

## Conversion, Reconversion and the State Recent Events in the Dangs

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*The events in the Dangs in the last week of December last year were a continuation of the ongoing persecution of Christians in Gujarat. The dominant section of the majority community, the regional media, many non-government organisations and the state have either joined hands against the minorities and the oppressed or have preferred to remain silent.*

### I

CHRISTIANS constitute less than 1 per cent of Gujarat's population. They are scattered throughout the state. The majority of them belong to the traditionally lower socio-economic stratum of society. Not only Christian missionaries and their institutions but poor Christians, particularly dalits and adivasis, are under attack and have been systematically harassed by Hindu fundamentalists under BJP rule. The state machinery is more or less in collusion with or indifferent to the miscreants. The Gujarat government has not only ignored the recommendations of the Minorities Commission but also questioned its need to visit the state. The prime minister has given a clean chit to the state government and said that the chief minister was not at fault and had taken action to prevent atrocities against Christians in the state. VHP leaders have openly said that the Gujarat government is carrying out their agenda. The Sangh parivar, including BJP ministers and other office-bearers, allege that 'people' in Gujarat are getting converted to Christianity, either forcibly or with all kinds of allurements. There is a conspiracy to create a Nagaland or Mizoram in Gujarat with a majority Christian population. The events in the Dangs, in the last week of December, are in continuation of the ongoing persecution of Christians. The dominant section of the majority community, the regional media, many non-government organisations and the state have either joined hands or preferred to maintain silence, against the minorities and the oppressed, as if the state and civil society have blended together.

The Dangs literally means 'forests' and is a land of tall trees, thick scab jungle and dense vegetation over some 1,764 sq km. It is the smallest district of Gujarat with a population of 1,44,091. There are 309

villages and two small towns – Ahwa, the district headquarters, and Waghai. More than 70 per cent of the villages have populations of less than 500. Ninety-four per cent of the inhabitants are adivasis. The non-adivasis have settled here during the last 50 years for business or white-collar employment. Kunbis or kukanas (40 per cent), bhils (33 per cent) and varlis (14 per cent) are the major tribal groups. Kukanas are believed to have migrated from Kokan. They are better off than the bhils. Though kukanas accept bhils as the rulers, the rivalry between the two continues in one or another form. The Dangs in general and the bhils in particular are known for their militancy. They had vigorously rebelled several times against the British administration. The bhil chiefs remained unconquered by any outside power till the mid-19th century. The British administration did not interfere in the social and economic life of the natives. The bhil chiefs were recognised as the rajas of different tracts and the Britishers took monopoly rights over timber. The Dangs was maintained as an excluded area.

For the Dangs, forest and land are commonly-shared resources. There was no personal ownership of land till independence. Shifting cultivation, hunting and collection of forest products were their sources of livelihood. They used to change their place of residence frequently for one or another reason. The British acquired lease of forests by hook or by crook from the bhil rajas in 1842. The government exploited the forest for revenue and commercial purposes. The rights of the adivasis on the use of forests had been slowly reduced. Shifting cultivation was restricted. In the process, the owners of the forests were considered as encroachers. The same policy has been continued after independence. Shifting cultivation has been banned and the rights to the use of forest products have been reduced considerably.

The Dangs is classified into three areas: reserved forest, protected forest and unclassified forest. The area under each category has not remained constant. In fact, the area under unclassified forest, which the tribals could use for cultivation, has declined over a period of time. For instance, under the Surat Circle the unclassified forests had declined from 2,218 sq km to a mere 621 sq km, whereas the area under reserved forests had increased from 2,977 sq km to 4,318 sq km between 1961 and 1971. "In the late 19th century about 66 per cent of the Dangs was classed as available for cultivation. By 1956-57 the figure had fallen to about 54 per cent. During the 1960s, the Gujarat government carried out a survey of the Dangs with the aim of giving land occupancy deeds to the cultivators. As a result of this survey, 79,913 hectares was classed as farmland, which represented 45 per cent of the total area" [Hardiman 1994]. By 1989-90 farmland had been further reduced to 61,400 hectares, that is 36 per cent of the area. Nearly 53 per cent of the area of the Dangs has been declared by the government as forest and the forest department has complete control over it. Nineteen per cent of the land is not available for cultivation [GOG 1996]. More than half is under 'reserved' forest which the local population is not only prohibited to cultivate land but from where they are also not allowed to use any forest product. In several cases (according to one report, as many as 110 villages) dwellings have been forcibly shifted from the area. According to a survey in 1968-69, from 79,409 hectares cultivated by the adivasis, the forest department acquired 21,154 hectares by using all kinds of means for forest plantation. In 1970, the government ordered transfer of 56,214 hectares for agriculture. But in reality only 15,617 hectares were allocated to 17,638 adivasi cultivators. According to official records, only 30 per cent of adivasi households have been registered as legal cultivators. Under the protected forests the department carries out plantation work, sometimes on the agricultural land of adivasis by removing their standing crops. This is being done even by violating a Gujarat High Court order of 1993. When the adivasi cultivators quote the order, the forest officers tell them to throw away the court order.<sup>1</sup> Adivasis are frequently harassed and beaten up by the forest department under one pretext or another. The terror of the forest department scares the inhabitants. Forest labour has been their

