

THE IMPACT AND INFLUENCE OF ISLAM AND HINDUISM ON THE VASĀVĀ BHILS RELIGION

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Abstract: This article examines the impact and influence of two major religions of India on the tribe called 'Vasāvā Bhils' of the South Gujarat in the Western part of India. Change in the life of the human being is constant and sure. However, the sudden (abrupt) change brings cultural shocks as well as shatters the belief system. However, the gradual and steady change is always desirable and it can be sustained till posterity. According to the 'greater traditions,' the Vasāvā Bhils religion is so-called "primitive" religion. Christianity and Islam have very little or negligible influence over the life of Vasāvā Bhils but the predominant Hindu religion has considered them as "lesser Hindus". The new word has been coined like "Hindu Bhils" in order to assimilate into the greater fold of the national mainstream. Some of the elite and educated have concealed their tribal identity and accepted the lifestyle of the majority. The money, media (social media) might (political power) have literally forced them to incline towards the major religion of the nation. They are branded as a culturally backward class.

Introduction

The history of humankind shows that religion is one of the deepest, innermost and intimate urges of humankind, which in one way or another way is found everywhere. The modern and systematically organized religion of the world may call the 'tribal religion' as the primitive practices of rites and rituals. In the beginning, almost all the religions did not have specific names, but through a similar process, individual "religions" gradually received particular names (Koonathan, 1999:2). Human beings are made of complex personalities. So, it is difficult to understand human beings as well as it is much harder to grasp and conceive

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her/his religion and the whole system of belief. These socio-religious practices (action) are themselves directed towards entities, the existence which is not open to observations (Mair, 1972: 210).

Religion plays a greater role in all aspects of human social life. It rouses and grants expression to the consciousness of the community in its members and while doing so, it stimulates the intention to maintain the common social life (Fuchs, 1975:12-3). The behaviour of human beings and their culture has always been changing since the very beginning of human life. A community or society cannot be fossilized like a log of wood or a stone. Every society, community and tribe has to be a living entity, which must, therefore, grow in its own way. All growth implies change. The religion of the Vasāvā Bhils cannot remain isolated or secluded from the process of change which comes through among other factors and acculturation and which inevitably leads to the process of syncretism in society.

Theoretical Backdrop

The changing Primitive religion of the Vasāvā Bhils can be studied into the realm of two major trends – Evolutionist and Functionalist. The evolutionists' school proposes the theory that Primitive religion grew out of ignorance and lack of intellectual understanding. This thought of school looks at them as bodies of incorrect (blind) beliefs and illusive practices.

Whereas the school of functionalists proposes that religion is essential to social solidarity and community feeling in society. The functionalists go further to criticize the theories proposed by the school of evolutionists and go ahead to advocate and explain that the Primitive religion is not merely fantasy or illusion. But Evans-Pritchard states the importance of analyzing primitive religious facts in relation to the whole institutional system of the society (Patel, 1999:205).

The socio-cultural and religious aspects of tribals (Adivasi means original dwellers) societies have been studied by some anthropologists as well as by sociologists.¹ These studies have been broadly classified into four different groups. As Arjun Patel elaborates, "The first group gives ethnographic details about the religion of different Adivasi groups. The second group of studies try to depict the different cultural processes among Adivasis such as assimilation, Sanskritisation, the Adivasi-caste continuum, Christianisation, cultural change, etc. Various movements such as revitalisation, Bhagats, messianic movements, etc. form a third group of studies. While a fourth group describes, relations between different Adivasi religions and their social structures. All these four groups focus on the process of cultural transactions, contacts of 'little traditions' with 'great traditions'" (ibid: 205). On

total replacement of the 'little traditions' Marriott argues here that the transmission of religious values and practices take place from one tradition to another tradition. The elements of the 'great tradition' have become part and parcel of local festivals, instead of one replacing the other, lingua franca elements to a large extent (Selvam,1999:190).

Although, the minimal impact of Hindus on the Vasāvā Bhils is from olden times but it has been aggravated from the last three decades and so on. The process of integrating the Vasāvā Bhils into Hindu religion is not at all a natural process but more through the manipulation is done in such organised and systematic manner to exploit the vulnerable group (section) for their material gain as well as to draw the political mileage (benefits) in order to create a vote bank among the tribals. The victimized community members do not even know and realise that they have become the prey of their systematic and organised mastermind (Patel, 1999: 206).

