

**Negotiating Violence: the construction  
of identity amongst adivasi Christians in  
Udaipur district, Rajasthan.**

*Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy*

by

**NIKHILA KALRA**

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

& ST. ANTONY'S COLLEGE

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## **Abstract**

This thesis elucidates processes of identity construction that have taken place amongst Bhil Christians in Udaipur district, Rajasthan, in the context of the endemic anti-Christian violence that has been carried out by Hindu nationalist organisations and adherents in this area since the late 1990s. My work explores how Bhil Christians engage with this, and seeks to make both an empirical and analytical contribution to existing analyses of anti-Christian violence by shifting the focus away from the construction of majoritarian Hindu identities in India's tribal belt, and placing it instead on the minority Christian community. Utilising a tripartite typology of violence (direct, structural and cultural) as its starting point, this thesis addresses questions of how Bhil Christians construct and perform their identity in this context, and how they understand and negotiate their relationships with both non-Christian communities and the state in their localities. This aims to situate Christians as agents in the construction of their own identities, rather than simply having 'otherness' imposed on them as a result of Hindu nationalist mobilization and rhetoric. This study shows that Bhil Christians are involved in a dualistic process of strategically emphasizing both difference and similarity between Christians and Hindus, while making recourse to an overarching adivasi identity that, in various ways, serves to challenge and often undermine the damaging constructions of Christianity that are propagated by the Sangh Parivar. At the same time, they foreground a Christian identity that is decisively shaped by notions of agency, moral uplift, and assertion; these are ideas that are informed by longer histories of adivasi self- and community-making, but have acquired important new meaning and relevance in the context of anti-Christian violence.

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## **List of Acronyms used in this work**

BJP- Bharatiya Janata Party

BPL- Below Poverty Line

CMS- Church Missionary Society

CNI- Church of North India

FBC- Filadelfia Bible College

FFCI- Filadelfia Fellowship Church of India

INC- Indian National Congress

MBC- Mewar Bhil Corps

NDA- National Democratic Alliance

NMM- Native Missionary Movement

NREGS- National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme

PESA- Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act

PRI- Panchayati Raj Institutions

RSS- Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

RVKP- Rajasthan Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad

SC- Scheduled Caste

ST- Scheduled Tribe

UCF- Udaipur Christian Fellowship

UPC- United Presbyterian Church

VHP- Vishwa Hindu Parishad

# 1. Introduction

This thesis elucidates processes of identity construction that have taken place amongst adivasi Christian communities in India, in the context of the endemic anti-Christian violence that has been carried out by Hindu nationalist organisations and adherents since the late 1990s.

Hindu nationalism is an ideology and movement that locates the essence of Indian national identity in Hinduism. This doctrine, also referred to as Hindutva, holds that for religious minorities, inclusion into the Indian nation is contingent on assimilation into Hindu culture (Jaffrelot, 2007). Building on the Hindu reform movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and formulated more concretely into a distinct ideology in the 1920s, Hindu nationalism became a serious political player from the late 1980s, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) - the party political wing of Hindu nationalism - eventually securing electoral victory at a national level in 1998. Its success was aided by the “dynamism and ideological inventiveness” of the Sangh Parivar - the ‘family of organisations’ that constitutes the Hindu nationalist movement in India (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000: 186).<sup>1</sup> The Sangh Parivar has been highly successful in disseminating Hindu nationalism in India’s public spaces. One of the key weapons in its arsenal in this respect has been the construction of threatening ‘Others’ to Hinduism, playing on Hindu fears of being politically, demographically and culturally marginalised in a secular state. For the most part Hindutva ideology, discourse and

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<sup>1</sup> This includes the BJP, which serves as Hindu nationalism’s political arm; the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a paramilitary volunteer corps and the ideological backbone of the BJP; the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) which works as a social and cultural organization propagating Hindu nationalism, and the Bajrang Dal, which seeks to militarize and radicalize Hindu youth, as well as a vast network of offshoot organisations. While there has often been an ambivalent relationship between the constituent members of the Sangh Parivar, they all to various degrees are informed by and propagate Hindutva ideology.

violence has been stridently anti-Muslim, but it has increasingly come to focus on India's Christian community as well.

While anti-Christian rhetoric has been a part of the discursive repertoire of Hindu nationalism since at least the 1920s, particularly with regard to the threat that conversion to Christianity posed to the unity and integrity of the Indian nation, it is only since the 1990s that it has become a visibly prominent feature of Hindu nationalist ideology and activity. This is demonstrated particularly by the fact that the incidence of Hindu-Christian violence in India has increased significantly since 1998, with estimates suggesting that an average of 200 attacks have taken place against Christians every year since then (Bauman and Leech, 2012).

Previously little studied, the subject of anti-Christian violence has received increased scholarly attention since this upturn (Sarkar, 1999; Zavos, 2001; Aaron, 2002; Froerer, 2007; Bauman, 2010). However, these analyses have focused heavily on the motivations and activities of the Hindu right: on answering questions of how and why an aggressive Hindu nationalism has been able to take root in the areas in which anti-Christian violence takes place. Thus they have mainly explored the strategies employed by the Sangh Parivar in its attempts to consolidate a unified Hindu community amongst new constituencies, namely dalits and adivasis, one of the key elements of which is the demonization of Christians and their subsequent targeting for violence. Christians themselves rarely feature as actors in these narratives, and are instead implicitly assigned a passive role as victims- they are often considered significant only in so far as they constitute a threat to the ambitions of the Sangh Parivar, and at worst they are treated simply as collateral damage in its quest for cultural and political dominance. In this sense, much of the literature that seeks to

explain the increasingly visible phenomenon of discrimination and violence against Christians has actually managed to side line Christians themselves by failing to bring them into critical analytical focus.

This research thus seeks to make both an empirical and analytical contribution to current understandings of this subject by shifting focus away from the construction of majoritarian Hindu identities in India's tribal belt and placing it instead on Christian identity. It looks at the way in which adivasi Christians construct and perform their cultural, social and political identities, how they express ideas of similarity and difference with Hindus, and how they understand and negotiate their relationships with the local state and non-Christian communities in their localities. This resituates Christians as agents in the construction of their own identities, rather than simply assuming that they have had 'otherness' imposed on them as a result of Hindu nationalist mobilization and rhetoric.

This thesis draws on qualitative research conducted amongst adivasi Christians from the Bhil tribe in Udaipur district, Rajasthan. This area is home to several Christian churches of various denominations, and has an increasingly significant adivasi Christian population. Since the mid-1990s, it has also seen the extensive mobilisation and 'hyperactivism' of the Sangh Parivar (Lodha, 2004). While for the most part this has taken the form of development activities and cultural projects, its work is imbued with a clear anti-minority ideology and anti-Christian discourse has found a strong foothold at the village level. This has resulted in low-level violence against Christians here, who are often faced with direct physical violence, harassment, and social ostracism, as well as discrimination in their engagements with the local state.

## **Hindu nationalism and the construction of the threatening Other**

Hindu nationalism is a movement and ideology that finds its genesis in the wide-ranging intellectual inquiries that emerged in nineteenth century India, in the context of colonial rule and the struggle to define “who is an Indian?” in the midst of the clear lack of unity that characterised the sub-continent (Khilnani 1997). Hindu nationalists sought to answer this question by locating the essence of India’s identity in the religious and cultural heritage of Hinduism. The roots of the movement can be found in the high-caste, socio-religious Hindu reform movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century such as the Brahmo Samaj and, from 1875, the Arya Samaj. These organisations were founded “with the aims of purifying and codifying Hinduism in the face of challenges from other organised religions and from a more secularized modernity”; in this sense, they were a direct response both to the categorizing impulses of the British administration in India, and the activities of Christian missionaries (Corbridge, Harriss 2000: 180).

While these movements contributed to the development of an ideological and organisational repertoire that was later drawn on by Hindu nationalism, it was not until the early twentieth century that it was articulated as a coherent ideology in and of itself. The main contribution in this regard was made by V. D. Savarkar, who is considered the ideological father of Hindu nationalism. For Savarkar, national cohesion could only be achieved through reference to India’s Hindu identity, and a Hindu, according to his definition, was someone who regarded India both as a fatherland and holy-land. This definition, then, evokes a particular ethnic nationalism that is based not just on territoriality or genealogy but also on religion - Hindus,

Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists all meet its criteria as they find their origins in India, but Muslims and Christians do not (Varshney 1993).

Unlike the religious reform movements of the previous century, Savarkar was not making an appeal to religious values or doctrines; instead, his was “first and foremost an ideology about building a modern nation-state in India [and] furthering the strength and unity of the nation” (Swamy 2003: 3). In constructing this idea of what it meant to be Hindu, Savarkar “sought to define and defend...an Indian nationhood in primordialist terms” that resolutely excluded and othered those practicing Christianity or Islam (ibid). As Varshney (1993) points out, this does not mean that those groups cannot belong to the Indian nation; however, they must prove their loyalty to it through assimilation and the erasure of distinctiveness, by accepting the centrality of Hinduism to Indian civilization and making no claims to particular privileges or concessions from the Indian state, such as personal laws or separate educational institutions. This conception of Indian-ness, and the place of minorities within it, is one that continues to inform militant Hindutva today.

Various organisations and political parties grew up around the ideology of Hindu nationalism throughout the first half of the twentieth century. 1915 saw the establishment of the Hindu Mahasabha, the first incarnation of party political Hindu nationalism, and this was later succeeded by the Bharatiya Jana Sangh in 1951. In 1925 the movement’s primary organisational arm, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), was founded. This was conceived of primarily as a cultural rather than political institution, charged with the dissemination of Hindu culture and values and with the creation of strong Hindu bodies for the protection of the motherland. To this

end, it placed heavy emphasis on physical discipline and martial values cultivated through daily training of its members in its *shakhas* (local units). This was followed in 1964 by the foundation of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), or World Hindu Council, the function of which was to revitalize Hindu society through the aggressive mobilization of Hindus against the threats posed by ‘foreign’ religions such as Islam and Christianity. Together, these formed the initial basis of the Sangh Parivar, or family of organisations, the term used to describe the multitude of constituents of the Hindu nationalist movement in India.

It was not until the 1980s that Hindu nationalism began to achieve real success in India’s political arena, culminating in the coming to power of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the head of a coalition government in New Delhi in February 1998. The rise of Hindu nationalism in India’s cultural and political landscape throughout this period has attracted a wealth of commentary and analysis. For some, it is the result of an ‘elite’ or ‘conservative’ revolution (Hansen 1999; Corbridge and Harriss 2000), reflecting the aspirations of a growing upper-caste middle class who were, throughout this decade, becoming increasingly disillusioned with the Congress party and who consequently turned to the BJP as an alternative- a party which promised to deliver the strong leadership and social and political stability necessary for a protection of their vested interests, particularly in the face of increasing lower-caste agitation for reservations in jobs and education. Others have attributed the BJP’s success to the Congress crisis of hegemony, and the high levels of instability this generated in India’s multi-party system; in this context, the appeal of Hindu nationalism is best understood as an ideology predicated on “the monolithic, organic

unity of the nation” which achieved particular salience as a result of the long-term history of the institutional and ideological decay of the Indian state (Bose 1997: 160).

Alongside these more structural analyses, it is also important to recognise the distinct imaginative strategies employed by the Sangh Parivar in winning over new constituencies.<sup>2</sup> One key strategy in this regard has been the construction of a threatening ‘Other’, which has predominantly centred on India’s Muslim, and more recently Christian, populations. In various ways, Hindu nationalist organisations have pursued an antagonistic agenda of stigmatizing and even demonizing these minorities, which has in turn helped the BJP to win support by portraying itself as the protector of Hindu interests in the face of the threat from minorities. This has often been achieved through dual processes of what Tambiah (1996) calls ‘focalization’ and ‘nationalization’, wherein local incidents or disputes between groups, or members of a group, are stripped of their particular contexts and incorporated into wider, national discourses on ethnic difference and, ultimately, antagonism.

In this way, particular ethnic group affiliations become attached to the Hindu nationalist agenda, drawing them into master narratives of ‘us’ vs ‘them’ (Froerer, 2006). This process sets the stage for another key weapon of the Hindu right: communal violence. Various scholars have studied the nexus between ‘votes and violence’ in India, showing how ethnic conflict is used to polarize communities and reify the threat posed by minorities, which is then capitalised on by politicians claiming to represent and defend the majority community against them. That

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<sup>2</sup> It is again worth acknowledging here that Hindu nationalism is not a monolithic entity and the various constituents of the Sangh Parivar do not always have their interests perfectly aligned. For a more detailed disaggregation of Sangh Parivar organisations and activities, particularly in southern Rajasthan, see chapter 3.

communal violence is a product of the strategic interests of political elites looking to win influence and elections is an argument that has, either explicitly or implicitly, found expression in a number of influential works on the subject (Engineer 1984, Varshney 2002, Brass 2003, Wilkinson 2004).

### **Adivasis, Hindu nationalism and communal conflict: existing literature on Hindu-Christian violence**

As I will show below, many existing analyses of anti-Christian violence in India have placed it within the paradigm of ‘politics by other means’ (Hansen, 2006), drawing on the idea that communal violence in India has a functional utility because it serves to polarize the electorate in terms of religious identity, which then reaps significant political dividends for Hindu nationalist parties (Brass, 2003; Wilkinson, 2004). These parties, the argument holds, have a vested interest in fomenting or sanctioning communal violence between Hindus and other religious communities (usually Muslim) because such violence hardens group boundaries and can be portrayed as a tangible manifestation of the threat posed to Hindus by minorities. This is useful come election time as it serves to consolidate and mobilise vote banks in favour of Hindu nationalist parties, who claim that they will protect Hindu interests against this threat. Several commentators have thus seen anti-Christian violence as a continuation of this strategy, albeit with a shift in emphasis from Muslim to Christian communities.

1998 can be considered something of a turning point when it comes to anti-Christian violence in India: according to the United Christian Forum for Human Rights, the total number of attacks against Christians between 1964 and 1996 was 38, while in 1998 alone the number stood at more than 90 (Aaron, 2002). Since then, two major

anti-Christian riots have taken place in the past fifteen years, one in the Dangs, Gujarat in 1998-99 (over the Christmas and New Year period) and one in Khandamal, Orissa in 2008. Beyond this, reported incidents of violence have remained consistently high. A report compiled by the Evangelical Fellowship of India for 2012 listed 131 serious attacks against Christians in India for that year (Jaisinghani, 2013). Most recently, a coalition of minority rights organisations released a report detailing the experience of minorities in the 100 days following the election of the BJP government under Narendra Modi in 2014. This lists 37 separate incidents of anti-Christian violence between May and September of that year, pointing out that this is by no means an exhaustive account (Dayal, 2014).

For many, the upturn in violence in 1998 was directly related to the political ambitions of the BJP which came to power nationally in the same year, forming a government at the centre at the head of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Given that anti-minority discourse and violence had been so intrinsic to the Hindu nationalist electoral victory at this time, it was argued that an increase in violence was a direct result of the access of the Sangh Parivar to the machinery of state, and its desire to maintain that access (Zavos, 2001). What was seemingly new about it, however, was that Christians were being targeted at much higher rates than before. Sarkar (1999) argues that once in central government, it became an electoral liability for the BJP to allow or encourage large-scale violence against India's sizeable Muslim population, both because it would be damaging to their mandate for ensuring law and order and because many of their coalition partners relied on Muslim votes. As such, the numerically small and electorally insignificant Christian population was foregrounded as the threatening other to Hinduism instead. Others suggested that there was little to gain for the Sangh Parivar in continuing to milk anti-Muslim

sentiment; this had plateaued, and a new enemy other needed to be found in order to maintain an effective anti-minority platform (Chatterjee, 1998; Fernandes, 1999). In this sense, anti-Christian violence is considered to be very much a continuation of a well-worn strategy used by the Sangh Parivar, although with a different, more politically expedient target.

The electoral ambitions of the BJP have also been heavily implicated in anti-Christian violence at the level of the state. In a Human Rights Watch report carried out in the aftermath of the anti-Christian riots in the Dangs in 1998-9, it was noted that the violence “correspond[ed] closely to particular election contests in which Hindu nationalists have pursued major strategic goals” (Human Rights Watch, 1999: sec. 1). The Dangs- as with many predominantly adivasi constituencies- had traditionally been an area of Congress dominance, and the BJP thus sought to reduce the Congress hold over the area in order to gain a greater vote share in local and state elections. One strategy for doing so was fomenting anti-Christian violence. According to Aaron (2002: 33), “the entire south Gujarat belt was a Congress stronghold until 1999, when controversy over Christians divided the tribals to benefit the BJP”- they went on to win the Assembly elections and a large number of gram panchayat posts in the region. He places the riots almost entirely within this political context, arguing that there had been no hostility between Hindus and Christians before the strategic involvement of the Sangh Parivar.

Other commentators have seen the functional utility of pitting Hindu against Christian and hardening the boundaries between them in terms of a strategy of ‘divide and rule’ on the part of Hindu nationalist organisations, aimed at dismantling adivasi unity that might threaten their interests. Some have highlighted the economic motivations that

underlie anti-Christian violence. Chakraborty (1999), for instance, puts forward the idea that India's business elite has sought to use Hindutva ideology and inter-religious violence in order to protect its own economic interests. He argues that this elite has for a long time treated adivasi communities as a cheap labour force and seen the land on which they live as a lucrative source of natural resources; their access to both of these, however, has been threatened by unprecedented levels of adivasi solidarity and resistance to exploitation, most famously demonstrated by the movement against the construction of the Narmada dam. Anti-Christian violence, then, has been a weapon deployed by the rich, whose economic interests are tied to the political fortunes of Hindu nationalism, to divide adivasi communities and dismantle their unity.