major source of livelihood. Till the mid-eighties, the forest department used to open jungle coupes for felling, logging and carting of wood. The location of the coupes was spread over the whole of the area so that practically every village had easy access to the place of work [Parikh 1961: 338]. Gandhians have organised forest labour co-operative societies (FLCS) since 1949 to eliminate timber merchants and contractors. There were 45 FLCS run by Gandhians and political leaders in the mid-eighties, providing seasonal employment to more than 5,000 persons. FLCS were hotbeds of faction-fights and corruption. A handful of local political leaders have amassed wealth and developed a vested interest in perpetuating the terror of the forest department. However, the FLCS provided slightly higher wages than the contractors [Joshi 1992]. The number of jungle coupes has declined sharply since 1986 with the new forest policy. Now only two or three coupes are opened every year for cutting dry trees. Except for plantation work, practically all forest labour has been discontinued. Consequently, the Dangis are forced to migrate outside the district for labour. It is estimated that more than 40 per cent of the Dangis migrate after monsoon for six months to work in sugar cane farms in neighbouring Surat and Valsad districts. There the conditions of work are wretched and wages are low.

The Dangis were almost illiterate on the eve of independence. There was only one school started by the British Political Agent for bhil rajas and nayaks. It had only 11 students in 1947-48. Christian missionaries began to work here in the early 19th century to spread the message of the gospel. Some efforts were made by them in the 1940s to start teaching Dangi boys. Gandhian constructive workers settled in Ahwa, the headquarters of the Dangis in 1948. They established Swaraj Ashram as the centre of their activities revolving around khadi and education. First of all they established Ashram Shala, a residential school. Later, the government of Bombay introduced the system of Ashram Shalas in 1953, following the Gandhian model which encouraged voluntary organisations with recurring and non-recurring 100 per cent grant. For Gandhians, the objectives of the Ashram Shalas were not only to teach the three R's but also to teach a 'better way of living'. According to them, tribals were 'backward' in their customs, not cleaning their teeth, not taking bath everyday, wearing only a 'langoti', i.e. loin-cloth, and believing in ghosts and many superstitions. Gandhians emphasise vegetarianism and, teetotalism and are anti-superstitious, and support

observance of certain festivals as observed by upper caste Hindus, fasting on certain days and cleanliness not only in a hygienic sense but also with an element of purity. Amritlal Thakkar, known as Thakkar Bapa, was the first to start an Ashram Shala for adivasis in the Panchmahals district. He noted in his diary in 1922, "Bhil children were admitted after bath and dressed in new clothes, putting 'chanlo' (red mark) on forehead and eating 'gor dhana' (jaggery and coriander seeds)" [Shah 1955: 148]. Such customs are usually practised by upper caste Hindus. In the early fifties there was competition between Gujarati and Maharashtrian Congress Sarvodaya workers to start Ashram Shalas as a device to create patronage networks. Later, after the formation of Gujarat with the Dangis, competition for opening Ashram Shalas intensified among the various factions of the Congress. Over a period of time these Ashram Shalas have stagnated and are in a shambles [Joshi 1980].

With state support, the Swaraj Ashram and Marathi-speaking Gandhian workers started 179 primary schools between 1949 and 1955. The primary schools run by the Gandhians and Christian missionaries with their own resources were taken over by the state. The number of primary schools had increased to 378 by the early nineties. There was only one high school in the district in 1961. In 1975 the district panchayat of the Dangis controlled by the anti-Swaraj Ashram faction invited two Jesuits to start high schools in the Dangis. The secondary schools have increased from eight in 1980 to 21 in 1990. Of them three are run by Christians; four are government schools and the rest are Ashram Shalas or schools run by various Gandhian and non-Gandhian organisations. Deep Darshan and Nava Jyot schools are run by Christian organisations. More than 90 per cent of the students (out of a total of 1,100) studying in these schools are non-Christian adivasis. These schools attract more students as their teaching is considered better than that of the others. Their performance in the Secondary School Examination (SSC) is strikingly better than that of all the other schools. On an average the Dangis had 36 per cent result in the SSC between 1988 and 1997, whereas the Deep Darshan school had 93 per cent. And that is the reason these schools are a sore point for those who have been running schools in the district for many years.

