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Socio-economic Characteristics of Tribal Communities That Call Themselves Hindu

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Foreword

Development has for long been viewed as an attractive and inevitable way forward by most countries of the Third World. As it was initially theorised, development and modernisation were multifaceted processes that were to help the "underdeveloped" economies to take-off and eventually become like "developed" nations of the West. Processes like industrialisation, urbanisation and secularisation were to inevitably go together if economic growth had to happen and the "traditional" societies to get out of their communitarian consciousness, which presumably helped in sustaining the vicious circles of poverty and deprivation. Tradition and traditional belief systems, emanating from past history or religious ideologies, were invariably "irrational" and thus needed to be changed or privatised. Developed democratic regimes were founded on the idea of a rational individual citizen and a secular public sphere.

Such evolutionist theories of social change have slowly lost their appeal. It is now widely recognised that religion and cultural traditions do not simply disappear from public life. They are also not merely sources of conservation and stability. At times they could also become forces of disruption and change. The symbolic resources of religion, for example, are available not only to those in power, but also to the weak, who sometimes deploy them in their struggles for a secure and dignified life, which in turn could subvert the traditional or establish structures of authority. Communitarian identities could be a source of security and sustenance for individuals. This change in attitude of the social sciences towards religion could also be seen in shifting trends in empirical research on the subject. Over the last two or three decades we have seen a steady shift towards treating religion as a "normal" sociological fact, without any teleological presupposition about its pasts or futures. This shift has also been reinforced by the emerging social and political trends in countries like India where issues relating to citizenship are raised by identity movements of historically deprived categories, such as the Dalits and the tribals, or the religious minorities, such as the Muslims, for a more inclusive and just development.

There has also been perceptible shift in state policy. With grass-rooting of democracy and a gradual shift in the social profile of political elite in

countries like India, the old secular-communal dichotomous way of thinking seems to be increasingly becoming meaningless. Social policies dealing with issues of marginalities and exclusions have begun to be framed using "social group" variables at the core. At global level also, much of the recent research and policy dialogue has centred on questions of citizenship and entitlements in relation to cultural and group identities. With growing movements of people, nation-states are everywhere becoming ethnically and culturally diverse and plural where religious and communitarian identities are difficult to dispense with. While questions of development and citizenship in relation to culture and religious belief or communities have become important issue in the public and political spheres, social science research on the subject is still at a nascent stage. It was in this broader perspective that the research programme on 'Religions and Development' was conceived. The research programme is funded by DFID and coordinated from the University of Birmingham. As partners in the consortium, we, at the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, have been working on various aspects regarding the subject in India. The working paper series disseminates some of these works.

The working paper, "Socio-economic Characteristics of Tribal Communities That Call Themselves Hindu" tracks down some significant trends and issues that were prevalent between the tribals and the external social structures, precisely the interaction with the Hindu communities and the influence of Hinduism. Since the tribals lived in contiguity with caste Hindu communities, and had viable social and economic exchanges with them; therefore many tribal groups eventually absorbed Hindu traits and ways of living. This process of adopting the Hindu idiom and way of life did not necessarily imply giving up their own complex of deities and lifestyles. In fact, these were combined without precipitating any contradictions. This, however, did not come about to mean that tribespeople have been uncritical of the Hindu system. Their expression to return to 'golden period' becomes important background against which the tribal movements (including those of religious revival) need to be understood.

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1. Introduction

The first part of the paper introduces some of the relevant trends and issues, including tribal peoples' relations with external society, including Hindus, patterns of religious interaction and syncretism; and the role of productive technology. The second section discusses interactions between tribal people and Hindus and processes of Hinduisation in more depth, by considering the history of six tribal groups. The opposite process, of tribal peoples distancing themselves from Hinduism, is discussed in the third section, and the overall findings are summarised in the concluding section.

1.1 Tribes in India

Tribes in India, constituting 8.6 per cent of India's total population, and classified into about seven hundred communities, including both 'major tribes' and their 'sub-tribes', inhabit all parts of the country except the States of Punjab, Haryana, and Delhi, and the Union Territories of Chandigarh and Puducherry (earlier called Pondicherry).[1] Their number and other demographic features vary from one part of the country to another (see Table 1), with the largest number of tribal communities (sixty-two) being in the State of Orissa.[2]

Unlike the tribes of North America, Australia and New Zealand, which are ethnically, socially, culturally and demographically different from the rest of their countrypersons, who are principally the descendants of the migrants from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and other parts of Europe, the tribes in India have wider and on-going links with non-tribe communities (particularly the caste communities of Hindus) (Fürer-Haimendorf 1982). While it would be possible to identify a tribesperson in North America by his or her physical features

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and cultural characteristics, such an exercise for Indian tribespersons would be futile, as well as frustrating. In some parts of India, tribespersons resemble non-tribes to such an extent that to separate one from the other would be nearly impossible. That was the reason why the enumerators of late nineteenth-century, who were collecting information on communities for the first Census of India and the various compendia that were being prepared on tribes and castes, found it exceedingly hard to classify a community as a 'tribe' or a 'caste'. In many cases, the decision was made arbitrarily, and only later subjected to interrogation (Risley, 1915).[3]

Table 1: Percentage of Tribal People in Different States and Union Territories of India

State/Union Territory	Percentage of Tribespersons among the Total Population
Andhra Pradesh	6.60
Arunachal Pradesh	64.20
Assam	12.40
Bihar	0.90
Goa	--
Gujarat	14.80
Haryana	--
Himachal Pradesh	4.00
Karnataka	6.60
Kerala	1.10
Madhya Pradesh	20.30
Maharashtra	8.90
Manipur	34.41
Meghalaya	85.90
Mizoram	94.50
Nagaland	88.90
Orissa	22.10
Punjab	--
Rajasthan	12.60
Tamil Nadu	1.00
Tripura	31.10
Uttar Pradesh	0.10
West Bengal	5.50
Jammu and Kashmir	10.90
Uttrakhand	3.00
Jharkhand	26.30
Chhattisgarh	31.80
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	8.30
Chandigarh	--
Dadra and Nagar Haveli	62.20
Daman and Diu	8.80
Delhi and Pondicherry	--
Lakshadweep	94.50

The existence of unmistakable links and obvious similarities between the groups, however, does not imply that there are no differences between the tribes and the castes.[4] For instance, tribal people are mountain and hill dwellers, for which they have earned the appellation *girijan* which means *'hill dwellers',* or they live in forests, so are called *vanvasi* ('forest dwellers') and *vanyajati ('forest castes').* In some states of India, they dwell close to coastal areas. The territories they inhabit are generally not the abodes of multi-castes. The differences of habitat in the areas in which they and caste groups live condition their respective economies. Tribespeople are generally foragers and shifting cultivators; while the castes are synergistically engaged in the agrarian system, in which each caste has a monopoly over a particular occupation. Different patterns of economic interaction are explored further below.

1.2 Tribes and the Outside World

Although Indian tribes have their own spatially-demarcated communities, they have never been isolated; they and their neighbouring communities are inter-dependent and have had long term contacts for exchange, as a result of which their social and cultural features have often been subject to external influences. Even those communities that are now isolated, for instance in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, were not so in the past (Mukhopadhyay, 2002). In fact, the isolation of tribes increased when outsiders (especially the colonial rulers) started entering into their territories in search of precious and non-renewable resources. As surveys of forest and hill territories began, tribal people moved to non-surveyed areas to escape the tyranny of exploitation and suppression. The neighbours of tribes belonged to different cultural and religious categories, varying from one location to another: they were Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and in some pockets of Rajasthan and Gujarat, Jain.

Even when the tribes had a degree of economic self-sufficiency, there were certain things (such as salt, some types of grain, pieces of cloth, metallic objects) for which they had to depend upon their neighbours. In lean seasons, they travelled to multi-caste villages to seek jobs as agricultural labourers. Tribal women were often seen (and are still seen) in the caste villages of Rajasthan selling toys for children; earlier they bartered goods in return for clothes (and cupfuls of grain), but today they usually accept money. Similarly, their men are seen selling medicines (of both faunal and floral origin), honey (along with the comb), and charms (amulets and talismans).