This analysis, while informative, does not afford Christianity itself much treatment, instead giving the impression that it is simply an expedient minority to target in order to pursue rational economic aims unrelated, for the most part, to ideas of religious and cultural identity. Other authors have sought to answer questions about what it is about Christianity specifically that makes it such a threat to Hindu nationalist interests and aspirations. Aaron (2002) nuances his analysis of the politics of anti-Christian violence by suggesting that Christians have been targeted in particular because of the work that missionaries and church leaders have done to enact social change amongst tribal populations, for instance providing education, healthcare and legal advocacy, and contributing to the uplift and dignity of these communities. This, he argues, has been "inimical to the Sangh Parivar, which is normally allied with various feudal configurations around the country, [and has a] voting base primarily from the upper and middle castes" (ibid: 54).

One of the key tactics used by Hindu nationalist organisations to gain support in poor, rural areas has been an involvement in the legitimizing activities of social outreach work, including education and healthcare provision. These activities have allowed the Sangh Parivar to access and build up trust within these communities, putting them in a strong position from which to promulgate their ideology and build vote banks (Froerer, 2007; 2009). It has also been a particularly important weapon in the Hindu nationalists' arsenal because it is a strategy that has allowed for an appeal to lower caste and adivasi constituencies to be made without seeming threatening to the interests of the BJP's traditional constituency of upper caste, middle-class voters (Thachil, 2011). Christian missions and organisations often provide the same kind of social services in these areas, which has made them a competitor to the Sangh Parivar; as such, it has sought to foment anti-Christian sentiment and violence in order to discredit the Christian institutions that might otherwise offer alternative avenues for service provision and uplift.

Clarke (2002) has tied these ideas into a broader cultural argument about the Sangh Parivar's vision of Indian nationhood. He argues that the conversion of adivasis to Christianity profoundly threatens the Hindu nationalist desire to tame "all heterogeneous and plural forms to fit in the unitary construction of a religiously synthesized India" (ibid: 208). In calling for the Hinduization of India, Hindu nationalism is an ideology and movement that seeks to eradicate plurality; from this perspective, Christianity constitutes an 'external' threat to the homogenizing aims of Hindu nationalists, as it provides an alternative cultural and religious belief system which has gained significant purchase within adivasi communities. Here, Clarke does seek to tie questions of Christian theology and praxis explicitly to the 'Hindutva phenomenon', but does so by speculating about the ways in which they might

incorporate ideas of pluralistic nationhood; these are predominantly “imaginative projections” rather than any empirical account of the interactions between Hindu nationalism and Christian identity (ibid: 223).

From a similar perspective, Zavos (2001) argues that anti-Christian sentiment has resurfaced as a prominent facet of Hindu nationalist discourse in the specific context of the vigorous political campaign carried out since 1996 by dalit Christians calling for Scheduled Caste status. This was threatening to Hindu nationalists because it represented the independent assertiveness of a marginal group, and this assertiveness cut across religious boundaries because it emphasized pan-dalit unity, irrespective of religion. This signalled a move towards a new cultural and political dalit identity that was emphatically de-linked from Hinduism. This was threatening to Hindu nationalists both because, as Chakraborty (1999: 951) notes, the “unprecedented unity among the downtrodden and oppressed...has always been considered a threat to the oppressors”, but also because it fundamentally challenged the imaginative conception of a culturally homogenous India that the Sangh Parivar has tried to co-opt dalits into. Mosse (2010) makes a similar point in his analysis of Christian dalit activism in Tamil Nadu, arguing that opposition to conversion became a particularly strident theme of the Hindu right because it represented dalits’ rejection of Hinduism; moreover, anti-Christian discourse was employed as a tool for undermining the links being forged between dalit Christian activists and the wider dalit movement in the state. In both cases, anti-Christian violence can be read as an attempt to curb the “assertive margins” (Zavos, 2001) through a strategy of weakening their unity by sowing religious discord.

This kind of analysis might also be usefully applied to adivasis when it comes to anti-Christian violence. The growing political assertion of adivasi communities outlined above is not just inimical to the economic interests of those allied with Hindu nationalism, but also to the socio-cultural project of Hindutva. The Sangh Parivar has been heavily involved in the so-called ‘Hinduization’ or ‘saffronization’ of adivasis in India. This refers to its attempts to bring adivasis into the fold of wider Hindu society. Despite the fact that, historically, many adivasi groups have engaged in their own distinctive cultural and religious practices (Raj, 2002; Weisgrau, 2013), Hindu nationalists claim that they are simply ‘backward’ Hindus who only need to be educated in correct forms of Hindu worship and culture in order to realise their true identities (Baviskar, 2005). To this end they are heavily engaged in practices such as introducing mainstream Hindu holidays and religious practices into adivasi communities. These ideas are further reinforced through the pedagogy in the schools that they run, which maintain a vigorous schedule of religious hymns, lessons in sanskrit, and martial exercises, with the intention of imparting a version of indigenous identity that is deeply Hindu (Sundar, 2004).

Adivasi activism, in contrast, draws on a form of indigenous identity that stresses indigeneity in terms of being India’s original inhabitants, and this is strongly underscored by ideas of cultural distinctiveness from caste Hindu society (Rycroft and Dasgupta, 2011). It is therefore inimical to Hindu nationalist ideology, as Chatterji (2004: 330) notes: “within politicized spaces, adivasis... struggle to rewrite the violent history of assimilation to which they have been subjected, refusing to identify as Hindus in mobilizing for self-determination in opposition to the state and Hindu ascendancy.” In this sense, they might also be considered within the framework of the assertive margins, as Christian identity becomes symbolic for Hindu nationalists of

the wider phenomenon of the assertion of adivasi identities that are emphatically delinked from Hinduism and Hindu hegemony.

Finally, Bauman (2013) has suggested that Hindu-Christian violence in India cannot be fully understood without reference to globalised political, economic, and cultural networks. He argues that anti-Christian violence is intimately linked to the effects of globalisation in India, as it represents to Hindu nationalists some of the key anxieties associated with this:

Christianity represents the shift to merit- and skill-based (as opposed to ascriptive) status systems because of its penchant for establishing (and using to its advantage) educational institutions, training facilities, and co-ops. Similarly, Christianity symbolizes the challenge of foreign meaning-making systems because of its literacy programs (particularly those operating in English). Christianity represents the unwieldy and uncontrollable flow of foreign capital and investment because of the Christian community's ostensibly greater access to foreign wealth and power (which is perceived to reproduce the inequities of globalization). And then, of course, Christianity comes to be associated with the socially disruptive effects of globalization through its development work among dalits and adivasis, which inverts traditional caste and class hierarchies. (ibid: 650)

These analyses tend towards macro-level (national and regional) enquiries into the broad ideological and political motivations of Hindu nationalism, which are given significant explanatory weight when it comes to the causes of anti-Christian violence. This approach has certain limitations in that it does not elucidate the local dynamics of violence, nor does it explain how these national discourses and ideologies are understood and negotiated in particular settings. Local-level case studies of anti-Christian violence have therefore been necessary to supplement this literature. In her study of an adivasi village in rural Chhattisgarh, Froerer (2007) illustrates the way in which relations between Hindus and Christians were progressively communalised by the RSS. She places particular emphasis on the instrumental role played by RSS organisers acting as 'conversion specialists', who were able to play on the tensions

created by pre-existing local disputes in order to promote a conception of Christians as a threatening other.<sup>3</sup> In this case, antagonisms generated by the purchase of land by Christian Oraons and their role in the local liquor trade were used to discursively construct Christians as an aggressive minority, determined to bring down the Hindus by stealing their land and plying them with alcohol.

Mindful of a tendency towards instrumentalism, Bauman (2013: 643) is quick to acknowledge that the motivations of those who actually engage in violence “may be more particular and local than the general, well-known, and widely articulated interests of the Sangh Parivar”. In his work on the Khandamal district of Orissa, which in 2008 saw the most intense and destructive anti-Christian riots in India to date, Bauman (2010) highlights the escalating tensions between the region’s adivasi Khandas and dalit Panas as key factors in the outbreak of serious violence. In keeping with the themes developed by Zavos (2001), he shows that the demands of the Pana Christians for Scheduled Caste status bred resentment amongst the relatively less well-off and less educated Kandhas, who believed it might encroach on their own access to reservations.<sup>4</sup> This conflict was communalised by Sangh Parivar activists, who successfully linked it to broader anxieties about the integrity of the Hindu nation. Bauman’s focus is less narrowly instrumental; while his analysis does centre on the role of Hindu nationalist activists in communalizing existing conflicts, it focuses largely on the motivations of the Kandha adivasis, who creatively responded to this

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<sup>3</sup> This follows the work of Paul Brass (1997, 2003), who has developed a theory of institutionalised riot systems and coins the term ‘conversion specialist’ to describe individuals who are likely to profit from riots. These are often political actors, adept at identifying and intensifying sparks of tension and transforming them into full-blown riot events.

<sup>4</sup> This was itself fuelled by a longer history of tension over reservations. Many Pana Christians had declared themselves adivasi in order to maintain access to reservations, while a section of the community had actively campaigned to have Panas certified as ST on the grounds that they were historically undifferentiated from the Kandha tribals and spoke the same Kui language.

rhetoric because it allowed them achieve their own ends and challenge the increasing assertion of the Panas.

### **Locating Christians in anti-Christian violence**

Despite the breadth and sophistication of these analyses, they are all primarily concerned with how and why Hindu nationalist ideologues and activists have constructed Christianity as Hinduism's other, with much less attention paid to concurrent developments within the Christian community. Scholarship that focuses on the electoral arithmetic of anti-Christian violence, for example, tell us little about Christians because their instrumentalist focus on the causes of violence serves to obscure almost completely its targets. By looking primarily at the construction of Hindu electoral constituencies, it tends to frame Christians as passive victims in this process- unable, as Aaron (2002) claims, to either transcend their otherness or be considered serious political players themselves. Even where this point is not made explicitly, by foregrounding the political machinations and ambitions of Hindu nationalist organisations these studies (for example Sarkar, 1999; Chakraborty, 1999; Chatterji, 2009) leave little room for an appraisal of Christian agency in understanding, mediating or responding to the violence instigated in pursuit of them.

Other analyses have built on these, linking strategies of divide and rule to the broader economic, social and cultural ambitions of the Sangh Parivar. These explanations go further in their examination of the specific place of Christianity in the Hindu nationalist imagination. However, even where their discussions acknowledge the political and social assertion of Christian churches and communities, the way in which they embody particular Hindu nationalist anxieties, and the potential obstacle that they pose to the realisation of a Hindu *rashtra* (nation), it is clear that the

analytical focus here is to understand the way in which Hindu nationalist organisations have constructed and reacted to these perceived threats. Again, very little is said about how these processes are understood and negotiated by Christians themselves. This is true even for local level studies of anti-Christian violence. While certain aspects of Christian identity do form part of these analyses- for instance with regard to their patterns of land ownership, education levels, economic activities, and attempts to gain Scheduled Caste status- these are considered primarily in terms of how they have been communalised by the Sangh Parivar. The key aim is to understand how and why an aggressive Hindu nationalism has taken root in these areas; Christians enter this picture in terms of how they are constructed by the Sangh Parivar, and how this construction is seized on and appropriated by those (Hindus) whose interests it serves.

Overall, then, the analytical emphasis in all these studies is placed on the construction of militant Hindu identities in cases of anti-Christian violence. What remains underexplored is a specific focus on the construction of Christian identities. To date there has been little attempt to develop parallel understandings of the other side of this coin: of the ways in which adivasi Christian identity has interacted with processes of 'Hinduization' and the violence that has accompanied it. This is the contribution that this thesis seeks to make to the literature on this subject.

While the immediate context for this enquiry is produced by Hindu nationalist activity and ideology, it is also clear that processes of Christian identity construction are informed by longer histories of negotiation and dialogue about what it means to be both adivasi and Christian, and broader structural processes and forms of violence that shape and circumscribe adivasi lives. Given this, I do not wish to look at Christian

identity simply as the result of ‘responding to’ Hindu nationalist violence, but as part of a longer process of self- and community-making. My approach here follows recent studies of tribal Christianity, which emphasise the importance of understanding the religious worlds of those “quite transparently deemed to be on the edges of the social world” and who have been further marginalised by the mainstream institutional church in India (Robinson and Kujur, 2010: 2). This has led scholars to focus on processes of acculturation that have taken place ‘from below’: how Christian belief and practice has been taken up by adivasis, and how they have made it meaningful to their own lived experiences and cultural context (Dempsey and Raj, 2002; Robinson and Kujur, 2010). This literature makes it clear that processes of adaptation, combination and syncretism between the religious universe of Christianity and the existing worldviews of adivasi communities- and the social and cultural practices that inform them- are key aspects of contemporary tribal Christian identity, and are often driven by adivasi Christians themselves. I therefore aim to bring these insights into conversation with the literature on anti-Christian violence: acknowledging the particular histories, existing meanings, and agentive decisions that have contributed to the identity formation of Christians in this area, and how these existing constructions interact with the new imperatives of a context of Hindu nationalist violence.

### **Defining Violence**

In 2004, the People’s Union for Civil Liberties, Rajasthan compiled a report detailing a number of complaints that had been brought to them by members of minority communities following the BJP’s election victory in 2003. It provides a revealing snapshot of various issues facing adivasi Christians in southern Rajasthan during this period, including the following:

December 2003: In Banswara district, an adivasi Christian priest was leading worship when an armed group of around thirty people belonging to the Hindu nationalist organization Banvasi Kalyan Parishad surrounded the congregation and began to stone them. As the worshippers tried to flee and find refuge, they were chased down and physically assaulted.

January 2004: The minister of Tribal Area Development for Rajasthan, Kanak Mal Katara, issued a press release stating that a survey would be conducted in order to identify Christians, implying that they should be taken off the Scheduled Tribe list having converted to Christianity.

February 2004: A Christian prayer meeting taking place in Udaipur district was disrupted by forty members of the RSS. The leader of the meeting was beaten, while the fifteen others present were physically and verbally harassed, including being made to bow to a photo of the Hindu god Hanuman and to shout '*Jai Sri Ram*' (Hail Lord Ram).

March 2004: In Udaipur district, RSS workers organised a mass rally during which verbal threats were issued to the district's Christian community, and anti-Christian leaflets and other paraphernalia were distributed.

These examples are indicative of the fact that violence against adivasi Christians in this region is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon, and cannot be fully understood using restrictive definitions of violence that see it simply as an act of physical harm motivated by interpersonal hostilities (Riches, 1986). Instead,

following more recent scholarship on the subject, violence is considered as a broader, more encompassing concept. In so far as it may be considered interpersonal, the term violence has the potential to describe a wide range of victim-perpetrator relationships and behaviours that may inflict harm (De Haan, 2008). However, it is also necessary to understand the ways in which violence is shaped, sanctioned and even perpetrated not just by individuals or groups of individuals, but also through institutions and social, political and economic structures. Finally, violence is also socially constructed, in the sense that what is considered violent, and the meanings attached to that, can vary depending on socio-cultural and historical context. Given this, I utilize an inclusive definition of violence, wherein it can be understood as “any action or structural arrangement that results in physical or nonphysical harm to one or more persons” (Iadicola and Shupe, 2012: 23). Certainly, in using this broad definition I acknowledge that there is the potential for conceptual ambivalence or imprecision in seeking to delineate when or how violence occurs (De Haan, 2008). However, I believe that my use of it here is justified and analytically helpful because of the specific nature of this enquiry: given that my focus is on foregrounding the voices and experiences of a community that has been targeted for violence, it is methodologically important to use inclusive definitions such as this as they create space for understanding the subjective perceptions of, and meanings attached to, violence by those who have suffered it (Waddington, Badger and Bull, 2005).

This being said, in order to provide more conceptual clarity while still retaining in essence an inclusive understanding of violence, I utilize here Galtung’s (1990) tripartite typology of direct, structural, and cultural violence as a framework for discussing the forms of anti-Christian violence faced by adivasi Christians in this

district, as it effectively captures the range of encounters and experiences that were described to me by informants over the course of my fieldwork.

### **Direct violence**

Direct violence is described by Galtung (1969: 171) as a type of violence that can be traced back to a concrete person or persons as actors; it is “violence with a clear subject-object relation... manifest because it is visible as *action*”. My research respondents detailed various types of direct violence, including being physically beaten, being threatened with weapons, and being forcibly made to perform actions contrary to their Christian beliefs or practices. While direct violence is often defined in terms of physical force, also included here are commonly experienced forms of violence that may not cause physical harm but instead emotional or psychological harm, such as ostracism, verbal harassment or threats, having church property destroyed, stolen or damaged, and caste-based discrimination such as refusing to eat and drink with someone or enter their house or kitchen (*bhed bhav*). These also fit the definition of direct violence as they are enacted by particular perpetrators directly upon another person or community of people.

### **Structural violence**

Violence can also be defined as an “avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs or... the impairment of human life, which lowers the actual degree to which someone is able to meet their needs below that which would otherwise be possible” (Galtung, 1993: 106). With this definition, it becomes evident that violence can occur without a specific actor and can instead be enacted through societal structures,

manifesting itself in unequal power relations and unequal life chances (Galtung, 1969). According to Farmer et al. (2006):

Structural violence is one way of describing social arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm's way. The arrangements are structural because they are embedded in the political and economic organization of our social world; they are violent because they cause injury to people (typically, not those responsible for perpetrating such inequalities).

Unlike in the case of direct violence there does not need to be a given perpetrator for structural violence to occur; rather, “historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces conspire to constrain individual agency. Structural violence is visited upon all those whose social status denies them access to the fruits of scientific and social progress” (Farmer, 2003: 79).