With the rise in number of secondary schools, the number of students has also increased three times during the last decade. The district now has a college also. In 1969 there were four Dangi graduates, their number is now more than 1,200.

Among the tribal talukas of Gujarat, the Dangis has the fastest growth in literacy, though the literacy rate is lower than the state average which is 61 per cent. The rate is 48 per cent as against 36 per cent among all STs in Gujarat.

At the same time, the Dangis has the highest rate of educated unemployment among all the tribal talukas and districts. A number of graduate and postgraduate Dangis are forced to earn their livelihood through manual labour in and outside the district. The district does not have many white-collar jobs. And as the Dangis are late-comers in the field of education educated persons of other adivasi groups continue to dominate. In 1970 a graduate Dangi told me, "A real test of life is to find a job. Our illiterate and ignorant relatives think that after having studied this much (a college degree) one gets employment immediately. But that is a wonder of the world! Interview calls are only a formality. We waste money for going and coming, but there is nobody to come to our rescue..." [Shah 1972]. The situation is now worse. The number of such frustrated youth has increased. Educated Dangis formed the Dangis Yuvak Seva Samiti in 1968 to get justice for the local youth. Their demand was that white-collar jobs in the district should be reserved for local Dangis. They were demanding an autonomous status for the Dangis. As unemployment among educated Dangis has increased sharply during the last two decades and as the forest resource-base has been shrinking, frustration among the youth is mounting and is getting ventilated in different forms.

Several secular NGOs working in neighbouring areas have extended their activities in the Dangis since the mid-seventies. A few local NGOs have also come up. They have taken several income-generating programmes such as milk co-operative societies, poultry, sewing, bamboo work, furniture work, etc. But none of them has so far provided viable supplementary income to a sizeable number of people. The only advantage of these NGOs is that they provide employment to a handful of educated Dangis.

Socio-economic transformation in the Dangis, thanks to overall capitalist development and particularly the forest and tribal development policies, has adversely affected the local population. As the adivasis lost their land to the forest department and experienced harassment, sporadic confrontation between the Dangis and the forest or revenue department increased. There were several struggles in the late seventies demanding the right of cultivation of the land they used to traditionally

cultivate. In 1977 a memorandum was submitted demanding: (a) resurvey of the district and allocation of land to the adivasis, (b) ownership of trees to the cultivator adivasis where the trees are located in land possessed by them, (c) closure of nurseries and plantations set up by the forest department on land cultivated by the tribals, and (d) more facilities to the Dangis for education, health and agriculture. Several demonstrations, meetings and processions were organised to press these demands. All methods – repression, intimidation and co-optation – were used to diffuse the struggles.

Once again in the mid-eighties the Dangis formed the Adivasi Bhumihiin Kisan Hakka Sanrakshan Samiti (BKSS) for asserting their rights over land and forests. Like in the seventies demonstrations, rallies, dharnas, meetings, etc, were organised. This was a more militant struggle than the earlier one and adivasis of several villages collectively had taken away 'forest' land and started cultivation, resulted in direct confrontation with the government. The government used force and removed the crops. Several adivasis were arrested. An adivasi of Mahal village said, "when we demand land they do not give and when we take land they shoot us. How do we survive?" Besides repeating the demands of 1977, the BKSS demanded that (1) all those adivasis from 110 old villages who had been forced by the forest department to evacuate, their villages should be allowed to settle in their old villages, (2) since adivasis had not been given land as per the 1970 survey, the survey of land and cultivators be carried out once again, and all those who were earlier cultivating land should be given possession of their land and all landless households be given at least five acres of land for self-cultivation, (3) adivasis should be given a reasonable price for the forest products which they collected, (4) all forest labourers should be given equal and minimum wages and free labour should be stopped, and (5) harassment by forest and other government officials should be stopped immediately.

The government did not heed the demands. Instead, the leaders of the Samiti and other adivasis were beaten up severely and arrested. A few activists were killed in police firing. The main leaders were arrested under TADA and all measures were used to crush the movement. Though the organised struggle under the leadership of the BKSS has been diffused, unrest continues. Neither the Gandhians nor the Christian missionaries working in the area extended support to these struggles; nor did they protest against the brutality of the forest and police department against the

adivasis. For the Hindu philanthropic organisations and fundamentalists, the economic problems of the adivasis were a non-issue. All of them looked upon the struggles of the Dangis as disruption of the peaceful life of the district.

## II

According to the 1991 Census 95 per cent of the Dangis enumerated their religion as Hindus. Sample surveys carried out by social scientists do not give a significantly different picture from the census. A few who are fully committed to particular sects such as Sanatani, Moksh marg, Swadhyay, Kabir, etc, reported their sect as their religion. The leaders of these sects and the followers called their sects as part of Hindu religion. However, Christian and some 'secular' scholars question the census operation. It is argued that adivasis are Animist and not Hindus [Raj 1994]. This is a ticklish issue, more so at this juncture when the Sangh parivar is bent upon making India a 'Hindu Rashtra'. Notwithstanding the risks, one cannot brush aside the issue.