Invariably, in caste villages, specialists from tribal villages are called to treat illnesses suspected to have a supernatural cause. There are many 'supernatural

specialists' in tribal settlements, as a consequence of which the local term used for a 'magical curer' may be used for an entire tribal community. For example, the terms *baiga* and *panda,* which are also the names of a tribe from Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, both mean 'priest', and the members of this community are believed to be the best shamans and spirit-mediums in their area. In rural Rajasthan, it is said that every tribal household has a *bhopa* (supernatural specialist). The general belief is that tribespersons acquire the knowledge of magico-religious cures because they are forest and hill dwellers, who live closer to nature than other groups. Hills and forests are believed to be the abodes of divine powers and spirits that intervene in human affairs, thus it is thought that those inhabiting such areas can master the lore needed to placate the realm of the supernatural or bring it under control.

What may be inferred from the above is the wide gulf between the anthropological definition of tribal society and the reality. Anthropologists conceptualised a tribal society as an isolated or semi-isolated group of human beings, having its own culture and exercising self-sufficiency and autonomy over its affairs (a definition oft-repeated in textbooks). A tribe was (and is still) viewed as a 'cultural isolate', having little or no relationship with the outside world. Because it was regarded as a 'whole', a 'complete society', with a pre-literate tradition (no reading and writing), it was thought that the best theoretical approach for its study would be structural-functional. It was little realised that this conception of tribal society, which largely evolved from a supposed understanding of African communities, was inapplicable in India, where communities had always had relationships with others, although the network of relationships differed from one context to another (Cohn, 1987).

Three such modes of interaction are considered below: interaction between tribal religion and Hinduism, economic and social mobility through changes of occupation, and the role of censuses in labelling and categorising people.

1.3 Religious Exchange with Hindus

Tribal people have always had relationships with other religious streams, as well as with local cults and sects, not only borrowing from them but also, in some cases, influencing them. However, most of their interactions have been with the majority Hindu community, the structural principle of which is the caste system (Srinivas, 1952). It is worth noting here that Hinduism is a non-proselytising religion (Srinivas and Shah, 1968): it does not have the idea of conversion. One is born a Hindu, or may be adopted by a Hindu family (Fuller, 1992). One need

not be a believer to be a Hindu: a person may call himself a Hindu even when he or she does not believe in the existence of god; even an atheist can be a Hindu.

The first mode of interaction between tribespeople and Hindus is a process of religious 'borrowing' or syncretism. For example, tribal groups have assimilated Hindu gods and goddesses in their religious system. The Oraons, for example, believe that the entire universe is regulated by a superpower known as Dharmesh, the representations of which are the earth (*dharti*), the moon (*chando*), and the sun (*bin*), and therefore, the veneration of these natural things is supreme in their worship system. At the same time, they revere Mahadeo Bhagat, a form of the Hindu *sanskritic* god, Shiva, and the monkey-god, Hanuman. The Oraon think that Hanuman's native village is Anjani, in the district of Gumla. On ritual occasions, they carry a flag in his honour. For them, their own religion and Hinduism can co-exist without any contradictions. It has also been reported that on the day of Diwali (the 'festival of lights'), the Oraon carry out the 'worship of the fowl' (*ranguâ pujâ*), which is their indigenous practice, along with the lighting of lamps. That Hinduism is pluralistic, allowing different (even contradictory) beliefs and practices to coexist, has been observed by many scholars (for example, Braden, 1967; Biardeau, 1989; Srinivas and Shah, 1968). Syncretism in Hinduism itself is also common; the religion is highly mouldable and adaptable. It has in its womb highly abstract ideas, alongside elaborate rituals for the pacification of spirits and restoration of homeostatic balance in the universe and cosmos. Hindus find no contradiction in believing that god is one and formless and at the same time, for instance, that a pebble or a plant is godly, deserving veneration. Vegetarian and non-vegetarian deities, deities that accept blood sacrifices and those that abhor them, deities that demand liquor and those that abstain from it, deities that remain completely detached from human business and those that actively participate in it, all exist together in the same cosmology, without any apparent paradox.[5] Obviously this background facilitated diverse communities with different combinations of deities, beliefs and practices to coexist and claim to be following the same religion, namely Hinduism.

Upper caste Hindus did not react when lower castes and tribal groups appropriated their deities and parts of the complex of beliefs and rituals. Indeed, Hinduism has, in some cases, been influenced by tribal religion. For example, some prominent Hindu deities had their genesis in tribal gods and goddesses. One of the well-known examples is the three guardian deities of Orissa, seated in the town of Puri, which have their origin in the Saora pantheon (Eschmann et al., 1978). Hindus did not object when lower castes and tribes picked up certain

aspects from their pantheon and modified them to suit their social structure and levels of knowledge, cognition, and practical circumstances. However, they did not permit the entry of lower castes and tribes into their places of worship, for the simple reason that they believed that these places would be sullied. As punitive sanctions did not exist, it was natural that tribes would borrow the things they most liked from others with whom they came in contact. In this way, the religious aspects of Hinduism spread to tribal communities. The tribes were most influenced by the Hindus both because they were the majority religious tradition and also because they were the communities with whom tribespersons interacted the most. The productive system of caste society was another factor, as we shall see later. The tribes regarded the Hindu system as superior to theirs. Some (such as the Bondo of Orissa) thought that if their prayers were answered in the Oriya language (which is not their language, but the language of their superior neighbours, upper caste Hindus), then their gods would grant their wishes.[6] Thus as noted above, economic interaction brought tribespeople closer to Hindu communities, from whom they periodically borrowed certain cultural and religious traits, such as apparently 'powerful gods', an 'effective language in which gods should be worshipped', and also 'lifeways' that would appease upper caste Hindus (Fürer-Haimendorf (1982). In a nutshell, they borrowed whatever they felt was good for them, since Hindus, as pointed out earlier, did not object to the spread of many of their cultural practices and traits. The process of borrowing occurred slowly and gradually, but demonstrates that tribes were not static and conservative, as presented in the anthropological literature.

In many cases, the complex of indigenous tribal religious practices did not bear a name. Outsiders gave a name to them, so that the tribal communities of north-east India that did not embrace Christianity (in the second half of the nineteenth-century) were called 'pagan' or simply, 'non-Christian'.[7] However, for the tribes, the beliefs, practices, and performances that attached them to their sacred entities, ensuring their long-term welfare, were far more important than the collective name they bore. To this repository of beliefs, practices and performances, they added some more, borrowing from their neighbours or others with whom they came in contact, those beliefs, practices and rituals that they thought would enrich their culture and enhance their control over the environment. There were no pure categories; what existed was an embryonic form of 'mixed-up genre'. In spite of the interaction of tribals with Hinduism and later Christianity, and also other religious and sectarian groups, they have nevertheless been able to maintain some kind of autonomy in their religious systems. Singh (1994, p. 12) notes that, notwithstanding these ongoing interactions, the hierarchy of tribal peoples' clan

and village deities generally survives intact: most of the sacred specialists among the tribals are from their own communities, with few from other communities. The calendar of festivals and festivities is also relatively intact.

Such interaction and syncretism is very different from a second mode of interaction: the practice of 'bringing back people to the Hindu fold' or 'purifying them' ('making them pure', the idea of *shuddhi*). This was a later development within Hinduism, against the backdrop of the politics of conversion and the desire of religious groups to increase their numbers, although the idea of '(re)converting adherents of/converts to other religions to Hinduism' (making them *shuddha*, 'pure') is not accepted by some strata and orders within Hinduism [8].

1.4 The Role of Productive Technology

An important analysis of the contribution of productive technology to the spread of Hindu values and the caste system is by N.K. Bose, whose perspective on tribal communities is usually called the 'civilizational approach' (Chaudhury, 2007; Sinha, forthcoming). Bose thought that tribes in India had always been part of the larger civilization. In grasping the nature of interaction in Indian society, Bose (1975) said, one can discern two ideal types: 'tribal organisation' and 'Hindu organisation'.