In his analysis of structural violence in India, Gupta (2012: 28) defines violence as “any situation in which people are unable to achieve their capacities or capabilities to their full potential”. In so far as the Indian state works to both normalise and even perpetuate extreme poverty, which obviously vastly limits the ability of people to achieve such capabilities, he argues that its relationship with India's poor is an inherently violent one. This violence, then, is embedded in particular structures of power, rather than the result of the direct actions of individuals. Structural violence profoundly shapes the life experiences of many adivasis in India. As Guha (2007: 3309) puts it, “adivasis have gained least and lost most from sixty years of political independence”. He argues that India's model of democratic development has done little for its tribal populations, and that they continue to be exploited and marginalised by the wider economic and political processes that characterise it. Recent estimates from the Planning Commission suggest that 47 per cent of adivasi households live below the poverty line, which is the highest proportion among any social group in

India (Karat and Rawal, 2014). Deprivation amongst rural adivasi populations is particularly acute: literacy rates stand at 59 per cent compared to 76 per cent for the rest of India, and most households lack access to even basic amenities (ibid).

Not only has the government failed to equalise opportunities for development and poverty alleviation for adivasi communities, but its policies have also actively dispossessed them (Guha, 2007). The role of the state in adivasi dispossession has a long history. Gadgil and Guha (1994) have shown how the intervention of the colonial state in the management of forest areas since 1864 vastly reduced the access of rural tribal communities to the natural resources on which their livelihoods depended. This was a process that was accelerated after independence, under the postcolonial state's Forest Department. Increasingly, legislation related to India's forests has sought to establish the right of the state to control over their produce, protection and management- this has engendered a situation in which adivasi livelihoods "clash with the formal laws of the land" and are consequently criminalised (Nilsen, 2012: 261). Moreover, following the economic reforms of the 1990s there has been increased predation and extraction from the natural resource rich areas of central India that are home to large tribal populations. The building of large dams and industrial mining, sanctioned by the state, have led to the displacement of millions of adivasis, riding roughshod over their rights to land and failing to provide adequate compensation or resettlement (Jayal, 2013).

These patterns of inequality and marginalisation are intensified by the relative invisibility of adivasis in the political process. Guha (2007) notes that unlike dalits and Muslims- other disadvantaged groups in India's polity- adivasis have been unable to effectively consolidate their numbers and channel their grievances through India's

democratic structures. He points out that they do not have national-level, successful political parties or leaders that represent them as a cohesive interest group, and as such their demands have been fragmented and confined to a district, or at best state, level. Compounding this, adivasis are culturally marginalised and are often conceived of as 'backward' by the state, the media, and other social communities in India. This perceived backwardness is not just related to economic status; as Baviskar (2005: 5105) writes, "the valences of that term extend beyond the material poverty of most adivasis...[it] is a more general attribute- the failure to conform to the 'civilised' standards set by non-adivasis". Because of this, adivasis often face discrimination, harassment and violence in their everyday lives.

These processes are pertinent to the experience of Bhils in southern Rajasthan. Skaria (1999) has shown that in western India colonial knowledge about 'scientific' forestry, and the desire to discipline forested areas for the production of teak, resulted in the construction of Bhil communities as wild and ignorant with regard to forest management. In doing this, colonial authorities were able to keep Bhils apart from the forests on which their livelihoods depended in the interests of commercial extraction. In west and southern Rajasthan, forest management programs were first introduced in this region in 1888, as colonial authorities sought to establish reserves in order to generate revenue from forested lands (Robbins, 1998). Prior to this, forests had been common resources used for resource gathering and grazing by village- including tribal- communities. Under the new colonial forest management regime, extensive controls were imposed: "for the most part, lands managed as forests were restricted from general use, guarded by paid state employees, and harvested for revenue" (ibid: 73).

The contention of Gadgil and Guha (1994) that these patterns of exploitation were continued after independence also holds true. Drawing on this work, in his study of the durability of poverty amongst Bhil adivasis in western India Mosse (2007) explains that primitive extraction intensified under Nehru's program of state-controlled industrial growth, and that industry and commercial agriculture benefitted from not only subsidised raw materials but also cheap labour from those who had become displaced or landless thanks to these policies. Moreover, this commercial extraction also led to the exhaustion of forest resources and increasing demand, which undercut the livelihoods of forest-dependent adivasis. Since the late 1980s and the onset of economic liberalisation, these processes have intensified. The acquisition of land by the Rajasthan government has picked up pace rapidly, causing widespread dispossession and displacement in the interests of industry, but also increasingly for real estate and tourism (Levien, 2013). Scott (1994) shows that in Udaipur district, first state forest policy and then a later emphasis on private contracting for resource extraction has led to severe environmental degradation and has made adivasi communities more and more dependent on agriculture and migration. Migration is often characterised by dangerous work and sub-minimum wages, and the integration of small-scale adivasi farmers into the market is primarily defensive: they are often forced to sell subsistence grain in order to cover debts, which themselves are often a result of the rising costs and falling prices that have accompanied the penetration of capital into peasant farming (Mosse, 2007).

There are social as well as economic mechanisms at work when it comes to understanding the structural violence enacted on Bhil adivasis. To return to Mosse's (2007) analysis, he argues that unequal categorical distinctions have their most

powerful effect on the poor: dominant social groups who control access to resources are able to enact systems of social closure and exclusion that preclude poorer, less dominant groups from securing employment and other opportunities. However, he also shows that Bhil poverty is manifested largely as “powerlessness, subordination and injustice in the face of the intentional assertion of unaccountable power” over them (ibid: 21). They are vulnerable to this not only because of the prejudices and assumptions of state officials and police, which construct adivasis as backward and uncivilized and often exploit them, but also because disadvantaged rural populations rely on informal systems of power, patronage, and brokerage which allow non-tribals to exercise power over tribals. In this sense, the material poverty of Bhils is often compounded by their low social status and cultural marginality.

In painting this picture, it is of course important to recognise the many sites of resistance that have grown up as a result of adivasi communities seeking to confront and redress these conditions (Baviskar, 1995; Sundar, 1997; Shah, 2010; Nilsen, 2012). Indeed, rebellion and resistance form a rich part of Bhil history in this region, from the Bhagat movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which acted as vehicles for religious and cultural uplift, to armed uprisings in 1913 calling for the establishment of adivasi rule in Bhil-dominated areas (these are discussed further in chapter 3). More recently, since the 1980s adivasi rights and welfare have been the focus of a number of political and social movements in the region, spearheaded by organisations such as the Adivasi Vikas Manch (Tribal Development Forum) which has mobilized adivasis around issues of rights to land, forest and livelihoods and enacted various legal and political campaigns in pursuit of them. Indeed, over the course of this thesis I argue that conversion to Christianity can also be considered a form of resistance to structural violence and the poverty and social suffering it results

in (chapter 5), and also as a means of expressing and enacting personal and caste uplift (chapter 6).

However, structural violence is an important consideration for the analysis of adivasi Christian identity for a number of reasons. Firstly, both the direct and cultural violence (discussed below) enacted against Bhil Christians are deeply embedded in existing patterns of structural violence. For example, the failure of the Indian state to act as a necessary provider of social goods such as healthcare and education in rural, adivasi-dominated regions has created space for Sangh Parivar organisations to act in this capacity instead, giving them a foothold from which to expand the influence of the BJP and promote Hindu nationalist ideology. Similarly, both the material reality of adivasi poverty and the particular cultural and institutional constructions of adivasis as uneducated and ‘backward’ provides the impetus for, and makes credible, damaging and inflammatory Hindu nationalist discourses about adivasi Christians being duped or bribed by missionaries into conversion (see chapter 4).

Adivasi Christians are also often denied access to Scheduled Tribe (ST) reservations on the basis of their religion. This is an act of structural violence because, as Gupta (2012) argues, this means that programs intended to make important contributions to the livelihoods and capabilities of the poor fail to do so, thus failing to improve their circumstances or relieve their poverty. However, as I discuss at greater length in chapter 7, it is also a *result* of structural violence. That ST Christians are denied access to these benefits is a knock-on effect of the argument used by the Indian government to refuse Scheduled Caste Christians reservations: that caste is a feature unique to Hindu society, and thus those practicing religions other than Hinduism cannot be subject to it. As Hasan (2009) notes, this reasoning is inimically bound up

in the discourse of indigenous and non-indigenous religions- one which ascribes legitimacy to the former but not the latter- and as such it is based on the logic of Hindu majoritarianism. The debate over reservations is therefore enmeshed in structural and institutional inequalities that serve to marginalize religious minority communities. Moreover, due to few resources, lack of educational opportunity, and the discriminatory attitudes of government officials- themselves forms of structural violence- adivasis often find it difficult to challenge this behaviour; although, as I will show, despite this difficulty Bhil Christians have utilised various strategies to try and confront these issues.

Not only does structural violence affect other forms of violence, but it also profoundly influences the way in which adivasi Christians conceptualise experiences of violence and how they respond to it. More generally, structural violence also shapes and constrains in various ways the choices that adivasi Christians make when it comes to identity construction and performance. While it by no means accounts for the entirety of the content of Bhil Christian identity in this region, structural violence is a theme that emerges in many areas of my analysis. In chapter 5, I argue that the narratives of healing from sickness and suffering that characterize the conversion testimonies of adivasi Christians are a product of structural violence; further, this actually has the potential to mediate tensions between Christian and non-Christians, because it makes these testimonies comprehensible to non-Christians who also experience the damaging effects of structural violence and understand the desire to convert to Christianity as an option for confronting it. In chapter 6, I suggest that Christian identity remains enmeshed in narratives of self-betterment and caste uplift; these desires are of course shaped by the cultural and economic marginalisation of adivasi

communities, and can also be seen as a reaction against characterisations of adivasis as wild, morally lax, and backward.

At the same time, the reality of a reliance on precarious livelihoods with few effective safety nets is one important consideration when it comes to how Christians choose to articulate difference and separateness from non-Christians; I argue that, in fact, this is an important factor in the desire of Bhil Christians to emphasize similarity over difference in some key areas of their social and cultural lives, and to take measures to ensure that, where possible, they remain part of shared communal life of their villages. Finally, in chapter 7 I show that for many Bhil Christians, being denied access to ST reservations is understood and articulated in terms of a more enduring and widespread experience of disenfranchisement affecting the rural poor. Moreover, it is evident that certain attempts to rectify this problem, in particular through advocacy undertaken by church organisations, ultimately have limited efficacy because they fail to challenge entrenched structures of power that serve to curtail people's access to the state.

### **Cultural violence**

In January 1999, then Prime Minister and leader of the BJP Atal Bihari Vajpayee visited the Dangs region of Gujarat following the intense outbreak of anti-Christian rioting that had broken out there in December of the previous year. After his visit, he announced that the riots called for a national debate on religious conversion in India. In making this pronouncement Vajpayee was complicit in displacing the blame for the violence onto Christians, implying that they had actually brought it upon themselves. In this way, the violence against them was justified and legitimised; rather than

censure Hindu perpetrators, he suggested that they had been understandably provoked by the alleged attempts of Christians to convert them to their religion.

Cultural violence is any aspect of a culture- for instance religion, ideology, language, art, economic doctrine, or science - that makes other forms of violence “look, even feel, right- or at least not wrong”(Galtung, 1990: 291). Cultural violence may motivate people to commit direct violence, or lead them to accept and condone structural violence, because it embeds the righteousness or inevitability of violence into their understandings of the world (Rauf, 2011). The way in which adivasis are culturally constructed as backward, wild, and of low social status- described in the previous section- serves this purpose; in this sense, structural, cultural, and direct violence obviously intersect here along the axis of being adivasi. However, Christians are also specifically subject to cultural violence due to the activities of Hindu nationalist groups.

The use of cultural violence to legitimate other forms of violence against minorities is a tactic used widely by the Sangh Parivar. For a start, Hindu nationalist ideology espouses an overtly militaristic conception of Hindu masculinity. Early twentieth century Hindu nationalist ideologues held that India had been conquered first by Muslims and then by the British because of the weakness and effeminacy of Hindu culture; as such, their cultural revivalism called for the construction of highly disciplined, physically strong male bodies which could be entrusted with the defence of the Hindu motherland (Corbridge, 1999; Banerjee, 1999). Moreover, the creation of a Hindu masculinity also served to act as a psychological resource in what Hansen (1996) refers to as ‘exorcising the Other’: building the self-respect and self-esteem of Hindus through acts of violence against minorities, in particular Muslims. However,

this is also the case for Christians. As Bauman (2014: 206) shows, anti-Christian violence is fuelled by the desire of “Hindu (and, more generally, Indian) men [to] assert their virility, manliness and vigour by dominating others, [to invert] the colonial-era hierarchy of ‘martial races’ by placing Christians (as proxies for the colonial globalising other) at the bottom, and [to] prove false the colonial accusation of Hindu effeminacy”. This demonstrates how Hindu nationalism is inimically bound up in aggressive, militaristic forms of identity making, which serve to both provoke and legitimise acts of violence against minorities.

Cultural violence is also enacted through the demonization of minorities. This is most evident when it comes to India’s Muslim community. Violence against Muslims is legitimised by Hindu nationalist discourses that stigmatise them as anti-national, alien, separatist, and a demographic threat to Hindus (Rauf, 2011). Further, as Hansen (1999: 4) argues, the success of Hindu nationalism in India has been in large part due to its ability to successfully propagate these discourses in the realm of public culture: “the public space in which a society and its constituent individuals and communities imagine, represent and recognize themselves”. Cultural violence is thus enacted on minorities through, for instance, the co-option of religious sites, symbols and spaces in to an explicitly majoritarian worldview, most notably at Ayodhya. Here, calls for the destruction of the Babri Masjid were able to strike a deep popular chord amongst Hindus because its location was imbued heavily with symbolic meaning by Hindu nationalists, who claimed that it was the birthplace of Ram; as such, the construction of a mosque on the site could be framed as an assault on the Hindu faith, and “the Babri Masjid was thus embedded in Hindu consciousness as a symbol of Muslim aggression against the Hindus” (Panikkar, 1993: 66).

Cultural violence is also at work where Hindu nationalists have sought to propagate particular versions of Indian history that demonise religious minorities, and seek explicitly to generate feelings of national consciousness rooted firmly in a Hindu religio-philosophical ethos (Visweswaran et al., 2009). Hindu nationalists have also successfully subverted narratives central to the Indian state, in particular that of secularism, by claiming that the so-called secular state is actually pandering to and favouring minorities at the expense of Hindus. These facets of Hindu cultural nationalism<sup>5</sup> have been disseminated and reinforced through various creative strategies of the Sangh Parivar, including rallies, processions, and other events, the use of Hindu symbols in public space, programs of Hindu cultural revival, the production of literature and other media, and educational provision.

It is through these means that Hindu nationalists have sought to transform Indian public culture into one that is rooted in a superior Hindu past, which can only be reinvigorated through the strong assertion of Hindutva and the assimilation of minorities into it (Hansen, 1999). In constructing an imaginary of the Indian nation as first and foremost a Hindu one, to which those of other religions or cultures must conform or face the consequences, the Sangh Parivar is responsible for enacting cultural violence against religious minorities, including Christians, as the anti-minority discourses, rhetoric, and symbolism that are deployed against them, and which circulate widely in India's public sphere, serve to both legitimize and encourage other forms of violence.

### **Theorising identity**

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<sup>5</sup> Acknowledging, of course, that Hindu culture in this sense is itself a constructed phenomenon.

Having outlined the conceptual framework for understanding violence I employ in this thesis, I turn now to the subject of identity. Fundamentally, the idea of identity relates to “people’s concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others” (Abrams and Hogg, 1988: 2). These are clearly important considerations for this thesis, which at its core seeks to understand what it means to be Bhil Christian in both an individual and a collective sense: how these meanings emerge, how they are understood and expressed, and, ultimately, how they relate to a context of anti-Christian violence. Following this, I have chosen to use identity as its central analytical concept. Acknowledging that there is little scholarly consensus when it comes to the precise definition or content of identity, this section outlines how I use the term and the critical concepts that will be employed in examining the construction of identity amongst Bhil Christians.

### **Christianity as a social identity**

As Fearon (1999) notes, identity is an inherently dualistic concept. On the one hand, it refers to a social category: a group of people signified by a particular label, which is distinguished by distinct rules for membership and supposed shared characteristics or attributes. On the other hand, identity is also deeply personal: it is a distinguishing feature or characteristic that a person sees as particularly consequential and meaningful to their sense of self (ibid).

This research is primarily concerned with the meanings and practices associated with being Christian as a social identity. By this, I mean that I am interested in the ways in which people enact their membership of the group ‘Christian’, understood as a broad category of belonging that shapes their relationship with the social world (De Fina, 2011). This does not refer to people’s ‘personal’ identities, in so far as they may

include particular characteristics that are unrelated to this. Having said this, however, there are both collective and individual aspects to social identity. In the construction of social identities, individuals associate themselves with wider networks of people who they believe share common interests, ideologies, practices, values, goals and so on with them, thus forming groups with a collective identity based on these assumed shared features (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). However, at the same time partaking of collective social identities also reconstitutes the individual's identity, as they seek to make and maintain group attachments and act in ways that signal this affiliation with and belonging to that group (Friedman and McAdam, 1992). Christian identity is therefore considered here in terms of the collective and individual construction of a social identity, looking both at the attributes, rules and meanings attached to group belonging for Christians, and how being Christian shapes individuals' self-perceptions and the performance of their identity as part of that group.

### **The social construction of identity**

Congruent with much mainstream scholarship on the subject, identity here is understood not as a fixed object but as a socially constructed phenomenon. As Hall (1994: 392) argues, identity should not be thought of as "an already accomplished fact" which is represented through particular socio-cultural practices, but rather as "a production which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation". Identity, then, is a product of particular social processes rather than simply an unchanging given, and it is created and recreated by human action and discourse. This conception of identity builds on a wider body of social constructionist theory, which emerged as an alternative to positivist-empiricist scientific philosophies and "emphasizes the historicity, the context-dependence, and

the socio-linguistically constituted character of all matters involving human activity” (Hibberd, 2005: viii). In this sense, one of the foundational assumptions of social constructionist theory is that people’s knowledge of the world is not a reflection of an objective reality ‘out there’, but is instead a product of interpretation and particular ways of understanding and categorising the world (Burr, 1995; Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002).