Formulation of the questions about religion and the method of enumeration of religion have been rightly contested. The question in the census and in social science survey questionnaires generally is: "What is your 'dharma'?" The word 'dharma' as understood by the investigator is alien to the Dangi, particularly in households where formal education has not reached. Consequently, all adivasis except those who are consciously baptised into Christianity or Islam or one of the new sects of Hinduism or the tribals who consciously name their religion as 'tribal religion' [Singh 1994] are categorised as 'Hindu'. It is a categorisation more by the enumerator rather than by the adivasi respondent.

If Hinduism means the institutional four-fold brahminical social order, the model prescribed by *Manusmruti*, accepting Vedantic philosophy, etc, the adivasis are certainly not Hindus. Though adivasis have a notion of hierarchy based on status or ranking, the Dangis have not imbibed the values related to purity and pollution as understood and practised by caste Hindus. They do not consider themselves as belonging to one of the castes among the Hindus. Nor do they perceive their present position as adivasi as the result of their deeds of their past birth. Their social organisation, norms of interpersonal relationships and many of their customs related to marriage, child birth, etc, are different in many ways from those of the caste Hindus of the adjoining areas. More important, caste Hindus do not consider adivasis as part of them. The adivasi is always looked down upon and placed outside the caste-based social order. Any effort to bring the adivasis into the institutional and dominant brahminical ideological framework of Hinduism by conversion to Hinduism is only for political purposes. This process, following different trajectories, in fact has a long history. It is now considered as natural and inevitable and is being systematically and aggressively carried out with state support, but not talked about.

However, if Hinduism means plurality of religious beliefs related to god and a supernatural power, worship in different ways to multiple gods and goddesses, nature and spirits, and diverse rituals and beliefs about life and death, the overwhelming majority of the adivasis of Gujarat in general and the Dangis in particular may be called 'Hindus'. Kukanas consider themselves 'higher' than the bhils. They do not eat beef, whereas the bhils

do. Among the kukanas those who eat beef required purification of some kind [Parikh 1961, Engineer 1999]. Such Hinduisation or popular Hinduism, if one may call it that, has been a two-way process. Adivasis have adopted many beliefs and gods of the caste Hindus living in their vicinity, the latter also have embraced several deities of the adivasis, and in many cases both followed similar rituals and beliefs independent of each other. In some cases the caste Hindus give brahminical names and legends to the deities worshipped by the adivasis. Such a process was clearly evident in the widespread socio-religious movement launched by the adivasis of central and eastern India in the twenties to change their established ways of life. The Dangs was also affected by the movement. It was popularly called the Devi movement. The commands of the Devi, Goddess Sarabai, were to stop drinking liquor and eating meat and, take bath twice a day. This has some closeness with the tenets of the Bhakti movement. Symbols, rituals and ceremonies practised in worshipping the Devi were similar to traditional patterns of worship which had many resemblances to those of several caste Hindus of the region. The Devi asked the adivasis not to become Christians. David Hardiman observes, "The cultural side to the Devi programme laid most stress on ritual purity and non-violent behaviour. Almost nothing was said about religious beliefs and no attempt was made to demand that the adivasis worship Hindu gods such as Krishna, Rama or Hanuman. In a few cases, most notably in the Dangs, superstitious beliefs were condemned, but this did not represent an important element of the programme in most cases. The adivasis were in fact permitted by the Devi to go on worshipping their old gods and goddesses so long as they did not perform blood (violent) sacrifice. Rituals and practice had to change, but not the religion as such" (1987: 164).

Adivasis of the Dangs worship Silaiya and Simaliya Devs (deities symbolising the village boundary and hill), Mavlima (goddess mother), Kanasari Devi (grain goddess), the snake and the tiger, ghosts of ancestors, etc [Parikh 1961]. However, educated adivasis have begun to observe festivals and rituals of caste Hindus thanks to their socialisation in public institutions run by Gandhians and the government [Shah 1984].

A section of the adivasis believe that they were the original natives of the land. In the thirties a religious movement called Sati Pati Panth was launched which opposed Hinduism as well as Christianity. The leaders of the Panth consider that the

present rulers are outsiders and had encroached upon the adivasis' land and forests. They do not participate in elections and do not pay revenue to the state. They follow their rituals and ceremonies which are closely related to nature. In the fifties the movement had a vast following in Surat and Bharuch districts. It launched a land-grab movement to oust non-tribal landowners. It has quite a few followers in the Dangs. There are some other organisations such as the Adivasi Vikas Parishad and Adivasi Ekta Parishad. They appeal to the adivasis to awake and get free from the clutches of the Hindus. Like the Sati Pati Panth, they also advocate that the adivasis are the original inhabitants of the country. The Adivasi Ekta Parishad emphasises their culture, related to nature, and their communal way of life. In 1997 the Parishad organised a conference near Dharampur, close to the Dangs, in which more than 10,000 adivasis from different parts of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh participated.