These two models of social organisation differ in many respects, in particular in terms of their technology of production. Tribal technology is believed to be inferior; it is thought that it cannot lead to increased production and surplus. Not only is this system able to support a restricted population, but also, tribal communities often pass through periods of hunger and deprivation, which force out-migration. By contrast, the caste system has a superior technological apparatus and a system of occupational specialisation and inter-dependence. As said earlier, castes are primarily associated with the agricultural mode of production. As a consequence, the caste system of social and economic organisation is said to be able to withstand instances, sometimes repeated, of crop failure and other natural calamities that may mar optimum productivity in a particular year (Bose, 1975). Some caste communities have also developed communal institutions (such as granaries), to which each village household contributes its share, and which take care of the lean productive years and provide assistance to poor people during life cycle occasions and ceremonial functions. In contrast, in this view, once tribes have enough to survive for a while, they slacken their productive activities. While caste society is considered to be surplus producing, tribes are essentially subsistence economies, in which whatever is produced is for the purpose of

consumption. From this, we may infer that if a caste society is 'future-oriented', a tribe is rooted in its 'present'. Against this background, whenever the tribes had difficult economic periods, they entered the portals of caste society, taking up an occupation and supplying its product to non-tribal groups, thus entering into what has been called in north India, the *jajmanī* system (the system of patron-client relations). If it was impossible for them to take up a specialised occupation, because they were largely unskilled, they were always able to become agricultural labourers in order to enter the system more or less permanently.

To illustrate this process, let us take the example of the Juangs of Orissa in the mid-twentieth century. The Juangs were a community of shifting cultivators. One of their groups in Dhankanel district of Orissa entered a caste village as basket-makers; another group took up occupations as agriculturalists in Pal Lahara, a small town in Angul district of Orissa. Basket-making was ranked low in the caste hierarchy of occupations, so obviously a person taking it up would also be lowly placed. Moreover, the Juang basket-makers continued with their traditional ('tribal') practices, such as non-observance of the norms of purity and pollution, offering liquor to their deities, and eating habits that challenged the sensitivity of Hindus. The outcome of the occupation they chose and the style of life with which they continued was that they were placed low in the caste hierarchy. In contrast, the Juangs of Pal Lahara took up a different occupation and reformed their habits. Firstly, agriculture is placed high among occupations, and is 'caste-free', so taking it up does not reduce the status of a group.[9] Secondly, the Juangs punctiliously began observing the Hindu practices of purity and defilement, stopped worshipping their liquor and meat-demanding deities, and broke their ties (particularly matrimonial) with those Juangs who persisted with their traditional habits. The agricultural Juangs were sensitive to the upper caste Hindu lifestyle and as a result were also able to establish matrimonial relations with other 'clean' Hindu castes, such as that of the oilmen.

This example demonstrates well how splinter groups from the same tribe, equally placed before they entered the caste system, became part of two differently ranked castes (*jāti*s). The advent of the caste system in egalitarian communities (like the tribal communities) creates hierarchy; people come to be unequally placed depending upon the occupation they adopt. However, notwithstanding the unfortunate consequences of social inequality, these tribespeople had no option but to choose the path of 'caste-isation', i.e. 'becoming a caste themselves', because it offered them economic security and an opportunity to attain specialisation in an occupation. Inequality, in their view, was a lesser evil than

the precarious existence they had led in their previous environment; their habitat had plenty to offer, but their technology lacked the efficacy to use the required resources (Patnaik 2002, 2005). Damocles' sword hung over their heads and the only alternative they perceived was to become part of the caste economy by becoming a *jâti*.

Religious Affiliation of Tribal Groups

The roots of cultural hybridisation may be traced to the world of tribal communities. In addition, a third mode of interaction between tribal people and the wider society is demonstrated by the ways in which people are categorised or choose to identify themselves for census purposes. The tribes had been assimilating borrowings from Hinduism into their own cultural system from time immemorial without being concerned about nomenclature. It did not occur to them that they might be called Hindu after they adopted certain Hindu deities and practices and they were not concerned about the political implications of these borrowings. However, the cultural hybrids were fractured when the 'typologisation' of Indian society began with the advent of censuses and compendia-preparing activities. These assailed the mixed-up compositeness of people in search of 'pure categories' – one could either be 'caste' or 'tribe', 'Hindu' or 'animist'. Census documentation was all about 'bounded types'; whereas social life defied such boundary drawing.

Tribes that had more Hindu traits and any who called themselves so were categorised as 'Hindu'. It is quite likely that tribes without a name for their indigenous religion called themselves Hindu, since it was the easiest category with which they could identify, and also, it was considered to be respectful. At the time of the Census of India, 1931, it was decided that when tribespersons opted for other religions, they ceased to be tribal. Instead, they were identified by the religious category into which they had opted to be included. Thus, in the context of Rajasthan, the Bhil were classified into Christian, Hindu, Jain, Muslim or Tribal. Similarly, the Garasia and Mina were categorised into Hindu, Muslim or Tribal. In 1931, 70 per cent of the Bhil were returned as Hindu, as against 19 per cent in the 1921 Census. In all three groups – Bhil, Garasia, and Mina – the size of the 'tribal population' fell substantially, since a large number of members of these groups apparently embraced other religions. For example, the population of 'tribal' Mina returned in the 1931 Census was 3.35 per cent and the proportion of Bhil and Garasia who were denoted 'tribal' fell to 23.62 per cent and 24.10 per cent respectively. An unanticipated consequence of this typologising was therefore an increase in the population of Hindus.

In addition, as a consequence of this taxonomisation, Hinduism became much more diverse, including virtually every conceivable mode of worship and reverence. However, it should not be surmised that all tribal communities accepted the title 'Hindu' unequivocally. The Census officials thought that the assimilation of tribes into Hinduism amounted to their becoming 'non-tribal'. Little did they realise that peoples' identity as 'tribal' would continue even after they had embraced some other religion. Many tribes have expressed dissatisfaction with the label 'Hindu'; and many have tried to revive what they think is their 'pristine' religion. We shall return to this later. In practice, therefore, official 'de-tribalisation' does not imply the cessation of a groups' 'tribal identity'. Nor does it imply that tribes will continue unchanged, which is a denial of the continuousness of change. Needless to say, all societies – irrespective of the characteristics of their social organisation – undergo processes of change, although the magnitude and intensity of such changes vary.

We do not have complete information about the religious affiliations of tribal communities. Moreover, recent information on this aspect is not available. The census booklets generally include information on various social indices (such as rural-urban distribution, literacy, occupational structure, sex ratio, health profile, disability, etc), but not on tribal groups' religious or sectarian allegiance. Almost 100 per cent of respondents to the Census of India, 2001, gave a religious affiliation (only 0.1 per cent, 727,588 individuals, did not state their religion). Of those who stated their religion, 80.5 per cent were Hindu, 13.4 per cent were Muslim, 2.3 per cent were Christian, 1.9 per cent were Sikh, 0.8 per cent were Buddhist, 0.4 per cent were Jain and 0.6 per cent were Other Religions, which includes the 'tribal religions and faiths'.

In many tribes, particularly the larger ones, different sections follow different religions; thus, for example, over half the Oraon are Hindu (58.43 per cent of the total population) and a fifth are Christian (21.05 per cent), with a minuscule proportion (around 0.04 per cent) following Islam, Sikhism or Buddhism. There also appears to have been a significant revival of their traditional religion: the Census of India, 1981, recorded 15.50 per cent under the category of 'other religions', roughly equivalent to indigenous religion. Between 1971 and 1981, therefore, the proportion of Hindu Oraons declined from 61.63 per cent to 58.43 per cent, while that of people following 'other religions' increased marginally from 14.58 to 15.50 per cent. Similarly, in the case of Asur of Jharkhand, Hinduism appears to be on the decline: an analysis of the 1961-1981 Census returns shows that in 1961, 71.18 per cent of the Asur followed Hinduism; in 1971, the

proportion had declined to 68.00 per cent and in 1981, it had declined further to 48.05 per cent. The number of Asur subscribing to their own religion, included under the rubric of 'Other Religions', increased from 18.39 to 30.98 per cent over the same period (Singh, 1994, p. 73). Of course, interpretation of these trends is complex: the rate of natural increase may differ between different religious communities, and self-identified religion does not necessarily reflect conviction or conversion – as noted above, it may change with social and political circumstances.