The genesis of this framework for understanding identity can be located in what Hall (1996: 597) describes as the development of the “sociological subject”, an intellectual shift away from Enlightenment notions of the self that stressed the autonomous, self-sufficient and ultimately unchanging essence of human identity. Instead, symbolic interactionist theorists such as Mead (1934) argued that people construct their identities through social interaction. The basic premises underlying the symbolic interactionist approach are as follows: human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them; the meaning of these things is derived from the social interaction that one has with other people; finally, these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (Blumer, 1969). As such, a person’s identity is informed by social context, which is itself created and mediated by interaction with others.

The sociological subject here, while located within broader social processes, was still one that was understood to have a ‘real’ inner core or essence; indeed, the function that was played by identity in this theoretical formulation was one of bridging the gap between an essential inner, personal world and the outer, public world (Hall, 1996). However, the idea that a person could have a fixed or autonomous inner identity came

to be challenged by various theorists. Laclau (1990) points to the contingency and changeability of identity through his work on subject position, arguing that because the social realm cannot be considered a closed, self-defined totality, there can be no fixed or definitive subject positions within it. As such, the social world provides a variety of different subject positions that are available to the individual at any one time, and it is identification with any of these that constitutes what we might consider an identity. For Giddens (1990; 1991), the concept of reflexivity is at the heart of the creation of self-definitions and understandings. He points towards the dislocating nature of modernity, arguing that detraditionalization (wherein traditions become unseated and renegotiated due to increasingly globalized flows of information and people) and disembedding (wherein social practices and relations are lifted out of local contexts and restructured across vast spans of time and space) have meant that people have had to become reflexive actors (Chaffee, 2011). Reflexivity refers to the idea that in the contemporary world, “social practices are constantly examined and reformed in light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character”(Giddens, 1990: 37-38). As such, identities themselves are reflexive: far from being an unchanging aspect of the self they are continually reconstituted, and maintained through particular narratives of the self that shift to accommodate and incorporate (constantly changing) understandings of and events in the external social world (Giddens, 1991). Following these theorisations, identity “becomes a ‘moveable’ feast, formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us” (Hall, 1992: 275).

## **Discourse and identity**

Discourse theory has been central to the de-centering of the autonomous, unchanging self or subject. For Foucault, discourse is conceptualised as a system of representation- a group of statements providing a language for talking about, and representing knowledge about, a particular historical moment (Hall, 1992: 291). It has several functions: constructing topics, defining and producing objects of knowledge, governing the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about, and regulating the conduct of others (Hall, 2001). This relationship between discourse and the subject is shown through his work on the disciplinary discourses that are at work in modern institutional sites, which seek to name and categorize people and thus produce them as particular subjects (Foucault, 1977). The individual, therefore, “is not a pre-given entity which is seized on by the exercise of power. The individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power” (Foucault, 1980: 72-73). Following Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) also see the individual as a product of particular structures and regimes of power. They argue that identities are necessarily contingent because a subject acquires its identity through being represented discursively: that is, discourses circulating in the social realm provide a set of signifiers and behavioural instructions that people who identify with a particular group follow, or attach themselves to, in order to be considered a part of that group (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002).

Given this focus on the ways in which identities are inherently constituted through discourse, itself a reflection of particular relations of power and domination, some scholars have argued that these formulations of identity obliterate the subject, leaving little scope for human action and agency (Hartsock, 1990; Benhabib, 1995). It is not my intention to undermine the subject’s agency here, but instead acknowledge that it

is necessary to consider the ways in which identities are constructed within, rather than outside of, discourse, and that as such “we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies” (Hall, 2000: 17). This does not preclude an awareness of the ways in which people dynamically construct their own identities. It does, however, alert us to the fact that certain historical, social, political and cultural contexts create particular discursive worlds in which actors must operate, and this can constrain and influence processes of identity formation (Nagel, 1994). Further, as Bleiker (2003: 29) notes, “despite their power to frame the world, discourses are not invincible”. People are able to use existing discourses as a resource in creating and articulating new ideas, and in this way they become agents of both discursive and cultural change (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 17). This is an important consideration when seeking to understand the construction of Bhil Christian identity, and the way in which Christians internalize, appropriate, and respond to existing discourses on conversion and Christianity is a recurring theme in this dissertation.

Discourse as a system of representation is not just something external that acts upon Christians- they are also engaged in constructing and deploying discourses of their own. In this sense, the idea of discourse is also one concerned with human communication, language and representation: it is “about conveying to one another what kind of people we are; which geographical, ethnic, social communities we belong to; where we stand in relation to ethical and moral questions” (De Fina, 2011: 263). In using particular language and expressing particular ideas when they talk about themselves and others, Bhil Christians are engaged in doing identity work (ibid): they are enacting their membership in the particular category of Christian.

Moreover, being alert to the discursive constructions employed by Christians has the potential more generally to elucidate what can be referred to as the “cognitive content” of Christian identity: the particular epistemological and ontological worldviews which are used by members of that group to make sense of their social, political, and material conditions and interests (Abdelal et al., 2006).

As such, the discursive formations that Christians use do not simply represent their identities, but also construct them through attaching particular meanings to being Christian, outlining membership rules, and defining boundaries between Christian and non-Christian. Engaging in, producing, and reproducing particular discourses when describing the self, one’s community, and those outside of that community, then, are important constituents of the process of constructing identity, even while acknowledging that these may be influenced and constrained by existing discursive regimes operating in the social world. Given this, both of these approaches to the relationship between discourse and identity will be important when assessing the ways in which Bhil Christians understand and represent themselves and their community.

### **Political subjectivity**

Subjectivity is a concept closely related to that of identity, and draws on many similar themes discussed in the previous section. It refers to a person’s “sense of self...the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions which constitute our sense of ‘who we are’” (Woodward, 1997: 39). While the idea of subjectivity is intimately involved with a sense of self and the interior life of the individual, it is also inevitably shaped by, and the product of, social and cultural forces. Various theorizations of the subject point to these processes. For Foucault, the subject is constituted both in processes of

self-making and of being made (Ong, 1996): as we have seen, rather than framing the subject as sovereign or autonomous, he instead sees it as produced in a field of discursive regimes and particular power relations (McHoul and Grace, 1993). This echoes the work of Bourdieu, who argued that the subject is intrinsically bounded by the structures of the social world that it inhabits, and these structures establish a set of limitations and options for the way in which the subject seeks to act and understand itself (Ortner, 2005; Sewell, 1992). However, as Ortner (2005) shows, other scholars have sought to add nuance to this kind of structural determinism by examining the idea of agency in their discussions of subjectivity, arguing that subjects can be knowing and therefore can work against the structures that make them, or fail to reproduce existing social patterns. Taken together, these theorizations serve to establish the idea that when we talk about subjectivity, this encompasses not only “the ensemble modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear and so forth that animate acting subjects [but also] the cultural and social formations that shape organize, and provoke those modes of affect, thought and so on” (Ortner, 2005: 37).

Of course, the idea of subjectivity is present in all discussion of identity undertaken in this thesis, in so far as it is concerned with how people understand themselves and create a sense of who they are. However, I choose to specifically explicate political subjectivity in this theoretical framework because I believe that it builds in valuable ways on the concept of identity when it comes to understanding the interactions between adivasi Christians and the state (chapter 7). Particular identities *are* adopted as people seek to engage with the state, but these are reflective of understandings of the self that are fundamentally shaped by their subject position “in a field of relational power” (Das et al., 2000: 1). It is these relations of power that form a focal point for my analysis of this subject. As such, the concept of political subjectivity has a

particular utility in seeking to understand the choices made by Christians in constructing and performing their identity vis-à-vis the Indian state.

Political subjectivity is understood here as the processes by which people are conceived of, and how they conceive themselves, in relation to structures of political power; for the purposes of this project, I refer specifically to the power wielded by the Indian state. As Smith (2008: 200-201) writes:

Subjectivity...is deeply tied- in a constitutive manner- with the formal and informal socio-political configurations that shape the conduct of persons and groups...these include the socio-political configurations that constitute the state.

Following on from the discussion above, I seek to examine both how adivasi Christians have been constructed as subjects by the state, and how they construct themselves as state subjects. On the one hand, adivasi Christians are clearly political actors, with their own understandings of the institutions of the state and their rights and entitlements with regard to them. They draw on these understandings in various ways in order to both represent themselves and make claims on the state. In this sense they demonstrate “politically literate subjectivity” (Madhok, 2013: 189). On the other hand, this subjectivity is externally constructed and constrained in various ways. The Indian state, for instance, acts as a “recognition-granting authority” and its agents have to power to control access to resources based on this recognition; as such, it has the potential to shape “the [subject] positions that people claim for themselves, accept in order to get access to resources, or inhabit in the process of negotiating belonging” (Krause and Schramm, 2011: 128). These are important considerations for adivasi Christians, particularly with reference to access to ST reservations.

### **Looking out: relational identity and boundary making**

Identity is also an inherently relational phenomenon. Here, I refer to the idea that “identities are never autonomous or independent but always acquire social meaning in relation to other available identity positions and other social actors” (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 598). Who we are, then, comes to be defined and constructed against who we are not. Identity is thus forged and expressed through processes that pivot on ideas of similarity and difference between the in-group (those who share a social categorization and its attributed characteristics) and the out-group (those who do not).

The notion of group boundaries has particular utility for the discussion here because it specifically captures the social process of relationality (Lamont and Molnár, 2002).

The idea of the boundary finds its genesis in work on comparative ethnicity in the social sciences, beginning with that of Barth (1969), who argued that far from being a result of unique and separate cultures practiced by discrete groups, ethnic identifications are in fact the product of the construction of boundaries between these groups. One’s identity is therefore at least partly a product of the act of maintaining the boundaries between in-group and out-group, delineated by such markers as language, cultural or religious practices, physical characteristics, political ideas and so on. Which markers are relevant to or foregrounded as a facet of group identity in relation to another are contingent and contextual, not simply reflective of the cultural core of the group. As such, much like identities themselves, boundaries do not remain static and actors can use different strategies to reinforce boundaries, to challenge them, or to shift them to include or exclude new groups or individuals (Wimmer, 2008).

Following this, boundary-making is understood here as “patterns of social interaction that give rise to and subsequently reinforce in-group members’ self-identification and outsiders’ confirmation of group distinctions” (Sanders, 2002: 237). As such, it is an essential feature of the process of defining who is a member of a particular group: both who we are and who we are not. The work of making and maintaining boundaries is an important theme that emerges in this research. While the notion of difference is often key to this process of boundary-making, it is also important to note that this concurrently opens up space for an acknowledgement of similarity. Over the course of this thesis, I show that expressions of Christian identity draw heavily on ideas of similarity as well as difference in seeking to delineate the group, resulting in boundaries between Christians and non-Christians that can be fluid or contested, and which are open to negotiation depending on context. Two of the boundary-making processes that will be discussed over the course of this thesis refer explicitly to the negotiation of similarity and difference between particular social groups: first, between Hindus and Christians, and second between different Christian denominations. However, I also draw upon these ideas to explicate another boundary that is significant to the construction of Christianity identity here: the one drawn by converts between their previous Hindu lives and their new Christian ones.

### **Looking in: the normative content of identity**

While the boundaries between different groups are a crucial component of identity formation, this should not preclude an acknowledgement of the significance of the content enclosed within those boundaries: the symbols, ideologies, values, and practices that animate a particular identity and give it meaning (Nagel, 1994). These find expression in constitutive norms, which are the normative guidelines for

practices or behaviours that a person is expected to engage in as part of a particular social group (Abdelal et al., 2006). Constitutive norms establish “the formal and informal rules that define group membership”, reflecting an ‘ideal type’ and setting particular expectations for how a member of that group should act or what they should believe; through this, they play a regulatory function in determining or influencing individual and group behaviour (ibid: 696). Moreover, because they establish the distinctive practices of a group, constitutive norms can also be understood as actions or behaviours which lead others- both inside and outside the group- to recognize the particular identity of the actor (ibid).

Various normative prescriptions associated with being Christian emerge from this study. Predominantly these relate to the following:

1. The religious or ritual life of Christians, including where and when worship takes place, the form that worship takes and the beliefs it reflects, rites of passage, and participation in festivals.
2. Healing practices, including beliefs about the nature and causes of sickness and suffering and legitimate sources of authority for healing.
3. The personal characteristics of Christians, including what moral attributes a ‘good’ Christian should have, how these should be reflected in daily life, and the habits they should engage in.
4. Behavioural taboos, including the aspects of social and cultural life that Christians should reject or refuse participation in, and which they should not.
5. Political activity, including how Christian politicians and activists should present themselves, the political issues that should be significant

to Christians, and how particular goals should be achieved; such norms may also serve a purposive function with regard to political behaviour.

These norms interact in complex ways both with other held identities, such as being adivasi, Scheduled Tribe, a convert or born Christian, and also with the imperatives of living with the various forms of violence outlined in the previous section. It is important also to note that there is not a single set of homogenous constitutive norms that apply to all Christians; as will become evident over the course of this thesis, for various reasons members of different denominations subscribe to different ritual practices, patterns of belief, and moral worldviews. Moreover, individuals may subscribe to these norms to a greater or lesser extent dependent on context.

Certainly, these norms are intimately involved in the construction and maintenance of boundaries, as they establish what Christian practice and belief looks like in contrast to that of Hindus, and in some instances are used to assert a specifically Christian identity in shared spaces. However, they are important in and of themselves because of their potential to act as ‘metaphors of collective consciousness’, providing clear statements about, and guidelines for, the intrinsic values of the community (Oberoi, 1994). In this sense, they serve the function not just of defining boundaries but also imbuing both the group and the individuals within it with a deeply held sense of their own identity: an understanding not just of who we are in relation to others, but of *what* we are and what meanings that holds (Nagel, 1994). It is important, therefore, not to side line the actual content of identity, even while acknowledging the situational contexts that contribute to its construction.

## Chapter outline

Following this introductory chapter, the structure of the remainder of this thesis is as follows. Chapter 2 sets out the methodology employed in carrying out this research. Chapter 3 then situates the questions examined in this thesis within their broader historical and social context, looking at the ways in which Bhil identity has been constructed over time and how it has interacted with processes of ‘Hinduization’, including Hindu nationalism. It also sets out the early history of Christianity in this region, beginning with the European missions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, providing a foundation for the examination of contemporary Bhil Christian identity that is the focus of the rest of the thesis.

Broadly speaking, the empirical chapters of this thesis each engage with a particular type of violence that has been pertinent to the experiences of Christians in Udaipur district, and which has had clear repercussions for processes of identity construction here.<sup>6</sup> Chapter 4 examines the discourses about Christianity and conversion that are deployed by the Sangh Parivar in Udaipur district, and the counter-discourses that are utilized both by the institutional church leadership and village Christians as they seek to engage with and resist this form of cultural violence. It therefore demonstrates the ways in which Hindu nationalist discourse shapes the way in which Christians represent themselves, but also the fact that it can be used by Christians as a resource in articulating their identities in new ways. I show that leaders from the CNI and the Catholic church are invested in portraying their churches as non-converting, and distance themselves from the practices of the more obviously evangelical Pentecostal

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<sup>6</sup> While of course recognising that these types of violence overlap, interact, and are mutually reinforcing.

church. As such, I argue that anti-Christian discourse- and in particular its focus on conversion- has in fact resulted in the construction of intra-Christian difference, with boundaries being drawn between proselytizing and non-proselytizing denominations. For its part, the Pentecostal church does not reject its characterization as a proselytizing religion, but instead seeks in various ways to foreground Christian indigeneity and elements of continuity that persist after conversion, thus challenging the focus on rupture and foreignness that characterises Hindu nationalist rhetoric on the subject. Finally, this chapter explores the counter-discourses employed by village Christians in confronting anti-Christian violence, which speak directly to discursive constructions of adivasi Christians as gullible, greedy, or coerced into conversion by emphasizing personal agency, choice, and strength of faith.

Chapter 5 explores the intersections of structural violence, conversion, and anti-Christian violence through an examination of the role of conversion narratives in the construction of Christian identity in this district. Focusing on Catholic and Pentecostal converts, it examines conversion to Christianity- which is almost always the result of spiritual healing- as an act of resistance against the poverty and precarity that punctuates Bhil lives in this region, as people seek to take control over their own health and well-being where other options for doing so are limited. Following on from this, I argue that the primacy of the healing experience in conversion narratives can have important repercussions for mediating inter-group relationships between Christians and non-Christians, as the shared experience of structural violence and poverty contributes to making conversion acceptable to non-Christians, who can understand it as a means for seeking health rather than as a rejection of the Hindu religion. This is further underpinned by the fact that converts place their experience of Christian healing within a cosmological framework that is recognisable to the wider

Bhil community, rather than seeking to distance themselves from existing local understandings about the causes of sickness and suffering.