Nearly 20 Christian organisations of different denominations now work in the Dangs. Most of them are Protestant. They mainly cultivate relationships with the local people, listen to their woes, sympathise in their difficulties, teach morals ('do' and 'do not do') and persuade them to join for prayer. Compassion is their approach. Miracles and medicines are used to attract the adivasis to join their fold. Some of them, as a part of their welfare programmes, also provide help in the form of loans for buying seeds or levelling land. Recently some churches have appointed newly-converted youth to work as 'Rakhewal' pastors with a salary. Catholics who believe in liberation theology are engaged in social welfare programmes. Proselytisation is not a priority for them.

In 1981, 1,500 persons, both adivasi and non-adivasi, were enumerated as Christians in the district. Their number had increased to 7,500 by the 1991 Census. The majority of them are Protestant. The Church of North India has the largest following. Most of them are first generation converts. Less than 5 per cent are of second or third generation converts. There are various reasons, as given by them, for accepting Christianity. The most common reasons are curing of diseases, relief from tension related to day-to-day problems, faith in prayer which helped them in their personal crises, particularly recovery from illness. "I was sick and tried 'Bhuva-Bhagat' [traditional healers] but could not get relief. My neighbour who is a Christian suggested to me to meet the 'Padari' [priest] and ask him to offer a prayer for my recovery. I was knowing the Padari as he

used to visit us. I told him about my illness. He asked me to join with him for the prayer and I began to feel better. From that day I used to attend the prayer regularly and later became 'Cristi' [Christian]." He was baptised 20 years before. Another person who has proselytised recently told me, "I wanted a male child. I tried 'Bhuva' and also observed 'vrata' [religious vows] but it did not help. I talked to the priest and thanks to his prayer now I am a father of a male child. Hence I developed faith in prayer and became, 'Cristi'". The humane and personal touch of missionaries who expressed concern, in the adivasis' dialect, about the day-to-day problems of adivasis and were willing to help them influenced some to become Christians. After baptism they slowly give up certain rituals related to worship. They are advised to give up worship of the deities which they used to worship from their birth. Their participation in traditional religio-cultural celebrations has declined. "You cannot worship two gods. You cannot be a Hindu as well as a Muslim, can you?" a Catholic Father asked me. Lancy Lobo observes, "Protestants share some prescriptions with Hindu sects such as abstinence from alcohol, smoking tobacco, etc, but they directly attack the indigenous cultural practices, such as marriage songs and rituals.... Unlike Hindu sects Christianity introduces new and hitherto unknown cultural practices to the tribals" (1992: 55-56). The missionary insists that if one becomes Christian one should not worship other gods. This does create friction at village and family levels. For instance, the Dangis traditionally celebrate their festivals like Holi, Akha Tij, Tera, etc, collectively. On Akha Tij a basket of germinated seeds of different corn – nagali, warli, etc – is worshipped with 'kumkum' (red powder) and is ceremonially thrown into water. Christians have stopped contributing for and participating in the festival. Such behaviour of a few in a small village of 60 or so households isolates them and creates ripples in the social fabric. But friction on such occasions has never been so sharp a to polarise the community in a tug-of-war. After all, it has never been a monolithic religious community. It may be noted that some Christian adivasis keep photos of Jesus as well as Hanuman, some say that they are 'Hindu-Christians'. But both Hindu and Christian bigotry would force them to be either stroke or.

### III

In the past the adivasis were known as 'kaliparaj', i.e, black-skinned people. Caste Hindus looked down upon them as backward and 'jungali', i.e, uncivilised

with bad customs and manners. Gandhiji called them 'raniparaj', i.e., brave people living with wild animals. Gandhians began to work among adivasis as a part of their political-cum-social reform programme to uplift them. They "disapproved of the tribal ways of life" [Chaudhuri 1975] and made efforts to bring them into the 'mainstream'. The Sangh parivar prefers to address adivasis as 'vanvasis', i.e., forest-dwellers. According to them the difference between caste Hindus and vanvasis is the place of settlement, the former live in the plains and the latter in forests. They consider that vanvasis are backward Hindus who need to be reformed. As a part of their programme to reach out the vanvasis, various outfits of the parivar and several sects of Hinduism carry out a number of philanthropic activities among the adivasis, including distribution of food, clothing and medicines during famines and epidemics. These programmes have been systematised and more extensively carried out during the last two decades. Charitable institutions providing health services have been started at different locations in the tribal belt. Some of the Gandhian workers are collaborating with these 'social' activities.