An additional important source of information on the religious affiliation of tribal groups is a major survey of the peoples of India undertaken under the stewardship of late K. Suresh Singh, the director-general of the Anthropological Survey of India in the 1980s. This survey, which has yielded dozens of volumes and atlases, was able to identify and locate 4,635 communities in India, of which 461 were tribal. It found that tribes have generally remained outside the all-India four-fold caste system derived from the Hindu religious texts, for which the term used is *varna* (or *chaturvarna*) (Singh, 1994). About 31.6 per cent of tribes were found to be aware of the *varna* system and 16.7 per cent placed themselves within it: nearly 8.3 per cent claimed to be Kshatriya; 7.5 per cent thought that they were Shudra; and 0.9 per cent placed themselves in the high caste *varna* of Brahmin. Gaddi Brahmin, Pangwal Brahmin, Kagati, and some among the Jaunsari claimed to be Brahmin. The Pardhan (of Madhya Pradesh) called themselves Vaishya. The People of India project, as this survey was termed, found 171 tribes (26.9 per cent) that thought they were of a high status; 298 (46.9 per cent) that perceived themselves as being in a middle position; and 161 (25.3 per cent) that saw themselves as being of low status. These self-perceptions were however not uncontested.

Some tribes follow only one religion. However, in many there are followers of more than one religion, such as Hinduism and tribal religion (90 tribes, 21 per cent), Christianity and tribal religion (55 tribes, 13 per cent), or, more commonly, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. The survey was able to discern the following three trends, which are still continuing:

1. Christianity had spread remarkably among the tribes of north-east India, namely in Manipur (94.55 per cent of all tribespeople), Nagaland (93.09 per cent), Mizoram (88.46 per cent), and Meghalaya (66.32 per cent). There had also been a rise in the number of tribal followers of Christianity in Bihar (11.87 per cent), Kerala (5.62 per cent), and Tripura (3.95 per cent).

2.   There had been a revival of the traditional (or 'indigenous') religion of tribes. This was most significantly manifest in Arunachal Pradesh (66.03 per cent of all tribespeople), where a religion named Donyi Polo was on the rise. Consequently, there had been a decline in the Hindu population in Arunachal Pradesh. In Meghalaya, 25.75 per cent of tribespeople were listed as following their own religion. Similarly in Bihar, tribes were returning to what they call the 'pristine religion', the 'cult of the sacred grove' (*sarna*, *jahera*). Madhya Pradesh is a witness to the revival and consolidation of Gondi Dharma. Similar trends were surfacing in other parts of tribal India.

3.   The spread of Hinduism in the tribal world follows two processes: first, at the local level, it exists alongside the folk religion, and a sort of blending between the two obtains; and second, a scriptural form of more puritan Hinduism is diffused by religious institutions. In the first process, as discussed above, the two different religious streams come into natural contact and negotiate their similarities and differences, charting out a course of mutual coexistence. The second process, in contrast, is a concerted effort to spread the values and lifestyles of a religion. Some Hindu organisations are entering tribal areas to spread their faith with an explicit intent of counteracting the impact of Christianity.

The Scheduled Tribes[10] are mainly followers of Hinduism; almost 88 per cent of their population is Hindu. However, in some states of India, Hindu tribals are an even larger proportion. For instance, according to the Census of India, 2001, in Gujarat 97.8 per cent of tribals profess Hinduism, 1.7 per cent are Christians and 0.2 per cent are Muslim. In addition, there are 2,166 Jains, 390 Sikhs, 231 Buddhists, and 11, 678 tribespersons belonging to Other Religions and Persuasions.

2. Tribal Groups and the Attractiveness of Hinduism

Which tribal communities have been most favourable to Hindu beliefs and practices? The obvious answer is that tribes living in areas contiguous with Hindu settlements and those having economic and social relations with Hindus have been most prone to the Hindu influence. Hunting and food-gathering communities, which lead a nomadic existence, have largely been detached from Hindu communities. But once they settle down, take up cultivation, and there are Hindu communities in their neighbourhood, then the chances of them adopting Hindu customs and practices increase manifold.

One may here obtain insights from a classification of tribes that L.M. Shrikant offered (see Naik, 1968, p. 97). According to him, Indian tribes may be divided

into four categories: the isolated, the semi-acculturated, the acculturated, and the assimilated. Although each of these categories may appear to be distinct, and examples of each may be found, the truth is that they are all placed on a continuum. Isolated communities become semi-acculturated over time when they come in contact with the outside world. Intense contacts culminate in the assimilation of communities with the exterior world, which may constitute the 'mainstream' of that society. Since in most cases the outside world happens to be the 'world of caste Hindus', this continuum provides a basis for analysing the process of Hinduisation of tribal communities. Isolated communities may be the least Hinduised, whilst the assimilated may be almost indistinguishable from their Hindu neighbours. A number of examples of assimilation processes are given in the following sub-sections, and its selection is made because of the availability of research material and the author's own knowledge.

2.1 Case of Pastoral Nomads

Some tribal people are pastoral nomads. Such communities are not isolated: they need caste communities of agriculturalists and traders for selling their merchandise. Today, as in the past, milk, animal droppings, and animals for traction purposes are sold to peasants; wool is sold to merchants; and animals for meat are sold to the caste of butchers. Even before India's independence, some of the payments that the pastoral tribes received, especially from the wool and animal merchants, were in the form of money. Since these communities were constantly travelling with their animals, passing through areas that had robbers and other antisocial elements, they used to deposit their money with merchants (*bania*) in the villages, fearing its extortion during their travels.[11] Entries of such deposits are found in the 'account books' (*bahi*) that merchant castes maintain. These relations between pastoral and merchant communities continue till today, although some pastoralists have now started using formal banking facilities.[12]

In other words, the economic exchanges of pastoral people require the presence of other communities, which in this context happen to be castes. Pastoral nomads, therefore, might be expected to be far more positively inclined towards Hindu values and ways of life than foragers. For example, the People of India project found that all the tribal communities were non-vegetarian, except for the three pastoral people, *viz*. the Toda, Bharward, and Rabari.[13] It is quite likely that the vegetarian habits of the Bharwad and Rabari are an outcome of their long-term interaction with twice-born castes, which are strictly vegetarian. The Raika-Rabari, who unlike their brethren in Gujarat are not included in the list of Scheduled

Tribes in Rajasthan, attribute their vegetarianism to their relations with the Jain and Bishnoi, with whom they have had enduring economic relations (Srivastava, 1997). Barring the ritual occasions of bloody sacrifice that their Rajput patrons sometimes performed, in which the Raika-Rabari were known to have partaken the 'transvalued food (*prasâd*) of meat', I never heard of any member of this community consuming non-vegetarian food.

With the coming of double or triple cropping, relations between the pastoralists and peasants have become strained. When pastoral communities move out with their animals on grazing expeditions, the fields are in the process of being prepared for the next crop rather than remaining fallow. Often, the peasants forcibly drive the animal breeders out of their fields or even nearby areas. Sometimes the conflicts between pastoralists and peasants involve bloodshed. The synergism that once obtained between the peasants and animal keepers have broken down, which has adversely affected the well-being of pastoral communities.

2.2 The World of the Kota

The Nilgiri Hills in Tamil Nadu are well known for being home to four communities, *viz.* Toda, Badaga, Kurumba, and Kota, which have symbiotic relationships with each other, reminding one of the *jajmani* ties that characterise the caste system. Each specialises in a different occupation and exchanges its respective products: the Toda are pastoralists, the Badaga cultivators, the Kurumba sorcerers, and the Kota artisans and musicians. Mandelbaum (1955, 1962) described this system as patterned after the Hindu model of social organisation. One of the myths that the dwellers of this region share is that the Toda, Kurumba, and Kota are brothers and were the earliest inhabitants of the Nilgiri Hills. The Badaga, who have yet to be listed as a Scheduled Tribe, are believed to come from outside (from Mysore) but were allowed to settle in the Nilgiri Hills with the permission of the ancient inhabitants primarily because they happened to have agricultural expertise (Mandelbaum, 1962, p. 601).