This article is based on the researcher's long association with the tribals and the extensive fieldwork done in the region of South Gujarat among the Vasāvā Bhils. The supplementary information is taken from the available various secondary data.²

The Vasāvā Bhils

Tribals by nature are peace-loving people. Since the tribals live over here moreover in the original form from the ancient time on the hilly tracks and mountains, the group lived in a cluster of huts (hamlets) scattered in the thick vast and dense forest. They made a living through fishing, hunting, food gathering and zoom cultivation. The tribal community owned the land and the forest but over the course of time, the forest became the property of the government, which led to a drastic change in their lifestyle and pattern of living.

The Vasāvās are a subsection of the largest tribe of India called Bhil, which is spread across different States, Especially Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. The traditional habitat of the Vasāvā Bhils in the region between two rivers, Tapti and Narmada (Reva), which is in the Western part of India. The majority numbers of theirs live in Narmada, Bharuch and Surat districts. ³ In olden times before settling down; they moved (in the forest) from one place to another, a nominal reciprocal influence was simultaneously exerted by them on the new group with which they came into close contact. There is evidence from oral traditions that the Bhils (including the Vasāvās) have come into contact with both Islam and Hinduism.

Christianity is a relatively new reality in the Vasāvā region, the influence of the Christian missionaries was limited in certain areas. In the late sixties (1960 onwards), real Christian activities were initiated among the Vasāvās of Jhagadia, Dediapada, Sagbara and Mangarol blocks in the form of relief and developmental activities (Food for Work). The missionaries' main activities were restricted to education, health and relief (Lobo, 2003: 316). It is not

impossible but difficult to analyze the impact of Christianity on the Vasāvā religious practices and beliefs because it has not much attracted the Vasāvās as the other groups of the tribe in the region and because the evangelical activities are still limited to certain small pockets of their society.⁴

We shall now attempt to take stock of the extent to which the Vasāvā religion has responded, reacted and accepted the elements of the Islamic and Hindu religious traditions as the neighbouring groups in a reciprocal manner. However, Hinduism has been a major religion of the country; it has made a greater influence and impact on them.

Islam

The Islamic influence on the Bhils has been bracketed by Siddiqui as, “The Tadvi Bhil is a relatively larger group inhabiting a compact area to be influenced by Islam. Their total population is roughly estimated to be around 50,000 individuals” (1979: 204). There are Vasāvās in the Sagbara and Akkalkuva areas who have accepted Islam in a considerable number.

When Mahamad Begada attacked Jaisinhdev or Pataee with his massive army, the chieftain of the princely state of Pavagad was badly defeated. The King of Rajpipala and his court were moved to a safer place on the mountain heights of Dev Hatara. For fear of being captured, some of the soldiers escaped to the interior forests and the mountainous areas to save their lives. The frightened soldiers remained in hiding in the narrow river beds, particularly on the mountain slopes, in caves and ravines *Kotar*. Having nothing to survive, they began to feed with an inferior grain *Dhan* which grew wild in the riverbeds. Since they had inferior grain (which is a normal course that could not be eaten), thenceforth they were called *Dhankha* (*Dhan* = grain + *Kha* = to eat) by the other tribes (Gujarat State Gazetteer, Bharuch District-1991:98).

Later as a result of the intermingling with the *Musalman* men (Begada’s soldiers) and the Bhil women, there originated a new race which in due course is known as ‘Tadvis’. The newly originated mixed race has been separated from the main group Bhils and formed a separate identity (Enthoven, 1920). This probably might be treated as fossils of actual relationship with Bhils. According to another explanation, the word Tadvi has been derived from *Tad* meaning ‘fission’. But some people believe that the Bhils once upon a time were residing on the bank *Tat* of the river Narmada. From this the word Tadvi might be derived and the word Tadavi eventually attained its corrupt form.