Congress workers continue to have a hold over educational and social welfare activities in the adivasi areas. The BJP has so far not completely succeeded in building an institutional base for distribution of patronage. Though the BJP won a majority in the state assembly elections, the Congress has still an edge over it in the tribal belt. Not only does the Congress continue to win the assembly seat from the Dangs constituency, it also captured back a few BJP seats in the 1998 assembly elections. As a part of the election campaign, a leaflet was circulated informing adivasis that Christian adivasis were not entitled to get benefits as scheduled tribes. It proclaimed: "after the election [the new government of BJP] would stop giving such rights to Christians. Realise! Realise! Purify yourself through yagna and become a Hindu. Otherwise you will regret later."

As a part of building a base among the adivasis the Sangh parivar is actively involved in welfare and religious activities in the region. The Hindu Jagran Manch (HJM) established Vanvasi Ashram, a residential school, at Waghai in 1991. Thirty male students live in the ashram. It aims at all-around development of the vanvasis. Swami Avishanandji has settled here for the last two years. One more ashram has been started in 1996 at Mokhamar village, near Subir, where the Nav Jyot school, run by Jesuits, is located. Swami Avishanandji says, "The ashram

here is one of the 7,000 projects of vanvasi 'kalyan' [welfare] in the country. When I came here and talked to people they said 'give us religion. Our brother who becomes Christian is deviating from us. There are many problems here, but first make us Hindu. We want our identity'. We regret that we have not come here earlier to show our tradition and culture. People here worship Hanuman. Village people get divided as some become Christians. Those who become Christians throw away our gods into the forest which leads to tension. Such tension has increased during the last five years. Thirty per cent of the Dangs got converted to Christianity with financial temptations and force. This process has been slowed down because of our work. Now the converted are coming back [into the Hindu fold]. We take them to Unai where they take bath in hot springs and get purified."

The HJM organised a Hindu 'sammelan' (conference) in June 1998 in the Dangs in which some Christian adivasis were collectively 'purified' and taken back into the Hindu fold. On the eve of the sammelan HJM distributed a leaflet which said: "The most burning problem of the Dangs is the establishments being run by Christian missionaries...Wherever Christian priests have gone in the world, they loot the people...They teach people to tell lies, to steal in the name of religion...Awaken Hindu and struggle against these thieves who lie, who rob you of your rights, and bring these people to their senses..."

Besides 'reconverting' from Christianity to Hinduism, HJM has launched a campaign to harass and pressurise those Christians who do not follow their advice. In 1998 at least 14 incidents were reported

in the press or in police records of harassment and beating. In several villages such as Jamalpada, Divan Temrun, Kudka, Darpada, Borkhal, etc., individual Christians were beaten up. In Darpada, the cycle of a Christian was snatched away. Stones were thrown during the Sunday prayers. Some prayer places – kacha buildings of bamboo and tiles (only 4 per cent of the houses in the Dangs are pukka) – were damaged. In Dhagunia village which has eight to 10 Christian households out of a total of 122 households, Christians were beaten up in November 1998. Some Christians were taken to Unai temple to be bathed in the hot springs. Those who refused to go were prohibited by the village sarpanch (headman) to take water from the village well. In Umerpada village the police inspector harassed Christians on the basis of a false complaint made by VHP workers. In Kudka village evangelist Premchand was beaten by the police patel. In early December, Dakshin Gujarat Adivasi Cristi Kalyan Parishad (DGACKP) submitted a memorandum to the chief minister giving details of the instances filed with the police. The petitioners asked: "Despite the complaints about burning of six and damage to four prayer places why is the government silent? Why is the police department not taking any action? Why has no one been arrested?" It is alleged that Christian adivasis are not given birth and tribe certificates, necessary for employment, by government officers. In that sense, the government has informally implemented what the leaflet, mentioned above, announced before the last elections.

In a few villages the Christians were persuaded and also intimidated that if they

do not go to Unai for purification, they would face social boycott. Most of those who succumbed to various pressures belong to the first generation of Christians. "We have to live in peace and harmony with our own people", one of them said. Another person from Jamanmala who was on his way to Unai told us, "I became Cristi because the Father advised me to offer prayer and God would help me for a better life. But my condition has not improved. Now Swamiji says, 'you should not forget your culture and religion; get purified'. I am now becoming Hindu so that we can continue to observe our rituals and can also drink liquor on festivals and can also use coconut in worshipping our 'devs' [deities]." "I became Cristi because I thought that it would save me from disease. But now I am going to Unai because this is our bap-dada's [parental] religion". One old person said "I have come here [to the ashram] because Swamiji has called us and others from the village have come".