Numbering about two thousand individuals, distributed in seven villages (Wolf, 2005, p. 1), the Kota offer a good example of a community that vacillates between "tribal and *jati* [Hindu] modes of behaviour". Mandelbaum (1962, p. 600) discusses the case of funeral ceremonies in which many buffaloes used to be sacrificed "to speed the departed soul". With the growth of Hindu influence, however, such funeral sacrifices came to be denounced. The 1930s were very stressful for the Kota: their population decimated as a result of a lice-borne disease, leaving them without ritual specialists to perform ceremonies in the traditional fashion.

This devastating event was interpreted as evidence that the Kota had committed "something terribly wrong" and that is why, it was thought, they were receiving a supernatural punishment. Wolf (2005, p. 33) writes that in the last decades of the twentieth century, partly in response to this event and partly to improve their status in relation to their Hindu and other 'tribal' and non-tribal neighbours, a movement with dual aims emerged. This aimed to 'purify' as well as 'modernise' their ways of life. The model for purification came from Sanskritic Hinduism and that for modernisation from western impact, of which the educated Kota were aware.

Thus, slaughtering of bovines on funeral occasions was stopped; the norms of purity and pollution were to be strictly adhered to; and the male style of wearing long hair was to be stopped. Mandelbaum (1962, p. 600) describes the system of which the Kota were a part as one in "isolation from the centres and carriers of Indian civilization" - they had no scriptural knowledge to bolster their claim to a higher status, and no Brahmins and Kshatriya to legitimise it. With the advent of the British in the Nilgiri Hills in the early twentieth-century, things started changing and the Kota (like the other communities with whom they had relations of exchange) came into contact with the plains' people. The gradual outcome of this was that they started accepting Hindu practices, mainly to increase their status, but also to appeal to a 'superior religious system' for help and intervention in times of distress. The Census of India, 1981, recorded that all the Kota were followers of Hinduism, although they continued to worship their own deities (such as Kambatrayar and Kambatesvari) as well. These changes increased their social rank rather than affecting their livelihood patterns and well-being.

2.3 Stratification among Tribes: Tilt towards Warrior Caste

It is wrong to say that tribes in India were generally non-stratified. Undoubtedly, some were, especially the small communities of hunters and food-gatherers, although even these were not egalitarian. Thus in my view, the application of the idea of 'primitive communism' to tribal communities is wrong, for they were differentiated and had an unequal distribution of privileges and prestige among their members. Indeed, some large tribes had a well-pronounced system of social stratification. One of the examples that instantly comes to mind is of the Raj Gond, who are distributed in various parts of the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra.

The Raj Gond constituted the erstwhile ruling segment of the tribe of Gond; the prefix 'Raj' signifies their association with the Gond kingdom. Sinha (1962) writes

that there were Raj Gond kingdoms in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but their kings (*raja*) did not alter the tribal character of their people. In the course of time, these kings became a 'dominant caste' in the villages of Andhra Pradesh. One of their villages that Dube (1955) studied was Dewara (in Adilabad district in Andhra Pradesh), where all castes acknowledged the supremacy and leadership of the Raj Gond in village affairs. The Raj Gond were dominant in spite of the fact that they sacrificed cows and ate beef, practices that would normally place one at the lowest level of defilement. All the castes but two (Brahmins and some weavers) accepted water from them; and all the lower castes accepted food from them. The Raj Gond claimed the status of a warrior caste (the Kshatriya); they also reposed faith in the worship of their clan-goddesses, as was common with the Rajput princes. Like the other twice-born castes, they wore the sacred thread.

Many reasons account for the high status of the Raj Gond in the twentieth century. First, they had control over economic resources, because of which they wielded strong political power. Second, the other castes were immigrants into their area, and therefore, had to accept their pre-eminence. The castes were dependent upon them, both economically and socially. Finally, the district in Andhra Pradesh they inhabited was under the dominion of the Nizam of Hyderabad, the Muslim prince, who always sided with tribespersons in any conflicts with Hindu caste folks. When Dube did his fieldwork in Dewara, the princely rule had been deposed, but the new government had not taken full effect, with the consequence that the ascendancy of Raj Gond continued. These factors collectively buttressed the status of Raj Gond, despite the practices that the upper caste Hindu found highly abominable. The implication of this was that the Raj Gond continued to enjoy a high status but were not incorporated into the Hindu hierarchical model.

Let us take up another example to show that the segments of tribes with control over economic and political resources often claimed the status of Kshatriya, for it linked them with the 'wielders of temporal power' in the Hindu hierarchy. Fürer-Haimendorf (1945), in his study of the Hill Reddi of Andhra Pradesh, showed that the British masters had appointed the Reddi chieftains as 'headmen', giving them the responsibility for collecting revenue from different households. For their services, they were paid and, in addition, had more opportunities to develop contacts with the outside world than their co-tribesmen. As a result, they added plough cultivation to their traditional method of agriculture (shifting cultivation) and became wealthier. In course of time, they took their religious mentors from the community of Lingayats (whose religion is called Virashaivism).[14] Once the

Hill Reddi started observing the Lingayat ways of life, their status automatically went up in the eyes of caste persons. Fürer-Haimendorf (1945) gives the example of a Reddi headman who went to the extent of declaring that he was not a tribesman at all, asserting instead that he was a 'Raj Reddi' of Kshatriya lineage. The tribal communities that used Hindu caste names during pre-independence times stopped doing so after independence when they realised that they would be able to get benefits from the policy of compensatory discrimination by remaining within their traditional categories. Thus, assertion of tribal identity became a common feature of their movements.

The Bhil

The Bhil are the second largest tribe in India after the Gond. Spread over a large part of   western India, concentrated in southern Rajasthan, western Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and northern Maharashtra; the Bhil number (according to the Census of India 2001) 12,68,3753 individuals.[15] The history (and ethno-history) of the Bhil goes back to sixth century AD. They are mentioned in Sanskrit and Hindi literature; for example, the reference to them in Tulsidas's *Ramacharit Manas* is well known. In fact, in the mid-1940s, the Bhil expressed a rather poorly articulated desire for a separate state, although this demand soon died out.

Tod's (1829, 1832) research into the antiquity of Rajasthan showed that the Bhil were the indigenous inhabitants of the Aravalli mountainous range where they are largely distributed today. They were also rulers in certain parts of Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh, before the arrival of the Rajputs. This led to a series of conflicts between the Bhil and the invaders, culminating in some compromises and truces. The Bhil lent support to the Rajput princes, as is clear from the relations they had with Maharana Rana Pratap,[16] acting as their allies in various wars. In reciprocation, the Rajput from time to time heartily acknowledged the help they received from the Bhil, as is clear from the emblem of the state of Mewar, which has the figure of a Bhil chief on one side and that of Rana Pratap on the other. The Rajputs also arbitrated in disputes between different sections of the Bhil, or for that matter, any other tribal society, and resolved conflicts between different tribes (Deliege, 1985). Further, the Bhil played a significant role in the coronation of many Rajput princes – for example, there is an account of the forehead of a prince being marked with blood taken from the thumb of a Bhil chief (Nath, 1960).

It may be conjectured that before they came into confrontational contact with Rajput princes, the Bhil had their own religious practices, for which anthropologists conveniently use the term 'animism'. But once their contact with the Rajput was established, with the passage of time, they became almost fully Hinduised. The outcome of this was that the Census of India, 1971, recorded all of them as being Hindu. It was the Census, 1981 that showed a marginal decline in the percentage of Hindus among them (to 99.82 per cent), with 0.14 per cent reporting that they had embraced Christianity, and the rest Buddhism, Islam, Sikhism or Jainism.