In the tribal area of Sagbara, there is an old mosque situated on the hill. The local tribals explained that there was earlier a temple standing at the site but with the conversion of the Sagbara chieftain to Islam, the temple was eventually converted into a mosque. The investigator has observed two *Durgas* near Kundiamba village (in Dediapada Taluka) and

one in Devmogra - a centre of Adivasi pilgrimage. The worship of the Holy tombs of *Pirs* (holy men) is not uncommon among the Vasāvās. Regarding the veneration of tombs by the Bhils. T. B. Naik writes: “The Bhils of Rajpipla state, they have a tomb of Baba Dev, highly venerated by them” (1956:198). The Vasāvās even give alms to fakirs (mendicants), receive their blessings and accept the amulet *Tavij* from them for being healed. The Vasāvās believe that the worshipping of the *Pirs/Dargas* (holy tombs) is helpful in recovering lost things and cattle and in curing many diseases (ibid: 198). Mirabhai from village Vandari narrates his life experience. Mirabhai had contracted leprosy. He constantly visited the holy tomb at Kimkatava. The *Aalim* (holy person or the seer) instructed him to go round the *Darga* and fully give up intoxicating drinks. One day, while attending the marriage of his friend, Mirabhai could not resist temptation and got fully drunk. His sickness aggravated and thereafter he totally abandoned visiting *Darga*. (Later he joined a local sect in order to receive healing). Likewise, there is another *Darga* - Bavagor (near Jhagadia town) where the suspected witches are treated for de-witching.

Some of the Vasāvās have established kinship relations with the Muslims by marrying their daughters especially to those Muslim men who were engaged in the occupation of running petty shops in the interior villages of the locality. One of such cases in village Vandari has been observed where a young man named Gulambhai has married a Vasāvā girl from neighbouring village Piplod, and both the families share an amicable relationship even today. The village itself has absorbed this in the social structure.

According to Pinto, during the *Ramsheela Pujan* (in 1984) the Adivasis have been communalised and instigated very tactfully by the hardcore Hindu groups against the Muslims residing in their localities (1995). They tried to project as though the Muslims are exploiters and traitors, thus they are a threat to the sovereignty of our ‘Hindu’ nation. The conflicts were first recorded in Dediapada and Sagbara of Bharuch District (now Narmada District) in 1990 as a reflection of Hindutvisation and this process was initiated in the area by a *Ramshilalapujan*. In November of the same year, some villages were marked out to pass the message to the Muslim shopkeepers for evacuating the village (Lobo, 2002:4845). The Muslim shops in the villages were looted and burnt down by the Vasāvās due to the provocation of the non-tribal exogamous forces. In the aftermath of the riots, virtually all Muslim shopkeepers moved out from their interior villages to safer places of Muslim dominated areas (Rajpipla town of Narmada district) to settle. This incident has strained the age-old relationship between the Vasāvās and the Muslims.

Hinduism

The Vasāvā Bhil tribe is surrounded by Hindu-dominant communities. The Vasāvās, who live in close contact with the Hindu community, generally believe that they are also Hindu.

“The Vasāvās of the Satpura hills like other relatively isolated Adivasi groups, are often referred to, in the documentation and common parlance, as ‘Backward Hindus’ or ‘Potential Hindus’ who need to be ‘purified’” (Hakim, 2003:275). There are two possible views: One, that Hinduism has had no impact on the tribal religion. Two, that the tribal religion is a backward form of the Hindu religion. “The so-called Aborigines who form the bulk of Scheduled Tribes and have been designated in the Censuses as animists are best described as backward Hindus” (Ghurye, G. S. 1963:20), Both the above positions indicate extreme ends.

Indeed, the influence of Hinduism on the Vasāvā religion cannot be overlooked because of intense contact with the non-tribal Hindus in recent years especially on account of the spread of education and migration. Thus, their economy, language, social patterns, food habits, religious beliefs, etc. have all been influenced by the non-tribal Hindu culture. A large number of Vasāvās from many of the interior villages have been converted to a localized form of Hinduism. Their changed affiliation to the new emerging sects might allow them to retain a few of their traditional tribal beliefs and practices.

As a result of contact, the Vasāvās have obviously borrowed religious ideas from their Hindu neighbours. Some of the elements of beliefs, customs, rituals, ceremonies, taboos and superstitions of the Hindus are very much common among the Vasāvās and so they consider themselves to be Hindus. For example, even in the interior forest village, we find a belief in ‘*Hanuman*’, a Hindu god (Naik, 1956:322-3). Having some commonalities and similarities in religious practices, they may feel that they are Hindus, yet they are different from Hindus in many ways. Venkatachar believes that though the Bhils have been in contact with Hinduism for a pretty long time, and despite their preference for Hindu gods and godlings, their outlook is essentially animistic (Ibid: 172). The Vasāvās do not label themselves as Hindus, nor do they worship even the most popular Hindu deities, nor do they hold Brahmins in any priestly reverence. Hindu Mythology has hardly been understood by them. They may only know the names of Rama, Sita, Laxmana and Shabari but are totally ignorant of the ‘*Ramayan*’, the ancient Hindu epic as well as the core value theme of Hinduism, particularly in the areas of Rajpipla State (Narmada district) and Khandesh (Ibid: 323; Hakim, 2003:276).