Last year VHP, RSS, HJM and other organisations of the parivar organised several anti-Christian rallies on Christmas day in different locations of the adivasi belt in Gujarat. One of them was at Pipalwada in Vyara taluka, bordering the Dangis. The Bajrang Dal started its activities in the Dangis in 1996. By distributing freely pictures of Hanuman it popularised Hanuman as the god of the Dangis. It recruits youth. The Dal organised December 6, 1998 as Hindu Vijay Gaurav Din, i.e., Hindu victory day, at Ahwa. However, the programme did not attract many youth and passed off as a non-event.

HJM decided to organise a mass rally on Christmas day, December 25, in Ahwa. The town has more than 100 Christian families, Dangis and non-Dangis. There is a Christian locality and a church. As a part of its propaganda HJM distributed leaflets declaring: "Christian priests are insulting Hindu saints through newspapers. This insult is insult of the whole Hindu society. It is a religious duty to bring sense to those Christians who dared to insult the Hindu saints. HJM is determinant to stop the conversion activities of Christian missionaries." Another leaflet was against Ishu (Christ) and the Bible proclaiming that Ishu was not a saint and a 'dut' (messenger of peace). It declared that Ishu had come on earth to divide the family and the people. He was a champion of war. The Bible asked followers to destroy the god of those who lived on the hills and to finish those people who worship gods and goddess.

Christian organisations such as the DGACKP and the Church of north India

wrote to the collector and district police commissioner in early December last that they had learnt about the proposed rally and were apprehending attacks on Christians and churches on the 25th as had been attempted the previous year at Pipalwada where there was an attempt to set fire to a church. The government was requested not to give permission for holding the rally on that day. The DGACKP asked for protection to all churches. The South Gujarat Human Rights Group also requested the collector not to give permission for the rally. The collector called a meeting of representatives of various organisations on the 23rd in which the Christian organisations reiterated their demand. The collector said that there would be enough police force on that day, but he did not commit himself whether he would allow the rally to be held. He finally gave permission to the HJM for the rally. Police protection was not provided to the prayer places.

The venue of the rally was very close to the church in Ahwa. The town was decorated with saffron flags on the 24th. Several truck-loads of people from within and outside the Dangis were brought for the rally. The procession started at 12 noon. The main slogans of the rally were: "Christians are 'chor' (thieves)", "Hindu jago Christians bhago" (Hindus awake, Christians run away), "gali gali me shor hai Padari sab chor hai" (everybody in the streets is shouting that Christian priests are thieves), "Jay Ram and Bajrangbali ki jay". Some of the placards were also painted with such slogans. Christian leaders complained to the deputy police commissioner and the collector that they should not allow the shouting of such provocative and insulting slogans. At around 4 o'clock the rally was converted into the meeting in which provocative speeches against missionaries and Christian conversions were made. It was alleged that the missionaries were anti-national and had plans to convert India into a land of Christianity. For that the missionaries were getting very huge foreign funds. People were asked to protect "our tradition and Hindu religion and teach a lesson to the Christians so that they do not convert people". One of the speakers said that they did not need to fear as the governments at the centre and in the state were "ours" (of the Hindus). It is also alleged that the collector went on the dais and received garlands.

Some Christians who were standing outside the ground protested against the speeches. They appealed to the authorities again and again, without success, to prevent the speakers from making offensive

speeches. It is alleged that some Christians threw stones at the meeting. The other side alleges that HJM activists threw stones at Christian women in the market. In the evening around 6 o'clock, the police used lathis and tear-gas to disperse the meeting to avoid any further confrontation. "Had there not been a lathi charge at that time, some Christians would have been killed as many of the participants in the rally were armed with stones, steel pipes, sticks, and trishuls", a police constable, a patidar by caste from central Gujarat, who was on duty at that place, observed in a personal interview with this writer.

As the meeting dispersed, a crowd of 50-60 persons went to the market. The mob broke open and looted five shops. Furniture was broken. Three of the shops were of Muslims and two were of Christians. Another mob went to Deep Darshan school, about one and a half kilometre from the venue of the meeting. It was allegedly led by Janubhai Pawar, Bajrang Dal leader. Two policemen who were on duty with sticks to provide protection could not stop the crowd. Stones were thrown and window panes broken. A third mob went to Subir, which is around twenty kilometres from Ahwa, by jeep. They first threw stones at the hostel. A few persons from the crowd went inside the compound of the school and set fire to a jeep and a motorcycle. On the same night six individual Christians were beaten up in different villages. Two churches were damaged. Next day when the home minister of Gujarat camped in Ahwa, churches in three villages were set on fire. A Christian was beaten up in one village. On the 27th 10 churches in different villages were damaged or set on fire. In five days from the 25th to 29th 19 churches were reported to have been damaged and 10 Christians beaten up. Except in three or four cases, the injuries were minor. The police has arrested more than 100 persons, both Christians and non-Christians and adivasis and non-adivasis, local and non-Dangis. But some Christians live in fear because they have been warned that as soon as the state reserve police is withdrawn "we will teach you lesson".