Although the Bhil were classified as Hindu and also called themselves Hindu, they have always been concerned to improve their ritual status in the eyes of upper caste Hindus. In the beginning, as Tod (1829, 1832) wrote, the Rajput accepted food from Bhil of pure aboriginal descent and also those who were called Ujale Bhil ('pure/clean Bhil'). However, when an orthodox variety of Hinduism spread, which insisted on the purity and pollution complex and demanded strict adherence to the accepted codes of conduct, the position of the Bhil started deteriorating. Many of the Bhil communities continued to be a little indifferent and leisurely towards the mores of hygiene, which Hindus strongly detested.[17] It was against this backdrop that during pre-independence times, a movement for religious reformation called the 'Bhagat faith' arose, combining the tenets of the Vishnu and Shiva worshipping cults (Mann, 1983).The underlying aim of the Bhagat movement is to purify the Bhil and bring them at par with the upper caste Hindus. The Bhil have also imbibed the teachings of the gurus (both of the national and the local level) of the Bhakti movement (such as Kabir, Govindgiri and Gulia Maharaj) and have produced their own genre of *bhagat*s (followers of the Bhagat movement), such as Losodia and Mavji. The collective contribution of these movements has been the instillation of values of restraint, cleanliness, vegetarianism, non-violence and non-harming attitudes, abstinence from offerings of liquor and sacrifices to gods and goddesses, and strict observance of the norms of purity and defilement (Mann and Mann, 1989).

One of the implications of the Bhagat and Bhakti movements amongst the Bhil is a division of their community into *bhagat*s and non-*bhagat*s (followers and non-followers). The protagonists of the movement want the *bhagat*s (i.e. their followers) to remain endogamous, break ties of commensality and connubiality with non-followers, and resolutely follow their newly-acquired lifestyle, insisting on its superiority. However, in practice this has not really happened. The two groups of followers and non-followers continue to intermarry and think of themselves as one community.

The Bhil case demonstrates almost universal assimilation into the Hindu fold, beginning with the establishment of relations with the Rajput princes. Gradually, their animistic traits were weeded out, and they became fully Hinduised. When a religious movement commenced among them, it was not to revitalise their 'long-lost religion', as has happened in many other tribal communities, but to spread the values of purity that upper caste Hindus are expected to follow amongst different ranks within their community. The aim was to make the Bhil 'purer' and more ascetic Hindus rather than return to an original or create a different religion. Although most of the Bhil became religiously assimilated into Hinduism, a miniscule number switched over to other religions, such as Christianity or Islam.

The Case of the Naikda, Nayaka, Naikpod or Nayak [18]

The Naikda or Nayaka believe that there came a time when an acute shortage of Brahmin priests occurred. At that time, their forefathers were entrusted with the task of performing ritual oblations (*yajna*) before Rama, the epic-hero of *Ramayana*, who had departed to the forest for fourteen years. Nayaka ethno-history presents them as ritual practitioners, thus justifying their inclusion in the category of Hindus. About 99.96 per cent of Nayaka are listed as Hindu; 0.01 per cent as Muslim; 0.01 as Christian; and 0.02 as Jain.[19] Their chief deity is Brahmadev. Brahmin priests officiate at their marriages, while priests (called *bhuva*) from their community conduct death rites for their clients. Some local Muslim saints have also influenced them (Singh 1984: p 922).

The Nayaka of Gujarat are cultivators; some also work as agricultural labourers, carpenters or in the timber industry. In contrast, the traditional occupation of the Nayaka of Maharashtra, who also call themselves Katkari, was to collect the hides of dead animals; some Nayaka families still continue with this occupation. Among them also 98.07 per cent are Hindu but, as is the pattern in other communities, they have their own set of deities, such as Narayan, Bhawani, Kalika, and Mahalakshmi. In addition, they revere the tiger, which is regarded as a village deity and worshipped before solemnising any wedding (Singh 1994, p. 923).

Another community bearing closely a similar name is the Naikpod, who dwell in the districts of Nanded and Yeotmal in Maharashtra. They trace their origin to Bhima and his consort, Hidamba, the legendary character from the epic Mahabharata, which also accounts for their adherence to Hinduism. The Nayak of Andhra Pradesh also trace their ancestry to Bhima. The community of Nayaka is also found in Karnataka. Working as agricultural labourers, they have been

reported to be 100 per cent Hindu. In spite of their lower status, they receive the services of Brahmin priests during marriages (Singh 1994, p. 925).

This section shows that some communities, like the ones listed here, trace their mythical lineage to Hindu epic heroes, thereby linking their 'little' tradition to the 'great' tradition. They explain their deities as 'incarnations' of the gods and goddesses of all-India Hinduism, also known as Sanskritic Hinduism. In this way, different traditions and communities are integrated into a whole.

The Mina

Like the case of tribes in the earlier sections, the Mina, of whom 99.76 per cent are Hindu, trace their descent to one of the incarnations of Vishnu, when he reportedly took the form of a fish (*mina*) to rescue the earth.[20] One of the important rituals the Mina perform is Meenesh Jayanti, the aim of which is to revere Vishnu. The anatomy of the ritual is derived from Matasya Purana, an Indological text (Singh, 1994, pp. 773-778).

Constituting the largest tribe in Rajasthan, at one time, the Mina owned their own small kingdoms, but during the nineteenth century they had to surrender to the Rajput invaders. The Mina are today divided into several sections, the most important of which are the Zamindar and Chowkidar Mina. The former are agriculturalists and pastoralists. Also called Badagaon Mina, they were the first to accept the rule of the Rajput. In reciprocation, the rulers gave them land and villages in which to settle down. In addition, members of this group were also appointed to positions of trust and responsibility. As was the case with the Bhil, the Mina played an important role in the coronation ceremony of the Rajput chiefs: the Mina chief used to put a mark (*tilak*) with blood from his thumb on the forehead of the new chief. They also looked after the treasure trove of the Rajput kingdoms.

Those Mina who did not surrender to the Rajput princes and kept on waging warfare against them came to be known as Chowkidar Mina. Because of their unremittingly defiant attitude, the British labelled them a 'Criminal Tribe'. The Zamindar Mina place themselves above this group; at one time, they did not share matrimonial alliances, but now these have been established. One of the reasons for this unity is that today the Mina think of themselves as one group, with the result that even those Mina who were in the past placed at the bottom of the hierarchy have been assimilated into the main group. This unity, they believe, is essential against the background of the politics of reservation, which

encourages sub-groups to include themselves under the generic name of a community, so that their demographic strength enables them to exercise political pressure on the local government in pursuit of its interests.

In some respects, the Bhil and Mina had similar relationships with the Rajput princes, but they differed in terms of their respective statuses. The ethnographic studies point out that the Hindu castes relegate the communities of the Bhil, Garasia, Damor, and Sahariya to a lower status, which is not the case with the Mina. In fact, the Mina place themselves in a stratum equal to the Rajput, Jat, Thakur, Mahajan, and Gujar in their area and in some areas, commensality with these communities is not forbidden.

As is common with other tribal communities, the Mina have their own repository of gods and goddesses, in addition to sharing the pantheon of Sanskritic Hinduism. They also have their own medicine men (*siyana*), who are not only herbalists but also cure afflictions divined to be supernaturally caused. One of their past practices was the raising of memorials to honour their dead. Notwithstanding the continuity of some of their traditional practices, they have adopted and assimilated upper caste Hindu values and practices (Sanskritic Hinduism). Their voluntary associations – namely Akhil Bharatiya Mina Kshatriya Mahasabha and Rajasthan Mina Sudhar Samiti – have played a remarkable role in their transformation, both economic and social.[21] These associations, founded by enlightened members of the community, have been working towards ameliorating the condition of the Minas since about the 1920s, for example, the Mina Samaj Vikas Samiti was established to promote Mina interests in 1924 (Singh, 1994, p.776). In addition, the activities of these associations have made the Mina more aware of their collective identity (Sharma, 2009).