Earlier Contacts with Hindus

From the very old time the Vasāvā Bhils through the bazaar, weekly markets *Hat* and annual regional fairs *Melo/Jatra* came in contact with the Hindu and Muslim traders. To buy necessary and needful agricultural tools, household and edible items, which are rarely available in the villages. Some shrines and temples of Hindus are in the heartland of Vasāvās such as Surpaneshwar *Dham* (sacred place) and Hanuman temple of Gumandev

in Jhagadia block, etc. From the olden days, these are the contact points where the Vasāvā came in touch with the Hindu deities.

The forest department of Gujarat formed the Jungle co-operatives *mandali* to clear some part of the forest to sell the timber wood to the Urban merchants at this point the traders cum contractors, forest department officials and employees enter the villages so they too came in close contact with the group, at this juncture the commencement of cultural exchanges between them took place. After the independence of India, the government introduced some educational as well as social welfare schemes to the alleviation of poverty (under the development programme) among the tribals. Under these schemes government officials, employees and Gandhian social reformists visited the villages to introduce the new development programmes as well as to supervise the ongoing schemes. This has impacted and influenced some cultural contacts; this has resulted in better interaction between both of them (Patel, 1999: 208).

Early Bhakti Movements

In earlier times, a powerful reformist movement among the Bhils of north-eastern Gujarat was led by Govindgiri' in 1913 to improve their social and economic conditions. The adopting of reformed religious and social practices was seen as the solution to the problems faced by the tribal society. Govind Guru gave the Hindu sacred thread, *Janoi*, to almost seventy-five thousand Bhils from Rewakantha, who all became *Bhagat's* devotees (Naik, 1956: 323-4; Fuchs, 1965: 241-4; Hardiman, 1987: 45; Pinto, 1999: 249). Another reform movement took place under the leadership of a Bhil resident of West Khandesh named Gulia (Gulab) in the year 1938. This socio-religious movement was aimed at gaining a separate tribal identity. The religious sermons of Gulia influenced nearly fifty to seventy thousand Bhils of the region and many of them became teetotallers. The murder of the 'spirit-guided leader' Gulia *Maharaj* brought the entire movement to a grinding halt. Both these movements did not take deep root in the tribal land because they were predominantly assimilatory movements besides being highly influenced by Hinduism.

The Devi movement also failed to catch on amongst the Bhils of Rajpipla State because it was invariably focused around a single strong 'messianic figure' or spiritual leader. The Devi movement had no overall leader. The Bhils did not accept leaderless socio-religious movements because they seem to have preferred a centralized leadership and each Bhil was subject to the command of a Bhil chief (Hardiman 1987:45).

The Hindu Gurus, dedicated sadhus and the followers of Arya Samaj (sect) constantly felt threatened by the presence of Christian missionaries among the Adivasis. To oppose the welfare activities of missionaries they opened a new campaign to work in the areas where the missionaries are fairly active. Leaving their ages-old conservative traditional

living, they started going ahead to propagate non-Brahmanical simple but modified Hindu *Bhakti Marga* thoughts. Mostly they followed the missionary style to disseminate their new thoughts as well as to counteract the spread of Christianity. The Vasāvā Bhils now turned as Arya Samagists were trained by the sect leaders to perform rites and rituals in a Vedic manner by reciting selective *Sholakas* (recital verses) in Sanskrit language and explaining them in simple Vasāvi Bhili dialect. Since the Vasāvā is an independent scheduled tribe, it does not fall under the category of *varna vyavastha* caste system of the Hindu religion. They follow entirely different religious customs, rites and ritual during their cultural and social celebrations. Similar to Hinduism they have also a village priest called *Badavo/Punjaro*. The priest performs nuptial ceremonies and other sacred rites & rituals. But nowadays the educated elite and migrated Vasavas invite either Arya Samajits or Brahmin priest from the town to conduct marriage ceremony and to perform *Satya Narayan pooja* (annual household worship) during the house inauguration replacing their traditional rite performers. Here commences the process of Sanskritisation and it is further extended. It has been observed that the Brahmin priest does not accept or consume any cooked food items or drink water from the Vasavas and avoids touching any household things. The offered gifts like coconut, raw food grains and money is being carried by him. The Brahmin priest considers the group as *Shudras* or *Ati-Shudras* (the most lowest class of untouchables).