In chapter 6 I show that Catholic and Pentecostal converts face differential levels of direct violence, and use this as a starting point from which to examine the different cultural constructions of identity that exist between the two communities. I suggest that the fact the Pentecostal converts belong to a church with relatively strict expectations for lifestyle change after conversion, forms of worship that are very distinct from Hindu ones, and an clear idiom of caste uplift, has resulted in their experiencing a higher level of direct violence than Catholic converts. This has had clear repercussions for the identity of Pentecostal Christians in this region, leading them to assert their faith more strongly and to discursively construct firm boundaries between Christians and Hindus. These boundaries emphasize the differences between the two communities, and work to place Christians in a position of moral superiority over Hindus. Catholic converts, on the other hand, face less violence, as they belong to a church that does not have such strict membership rules and retain many elements of their pre-conversion lives. Unlike Pentecostals, they express high levels of similarity with Hindus. This is, I argue a function of the fact that violence has not served to construct such exclusionary boundaries between Christian and Hindu in this instance, but it is also a purposive act on the part of Catholic converts as they seek to reduce the potential for conflict through an assertion of similarity. However it is important not to overstate the cultural distance from Hindus that conversion to Christianity creates, even for Pentecostals. This chapter goes on to show that even where they may exhibit some elements of rupture, Christians from both denominations are often engaged in efforts to continue- as far as possible- to perform

communal obligations, remain embedded in existing social networks, and maintain relational ties with other members of their villages.

Finally, Chapter 7 looks at structural violence as it is enacted on Christians specifically as they are denied access to Scheduled Tribe reservations, while also recognising that this must be understood as part of a broader experience of violence that is perpetrated by the state on rural adivasi communities more generally. This chapter looks at village level engagements with the local state in order to understand Christians as political actors, and to examine how issues of religious identity and political subjectivity intersect. The focus here is on the strategies that are employed by Bhil Christians as they negotiate the discrimination they face at the hands of local state actors. I argue that while some forms of resistance, in particular advocacy carried out by church organisations, have been effective to some extent, their efficacy is limited where it fails to fundamentally alter the inequalities of power that adivasis routinely face in their engagements with the state. However, it is also the case that Christians have been able to secure access to institutional power at a local level through gram panchayat institutions, and in such instances they have been successful in challenging the political influence of Hindu nationalism and redressing the violence they have faced as a result of it.

Chapter 8 summarizes the key findings that emerge from this study. It argues that a study of the construction of Bhil Christian identity in Udaipur district shows clearly that they are not simply victims of Hindu nationalist violence, but negotiate and resist it in creative and proactive ways. This has involved a dualistic process of strategically emphasizing both difference and similarity between Christians and Hindus, which in various ways has sought to challenge and undermine the damaging constructions of

Christianity that are propagated by the Sangh Parivar, while also foregrounding a Christian identity based on uplift, agency and assertion in the face of anti- Christian violence.

## **2. Methodology**

The material in this thesis draws on a case study of processes of identity construction amongst Bhil Christian in Udaipur district, Rajasthan, based on the use of qualitative research methods. A case study was considered appropriate here firstly because the research questions I am asking are both descriptive and exploratory (Yin, 2011): what is happening here with regard to the construction of Christian identity, why, and how? Secondly, evaluating and understanding the context in which this has occurred is key to my enquiry. This suggests that data should be collected in and from a real-world setting in order to generate a fuller understanding of the processes at play here (ibid). Finally, one of the central challenges facing the researcher in studies of identity is its inherent complexity, variation, and contingency. The high level of detail, contextual knowledge, and thick description generated by case study methodology means it is well suited to capture and illustrate this complexity.

### **Field site selection**

The findings of this thesis are drawn from eleven months of fieldwork that were carried out between November 2012 and October 2013 in Udaipur district, southern Rajasthan. Rajasthan can be considered a communally sensitive Indian state. It has seen bipolar electoral competition between the BJP and the INC since 1990, and when in power BJP state governments have been active in giving ideological, political and financial support to Sangh Parivar organisations (Sahoo, 2013a). This has been associated with a rise in violence against minorities in the state, including some high-

profile incidences of anti-Christian violence (Srivastara, 2004; Rajalakshmi, 2005; Sahoo, 2013a; Jha, 2013).

Udaipur district was selected for this research for several reasons. First, it has a significant adivasi population: 50 per cent of the district's population is Scheduled Tribe.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, it is one of the areas in Rajasthan that has seen a large organisational effort from the Sangh Parivar since the 1990s, as part of a broader pattern of the aggressive mobilisation of Hindu nationalist groups in the tribal regions of south Rajasthan, often backed by- and in turn building stronger constituencies for- the BJP. The activism of the Sangh Parivar has not only resulted in the BJP expanding its presence in these rural adivasi areas, but has also meant that a "growing religious fundamentalism has penetrated the social psyche" in the communities in which they work (Lodha, 2004: 5461). According to a report put out by the People's Union for Civil Liberties, Rajasthan, Udaipur has seen a number of violent anti-minority incidents as a direct result of this, particularly those targeting tribal Christians (Srivastara, 2004).

Finally, Udaipur district has had a Christian presence since the European missions of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, first with the arrival of Scottish Presbyterians in 1877, and later French Capuchin Catholics in the 1930s. Most recently, Udaipur has become an important centre of activity for the region's growing Pentecostal movement. All of these churches' missions have been focused heavily amongst Bhil communities, and Bhils comprise the vast majority of Christians in this area. In this sense, Christianity in Udaipur can usefully be characterised as tribal. These factors serve to make it an

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<sup>7</sup> Bhils account for around 30 per cent of this population.

appropriate field site for an enquiry into the construction of adivasi Christian identity in the context of Hindu nationalism.

It became clear early on that the Christian community in this area could not be treated as a monolith, and that there was significant divergence in belief, practice and experience between the major denominations in the area, namely Church of North India or CNI (Protestant), Catholic, and Pentecostal. It was important to capture this diversity in my work, and as such denomination was an important categorical variable within the broader case study on the construction of Christian identity in this area.

Given this, three churches, one of each denomination, were chosen as sites for carrying out this research, each located in a different village in the adjacent tehsils (blocks or sub-districts) of Jhadol and Girwa.

**Table 1: Field site population totals**

Village	Tehsil	Church denomination	Total population	ST population (%)	Approx. Christian population (%) <sup>8</sup>
Pada	Girwa	Pentecostal	4588	97	4
Nai	Jhadol	CNI	2169	80	1
Jhamliya	Jhadol	Catholic	728	98	2

*Source: Census of India 2011*

Data was primarily gathered in the villages in which these churches were located:

Pada (Pentecostal), Jhamliya (Catholic) and Nai (CNI).<sup>9</sup> These can further be divided into convert and non-convert villages: in Pada and Jhamliya, the Christian communities are predominantly made up of converts from Hinduism to either Pentecostalism or Catholicism, while in Nai it is made up of people who have been Christians for several generations, whose families converted in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early

<sup>8</sup> These figures are based on my own estimates, as there is inadequate official enumeration of Christians, particularly in convert villages.

<sup>9</sup> I have changed the names of these villages to enhance the anonymity of respondents.

20<sup>th</sup> centuries and joined what was then the Presbyterian church- this was to be brought under the umbrella of the CNI in 1970.

As shown above, these villages all had significant Christian populations- either accounting for, or a result of, the presence of a church- and this made consistent access to members of the congregations and church leadership there easier. Moreover, they were obvious and frequent centres of Christian activity, which provided a good arena in which to conduct participant observation. In terms of accessibility, the villages were located within 20 km of each other and were situated close to the main road from Udaipur, which was served relatively well by public transport. In this sense, the field settings fulfilled many recommended criteria for research sites (Spradley, 1980). It is worth noting, however, that my sampling methods (discussed further below) meant that in a few cases interviews were carried out with people who attended these churches but lived in other villages in the immediate area.

It was also the case that in the beginning stages of my fieldwork I conducted some preliminary group interviews with CNI congregations in two villages in the neighbouring tehsil of Kherwara, but did not go on to do any further work there. The data I obtained from these interviews is used where valuable to discussion, and is flagged up accordingly. Data was also collected in Udaipur city itself, which is where the parent churches of all three village churches are located. As such, it is home to many of their senior clergy and administration, who were also interviewed as part of this research. These interviews were usually carried out in English, and allowed me to get a sense of the broader context of Christian history, politics, institutions, and demography in the region as a whole.

## **Research methods**

This is a qualitative research study that adopts an ethnographic perspective: while drawing heavily on theories and practices of inquiry utilized in comprehensive ethnographies, it takes a more focused approach in order to study a particular aspect of the lives and practices of the study participants (Green and Bloome, 2014)- in this case, their Christian identity. The predominant methods of data collection were participant observation and semi-structured interviews carried out with both church leaders and village Christians. Participant observation is an appropriate method for collecting data where the research problem is concerned with understanding human meanings and interactions from the point of view of insiders, where little is known about the phenomenon, where the phenomenon under investigation is observable within the practice of people's everyday life, and where the questions being studied are appropriate for a case study (Jorgensen, 1989). This makes it a valuable methodology for this research enquiry. Participant observation was carried out through spending time in the villages in which I worked. Initially, this primarily involved attending Sunday services, prayer meetings and other activities that were organised by the church. These were not only easy points of entry through which I could begin to build a picture of the Christian community in these areas, but also an arena in which people could learn who I was, become accustomed to my presence, and talk to me informally. Throughout the year I came to gather further observational information about the area through frequent travel around the villages on foot and by public transport, through spending time with families in their homes and on their land, and by attending village functions. For the most part, data was collected mentally or with brief notes throughout the day and then written up into fully developed field

notes in the evening; in some cases, when it was not intrusive, I recorded oral notes for transcription later.

Participant observation was necessary to supplement the data I gathered through semi-structured interviews because there are certain aspects of people's lives that cannot be captured simply through asking questions. These include particular behavioural or cultural norms that are taken for granted by those who participate in them, or social actions and calculations that take place without much conscious thought being given to them (Guest, Namey and Mitchell, 2012). This is pertinent particularly when it comes to aspects of religious practice, the rituals and intricacies of which are often far better captured through observation than simply asking what happens, particularly when people perform them on a regular or routine basis. Participant observation allowed me to become familiar with patterns of behaviour and the everyday social life of the communities in which I worked (Bernard, 1994), and, to some extent, helped to reduce the effect of reactive behaviour that might alter people's actions and interactions in front of an unfamiliar person (Fetterman, 2010). It also enhanced the interviews I conducted, allowing me both to formulate meaningful and relevant questions and to more intuitively understand and interpret the answers that people gave to them (Bernard, 1994).

Augmented by participant observation, semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection used for this thesis. Semi-structured interviews were chosen here because they both allowed me to suggest certain themes that were pertinent to my understanding of the research topic, as well allowing the respondents the space to discuss issues and lead the conversation in directions that they deemed important (Willis, 2006). This space was vital given the social constructionist focus of my work,

and the idea that people are constantly engaged in producing, maintaining, and revising their identities and attaching meaning to those processes. While there were certain themes I sought to explore in most of our interactions- for instance conversion stories, ritual practices, difficulties faced as a result of religious identity, and similarities and differences between Hindus and Christians- these were not always addressed in every interview, and where people brought up other issues spontaneously these were explored as part of the discussion. I also allowed space for people to ask me questions, which often led to conversations that provided further contextual information for my study.

Semi-structured interviews thus allowed people to express their experiences and understandings without being bound too strictly by a rigid and potentially inadequate set of questions. Informed consent was always obtained orally before interviews were carried out, due to the low levels of literacy anticipated in the villages in which I worked and concern over the way in which an official form might be received given the potential sensitivity of my enquiry. Interviews were recorded, and transcribed later. They were carried out with an interpreter, as I did not speak the local language fluently- this is discussed more extensively below, where I also address issues of researcher positionality and reflexivity. In total, formal interviews were carried out with 64 individuals. This included 15 church leaders (including priests, pastors, and nuns), and 49 village Christians: 21 Pentecostals, 18 Catholics, and 10 CNI members (with the addition of the two focus groups mentioned above).

As I was unable to interview equal numbers of people from each denomination my three research sites are not treated as directly comparative cross-case studies, although points of similarity and difference between denominations are frequently evident and

analytically significant throughout this thesis. I had differential levels of access to each community and did not spend the same amount of time in each. The Pentecostal community is large compared to other denominations, and the church has links with- and periodically hosts- foreign visitors; this meant it was logistically easier to locate research respondents, and they were often more used to seeing and interacting with outsiders. The Catholic community with which I worked was smaller and more remote and so took longer to establish ties with; however, the village of Jhamliya itself was quite compact, making visiting respondents relatively easy once these ties were established. Finally, the CNI community at Nai proved more difficult to access given the pastor, a key gatekeeper, did not actually live in the village but in Udaipur, and the fact that the Christian population was smaller and widely spread out geographically- as such it was the last site that I located and it was more challenging to both identify and interview people within it. Acknowledging the different profiles of these communities, then, my choice of three different research sites is not intended to be directly comparative, but instead serves to diversify my sample in a way that reflects the range of identities of the Christian community here.

As noted above, I also carried out two semi- structured group discussions with CNI congregations in in the early stages of my fieldwork, which are also used in this thesis where pertinent. These were interviews taken with 10-13 church members after Sunday services, and were used as an initial method for data collection because of their utility in the preliminary and exploratory phases of research (Litosseliti, 2003); they allowed me to quickly gain a better sense of the social context in which I was working, to gather a wide range of information in a relatively short time, and to gauge which topics resonated particularly with participants. Of course, it is also the case that the utility of data that is collected from group settings is highly dependent on the

particular dynamics of the group. Homogeneity is therefore an important element in focus group discussions, as “homogenous groups...are generally more comfortable and open with each other” (Keown, 1983: 66). In the context of my research, the significant shared characteristic of participants was their Christian identity and their attendance of the same church. An element of comfort between the participants clearly existed because of that. However there was diversity in terms of age and gender in these groups, and this could have resulted in power imbalances leading to inhibition and deference on the part of certain participants (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014). As such, this data is used primarily in understanding the collective actions of the community in relation to the state, rather than in any discussion of individual experience or personal identity construction.

### **Positionality, reflexivity, and ethics**

In qualitative research, the researcher cannot be considered an objective, external observer of social phenomenon. Instead, it is the case that:

A researcher’s social, cultural and subject positions (and other psychological processes) affect: the questions they ask; how they frame them...their relations with those they research in the field or through interviews; interpretations they place on empirical evidence; access to data, institutions and outlets for research dissemination; and the likelihood they will be listened to and heard. (Gregory et al., 1999: 556)

As such, it is important to outline here my understanding of my position as a researcher in the field, due to the effect this inevitably had on the way I carried out and interpret my research. It also serves to contextualise my findings for the reader, by clarifying further the relationships between my research setting, my respondents, and myself.

### **Negotiating researcher positions in the field**

Although I spent a significant period of time in the field, and as my research progressed was increasingly able to understand daily life in the village and interact with people comfortably, my status as an outsider was always apparent: I was clearly a foreigner (*videshi*), I did not speak the local languages well, and I did not live permanently in any of the villages I studied due to the necessity of travelling between several different field sites. This inevitably had an effect on the information I was able to gather and on what terms. As an outsider, it took me some time to orient myself within my research environment, to gain knowledge of the wider context in which it took place, to meet people and develop rapport with them, and to learn how to ask meaningful questions. The social and cultural distance between myself and my respondents was at all times obvious, although by spending time in the field, involving myself in church services, meetings, celebrations and other similar activities, and attempting to speak with people in their own language I tried to lessen this as far as possible. I was also a 'privileged outsider' in this setting, due to factors such as my access to resources, level of education, and my ability to come and go from my research sites (Kerstetter, 2012). I tried to be sensitive to potential power imbalances as a result of this, but of course this does not mean that they were not present as I carried out my research (Burawoy, 1991).

The specific nature of my research enquiry generated some important considerations with regard to my positionality in this project. As an English-speaking, western foreigner interested in studying Christianity, it was often immediately assumed that I was myself Christian (I am not), or- particularly in the case of the Pentecostal church, which sometimes hosts foreign visitors- a church worker, even a missionary. While I was transparent in the fact that I was not a Christian, this assumption often generated a kind of insider status with Christian respondents; this was helped also by my

attendance of church and my familiarity with some aspects of Christian belief and practice from growing up in the UK. Moreover, even if I was not a Christian it was immediately presumed I was not a Hindu, and this contributed to establishing rapport and my ability to talk with people about potentially sensitive subjects related to Hindu-Christian difference and conflict.

However, this also generated some difficulties that it was necessary to constantly negotiate throughout my fieldwork. My foremost concern in this regard was that this automatic assumption about my identity might put either myself or the Christian community at risk, especially given that Hindu nationalist discourse directly links Christian conversion with foreign missionaries and funding. As such, before I began any fieldwork in rural areas I consulted extensively with the church leadership in Udaipur city, explained my research purpose, and made initial trips into the field only under their advice and often accompaniment. Whilst in the field, I was a highly visible presence in my research sites, which posed potential problems when it came to ensuring the anonymity of respondents. Even though throughout the period of my fieldwork Hindu-Christian tensions remained very low, I endeavoured to remain aware of the ways in which my presence might affect the lives of respondents and to anticipate any potential harm. I did this through open discussion of these issues with church leaders and interviewees, and was sure to follow strict procedures regarding consent and confidentiality.

Before interviews informed consent was always obtained from participants, and my status as a researcher and the subject and purpose of my study was always made clear.

The stated benefits of participation were always confined to an academic context.<sup>10</sup> As mentioned above, I used oral consent measures to facilitate gathering consent, given that literacy levels are low amongst adivasi populations in this region and there remained the possibility of people being uncomfortable with signing something even if they were able to do so. It was always emphasized that respondents could refuse to participate in interviews at all, refuse to answer particular questions, or withdraw their consent for the interview at any time. Semi-structured interviews, which often took the form of more free-flowing conversations, required the constant evaluation of consent and issues of control and transparency, and I often returned to the subject of consent more than once over the course of interviews. Power is also an issue in the researcher-researched relationship more generally, and it is important to acknowledge that people may have felt that they *had* to talk to me, either because a pastor or priest had told them to, or else because of perceived imbalances in social and material status between myself and my informants. As far as possible, I tried to be alert and responsive to these dynamics, and to bring interviews to a quicker close if they seemed to be present.

