in early 1913, with large numbers of Bhils following these commands in the princely states of Dungarpur, Banswara and Sunth, and in the British-ruled Panchmahals. This caused considerable alarm in these states, for they were highly suspicious of any forms of self-assertion by adivasis, and also depended crucially on the revenue from the tax on liquor.⁵¹ Their heavy-handed attempts to repress the movement provoked Govindgir into leading his followers to a hill, where he declared a new kingdom of the Bhils. This gathering of thousands of Bhils alarmed the British, who sent troops. In November 1913 they stormed the hill, shot those who resisted, and captured and imprisoned Govindgir.⁵²

The missionaries most affected by Govindgir's movement were those of the IP Jungle Tribes Mission. They saw his activities in wholly negative terms, as some of their Christian converts amongst the Bhils had been harassed by his devotees. Govindgir and his followers were categorised by these missionaries as 'a set of dirty beggars', who were 'doing their best to lead the poor Bhil astray'.⁵³ The large majority of the Bhils did not agree with this judgement. Despite the harsh and continuing repression of the movement, Govindgir continued to be revered, and many continued to follow his commands.⁵⁴ Govindgir was released in 1919 and went to live in the British Panchmahals, where he continued to attract a stream of followers up until his death in 1931. The sect continues to be strong in the area, being known now as the Govindpanth.

Although colonial rule had brought about a crisis of faith for many adivasis in their own cultural values and systems of belief, they preferred to adopt the way of the Bhagats as an alternative rather than that of the missionaries. Clearly, the Bhagats and their message reached them in a way which the white missionaries were unable to do. This has to be understood at a number of levels. In terms of their relationship with regionally dominant groups, the Bhagats path provided grounds for an alliance with those amongst the elite who believed that adivasis should be assimilated into the wider society in a dignified manner. The religious tradition with which the Bhagats and their followers were aligned - that of a devotional worship which was egalitarian, non-militaristic and broadly tolerant - had had much in common with the values propounded by Indian nationalists - in particular by Gandhi and his followers - and alliances were subsequently forged between the two. At another level - that of everyday practices and relationships within their own societies - the Bhagats had the advantage of not being exclusivist, unlike the missionaries, who viewed any deviation from Eurocentric practices and dogmas as heresy. In the Bhagat sects, devotional worship could continue alongside the propitiation of existing deities and spirits, and no tension was seen to exist between faith and healing through exorcism. This did not mean that there were no tensions between the Bhagats and the wider adivasi society. Their condemnation of the persecution of witches and their disavowal of meat and liquor could cause bitter conflicts, with non-Bhagats refusing to marry into

⁵⁰ Govindgir to The Political Agent, Rewa Kantha, 12 November 1913, National Archives of India, Mewar Residency, File 3 of 1914.

⁵¹ Kamdar of Banswara Sate to the Political Agent, Southern Rajputana States, 3 June 1913, National Archives of India, Foreign Dept. Internal-A.8.67, March 1914.

⁵² Hari Sen, 'Popular Protest in Mewar in the Late-Nineteenth and Early-twentieth Centuries', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Delhi 1996, pp.217-19.

⁵³ 'Notes from the Field', *Jungle Tribes Mission Quarterly Paper*, Belfast 1914, p.4.

⁵⁴ Mohanlal, Dewan of Dungarpur, to Political Agent, Southern Rajputana States, 8 June 1917, Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner, Dungarpur Mahekma Khas, R1426, 1917.

Bhagat families. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, few adivasis were entirely confident in their old values or entirely dismissive of the efficacy of the way of the Bhagats, and at propitious moments, as in 1913, large numbers might suddenly and dramatically embrace the new.

The Bhagats themselves carried on their own dialogue with the missionaries. In many cases, they valued the education that they could gain for their children in mission schools, or the treatment that they could obtain in mission dispensaries and hospitals, for they largely rejected the older adivasi antipathy towards literacy and schooling, as well as the belief in witchcraft and sorcery. By providing institutions which could satisfy their desire for education and new forms of medical therapy, the missionaries helped, ironically, to advance the cause of the Bhagats, who were seen to prosper in wealth and health and gain a new self-confidence in dealings with the outside world in comparison with non-Bhagat adivasis. The missionaries thus helped to advance new forms of consciousness, albeit not on the terms which they desired.

New Evangelicalism and the Hindu Backlash

Christian missionaries gained few adivasi converts during the colonial period, despite the great support given to them by the colonial state. There were no waves of mass conversion, as amongst the dalits of central Gujarat in the period 1890-1910.⁵⁵ The mass movements amongst adivasis of those times were led by people such as Govindgir, and in South Gujarat, the Devi mediums of 1922-23.⁵⁶ Compared to these movements for self-assertion, the impact of the missionaries was very slight indeed. This is not to say that the missionaries failed entirely, for they did manage to establish a few Christian communities which have managed to survive and flourish.⁵⁷ There was something of a breakthrough in this respect during the great Gujarat famine of 1899-1900, when they established orphanages for children whose parents had died. Most of these children subsequently became Christian, forming the nucleus for a number of Christian farming settlements.⁵⁸ As a result, the numbers of adivasi Christians could thereafter be counted in hundreds, rather than in tens. There were however very few fresh conversions after the famine years.