Today the Adivasi as observed by Arjun Patel, are gradually adopting the Brahminical value system — their food habits are also changing in imitation of upper-caste Hindus” (1999:210). Many Dhankha Tavavis from Nandod block under the influence of Guru Vishwanath Maharaj have become fully vegetarians and teetotallers (ibid,:210). The Vasāvā Bhil folk culture and the traditional habits and customs are changing under the influence and impact of upper-caste Hindus and Hindu Gurus. In the present time in many Vasāvā villages, one gets to see the two socially separate groups, one following upper-caste Hindu customs are called *Bhagats* (Hindu devotees) others those who follow age-old tribal customs who are called *Jagats* (worldly folk). The *Jagats* continue to offer goats, fowls, eggs and home-brewed liquor to their deities, clan godlings and ancestors on various social and cultural events and festive occasions. The *Bhagats* consider these types of offerings as profane and violent in nature, so the result is (under the command of their Guru) the group stops worshipping their tribal deities. They deliberately avoided participating in the traditional tribal rites and rituals even though conducted on the village level. With the emergence of the Bhagat, the Hindu festivals such as Ganpati (*Dudhalo Dev*), *Navratri* (nine nights dance devotion), goddess *Dashama Pooja*, etc. entered the villages. In the later section of this paper, we will focus on the Neo-Movements and sects as the promoting factors behind the same.

*Sanskritisation and Hinduisation of the Vasāvās
by Neo-Bhakti Movements and Sects*

The influence of Hinduism is seen among the Vasāvās in the form of various sects such as Ramanandi, Kabir Panthi, Bhathiji, Sanatan, Sat Keval, Nirant, Jai Gurudev, Ukaram, Moksha Margi, Swami Narayan, Asharam Bapu, Murti (Maliamba) (Lobo, 1988). A local devotee of a new sect *Panthi* is appointed as the regional overseer of *Maharaj* to perform various ritual ceremonies on behalf of the main Guru or *Bapaji Maharaj* (who are mostly non-tribals). Different Hindu sects have contributed to the Hinduisation of the Adivasis. The *Bhagat* or the *Bhakti* movement and later a host of other movements quickened the process of Hinduisation in the region (Lobo, 2002:4844). After the 1980's soon after the Ramshila Pujan, Ramjyot and Rathyatra the neo-Hindu sects *Sumpraday* and others like Hindu Jagran Manch, Hindu Milan Mandir, Swaminarayana, Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Durga Vahini, etc. They all aimed to awaken Hindu consciousness among Adivasis by hammering on their mind to convince them that they will benefit from Hinduism. One of the methods of making propaganda was telling tribal groups that 'Islam is spread through the swords (war), Christianity is spread through *Roti* (food for work programme) and only Hindu religion is spread through a right path of knowledge (*Gnan Marg*). One of the examples cited by Pinto (1995), of spreading negative thinking and in a roundabout manner to achieve their target goal of assimilating tribal sections in their fold. "During the Ramshila Pujan in 1984, a token collection of Rs. 1.25 was taken from Adivasis with the question: 'Are you Hindus? If you are, then prove it by contributing Rs. 1.25 for Ramshila Pujan. If not, then prove that you have come from a Muslim womb!'" (Patel, 1999: 219). Anti-Muslim feelings have been energetically propagated by the Hindu sects that the average literate tribal person does not stay out unaffected by its impact. The neo-Christian tribals were made frightened by conveying a threatening message that 'they will be banished from India and sent out beyond the national frontiers'".