Participant observation also presents an ethical issue with regards to informed consent, as the researcher cannot ensure that they gain consent from all those interacted with or observed (Guest, Namey and Mitchell, 2012). However, my role as a researcher was made clear on arrival in any new participant arena- usually announced in church- and I was always straightforward about my purpose of collecting data when people approached me in a non-interview setting. In order to maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in data transcription so that the

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<sup>10</sup> In some cases respondents found it difficult to understand what it meant to be doing a PhD; in these instances, I worked with my interpreter to find a way of explaining this in meaningful terms.

identity of participants was safeguarded as far as possible at all stages in the research process. This consideration also influenced my favouring of oral consent procedures, as there may be risks to anonymity associated with keeping copies of signed consent forms (Thorne, 1980). Alongside the importance of informed consent, my interpreter was also well briefed in issues of confidentiality.

The issue of my assumed identity as a Christian was compounded by the fact that obvious first points of contact for beginning my fieldwork were with church leaders in Udaipur. My concern in this respect was that the automatic assumptions people made about my religious identity, coupled with too strong an affiliation with the institutional church, might lead to a kind of social acceptability bias where interviewees would simply tell me what they thought they should say, or what they believed I would want to hear. However, I ultimately found that my participation and visibility in the life of the local churches became necessary for several reasons. First, initial attempts to access Christian communities through other gatekeepers, such as NGO employees, led to guarded responses on the part of Christians to my enquiries. This is unsurprising, as I was accompanied by people who were already positioned in certain ways (i.e. as NGO workers) within these villages; my questions about Christian religious practice made little sense in these situations, and were often simply confusing or suspicious. Second, and most importantly, the context of Hindu nationalist influence and activity meant that people could be reluctant to talk openly to unknown outsiders about their religious identity. It was only once I began to attend church regularly, and to be seen with or directly introduced by local pastors, that Christians in my village field sites began to willingly talk with me.

As I spent longer in the field a greater level of familiarity was built with my respondents, and I felt that people were able to talk to me more freely about the way

that they understood and practiced Christianity. It was also the case that as I worked snowball sampling allowed me to use existing informants to identify new ones, meaning that I was not reliant on church authorities to act as gatekeepers for the entire research period. Moreover, as discussed further below, snowballing is of particular importance and efficacy in identifying members of stigmatized groups (Noy, 2008): being introduced by other, familiar members of the Christian community often meant that people were happier to talk to me about their religion, and any problems they had faced because of it. Alongside this I also actively tried to mitigate potential respondent bias in a number of ways, including through use of participant observation as well as interview data; the reappraisal and rewording of ineffective questions after testing; asking a question more than once, in different ways, or asking for points of clarification during interviews; by conducting interviews in people's homes instead of the church, where possible, and without pastors present; and by triangulating data with other sources such as church leaders, some non-Christian villagers, NGO staff, and local scholars and researchers.

This being said, my positionality meant that encountering some degree of acceptability bias as I carried out my research was unavoidable. However, in some respects bias of this sort was useful to my work. For instance, the fact that people inevitably sometimes told me what they thought they should say was often helpful in developing my understanding of the idealised norms associated with Christian identity, and of course by giving answers like this people were very much engaged in 'doing' identity and projecting a certain image of what it means to be Christian. This issue is taken up particularly in chapter 6. As such, my position as a researcher should not be seen simply as a methodological obstacle to be overcome as far as possible, but as a useful source of particular kinds of data when considered reflexively.

Given that this thesis is concerned with the relationships between Christian and Hindu communities in this district, it is important to note here that its findings are based predominantly on observations of, and interviews with, Bhil Christians. Certainly it was always my intention to foreground the narratives of Christians given the analytical focus of my work, but initially I had planned to get a sense of ‘both sides of the story’. However, in the end practical considerations precluded carrying out any sustained work amongst Hindus. Due to the sensitive nature of my research it was important to establish and maintain trust with Christian respondents and to demonstrate that I was interested in hearing their stories; this is something that I felt would be undermined if I had tried to engage on the same topic with non-Christians. This obviously has repercussions for the nature of the data I was able to collect and thus the conclusions that can be drawn from it, as I rely almost exclusively on Christian accounts of violence and understandings of inter-group relationships. As such, this thesis does not seek to provide any comprehensive analysis of why individuals engage in anti-Christian violence, or how the expressions of Christian identity that I describe in this study are received and interpreted by Hindus. Again, this is justified here as the stated aim of this work is to shift attention on to the construction of minority identity in the context of Hindu nationalist violence. However, this may provide a fruitful avenue for future research, particularly in terms of more concretely evaluating the ways in which identity construction amongst minority groups is understood by the majority community, and what role this plays in fomenting or diffusing collective violence.

### **Language, translation, and the use of interpreters**

My use of an interpreter was also necessary in the field. I am not fluent in Hindi and I was not able to speak it at a level that allowed me to express and capture the meanings necessary for an enquiry of this type. Moreover, in the villages in which I was working it was more difficult for me to communicate because most people primarily speak the regional language of Vagri; even though most would switch to Hindi when talking to me, it was usually spoken with vocabulary and variations in pronunciation that I found hard to follow.

The use of interpreters must be considered reflexively because they are not passive in the research process, simply relaying data between informant and researcher, but actively participate in data production: they take their own meanings from, and therefore shape, information before it reaches the researcher and may make judgements about which information it is even necessary to convey (Burja, 2006). Moreover, this effect is heightened given that language does not simply express meaning but constructs it (Temple and Young, 2004). This is an important consideration here, as a central contention of this thesis is that discourse- considered in terms of the way in which people talk about themselves and others- is an important element in the construction of identity.

I took several steps to try and address these issues. I was sure to discuss my research project and its aims in clear detail with my interpreter, both so that she understood the nature and purpose of the questions she would be asking, and because she would often have to clarify my work and position to respondents. Once we had carried out several interviews together and I was confident that she understood my research, it was often the case that I would explain what information I needed to gain from a particular line of enquiry and why, and then draw on her ability to word questions in a way that

would make them intelligible, meaningful, and appropriate to respondents. After interviews were taken, recordings or notes would always be translated and transcribed collaboratively: we went over each interview together, so that she was able to expand upon her initial translations in the field and I was able to ask for any points of clarification. This kind of collaboration also helped in terms of recalling elements of interviews such as people's tone of voice, the way they interacted with us and other people, and any non-verbal cues they gave.

In terms of positionality, throughout the course of my research I had to continually consider not only my own impact on the research process but also that of my interpreter as an active participant in the production of data (Temple and Young, 2004). My interpreter was the same age, gender, and marital status as me: in terms of these subject positions, we could be treated similarly in the villages we worked in. However, she was Hindu, and above I mentioned that my assumed position as non-Hindu meant that it was easier to discuss issues of Hindu-Christian conflict with my respondents. This could potentially have been compromised by the religious identity of my interpreter. However, although she was Hindu she did not simply accompany me for interviews but also attended church services, meetings, celebrations and other similar events. This meant not only that her presence became familiar along with mine, but also that it was obvious that she was respectful of, and happy to participate in, Christian practices. Respondents tended to react very favourably to this. This added a further nuance to the insider-outsider dynamics that were present in interviews, as it was often the case that her being Hindu meant that people would explain in greater detail aspects of Christian belief and practice that they assumed I was already familiar with.

Moreover, again blurring any straightforward dichotomies, I believe that the presence of my interpreter also provided important elements of ‘insider-ness’ to our interactions with people. She grew up in a village in Udaipur district, so could not only speak fluently in the local dialect but was able to converse freely and easily with respondents and guide me in points of propriety and behaviour. This meant that social rapport was much easier to establish than it would have been on my own. She was also able to gauge social dynamics that I may have missed, indicate to me when she thought somebody was uncomfortable or unable to talk freely because of the presence of another person, or when they were saying something incongruous or that required further clarification. This provided me with additional information to assess and amend the trajectory of interviews where necessary. In this sense, I believe that the different ways in which we were both insider and outsider to the communities under study were usually complimentary rather than contradictory.

### **Sampling**

As with most qualitative studies of this kind, non-probability sampling was used to obtain data for this thesis. This was due to the need to target a specific population with reference to the research question (Christians, and Bhil Christians in particular), the fact that this population is not enumerated and is often ‘hidden’ to official records and outside observers, and of course the nature of my research enquiry: the aim here is to explore the subjective meanings attached to Christian identity as a social phenomenon, which does not require me to generate significant statistical inferences about the Christian population as a whole.

During the initial, exploratory phase of my research I conducted what might be described as ‘expert’ sampling: locating individuals who have particularly high levels

of knowledge about the subject under study, who can help to delineate and define areas of interest, and who may then act as gatekeepers to help identify further respondents for research. For the purposes of my fieldwork, this was usually church leaders, administrators, and Christian academics who worked in Udaipur city. Convenience sampling did take place in some cases: as I spent time in the villages, I occasionally met people who fit the criteria for study by chance. However, snowballing was the primary sampling method used here, as individuals I talked to referred or introduced me to others within the Christian community, who then went on to do the same. Snowball sampling was not only efficacious, it was to some degree necessary given the context of anti-Christian violence: as Noy (2008) points out, snowballing is of particular importance in identifying members of stigmatized groups, who might otherwise be hard to find or engage with. In the latter stages of data collection, sampling was more overtly purposive as I aimed to capture heterogeneity along the lines of gender, age, economic status and in particular denomination in order to gather as wide a range of perspectives as possible. I also purposely looked to interview individuals with unique features that were pertinent to this study, for instance Christians who had occupied roles in village politics, or held positions of authority in the church. Snowballing was still used here, but with particular criteria for potential respondents in mind.

The sampling methods used here do present a limitation to this study. Respondents identified in snowball sampling are of course not randomly drawn but are instead a product of the subjective choices made by the initially selected respondents (Black and Champion, 1976). While a reliance on existing relationships means it is a particularly effective method for identifying and accessing respondents where the

subject of the study may be sensitive in nature- an important consideration here- this also means that there are inherent problems of bias towards people with similar social characteristics as the initial contacts (Faugier and Sargeant, 1997). I used purposive sampling to help to reduce this effect, but I am aware that this could not fully eliminate it. As such, it should be acknowledged that my reliance on nonprobability sampling methods limits the generalizability of these findings to any larger population than the one under study. However, as is the case with most qualitative research, the external validity of this study lies not in statistical but theoretical inference; as such, I do not seek to generate conclusions that can be extended to a larger population, but instead examine and explicate social processes related to violence and identity construction that may have potential relevance and explanatory value in diverse settings (Davies, 1998).

### **3. Intersecting identities: Being Bhil, Hindu and Christian in Udaipur district**

This chapter situates the analysis of Christian identity construction in Udaipur district within its broader historical and social context. First, it looks at how Bhil identity has developed over time. It highlights the way in which the Bhil tribe has been constructed both in its interactions with other castes and by the administrative practices of the colonial and postcolonial state, but also how these designations have been appropriated and inhabited by Bhil people themselves. Second, it outlines processes of ‘Hinduization’ amongst Bhils, in particular the Bhagat movements of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and the later penetration of Hindu nationalism. This engages with the ways in which Hindu and adivasi identity have interacted, while also elucidating the socio-political context in which anti-Christian violence has emerged in this area. Finally, this chapter sets out the history of Christianity in the region, from the first missionary encounters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the introduction of Pentecostalism in the 1960s. It gives a historical perspective on early manifestations of Bhil Christian identity, providing the foundation from which to explore its contemporary construction in relation to anti-Christian violence.

#### **The Bhil tribe in southern Rajasthan**

The Bhil tribe is a designated Scheduled Tribe of India, numbering around 17 million people located primarily in the central Indian belt of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra. It is the second most populous tribal group in the state of Rajasthan, and constitutes around 30 per cent of the 1.5 million ST population of Udaipur district.

**Table 2. ST and Bhil populations totals in India**

	<b>Total population</b>	<b>ST population</b>	<b>Bhil population</b>
<b>India</b>	1 210 193 422	104 618 720	17 071 049
<b>Rajasthan</b>	68 548 437	9 254 039	3 609 075
<b>Udaipur</b>	3 068 420	1 525 289	457 587

*Source: Census of India 2011*

The designation of Bhils as a ‘tribe’- that is, as a culturally distinct group, ethnically and socially separate from Hindu caste society- has a long and contested history.

While the exact etymology of the term is uncertain, the first references to the Bhils as an ancient, aboriginal Indian race can be found in Sanskritic literature: the

Mahabarata and the Ramayana both make mention of outcaste, forest-dwelling peoples, for example the Nishadas, who were the supposed ancestors of non- Aryan tribes and in particular the Bhils. Later, it has been suggested that term was used

during the medieval period of Rajput expansion in the state to describe groups living in Rajasthan’s hilly tracts, which had been subjected to Rajput rule and who were deemed culturally backward (Kamphorst, 2008). By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such

descriptions had been seized upon by colonial observers, who perpetuated the idea of contemporary Bhils as the descendants of an ancient race, and codified this through racial science, ethnography and administrative practice (Weisgrau, 2013). In this way, the Bhil tribe was constructed: racially separate from caste Hindu society, and with distinct physical, linguistic and cultural characteristics.

Contemporary scholarship has challenged these assumptions about the separation between ‘tribal’ and ‘caste’ society. Beteille (1986) rejects the idea that India’s tribes are its indigenous inhabitants, obviously distinguishable racially, culturally and

spatially from mainstream Hindu society. He argues instead for an acknowledgement of long histories of interaction and integration between so-called tribal and non-tribal populations. This is congruent with other recent enquiries into Bhil society and its interactions with other groups, which point to more recent processes of social, political, and economic stratification that account for the observed separation and ultimately marginalisation of Rajasthan's tribes (Hardiman, 1987; Unnithan-Kumar, 1997). This suggests localised processes of 'devolution' wherein tribal communities, previously agricultural cultivators *within* the caste system, gradually lost their land and status to more powerful social groups (Weisgrau, 2013).

This means, then, that Bhil is an ascribed identity that incorporates communities from a range of historical, linguistic, cultural, and occupational backgrounds; it is important to note that the designation 'Bhil' enforces a kind of conceptual unity on a group that contains much internal diversity (Hardiman, 2006). At the same time, it is meaningful because these long-held assumptions about Bhil origins, attributes, and exceptionalism still hold significant sway in Rajasthan's public and administrative culture. They also continue to inform processes of identity making for Bhil communities as they seek to represent themselves and organise politically, particularly in terms of being adivasi (original inhabitants).

### **Bhils in the pre-colonial period**

Bhils feature notably in the historiography of Rajasthan, particularly with regard to their status as warriors and military allies of the Rajput rulers of the kingdom of Mewar during the medieval and early modern periods.<sup>11</sup> Legends associated with

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<sup>11</sup> Mewar was a Rajput kingdom, and later princely state, whose territory included the present-day districts of Udaipur, Chittorgarh, Rajsamand, and Bhilwara in south Rajasthan.

Bappa Rawal, the 8<sup>th</sup> century founder of the Mewar dynasty, show how he was able to consolidate his kingdom only with the help and friendship of the Bhils who inhabited the area. Similarly, Bhil warriors feature prominently in the story of the Battle of Haldighati in 1576, in which Rana Pratap Singh fought the Mughal forces of the emperor Akbar. Their archery skills, courage, and knowledge of the local terrain are said to have helped the maharana keep up his resistance to the Mughal invaders for as long as he did; in acknowledgement of this, the Mewar coat-of-arms features a Bhil bowman at the right hand of a Rajput ruler. Bhil loyalty to, and co-operation with, the Rajput rulers of Mewar, then, form a key part of the historical narratives of Rajasthan.

The relationship between Bhils and Rajputs is a key area of interest in seeking to examine Bhil histories in this region; indeed, Weisgrau (1993: 95) argues that the social, economic and political relations between them “provide sufficient data to account for the processes of tribal category creation, stratification and subsequent marginalisation, without resorting to racial theory or mythological typologies”. Certainly, these relationships were not as straightforward as the above accounts suggest.

Prior to Rajput conquest the Bhils resided predominantly in the hilly tracts of southern Rajasthan, and Bhil headmen exercised power over specific clans and areas of territory. Rajput invaders began carving out their own states in Rajasthan from the 6<sup>th</sup> century onward, and this resulted in them coming into prolonged and violent conflict with the Bhil communities already settled there. On the one hand, this conflict cemented the Bhils in the minds of the Mewar rulers as volatile and in need of subjugation (Sen, 2003); on the other, the fierce resistance they put up eventually

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meant that over time the Rajput chiefs had to develop “relations of mutuality” with the Bhils, recognising the rights of their headmen to land and certain forms of tribute in return for their assistance in keeping peace and order (Mathur, 2000: 31). This ambivalent relationship is perhaps best expressed in the folklore surrounding the coronation ceremonies of Rajput rulers, which were apparently held until the 14<sup>th</sup> century: a Bhil from a certain family would be called upon to make a *tilak* on the new ruler’s forehead with blood from his thumb or toe. The tensions inherent this practice are explained by Major K.D. Erskine (1908: 228) in the *Rajputana Gazetteer*:

The Rajputs considered this to be a sign of Bhil allegiance, but it seems to have been rather a relic of Bhil power. The Bhils persistently tried to keep this practice alive, despite the belief that the man whose blood was used would die within a year. But the Rajputs were anxious to end this custom as they shrank, they said, from the impure Bhil blood. But perhaps the real reason for their anxiety was that the ceremony acknowledged the need for investiture by an older and conquered people who could still upset Rajput control.