During my visits to several villages in early January I found sharp Christian-non-Christian divisions in the villages. Several non-Christian adivasis told us that the present strife had been the creation of politics. In most of the villages outsiders damaged the prayer houses. That too during the nights. In Muchond village the church was set on fire on the 27th at midnight by hooligans who came to the village from outside in a jeep. As soon as the village

inhabitants came to know of the fire they joined together to extinguish it. The initiative came from non-Christians. This is true of many villages. In a few villages Christians and non-Christians jointly repaired the damaged churches.

The BJP government in Gujarat and at the centre said repeatedly that there had been conversion by force. But so far they could not get any evidence. Concocted instances of disfiguring of Hanuman idols or throwing away of idols into forests by Christian adivasis have been widely circulated. Newspapers have published such stories without verification. The deputy chairman of the state planning board, Acharya, who is preparing a 'Hindu Economic Plan for Gujarat' had the audacity to say publicly that the destruction of churches in the Dangs was a 'reaction' of the Hindus. According to him, "It is the missionaries who started the whole thing. The Hanuman temple was attacked first, leading HJM to take out a rally on December 25 as a show of strength of the Hindu forces".<sup>2</sup> In response to our question "Why did you organise rally on 25th December?" Swami Avishanandji, the main organiser of the rally, said, "If conversion is their constitutional right, to organise a rally on any day is our constitutional right". The leaflets, cited above, attacking Ishu and the Bible were circulated. They bore the publishers' and printers' names. Such activities were a deliberate attempt to hurt religious feelings and contributed to creating tension in the area. But the government has not taken any action against the culprits.

#### IV

The Dangs is in turmoil. During the last three decades the Dangs have been pushed out of their forest-based subsistence economy. They have been forced to be settled agriculturists, but the total farm land area available to them has been considerably reduced. Whatever little agriculture land they cultivate is being increasingly encroached upon by the forest department for plantation. They are almost debarred from using major and minor forest products. The quantum of forest labour has declined significantly, forcing them to migrate outside to work on low wages and in wretched condition. Education has increased, but without non-farm job opportunities. Unemployment among the educated has increased, leading to frustration. Various welfare programmes have not taken off the ground. Restlessness among the Dangs has been manifest in various forms, resulting in several agitations. Atrocities against adivasis involving the forest

and police departments have increased. Instead of solving their basic issues of survival, the present agitation focusing on Christian missionaries has been fostered from outside, diverting the prevailing tension and dividing the Dangs on religious lines which are a non-issue for the Dangs.

The events in the Dangs are a part of organised persecution of Christians in Gujarat. The additional chief secretary of home department is reported to have told district collectors in, 'high level review meeting' in November 1997 that "there is a conspiracy in tribal areas to destroy Hindu 'sanskriti' by creating class war and large-scale conversion. Tribal welfare programmes need to be geared up to counter the conspiracy." He asked the district collectors to keep a close watch on Christian missionaries and their conversion activities.<sup>3</sup> The anti-Christian campaign on a large scale spearheaded by VHP, HJM and Bajrang Dal followed. In 1998 a number of events took place in different parts of the state, including the burning of the *New Testament* in Rajkot, digging out of the body of a dalit Christian from the grave in Kapadwanj, attack on nuns in Panchmahals, and damaging of churches in tribal areas. The VHP and other organisations are openly involved in the anti-minority campaign. The director-general of police, C P Singh, accepted in October 1998 that "it was the activists of the Vishva Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal who were taking law into their own hands which posed serious danger to peace in Gujarat. Many of the attacks on the minorities were after these organisations had whipped up local passions on mere allegations of conversions [by Christian missionaries] and forced inter-religious marriages, where again conversion was supposed to be the alleged motive..."<sup>4</sup> But the government has not taken action against the culprits. Moreover, the Gujarat government has set up a police cell for monitoring inter-religious marriages. This announcement was made in the assembly by the home minister. Thus the state has become openly a party to the persecution of minorities.

#### Notes

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1 In 1993, on behalf of 228 adivasis of 20 villages a special civil application was filed asking for restraint on the forest department and its employees from evicting the adivasis from the land they have been cultivating [Engineer 1999,

Chaudhari 1996]. The Court issued the stay order.

2 *The Times of India*, Ahmedabad, January 2, 1999.

3 *Sandesh*, Surat, November 8, 1997.

4 *Communalism Combat*, October 1998.

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