3. Distancing from Hindu Communities and Hinduism

The tribal communities which integrated with Hindu castes guaranteed their livelihoods and survival, even in difficult times of crop failure and natural calamities. However, it should not be surmised from the cases described above that tribal communities have always been beholden to Hinduism for helping them to elevate their status and aid their interaction with Hindu communities on an equal footing.[22] Undoubtedly, the tribal communities saw many advantages in becoming part of the Hindu caste system, but they were also its critics. As Risley (1915) noted, once tribes or their sections became *jati*s, especially lower castes, they realised the traumas of inequality. Although their own systems were not egalitarian, they did not have the kind of separation, discrimination, and inequality that

accompanied the caste system. It may not be out of place to remember here Leach's (1960) characterisation of different castes as different 'species', which do not mate, and are known for their distinctiveness and uniqueness rather than their similarities.

Moreover, by becoming Hindu, the tribespersons realised that they were effacing their separate identities. They were no longer 'tribal', but a 'caste', a *jati*. They did not mind losing their 'tribal' identity if they became a higher *jati*, commanding both resources and social esteem. But if they were equated with a lower caste, discriminated against and oppressed, they certainly wanted to emerge out of that state. In addition, once the government of independent India promulgated the policy of compensatory discrimination, there was all the more reason for the 'erstwhile tribals' to remain 'tribals', since their inclusion as Hindu *jati* would disqualify them from 'tribal' status, and thus from the privileges accorded to the Scheduled Tribes. The efforts by tribal groups to distance themselves from Hinduism have, therefore, economic, social and cultural motives.

One of the examples that immediately comes to mind is of the Bhumij of West Bengal, who lived in multi-caste villages, in which they were often the 'dominant communities'. Their territories were not isolated, as is proverbially said about tribal communities. In many of the multi-caste villages they inhabited at the time of independence, they were the wealthiest inhabitants, owning about four-fifths of the land (Sinha, 1959), although this does not imply that all the Bhumij were rich, for some were landless and worked as labourers. The lifestyles of rich and poor Bhumij differed, and also the families with which they entered into matrimonial alliances, but they all shared the same 'self-view' that they were the "earliest inhabitants and present lords of their homeland'" (Mandelbaum, 1962, p. 604). This thought was one of the main planks of their unity. Although their economic and social status differed, they considered themselves to be a single community, since they shared the same origin and past history.

Living in multi-caste villages, like the other castes, they had also entered into *jajmani* ties with others, such as barbers and laundrymen. Although they required the services of Brahmin priests, they did not receive them. The reason the priests gave was that the Bhumij, though calling themselves a 'Hindu *jati*', continued with their 'tribal' habits and ways of living (such as drinking liquor, eating non-vegetarian food, their women enjoying the freedom to remarry and the dead being buried rather than cremated). However, under the influence of holy men who frequented their area, diffusing the values of Sanskritic Hinduism, well before

independence the Bhumij had started to 'reform' themselves . By the mid-1930s, they had founded an association, which they called 'Bhumij-Kshatriya', and had claimed the status of Rajput in the caste hierarchy.

However, a reversal to this 'caste affiliation' occurred in the early 1950s, when their leaders realised that the traditional Kshatriya way was no longer the best means of achieving upward social mobility. Once they were known as an 'upper Hindu caste', it was realised, they would lose the material advantages that flowed from being listed as a Scheduled Tribe. In his work on the Bhumij, Sinha (1959) provided an account of a meeting of their leaders in 1954 in which a Bhumij, who was serving as a member of the state legislative assembly, said:

"The programme for labelling our caste as Bhumij-Kshatriya should be abandoned. I know from my experience as an M.L.A. [Member of the Legislative Assembly] that if we claim to be Kshatriya, then we shall get no facilities from the Government as Adibasis [tribals]" (quoted in Mandelbaum, 1962, p. 604).

The result of this (and of other influential leaders repeating the same argument) was that the Bhumij added the term 'adivasi' to the name of their association: it became the Bhumij Adibasi Kshatriya Association. The new Bhumij political leaders were less concerned about subscribing to upper class values by 'purifying' their customs, 'modifying' their culinary practices and eating habits, or fettering their women. They were more concerned with matters of education and organising themselves for political purposes. Mobility on the 'axis of power' appealed to them more than mobility on the 'axis of status' (adopting upper caste Hindu values, moving up in the caste hierarchy) (Béteille, 1992). The Bhumij wanted to be classified as a tribe, distancing themselves from emulating the values of Sanskritic Hinduism and identifying themselves with the upper castes, and instead pushing zealously towards the path of social and economic advancement.

There are other examples of tribal communities that have distanced themselves from the Hindu model, even though they were living in the company of multi-castes, and had at one point emulated Hindu lifestyles. The case of the Santal is another example of a community developing a negative orientation towards the Hindu system. Distributed over a large area in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal, and also in the neighbouring country of Bangladesh, the Santal number 6,156,260 individuals, according to the Census of India, 2001. Traditionally, their religion was characterised by a belief in a pantheon of supernatural beings represented at the top by a supreme god known as Thakur.

There were six other major gods and a host of nature and ancestral spirits (Culshaw, 1949; Biswas, 1956). Having no idols or temples, the Santal believed that 'sacred groves' were the places of residence of the supernatural powers. It was here that prayers and sacrifices were made to placate the extra-mundane powers (Bodding, 1942).

The Santal, however, were never a secluded community. Their culture resembled that of the neighbouring Hindus. Their kinship usages were similar to the Hindus, as was their everyday behaviour. They were dependent upon Hindu midwives and on the castes with which they had ties of reciprocity. The wealthier families among them, as has been common with other tribal communities, incorporated in their culture the traits of the twice-born castes, such as abandoning beef eating and cow sacrifice, strictly imposing the norms of purity and pollution, and changing their dress and marriage customs (Orans, 1965). However, in spite of these changes, unlike the Bhumij, the Santal did not try to become a *jati.*

A rebellion against the colonial administration in 1855-7, in which they were badly defeated, left an indelible impact on them. The aim of this movement was to recover the lost land that had steadily gone to non-tribal migrants in their area. The fact that they collectively fought against the powerful outsiders inculcated among them a much stronger feeling of unity and distinctiveness. Historically also, they considered themselves as "utterly different from the Hindu" (Culshaw, 1949). This feeling that they were a distinct ethnic group was considerably reinforced after the rebel movement. Before the Census, 1951, the Santal were usually enumerated as Hindu. However, by 1951, they wanted to show their strength as having their own religion, a 'pristine' religion, which came to be known as Sarna, the 'sacred grove', believed to be the location of their tribal deities and the site of religious performances. Many Santal leaders, particularly Raghnath Murmu, on whom the title of 'esteemed guru' has been conferred, have concertedly worked towards giving a religious and ethnic identity to their community that is distinct from the Hindu.[23] As part of this movement to create an identity distinct from their Hindu neighbours, the Santal revived some of their traditional habits, for instance beef-eating (Orans, 1965).

This process of insisting on one's identity is taking place among a large number of other tribal communities. It is generally thought that these 'ethno-political and identity movements' are principally social in character, in the sense that they draw boundaries around communities, distinguishing each from the others. To put it differently, members rally around the name of the tribe, although there is

a likelihood that they continue to share certain cultural features with caste Hindus, with whom they have had long-term relations of exchange and dependence. However, in some tribal communities, the transformation is not only at the social level; it is also happening at the level of culture. Old (and worn out) cultural traits (such as eating habits, dress patterns, traditional institutions of governance, tribal deities and modes of worship) are being revived so that their identity also has cultural roots; in other words, it becomes much deeper. Interestingly, many of these tribal communities are going through anthropological texts and compendia on them produced during colonial times to develop an understanding of their cultural past, since this, it is believed, will greatly aid their revivalism.

4. Conclusion

Since they live in contiguity with caste Hindu communities, and have viable social and economic exchanges with them, many tribal groups have gradually absorbed Hindu traits and ways of living, in many cases ending up as a *jati*. Often the process of assimilation into Hindu religion and society has had mixed economic, social and cultural motives. Bose (1975) called this the 'Hindu method of tribal absorption'. Hindus have not objected to such acceptance of their cultural practices, but it is not a one-way process. One of the salient characteristics of Hinduism is its openness – it has not only absorbed different communities but also their symbols, beliefs, customs, rites and rituals, and material aspects, giving them, so to say, a 'Hindu flavour'. Tribal communities have been Hinduised from time immemorial; some of them, or their sections, have also tried to move up in the Hindu caste hierarchy, claiming the status of the warrior or merchant caste. The process of upward mobility in the caste hierarchy – or what is called Sanskritisation – closely followed the process of Hinduisation of tribespeople.