Whatever the truth in this story, it shows that in various ways Rajputs and Bhils demonstrated ritual ties despite the inequities in their power. The political dominance of the Rajputs during this period was located not just in their status as conquering kings but also in their role as *jagirdars* or *thakurs*: men who were granted jurisdiction over large estates (*thikanas*) in return for political and administrative service to the maharajas. These often became the de factor rulers in their localities, particularly in the remote hilly tracts (known as the *bhomat*) in which Bhils lived, and they had high levels of autonomy from the central Mewar state.<sup>12</sup> *Jagirdars* could bind Bhil headmen to them with sub-grants of land in return for oaths of loyalty; this loyalty was performed to both the *jagirdar* and the state at certain points of the year, when

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting here that the Rajput identity of many thakurs in the *bhomat* is highly contested; it has been suggested that they were in fact Bhil headmen claiming Rajput status, or else the offspring of Bhil mothers and Rajput fathers. This contestation goes on to the present day, and those who identify as Rajput are often heavily invested in defending and maintaining their status (Bordia, 2009).

the headmen of various villages would come to administrative centres to participate in festivals and present gifts (Vyas, 1980). In this way, “it could be observed that the tribals and the Rajputs were related with each other in terms of tradition, ritual, and power” (ibid: 35). Some scholars have also suggested that these relationships persisted in other arenas, and that intermarriage between Bhils and Rajputs was a relatively frequent occurrence (Sen, 2003).

However, it was also the case that much of the time Rajput political domination led in concrete ways to the exploitation and further impoverishment of Bhil communities. Many histories of the region point to the control that *jagirdars* had over the lives of Bhil villagers, which extended to the right to extract forced labour (*begar*), forms of bonded labour, and harsh, often arbitrary, physical punishments (Weisgrau, 1993). Rajput expansion was also accompanied by the increasing access of traders and moneylenders to Bhil areas, which led to severe problems of indebtedness and the associated practice of debt-based labour (*sagri*) (ibid).<sup>13</sup> Conditions worsened considerably for Bhil communities with the decline of the Mughal Empire in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the subsequent Maratha incursion into the area. This brought with it violence, destruction of land, and intense financial extraction in the form of fines that were levied by the Maratha courts as forms of punishment; unable to pay these fines, many Bhils were consequently criminalised (Mathur, 2000). Such chaos and uncertainty often led *jagirdars* to act even more extractively; it was also at this time that Rajputs, along with other higher castes, were definitively distancing themselves from the Bhils as their material condition worsened, reducing any social proximity that had previously been shared (ibid). These processes go some way to

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<sup>13</sup> Indebtedness remains a significant social problem for Bhils to the current day.

explaining the positioning of Bhils outside of ‘caste’ society, both economically and socially.

### **The colonial construction of tribe**

The Rajput states of Rajasthan came under the administrative influence of the British government in India in 1817-1818. A period of treaty-making between the Rajput rulers and the British during these years led to the establishment of twenty-two semi-sovereign princely states in what then became known as Rajputana, placing Rajput kings and nobility in a relationship of “subordinate co-operation” with the British (Rudolph and Rudolph, 2011).

Much has been written about the role of the colonial state in the construction of identity in India. Many authors have shown that the deployment of particular technologies of power by the British- that is, the vast project of information-gathering, enumeration and classification undertaken as a means to further colonial power and control- served to categorise people under discrete religious and caste headings that may previously had a more porous and flexible character (Cohn, 1987; Pinney, 1990; Appadurai, 1993; Bates, 1995; Dirks, 2001). These categories were then reified further through political practice, for instance the establishment of separate electorates, territorial concessions, and other administrative efforts targeted at specific groups (Chakrabarty, 2003; Shah, 2007). It is widely argued that the resulting conceptions of distinctiveness and separateness continue to permeate contemporary politics and discourses, and have had a profound influence on shaping the collective consciousness of these groups today (Pandey, 1990; Jenkins, 2001).

‘Tribe’ was one social category to emerge from colonial anthropology. As Bates (1995) shows, racial ideology was intrinsic to this process of categorisation. The concept of tribe emerged in India as a result of the 19<sup>th</sup> century European discourse on racial difference, and the development of the ‘Aryan invasion’ theory that produced a basic hierarchical division between Aryan and non-Aryan, or aboriginal, races (Upadhyaya, 2011). By the 1830s India’s interior was becoming more accessible to Europeans and as a result explicitly racial contrasts were being drawn between Indians who lived in the plains- thought to be descended from Aryans and to conform more to a Caucasian ‘type’- and those who lived in the hills and forests, characterised as savage and uncivilized (Arnold, 2004). This widely acknowledged distinction became more formally codified from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as the colonial administration endeavoured to establish racial categories through the measurement of physical attributes, pioneered by the work of H.H. Risley and Edgar Thurston (Bhukya, 2008). Groups of people deemed to have a low ‘nasal index’, particular head shapes, dark skin, and short stature were classified as ‘primitive tribes’; in this way, tribal status “was inscribed on the permanent physical exteriors of Indian bodies” (Shah, 2007, 1808).

The representation of India’s tribal inhabitants rapidly evolved to encompass not just physical traits but other characteristics that placed tribals on the lowest rungs of Indian civilization and society. Skaria (1997) argues that the idea of tribe came to be separated conceptually from that of caste because of a particular construction of ‘wildness’ that was ascribed to tribes by colonial powers. This was embedded in what he calls anachronistic thought, wherein societies were ranked “in relation to each other, situating them above all in relation to time, or, more specifically, in relation to the modern time that was epitomized by Europe” (ibid: 727). Various criteria, then,

served to mark out India's tribes as the furthest behind European modernity to colonial officials: living in forested areas, societal isolation, a reliance on hunting as a mode of subsistence, and a lack of written script or codified law (van Schendel, 2011). Such broad classificatory criteria were of course problematic in a number of ways: a diverse range of social groups could be brought together under the label of tribe with very little in common except their assumed 'primitiveness', and whole communities could be classified as tribes despite only a section living by the particular standards set out by the administration.

The justification for this often arbitrary-seeming listing of India's tribal populations lay in its intimate link to the project of colonial governance. Fundamentally, this 'invention of the primitive' justified colonial domination over a society which was patently unable to govern itself. As Skaria (1997) shows, the figure of the tribal in the colonial imagination was often that of a naughty schoolboy who would never grow up thanks to his inherent primitiveness; as such, he could never become fit for self-rule. The designation of 'tribe', then, was not truly a marker of specific shared traits, but one that cemented an unequal power relationship: "to be tribal meant to be subordinated to a superior power with a civilizing mission" (van Schendel, 2011, 21).

There was also an economic motivation in the designation of particular regions as tribal, as it led to the introduction of regimes of governance which enabled the colonial government to extract forest and mineral resources from these areas (Aaron, 2007). Moreover, the category of tribe can also be understood as a "politico-administrative category" that served to label troublesome groups living in inaccessible areas that were particularly in need of pacification and subjugation (Pathy, 1984: 3). This was institutionalised further by legislation such as the Criminal Tribes Act of

1871, which labelled whole groups as habitually criminal and required them to report periodically to local police. This provided a means of extending state control amongst particular populations in inaccessible parts of the country (Bates, 1995). As such, the relationship between British rulers and those they designated tribal was one in which “paternalistic protection and violent correction went hand in hand” (van Schendel, 2011, 22).<sup>14</sup>

### **The Bhil tribe in colonial Rajputana**

These themes were clear in the British administration’s attitude to the Bhils of southern Rajasthan. Accounts by colonial officials construct an idea of the Bhil as a racially distinct forest-dweller, by turns savage and child-like. Thomas Hendley, surgeon to the Mewar Bhil Corps in Kherwara from 1871, exemplified many of these attitudes in his 1875 *Account of the Maiwar Bhils*. He described them phenotypically as very dark, with small eyes, large lips, massive jaws and “an amiable but timid expression”; their skulls, he argued, were very different to the delicate ones of the pure Hindu, and their large noses and prominent, “moveable” ears were a physical sign of their wary natures (Hendley, 1875: 366-7). For Hendley, the Bhil was characterised by a variety of traits that epitomised the idea of the noble savage: he was “a merry soul, loving a jest”, prone to excessive drinking and fighting, but “though quick-tempered [he is] very good-natured, even in very rough play” (ibid:

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<sup>14</sup> While the imperatives of colonial rule contributed considerably to the construction of the tribe in India, it was also a process that was rooted in, and upheld by, existing social hierarchies in India. Damodaran (2000) argues that the association between living in forested areas and being wild and less civilized was already established for centuries before the advent of colonial rule, and was a clear feature of existing Brahmanical knowledge and hierarchies; in effect, the specific construction of the tribe during this time was a result of colonial epistemology lining up with Brahmanical knowledge, and confirming hierarchies that were already in place. Moreover, as Guha (1999) points out, the racial science and ethnography used by the British was appropriated by Indian elites who sought to establish parity with the European upper classes on the one hand, and to justify indigenous hierarchy on the other; in this sense, the upper strata of Indian society enthusiastically ‘took to’ European racism and used it to bolster their own social position.

359-360). While Bhils showed some admirable traits, they were fundamentally unsuited to self-rule:

Though robbers, and timorous, owing to ages of ill-treatment, the men are brave when trusted, and very faithful...but have not the elements necessary to form a great people: a man thinks only of his *pal* and his neighbours, and is unmoved by outward changes of government. (ibid: 358- 359)

Others took a less sympathetic view. To John Malcolm, a major general sent to the region in 1818 to help establish British rule, the Bhil were:

A diminutive and wretched-looking race...professed robbers and thieves, armed with bows and arrows: they lie in wait for the weak and unprotected, while they flee from the strong. Ignorant and superstitious to a degree...they are quick, have a kind of instinctive sense of danger, and are full of art and evasion. To kill another...or to suffer death themselves, appears to them a matter of indifference. The whole race are illiterate, and they are, without exception, fond of tobacco and liquor to excess. (Malcom 1823 cited in Hardiman, 2006: 204)

They were not, he suggested, readily submissive, instead revelling in indolence and savagery and fiercely protective of their freedom.

Whatever the attitude, it was clear that to the British the Bhils were in desperate need of civilizing, either because of their primitiveness or their intractable lawlessness.

This resulted in a period of “labyrinthine, demanding and often violent negotiation with [the] new regime” for the Bhils of southern Rajasthan (Sen, 2003: 264). This had profound implications for the construction of a collective Bhil identity in this region.

As Shah (2007) points out, the expansion of state control over the lives and livelihoods of tribal populations during the colonial period contributed to the development of a collective tribal identity amongst otherwise disparate groups, thanks to a shared experience of domination and subordination and the resistance that these engendered.

Law and order were a key concern to the British administration in this region, particularly in the remote and hilly tracts in which many Bhil communities were settled. A priority for the British and Mewar rulers after 1818 was access to natural resources and the opening up of trade; in order to secure these ends, they sought to secure the road between Udaipur and Ahmedabad, which passed through Bhil-dominated territory (Sen, 2003). Traditionally, Bhils had levied certain taxes along this road: the *bholi*, which was a payment given by travellers in return for safe passage, and the *rakhwali*, a fee paid to Bhil villages by others in the area to protect against the raids and robberies they carried out. The Maharana of Mewar and the British resident at the time, James Tod, made the decision to abolish these taxes; this led to a Bhil insurrection that lasted for several years, requiring British military intervention throughout the 1820s (Bonarjee, 1899). By the 1850s the right of the Bhils to levy taxes had been reinstated. The ferocity of the Bhil resistance to the abolition of *bholi* and *rakhwali* seemed, to some British observers, somewhat irrational. Colonel C. B. Euan Smith, Resident of Mewar in the 1880s, wrote of the inadvisability of any further attempts to eradicate it, stating that it “would be certain to arouse the Bhil tribes, who attach imaginary importance to this right of levying bolai wholly at variance with, and totally disproportionate to, the actual material benefits they reap therefrom” (Smith 1882 quoted in Fattori, 2012: 138). However, as Sen (2003) points out, their resistance was based not just on economic considerations but on an assertion of Bhil interests rooted in their right to autonomy and territorial authority.

Tensions continued to rise as a result of various measures enacted by the Mewar state under the supervision of the British administration. Congruent with developments across India, the right of tribal communities to forest produce was undermined by the

imposition of levies on the collection of timber, Bhils were prohibited from the manufacture of alcohol due to contracts being granted to outside traders, social practices such as witch-hunting were ruthlessly policed and punished, the manufacture of salt was banned and its price rose considerably, and finally the region's opium weighing centre was moved from Udaipur to Chittaur, meaning that opium traffic no longer passed through Bhil territories and they lost out on a significant source of revenue (Mathur, 2000; Gupta and Bakshi, 2008).

Compounding this was the continued material exploitation of Bhils under a growing burden of taxation implemented by landowners at the behest of the state.

Rebellion broke out in 1881 as these issues came to a head, and again in 1921 after the steep rise in prices after World War I and the outbreak of several epidemics that impoverished Bhil communities further. The latter was known as the *Eka* or *Eki* (unity) movement; it mobilised Bhils around issues of exploitation by local *thakurs*, police brutality, excessive taxation, and the right to forest produce, linking these to the broader aims of the Indian nationalist movement (Bordia, 2009). While this movement was eventually put down by intense sustained military pressure, it had a meaningful impact on the construction of community identity, tradition, and shared practice amongst the Bhils of this region:

By considering themselves part of [the nationalist] movement, the Bhils participated in a process of understanding colonial control and contesting it. Their widespread communal solidarity empowered them in the approaching age of political arithmetic... another legacy of the movement was the Bhil's persistent rejection of the state's judiciary and abiding commitment to settling their own disputes... the experience of the Eki had reiterated the Bhils' traditions of collective consultation and decision making, and enriched it with an awareness of contemporary politics. (Sen, 2007: 166-7)

## **Responding to rebellion: pacification and protectionism**

While brutal military repression was the first recourse of colonial powers seeking to subjugate tribal movements, these insurgencies also fostered a sense of deep ambivalence about the nature of tribal resistance in the administration.

Having put down agitations with force, colonial officials were often at pains to recast tribal rebellions as an expression of unbridled boisterousness rather than hostility or political grievance (Skaria, 1997). While in one sense this was both reinforcing imperial masculinity and seeking to detract from the violence and domination of the colonial project, these accounts also further embodied aspects of the idea of the noble savage: the tribals' proclivity to rebel was not, as was the case with the members of caste society, a result of their deviousness and duplicity, but was rather an expression of their natural energy, independence, and courage that simply needed to be harnessed in the right ways (ibid). Following this logic, the British established the Mewar Bhil Corps (MBC) in Kherwara in 1846. The function of the this regiment was to police Bhil areas and directly suppress sedition; however, it was also thought that it would turn Bhils from their lawlessness and criminal behaviour if they were given honourable and stable employment, and that those trained by the MBC would provide a positive example to their kinsmen, thus effecting civilizing change within Bhil society.<sup>15</sup>

However, the idea of the noble savage, particularly in the context of tribal resistance, was also significant in that it contributed to the development of a humanitarian discourse with reference to India's tribes. As Damodaran (2006) demonstrates,

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<sup>15</sup> The Christian missionary movement was also deeply involved in this civilizing project, discussed in further detail below.

rebellions forced the colonial government to engage with tribal notions of land, place and being, and this compelled a recognition of their rights. For instance, in the wake of Bhil rebellions the British administration increasingly began to allow them greater access to the forest, reduced the burden of land revenues and bonded labour, and put stricter controls on police and *jagirdars* (Jain, 1991). Increasingly, officials also began to see tribal people as cultural beings being brutalised by the effects of colonial expansion and law, which contributed to the production of the idea of the tribal whose unique livelihood and culture required special protection on the part of the state from the incursions of unscrupulous non-tribal landlords and moneylenders (Damodaran, 2006).

These concerns manifested themselves in a range of measures that sought to record, codify and protect the customary rights of tribes. A host of legislation pertaining specifically to tribes was therefore introduced across India. The Scheduled Districts Act of 1874, and later the Government of India Act of 1919, designated these areas as either excluded or partially excluded from “the scope of [constitutional] reform”; the former were to be governed exclusively by the centre, while the latter allowed for the Governor or his council to act at his own discretion (Bijoy, 1999). This set-up was given further articulation in the recommendations of the Simon Commission of 1928, in which it was proposed that tribal Backward Tracts should be excluded from general constitutional arrangements in order that their populations should be protected from exploitation, be able- within reason- to exercise their ancestral customs, and have the freedom to pursue traditional methods of livelihood with security of land tenure (Damodaran, 2006). This was enshrined in law by the Government of India Act 1935, which held that excluded and partially excluded areas should be brought directly

under the jurisdiction of the Governors of the provinces in question.<sup>16</sup> All these efforts served to further reify the category of tribe, and to construct its position within (or indeed, outside of) Indian society.

### **Scheduled Tribes in the postcolonial polity**

This reification of tribe continued in the newly independent Indian state. A key challenge facing Indian nationalists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was one of constructing a unified imaginary of an independent Indian nation state; as such, they had to engage seriously with the idea of tribal difference and divergence from mainstream caste society. For the most part, nationalist politicians shared the view of colonial officials in viewing India's tribal communities as primitive and backward, the people furthest removed from the idea of the modern state that they were seeking to build (van Schendel, 2011). The appropriate path to take with regard to India's tribes was a source of fierce debate. A key contributor to these debates was G. S. Ghurye (1963 [1943]), a sociologist and Indian nationalist, who argued that the colonial distinction between tribes and castes was erroneous, and that in fact tribal groups were backward Hindus who needed to be properly assimilated into 'mainstream' society in order to hasten their development. The counter-argument to this line of thinking was exemplified in the work of Verrier Elwin (1943), the English anthropologist who held that a protectionist approach was necessary: that tribal populations should be insulated from outside economic and cultural forces and able to follow their own 'simple' form of development.

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<sup>16</sup> The excluded areas included around 18 600 sq. miles in Assam, while the partially excluded areas accounted for around 10 000 sq. miles in the other parts of India (Bijoy, 1999).