The members of a sect *Panth* are addressed as *Bhagat* which means 'devotee'. The *Bhagats* of the Hindu sects observe strict vows (norms) in their day to day lives. They avoid eating in the house of non-*Bhagats* or those who do not belong to their sect. The *Bhagats* abandon the drinking of liquor and other intoxicants such as *Todi* and *Ganja* (smoking opium). They do not consume meat, fish, honey and eggs but rear fowls and goats in their houses. Certain peculiar *Bhagats* totally abstain from drinking water in non-*Bhagat* homes even though they are his close kith and kin. Every morning the *Bhagat* has a purificatory bath. He performs an *Aarti* of the most popular gods of the Hindu pantheon, such as Ram, Hanuman or Mahadev. One or two triangle-shaped red colour flags are hoisted on their houses. Once in a month or once in a year, the devotees visit the Guru's (*Bapaji*

Maharaj) headquarters on foot to partake in a *Satsang* (religious congregation) and *Bhajan Mandali* (the singing of religious songs in a group). On this occasion, the devotees receive *Prasadi* from the hands of the Guru with great reverence. On the village level, all the sect-members gather together as a *Bhajan Mandali* usually on full moon nights to sing *Bhajans* (religious songs) for the whole night.

During the researcher's stay in village Vadari of Dediapada block, he observed that most of the villagers joined various sects to be cured of their ailments or to free themselves from alcoholism. They believed that something might have been wrong in their lives. A holy thread (promise) *Doro* or *Gurukanthi* is tied around the neck of the patient to save him/her from the prevailing situation (maledictions). On visiting the Guru's headquarters, he performs an *Aarti* and a knotted thread is tied around the neck of the person who is thereafter considered to have converted and become a 'devotee' (*Bhagat/ Panthi*) following those norms which are followed by 'proper Hindus'.

Hinduisation Through Education and State Government Policies

Increasing importance given to education (special formal education) has had its impact on the Vasāvās who have become aware of its importance. Hence children (male and female) are admitted to the boarding schools and residential schools *Asbaram Shala* wherever such facilities are available. This means that the young Vasāvā children remain away from their homes, homelands, natural setting and culture. The elders cannot teach the young generation their traditional folklore which has traditionally helped to pass on their cultural traits to posterity. There is a big widening gap in Vasāvā society mainly between the oral tradition holders and the recipients of formal education (written tradition). The educated young generation is either totally or partially ignorant regarding the cultural traditions, practices, customs as well as folklores. Patel observes further that the Hindu *sampradayas* (sects) have started many educational and social welfare institutions there they tactfully follow a policy called 'catch them young' through this modus operandi, they have started introducing and imbibing the Hindu ideology into the community beginning with Adivasi boys and girls at an early age (1999:214).

The government has introduced the predominant culture of the high caste section of the society as a national curriculum in all the State board schools. The tribal students are exposed to such kinds of study materials automatically made to forgo their age-old cultural traditions and customs and unknowingly assimilate in order to get fully absorbed in the new alien culture. At this very juncture, the process of alienation and Sanskritisation simultaneously takes place. Unknowingly the tribals are made aware that the dwelling land of the higher caste is the land of Gods *Dev Bhumi* and the homeland of Adivasis is the land of giants *Danav Bhumi*.

Here is an interesting example of how the young Vasāvās are getting merged into the great traditions through their formal education. During the *Holi* festival last year, the investigator asked a question to a girl from Vandari village (who stays in the boarding school). ‘Why do the *Gerias* insert a peacock’s feather in their headgear *Pagadi* on the great festival of *Holi*?’ The high school girl casually answered, ‘because Shree Krishna wore a peacock feather on his headgear.’ It showed the ignorance of her own traditions. The Vasāvā children staying away from home (homeland) in boarding schools learn more about the popular pantheons rather than their tribal deities. Thus the young generation of Vasāvā Bhils will have neither the self-confidence nor the full knowledge needed to convincingly explain their own mythology because they actually know very little about it.

The State has been Hinduising the Adivasis. “In each of the decennial census, the column for religion was increasingly filled up as Hindu” (Lobo, 2002:4844). From the year 1961 onwards the Adivasi Bhils were officially renamed as ‘Hindu Bhils’ and it is even printed in the official ‘caste certificate’ *Gnatino Dakhalo* that is issued as proof of their being Scheduled Tribe (ST). “Since the 1961 Census the tribals are deliberately recorded as Hindus hence we have Hindu Bhils and so on” (Lobo, 1992,1996:26). No one is aware of the mystery behind this change of a generic term. The question that arises here is: why was the term ‘Hindu Bhil’ used instead of ‘Vasāvā Bhil’? (The census records are not reliable because those employed to take the Census often categorised them as Hindus and did not give a special indication of their identity as indigenous tribes).⁵ The government wants as Patel observes that the Vasava Bhils must be recognised as Hindus and, therefore, they enter Hindu names in the census paper as well as in the school certificates and other related documents (1999:222). The State government declares school holidays on special regional and local occasions but it is a paradox that the tribal students do not get a holiday on 9th August to celebrate World Tribal Day.