This continued to be the case for many years after Indian independence. The white missionaries retired home or died, being replaced by Indian Christians, who often came from southern India. They sought to build an indigenous church which was free from links with imperialism. They developed more vernacular forms of worship, while continuing to run schools, hostels and medical dispensaries based on modern pedagogical and scientific principles. They thus continued to act as a force for 'modernisation' in 'backward' tracts. They were generally accepted by the adivasis as

⁵⁵ This is described in J. Tremayne Copplestone, *History of Methodist Missions*, Vol.IV, *Twentieth-Century Perspectives (The Methodist Episcopal Church, 1896-1939)*, The United Methodist Church, New York 1973, pp.790-98

⁵⁶ See David Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi*, in particular pp.151-65.

⁵⁷ Interview with Pitar Galji Bhanat, Samaiya village, Vijaynagar Taluka, Sabarkantha District, 15 December 1997. Pitar's father, a Bhil Bhagat, was converted by the CMS missionaries who were based in nearby Biladia.

⁵⁸ *Battling and Building amongst the Bhils*, pp.32-7

providing much-needed services in a situation in which state provision was woefully lacking. Compared to the earlier white missionaries, they were far more tolerant in their view of other religious traditions. They made little attempt to convert, and though the adivasis respected the Christian padres, few were baptised into Christianity. Only in the last two decades of the twentieth century was there any significant change in this respect, with the development of a movement of mass conversion in the Dangs and surrounding areas. In 1961 the Christian population of the Dangs District was 654, which was less than one percent of the population. In 1991 there were 7,500 Christians – five percent of the whole. Estimates for the late 1990s put the figure at between 15,000 to 20,000 Christians.⁵⁹

The notable feature of these new conversions was that they were not on the whole carried out by the older-established mission bodies. Rather, they were carried out for the most part by evangelical protestants belonging to organisations such as the Pentecostals and the Evangelical Church of India. The new missionaries, most of whom came from South India, abandoned the gradualist approach, with its cautious attitude towards baptism and emphasis on the building of institutions to provide education, economic development and allopathic medical care. The new evangelists demanded a leap of faith, preaching that the poor could overcome their many problems through faith in Christ alone. They told the adivasis that their old deities could no longer protect them, only prayer to Jesus. Some of such missionaries claimed even to be able to cure the deaf, the dumb and crippled through prayer alone, and they discouraged adivasis from going to doctors. This struck a chord with many adivasis, leading to a series of mass baptisms in the Dangs and surrounding areas.⁶⁰

This caused great alarm to Hindu nationalists, who believed that the adivasis were being won over to a ‘foreign’ religion. For them, Hinduism and Indian civilisation were synonymous, and conversion was seen as a betrayal of Indian nationality. They accordingly launched a strident counter-proselytisation of their own. This involved the standard gamut of social work - economic development, education, moral reform - but with a particularly strong emphasis on allopathic health care. Special camps were organised which provided eye-operations (mainly cataract-removal) and dental care. Alongside this, they launched an onslaught on the missionaries. This culminated in a wave of violence against Christians in 1998-9, with churches being burnt down and Christians beaten up and even killed. Many Christians were forced to ‘reconvert’ to what was defined as ‘Hinduism’ through staged *shudhhi* ceremonies.⁶¹

In all this, there was a dramatic reversal. Whereas in the past the missionaries had stood for ‘civilisation’ against ‘superstition’, it was now Hindus who accused Christians of being guilty of the latter, by duping credulous ‘tribals’ into conversion through what they depicted as trickery. It was argued that the missionaries should have confined their medical activities to the practice of ‘modern’ scientific bio-medicine. Their activities were contrasted to the Hindu religious workers who were seen to provide such ‘legitimate’ health care. According to this line of reasoning, it was not acceptable to link healing with religion so far as actual medical technique was

⁵⁹ Satyakam Joshi, ‘Tribals, Missionaries and Sadhus: Understanding the Violence in the Dangs’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 11 September 1999, p.2670.

⁶⁰ Joshi, ‘Tribals, Missionaries and Sadhus’, p.2670; *India Today*, 25 January 1999.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp.2672-4; William Dalrymple, ‘Baptism by Fire’, *The Guardian Weekend*, 20 March 1999, p.25.

concerned; religious figures were expected to encourage and employ 'modern' methods.

The Hindu right has been contradictory has thus depicted evangelical missionaries as being on the one hand agents of western imperialism, while on the other they have condemned them for not being western enough. They have failed to understand that the evangelical approach has occupied a radically different epistemic space to that of the white missionaries of the colonial period and the Indian missionaries who took over from them in the postcolonial period. These missionaries had seen themselves as agents of a civilisational 'progress' which originated in the west. The evangelicals, by contrast, offered the adivasis a solution to their many problems through mass conversion to a cosmology which would, it was believed, invite supernatural intervention on their behalf. In this, they had much in common with the earlier Bhagat movements. Their success can therefore be seen to have been rooted in their more direct engagement with the belief systems of the adivasis.

Whether this success will be consolidated in the future, or whether the adivasis will perhaps move towards a consciousness which is more in tune with the agenda of Hindutva has yet to be seen. There are in fact indications that the Hindu right is a spent force in the adivasi belt.⁶² There is no inevitability to its advance, and in a changed political climate other, more tolerant, forms of belief which are more in tune with the culture of the adivasis may yet prevail.

⁶² This was an impression which I gained from a research trip to the Dangs in December 2000, where I interviewed some people who had been complicit in the attacks on Christians two years before.