The process of adopting the Hindu idiom and way of life did not necessarily imply giving up their own complex of deities and lifestyles. In fact, these were combined without precipitating any contradictions for people, who felt that they could both be 'tribal (*adivasi*)' and 'Hindu *jati*'. In the course of time, some of the tribes gave up some of their earlier practices, for they found them to be defunct. These processes of borrowing traits, making them synchronous with the existing reality, eliminating earlier traits once these were perceived to have become incompatible with new beliefs and practices, and guiding the evolution of one's culture has been going on for centuries. Tribes have never been isolated, although they have inhabited (and some still do), relatively inaccessible and difficult areas.

From this, however, it may not be inferred that tribespeople have been uncritical of the Hindu system. When Hindu landlords, liquor vendors, and moneylenders fleeced them, usurping their land and property, exploiting their women and children, and reducing them to a state of serfdom, some tribals have desired to return to what they thought of as the 'golden period', when they were free to do what they liked and live the way they preferred, and when there was no one to ridicule their customs or destroy their culture under the pretext of reform. In addition, as government policies have evolved, some tribal groups have attempted to re-classify and re-position themselves to take advantage of government categorisation and positive discrimination. Tribal movements (including those of religious revival) need to be understood against this background.

End notes

1. See Government of India, Draft of the National Tribal Policy, July 2006.

2. For a general introduction to tribal communities in India, see Patel (1997), Verma (2002). Some people prefer to call Indian tribes 'tribes in transition', after Desai (1969).

3. Risley (1915, p. 72) observed that, when data for the Census of India, 1901, were being collected, it was found that tribes were "gradually and insensibly being transformed into castes." He found this process to be one in which large groups of people (tribals) were forced to "surrender a condition of comparative freedom" and take in exchange a system which was "burdensome", since its 'tribe-caste' status would be regarded as inferior. Moving from a tribal system to the caste system amounted to a movement from, relatively speaking, an 'egalitarian' to a 'hierarchical' system; in the process 'free' tribals became 'subservient' castes.

4. See Risley (1915: Chapter II); Carstairs (1957: Chapter VIII); Mandelbaum (1962: 576-85).

5. Contrary to popular belief in the West, Hindu deities are not "individual gods", indicating a polytheistic faith. They are, rather, the manifestation of the one god, known as Brahman. The "human" or physical representation of Brahman's aspects or attributes in the form of deities is a vehicle for the devotee to focus his or her attention, devotion or meditation on that particular aspect or attribute in a form more easily visualized and held in the mind. The many deities of Hinduism, which may be seen as reflecting different aspects of Brahman, are represented by images.

6. Fürer-Haimendorf (1982, p.316) writes about the Bondo of Orissa: "...many prayers and magical formulae are also spoken in Oriya, because the Bondo think it proper that deities and spirits should be addressed in a 'superior' language. Thus Oriya is fast becoming the ritual and not only the trade language of the Bondos."

7. For this, see Bhattacharyya (1995). It is likely that, to distinguish Christians from non-Christians (i.e. the followers of the traditional religion), a local term might have come into existence to designate the followers of the traditional religion. I learnt that among the Angami Naga, the religion of non-Christians is called *nanyü*.

8. In Hinduism, a person is Hindu by virtue of his or her birth in a Hindu family. In theory, the position one has in Hindu society is unchangeable. Therefore, the concept of conversion from one religious faith to another does not arise. However, certain sectarian groups within the fold of Hinduism have introduced the concept of "purity" (*shuddhi*), by which is meant 'bringing

home'— i.e. making people Hindu – those individuals who have renounced Hinduism by converting to other faiths. The concept of *shuddhi* is, however, alien to Hinduism as a person can be Hindu even when he or she does not believe in any divinity, or has faith in a multiplicity of gods and goddesses. The point emphasized here is that the idea and practice of conversion to Hinduism do not exist.

9. In north India, there are many proverbs according to which agriculture (*kheti*) is the best (*uttam*) occupation, followed by business, and at the bottom is placed 'serving others' (*châkrî*).

10. The tribespeople who are officially considered disadvantaged and granted special treatment through the Constitution of India are called the Scheduled Tribes. They are generally isolated from the mainstream of Indian society, as a result of which they suffer from many disadvantages. The objective behind the constitutional provisions for the Scheduled Tribes is to improve their lives and enable them to participate in the democratic and secular institutions of the country.

11. See Srivastava (2005). The pastoral nomads have been quite indebted to the caste of merchants, the Baniya. When Hardiman (1996, p. 123) spoke to three Rabari in Arambhada village in Saurashtra, they told him: 'the Vanios [Baniya] used to nurture us.' The Gujarati word [verb] they used was *nabhavu*, which means 'to keep faith in, keep alive, or nurture.'

12. When I was carrying out my fieldwork with the Raika-Rabari of Rajasthan in 1989, my friend, Hemant Kumar Verma, who happened to be posted to a rural branch of a nationalized bank in Ranibara wrote to me about the members of this pastoral-nomadic community who regularly visited his bank to deposit money. Generally, they did not withdraw the money unless they had to organize a feast. In particular, their deposits were almost completely withdrawn on the occasion of a death-cum-marriage feast (*ausar-mausar*).

13. However, the survey found that the Christian Toda were non-vegetarian (Singh, 1994, p.6).

14. Lingayats, who in many areas consider themselves superior even to Brahmins, uphold the practices of purity much more stringently than do most Hindus.

15. Their distribution in different states is as follows: Gujarat: 3,441,945; Madhya Pradesh 4,619,068; Maharashtra 1,816,792; and Rajasthan 2,805,948.

16. Maharana Rana Pratap was the ruler of Mewar (South central Rajasthan) from 1570 to 1576. He was the only Rajput (Hindu warrior caste) ruler who fought fiercely against the powerful Mughals.

17. Since the Hindu norms of purity and pollution remained unenforced in the Bhil hamlet that Carstairs (1957, p. 134) studied, the Hindu thought that the Bhil were 'untouchable'. Those Bhil who had moved to the plains acquired a low-caste status, primarily because of the lifestyle they led. However, once they reformed themselves, their position in the eyes of their Hindu neighbours went up. It is against this background that we have to understand the rise of the Bhagat and Bhakti movements among them.

18. Please note that the same community may be known by very similar names which may have different spellings.

19. These figures are given in Singh (1984, p. 922).

20. According to the Censuses, 1961 and 1971, all the Mina followed Hinduism. However, the number of Hindus among them has reduced marginally over time. The Census, 1981, recorded 99.97 per cent Hindus.

21. It may be noted that the word 'Kshatriya' is used along with Mina. It is clear that the Mina classify themselves in the *varna* category of Kshatriya.

22. This situation is different from what we find in north-east India (especially in the states of Maghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh), where Hindu communities are largely non-existent, and hence the impact of Hinduism on tribal people is negligible. Conversion of tribal communities to Christianity in north-east India has been going on from the second half of the nineteenth century, with an overwhelming impact on the lives of people. In November 1985, I was carrying out a piece of fieldwork with a group of my students in a village in the district of Kohima. We were staying in the campus of the Science College. On the day of Diwali (the 'festival of lights', 12 November 1985) we hosted a dinner for a batch of female students from the College. On this occasion, my students also thought of having some kind of a cultural programme. Our students sang film songs, mostly from Hindi movies, performing individually. When the turn of the Naga students came, they only sang hymns, and only performed collectively. The impact of Christianity on their personal life was unparalleled. When my students requested them to sing some film songs, from English movies as well, they expressed their inability to do as, they said, they did not know any. One of the Naga students said that for them, singing meant the 'singing of hymns'.

23. Raghunath Murmu (born 5 May 1905) also improvised a script for the language of Santal, called Santali. This script is called Ol Chiki.

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