A famous member of parliament (MP) from Valia block arranged and sponsored a programme of *Akband Ramdhun* for the Vasāvā Bhils of the Narmada and Bharuch districts, where he provided free transportation as well as free-feeding *Bhandara* facilities to a good number of tribal villagers for several days. The State government has sponsored small sized multi-purpose halls for the village level social gatherings but it is mainly used for religious purposes. Various Hindu sects have intensified their activities and movements in the region by the celebrations of *Ramkaths*, festivals, *yoggyas* (fire sacrifices), walking pilgrimages to the famous shrines, multiple wedding ceremonies, renovation and construction of small temples in the villagers (Patel, 1999:114). The political party leaders (MLAs) and Hindu local traders are deliberately backing these events with financial aid in the form of a donation to Dan. Pinto (1995) observed and states, nowadays there are

temples seen in almost every village. Adivasi gods and deities are sometimes systematically replaced by Hindu idols on the village level.

In the olden times, the Vasāvā Bhils raised memorial stones or put up small wooden pieces in honour of their dead. The local tribals do not know the history of these stones; they call them *Anvath* or *Anvath Pir* (monuments for the dead) believing them to be their deities. All the common offerings are offered to the *Anvath Pirs*. In some Vasāvā villages, these stones are called *Hanman*. While travelling in the tribal areas of South Gujarat one can observe some of these memorial stones have been transformed in the smaller temples. The investigator saw a fairly large-sized stone with a well-carved image of *Hanuman* in village Kanji of Dediapada block. He was informed that a quern - maker *Salat* had carved the image of *Hanuman* on the stone seven or eight years back. It is interesting to note that Vandri village does not have a god-yard *Sthanig* of *Hanuman* thus indicating that the movement from *Anvath Pir* to *Hanuman* has not yet taken place in this relatively remote village community.

Little traditions' of Adivasis are given a go, by the 'Great traditions' of Hindus in order to absorb them into their fold. This is clearly illustrated by just one example from the Vasāvās. In the olden times, the invitation for a wedding was done by throwing *Notroo* (rice mixed with *Haldi*) at the main door of the person who would be invited. Nowadays, printed invitation cards are sent to those who are to be invited to the wedding. These invitation cards contain information about the auspicious times of *Muburt* along with pictures of Hindu gods, thus giving the impression of a Hindu wedding.

Dev Mogra is an Adivasi pilgrim centre where the tribals express their strong faith in the goddess on the proper day of the fair. The tribals from various States like Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh bring their annual offering in form of goats, fowls, eggs, home-brewed liquor, fresh vegetables and food grains to offer it at the feet of regional goddess Dev Mogra. From the last three decades, the Gujarat State government has passed a by-law of the prevention of animal and bird sacrifice at public sacred places. In recent days the Adivasis very secretly offer the animal sacrifices at an outer peripheral of the temple. It is being said that this by-law has been passed to favour the higher caste Hindus. In this place, a large number of non-tribals from the plains come for *Darshan* and to worship the *Kuldevi*, a regional deity. There is a cultural exchange of the tribals with Hindu groups but the extent to which these traits have been borrowed from outside or independently developed within the culture is tricky to determine (Hakim, 2003: 276-7).

The Vasāvā Bhils Morden Consciousness

Some of the educated Vasāvās who are mainly employed as primary school teachers and local government employees seem to be undergoing an identity crisis and they seem to

suffer from an inferiority complex because of their *Adivasi* (Vasāvā) culture. The processes of Sankritisation and Hinduisation have definitely been accelerated within this group. The

Hindutva supporters are aware of the benefits of keeping the Adivasis within the Hindu fold in order to shelter and protect Hindu hegemony. Having chosen Hinduism, the Vasāvās have indirectly recognised the supremacy of the upper caste. Thus they have completely forsaken their traditional religion. “The creamy layer among the Adivasis has been caught up in a very ambivalent position. They exclude themselves from the ordinary Adivasis and want to include themselves among Hindus or at least pass off as non-Adivasis. This creamy layer has become highly Hinduised” (Lobo, 2002:4845).

The Vasāvās have already adopted and seem to continue gradually to adopt more and more Hindu traits, but the basic character of the Vasāvā religion will take long years to change. The belief in their deities is still strong, especially in the interior villages. Though some Vasāvās have converted to Hinduism, they can return to their fold at any time as there is no restriction upon them. Till this day all rites, rituals, ceremonies, festive celebrations, rites of passage, etc. are still enthusiastically observed with the same traditional understanding and communitarian spirit in many Vasāvās interior villages. Their society never bars them from accepting newer additions and borrowings. They are free to follow the path of their choice but the community expects the individual members to preserve the essential core of their religious traditions (their tribal beliefs and practices). A special kind of Adivasi self-consciousness is now emerging. As Patel (1999) makes an observation, “there is also a feeling of growing hatred towards the Hindus, particularly towards the upper castes. They allege that the Hindus have imposed their beliefs, their faith and their culture on the Adivasis in the name of the so-called ‘mainstream’ traditions”.

The tribals contact with the neighbouring non-tribal Hindus has impacted all aspects of the Vasāvā's life – material, social, economic, linguistic and religious – but the degree of influence differs in various aspects of their life. In the past 30 years Vasāvās Bhils self-consciousness, self-respect and insistence on tribal (*Jal, Jamin, Jungle and Janvar*) rights have also shown a rising trend. But at the same time after the 90s the Adivasis have become aware of their political power (15 per cent population of Gujarat State) and all these years the tribal groups have been politically manipulated and intentionally kept backwards by the State and non-tribal leaders by repeatedly saying that ‘Adivasis lack much of the intellectual capacities’ *Aa Lokone Buddhi Natbi*.⁶

Conclusion

Nowadays one can mark the difference between the religious activities found among the Vasāvās living in the interior (forest) villages when compared to those living in the *Rasti* area (in plains) or those living in close contact with non-tribals. The belief and worship of

(gods) deities of tribal origin are still strong. The worship of nature and natural objects is still observed in many interior Vasāvā villages. Annually the community still celebrates the festivals and rites of passage which are repeated in order to maintain social solidarity, homogeneity, uniformity and to teach religious morals so as to facilitate smooth living in the society. The worship of ancestors strengthens their aspiration of wellbeing and encourages them to hold fast together as a single community. In present days the elderly folk of the villages struggle to keep the whole traditional belief system (oral tradition) alive and attempts have been made to pass it on from generation to (young) generation. The celebration of festivals and life cycles, worship of ancestors and the re-enactment of myths are three of the crucial elements in ensuring the continuity of the Vasāvā religion.

The money, media (social media) might (political power) and mind (public general thinking ethos) have literally forced them to incline towards the major religion of the nation. They are branded as a culturally backward class; it is a sheer misunderstanding to see their culture as the reflection of their backward economy. The modern education of the majority culture has so much attracted the Adivasi folks that the Hindu wave of the impact and influence is just irresistible. While in the past it was the oral way of transmitting the tradition that shaped Vasāvā Bhil religion to give it its atypical characteristics, today one can witness and perceive very opposite. In olden times as one can see how the Vasāvā religion has been able to interact and mostly influenced by the major religion like Hinduism and whereas comparatively less with Islam, without losing its own core distinct identity of the Vasāvās. But with the emergence of ultra-modern mass media, formal education, development of transportation facilities and migration to the cities for employment, there are greater opportunities as well as umpteen numbers of chances having more interaction with all the predominant religions.

Notes

1. Adivasis and Dravidians are considered to be original inhabitants (dwellers) of the country.
2. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. S. M. Michael SVD, the Director of the Indian Institute of Culture, Mumbai, who personally guided me to prepare this article.
3. The majority of the Vasava Bhil tribe population reside in the region of South Gujarat in the districts of Bharuch, Narmada and Surat (Tapi),
4. The Christian missionaries gave the Adivasis, education, material benefits and protection and helped them fight against their exploiters.
5. A majority of census officials were Hindus, and they have registered Vasava Bhils as Hindus.
6. The tribal political leaders appealed to Adivasis groups to demand their own State – ‘Bhilistan’.

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