In the end, the constitutional framing of the Scheduled Tribes in India tended towards the necessity of a protectionist strategy, even if, it was argued, this could be removed at a later date as the tribes caught up to the rest of society. Congruent with various colonial acts, the Constitution of India made provision for the special protection of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), including reservations or quotas in government employment, educational institutions and in parliament and state assemblies. However, while SC economic deprivation was seen to be linked to low ritual status, with their development thus contingent on an eradication of difference, Nehruvian policy called for tribal society to be allowed to develop according to its own particular 'genius'; tribes therefore continued to be exoticized as well as patronised by the leaders of independent India (Corbridge, 2000). As such, the Constitution also stated that state governments were compelled to allow the Scheduled Tribes to lead an undisturbed cultural life, and tribal regions were designated as separate administrative areas in order to protect the rights of ST populations to land, water and forest (Rath, 2006; Shah, 2007).

Bhil is one of the twelve Scheduled Tribes listed in Rajasthan, and the second most populous. This means that- legally if not always in practice- they have access to benefits conferred on Scheduled Tribes in the form of reservations. Currently, there is a 12 per cent quota for STs in government jobs and education. Further, twenty-four constituency seats in the Rajasthan State Assembly are reserved for STs, meaning that only ST candidates are eligible to contest them in elections; this includes six of the nine seats available in Udaipur district.

Additionally, certain legislation provides special protections to particular areas in Rajasthan with high ST populations. Large parts of Udaipur district, including those

in which the villages in this study are located, are designated Scheduled Areas: these are areas that meet the criteria of having a large ('preponderant') tribal population and are considered underdeveloped, with a marked disparity in economic standards from non-Scheduled areas. Any state that has Scheduled Areas<sup>17</sup> must have a Tribal Advisory Council, whose function is to advise the state government on issues pertaining to tribal welfare and development. Further, special legislative measures allow for a State Governor to amend any laws passed by national or state legislatures for Scheduled Areas, and in theory provide safeguards against the alienation of land from tribal populations and exploitation by moneylenders. More recently, the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act was passed by the Rajasthan government in 1999, which provides for a degree of autonomy of Scheduled Areas, devolving management of forest resources to tribal communities, protecting tribal customs and traditions, and allowing for processes of dispute resolution to be carried out using customary methods. However, a lack of political will to implement this Act means it is still not in operation in many areas, including Udaipur (Menon and Sinha, 2003).

Rajasthan's STs are also targeted by specific development policies. The state government implements various tribal development plans in so-called Tribal Sub-Plan Areas, with the objective of prioritizing tribal communities in development programs. These objectives have included targeting finance, credit and capacity-building programs at them, creating tribal-only self-help groups and other community-based organisations, ensuring their representation in local-level political institutions, and

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<sup>17</sup> This includes Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Rajasthan- these are covered by the Fifth Schedule). Tribal areas in Assam, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya are covered in the Sixth Schedule, with slightly different provisions.

protecting their particular social and cultural interests (World Bank, 2010). NGOs working in this region also run a wealth programs aimed specifically at tribal development and targeting adivasi populations accordingly, and many of these also engage in tribal cultural programs and activities (Sahoo, 2013a).

The conferring of benefits according to group ascription has repercussions for tribal identity, in that it incentivises self-identification as ST in general, and as Bhil in particular, in the pursuit of rational goals such as access to government benefits, land, development projects, and particular protections under the law. It has long been argued in India that, far from eradicating caste, reservation policy has actually led to its renewed significance: not only do communities foreground their caste identity in this context, but caste movements and appeals to caste in politics have been invigorated by the demand for reservations (Weiner, 2001) . Similar arguments can be made with regard to tribes: reservation and development policies that specifically target STs encourage people to identify as such, and mean that the boundaries delineating that identity become hardened and rigorously policed by those seeking to protect their group's access to benefits.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, in designating certain areas which need special protection in order to safeguard 'traditional' ways of life for tribal communities, the idea of tribe is further reified and marked out as culturally distinct, economically backward, and bound up in tradition, all of which necessitate insulation from wider Indian society. At the same time, these designations can also be taken up and used constructively by adivasi communities. In Udaipur district, special legislative provisions for tribes have in some cases been embraced and appropriated

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<sup>18</sup> Certainly, this has had repercussions in terms of both the construction of identity of adivasi Christians and the violence that they have experienced– this is discussed further in chapter 7.

by adivasi activists, who use them to articulate ideas about tribal autonomy or self-rule and to agitate for rights to land and forest produce (Bordia, 2009).

### **Becoming adivasi**

Adivasi is a term that has become relatively commonplace in reference to India's tribal groups but it is one replete with specific connotations about the nature of tribal identity, namely, their status as India's "original inhabitants" or indigenous people. The growing sense of collective tribal identity and rights that resulted from state expansion in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was a key factor in the construction of 'adivasi'. Hardiman (1987) explicitly links the development of the term to the subjugation experienced by communities which had hitherto been relatively free from the control of outsiders, noting that it was first used by activists in Chotanagpur in the 1930s to build a sense of shared identity amongst different tribal groups. However, it was Christian missionaries who played a key role in the production of the term adivasi, and the particular "ideology of difference and subordination" that it represented (Shah, 2007; Aaron, 2007: 16).<sup>19</sup>

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, British officials were convinced that the introduction of Christianity to tribal populations would further both their governmental interests and the overall civilizing mission of the colonial project. As such, they encouraged missionaries to come and work in tribal areas with the intent of converting their inhabitants not just to Christianity but also to "a peaceful and subordinate subjecthood" (Hardiman, 2002). The assumed primitiveness of tribal populations was often a draw for missionaries themselves, and was a prominent feature of missionary

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<sup>19</sup> As Shah (2007) notes, this fact is often obscured or suppressed by adivasi activists as they seek to foreground autonomous adivasi religious traditions.

ethnography. As Bhukya (2008) notes, in their accounts of tribal society- which emphasized its wildness, criminality and backwardness- missionary ethnographies largely converged with colonial ones, seeing the liberation of tribals as dependent on the modernising agenda of the colonial state. The picture drawn of tribes as primitive, animistic and isolated from broader Hindu caste structures afforded many missionaries a sense of optimism that evangelization would be easy amongst these communities; they imagined the tribal mind as a *tabula rasa* that provided fertile ground for the propagation of Christianity and a broader civilizing mission (Chaudhuri, 2012).

The dispossession and exploitation of tribal populations at the hands of landlords and moneylenders was also considered by Christian missionaries to have a pragmatic utility with regard to their aims of conversion. In his study of Chotanagpur- where the term adivasi was first coined- Aaron (2007) shows that interest in Christianity spread in this region primarily because of the help that missionaries offered in resisting landlords and offering legal help. This meant, he argues, that conversion was less to do with the attraction of a new religious cosmology and more about social exchange: on the one hand were tribal communities who wanted to secure legal claims to the land on which they were settled, and on the other were missionaries keen to send glowing reports of successful evangelization back to their home churches. Alongside this sustained flow of petitionary advocacy, which- dealing as it did with land rights- reinforced an idea of original inhabitancy, missionaries were also involved in the linguistic and anthropological codification of tribal cultures, as well as facilitating a more active associational life through institutions such as schools, training centres and health facilities (ibid). It was as a result of these developments that an adivasi identity around which people could mobilize began to emerge in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Mission education was also a factor in the creation of an educated, urban-based elite which went on to articulate demands for a separate state of Jharkhand in the 1920s- this was the first demand for a state based on adivasi identity, and led to the widespread promotion of adivasi as a social and political category (Shah, 2007).

Today, the term adivasi has come to signify a certain type of indigeneity, centred on the identity of tribal communities as the ‘original inhabitants’ of India. This idea of indigeneity has been used by adivasis as a means of underscoring their own cultural distinctiveness (Rycroft and Dasgupta, 2011), and an ancient, symbiotic relationship between adivasi communities and the ‘ancestral land’ on which they live (Baviskar, 2005). While, as noted above, various scholars have raised issues with the historical and social legitimacy of the concept of indigeneity with regard to India’s tribes (Beteille, 1986; Guha, 1999), it is still the case the connotations attached to it have acquired a very real relevance both to those who choose to identify as adivasi, and in Indian society at large. Claiming the name adivasi has been a way for dispossessed and marginalised groups to engage in a particular type of cultural politics, bolstered by global discourses on the rights of indigenous populations. This has allowed them to make both a statement of distinctiveness and the right to autonomy, and to stake a robust claim to certain material and symbolic resources: for instance, the right to land is articulated with reference to the ancient, spiritual connection that adivasis supposedly have with it (Rycroft and Dasgupta, 2011; Baviskar, 2005). Adivasi activists have therefore stressed a shared experience of both dispossession and resistance, as well as their traditional links to the land and distinctive indigenous identity, in seeking to claim rights to resources and representation (Shah, 2007).

This ‘imagined community’ of adivasi identity (Baviskar, 1995) has had great significance with regard to the activism and political mobilisation of Bhils in Udaipur district. Here, it is often invoked in the sense of ‘*adi-kaal*’ or original era: “integral to its meaning is a historical trajectory of a glorious adivasi past, subsequent impoverishment and resource extraction with British rule, leading to the subordination that adivasi people find themselves in today” (Bordia, 2009: 173). The idea, then, is that once institutions and communities that have oppressed tribal people throughout history are ridded of their influence- for instance, moneylenders or local-level state bureaucrats- an authentic expression of tribal identity can be achieved, and Bhil society can be organised based on its own unique forms of community, solidarity and organisation (ibid).<sup>20</sup>

Outside of the particular connotations attached to the political use of the term, adivasi has also come to be used widely in people’s general self-identifications here; respondents in my research often used it as a descriptor when referring to themselves or their community, and it has become a commonplace label for tribal people in this area.

### **Social stratification within the Bhil tribe**

Despite the conceptual unity suggested by terms such as Scheduled Tribe and adivasi, processes of social stratification have also had important ramifications for Bhil identity in this region. According to Rao (1988), class-based differentiation has long been a feature of Bhil society, and is a result of the political power of clan headmen and their families, the access of certain groups to cultivable land and their adoption of

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<sup>20</sup> These ideas would sometimes come across in my discussions with people over the course of my research; one Catholic woman from Jaganathpura, for example, told me that theirs was an equal (*barabar*) adivasi village and if any upper castes tried to come to there then they would fight them and chase them out.

new agricultural technologies, and the ability of politically and economically better-off groups to capitalise on the benefits of ST reservations. These have often sought to enhance their status further by distancing themselves from the designation Bhil. Some Bhils, then, choose instead to identify as Meena, which is considered a higher-status tribal group. Outside of class-based differentiation other cultural processes have also contributed to stratification within the Bhil tribe, as Bhils have sought to enhance their status through the adoption of new social identities. Historically, this has most often been in the form of sanskritization and Bhagat movements from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and to a more limited extent through conversion to Christianity following the arrival of European missionaries from the 1860s.

### **Bhil interactions with Hinduism**

The question of whether or not adivasis should be considered Hindu has received major attention in the anthropological literature on India's tribes, and a strident theme in this debate has been the clear differences between mainstream Hindu religious practice and the animistic beliefs of adivasi groups. In Udaipur district, although the religious practices of Bhil people combine elements of Hinduism with localised modes of worship and ritual practice, they almost universally refer to themselves as Hindu- unless, of course, following another religion such as Christianity (Weisgrau, 2013).<sup>21</sup> This self-identification as Hindu is a result of a long history of contact and acculturation between Bhils and so-called caste Hindu society, beginning, as described above, with Rajput expansion in the medieval period. It was particularly

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<sup>21</sup> This informs my use of the term Hindu to describe non-Christian people throughout this thesis: it is how they describe themselves. Other works on tribal religion have referred to Hindu and *sarna* (animist) adivasis as separate groups; this distinction is not meaningful to, or used by, adivasis in my field sites.

strengthened, however, by the Hindu reformist Bhagat movements which began in this region in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Bhagat movements, sanskritization, and Bhil assertion**

The first Bhagat movement in this area was relatively short-lived. Started by a Brahmin named Mavji Maharaj, followers of the Mavji movement- mostly Bhil- pledged to refrain from eating meat, drinking alcohol, and from certain social customs such as paying bride-price and polygamy. This movement was one of Sanskritization; it offered the potential for Bhils to claim higher social status through practicing behaviours typical of upper-caste communities. Certainly there was an element of paternalism to this: Mavji, for example, preached that Bhils and other low caste groups would be entitled to salvation contingent on their living a life of appropriate virtue and devotion (Mathur, 2000). However, as Hardiman (1987) points out, there is a sense in which religious reform movements amongst the Bhils were not simply an emulation of upper-caste norms, but were instead an appropriation and democratization of Brahmanical notions of purity that sought to rob them of their power to dominate.

This insight is also relevant to the later Hindu reform movements that took place in this region. The Govindgiri movement began in 1901, following a severe famine the previous year. Govindgiri, a Satnami devotee from the Banjara caste, travelled extensively around southern Rajasthan preaching devotion to Rama, encouraging various forms of virtuous living such as abstention from meat and alcohol, instructing people not to steal, lie, or committing adultery, and forbidding commensality with other castes, including Brahmins. He soon attracted a large following and as time went on his message began to acquire increasingly political overtones, eventually

advocating for the creation of an autonomous Bhil state. The movement culminated in 1913 in a bloody standoff between Govindgiri and his followers and the Mewar Bhil Corps, resulting in the death of thousands of Bhils. However, it also resulted in raising Bhil consciousness and became a symbol of their liberation (Jain, 1991). Similarly, the Eki movement led by Motilal Tejawat began with a program of cultural reform, including instructions about food, drink, and marital relationships, and culminated- as seen above- in a strident political movement for Bhil rights. In this way, messages of cultural and social uplift were intimately tied to economic and political advancement as well. Thus these movements were not simply attempts to emulate Hindu norms, but instead entailed an assertion of Bhil interests and status through the prism of a particular form of Hindu identity.

Other Hindu reform movements were also beginning to gain influence in this region during this time. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the Arya Samaj had developed a significant presence in the area, predominantly in Gujarat but also to some extent in Rajasthan. A precursor to the ideology and activities of the Sangh Parivar today, the Arya Samaj stoked fears of aggressive proselytization and claimed that adherents of foreign religions who would soon come to swap India's Hindus, beginning a campaign aimed at reconverting 'lost' Christian and Muslim adivasis (Hardiman, 2008). However, the zeal for this movement was relatively short-lived, with enthusiasm and funding for its activities drying up significantly by around 1910 (ibid). However, it laid the foundations of the anti-minority ideology that would later be promulgated by Hindu nationalist organisations working in this region.

## **Hindu nationalism**

As Basu (2015: 262) notes, “Hindu nationalists are deeply embedded in the cultural and political life of Rajasthan”: the BJP is a dominant political force which routinely alternates in power with Congress, and Hindu nationalism also has a strong base as a militant social movement thanks to the work of other Sangh Parivar organisations, each involved in conducting activities amongst particular sections of society. These include the RSS, the VHP, the Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad (focusing on tribal communities), the Bajrang Dal (the VHP’s paramilitary wing), and Seva Bharati (a social service-based organisation). Hindu nationalism’s strength in this state has been facilitated at least in part by the distinctive regional character Hindu nationalist ideology has assumed in Rajasthan. As Jenkins (1998) shows, the Sangh Parivar here has been adept at exploiting a particular regional identity, allowing it to cut across caste boundaries through invoking ideas of a shared Hindu past based on a specifically Rajasthani Rajput ethic. Drawing on its militaristic Rajput history, Hindu nationalist ideologues have sought to portray Rajasthan as an exemplar of the assertive, martial brand of Hinduism that occupies a celebrated place in Hindutva ideology (ibid).

This has obviously strengthened Hindu nationalism’s appeal to the upper-castes, in particular the Rajput communities that this regional narrative explicitly valorises. However, it has also meant it has been able to appeal to lower-caste communities in the state. Alongside the kinds of sanskritization discussed above, lower status groups in Rajasthan have often sought upward mobility through ‘kshatriyanization’, or claiming descent from Rajput clans (Narain, Mathur 1990); this includes many tribal groups, including sections of the Bhil, Meena and Garasia community. By choosing to

organise around an ideology of Rajput valour- one that has been venerated by a range of communities in Rajasthan throughout history- the Sangh Parivar has been able to make broad appeals across both caste and class. It has also been a particularly efficacious electoral strategy for the BJP, because it has allowed it to function as a regional party *as well as* a national one, drawing on “a manifestation of regional pride that does not rely on regional exclusivism” while also making broad appeals to voters in a state which actually exhibits a high level of social fragmentation (ibid: 105).

At the same time, however, Hindu nationalist ideology in this state does make consistent recourse to the more familiar majoritarian and anti-minority discourses of militant Hindutva, including the vilification of Muslims and- since the late 1990s in particular- an intensive focus on the issue of religious conversion, particularly to Christianity. This more militant face of the movement highlights the fact that Hindu nationalism here should not be treated as a monolithic entity or set of practices; instead, it is embodied in the activities of many different organisations that often have different ideological emphases, modes of operation, and aims. As Jaffrelot (2010: 202) has shown in his extensive work on the Sangh Parivar, while its components nominally espouse the same ideology and do share a strong bond, they often operate autonomously from one another; indeed, he argues that the so-called *parivar* “hardly forms a family, given the latent or explicit tensions” between its constituents.

A major fault-line in this respect is that between the BJP, which has often made conscious efforts to position itself as a moderate political party in order to make itself acceptable within the Indian party system, and other Sangh Parivar organisations which have pressed for the promotion of a more aggressive and at times overtly

violent form of Hindu identity and interest, based heavily in anti-minority ideology (Jaffrelot 2007). This has certainly been the case in Rajasthan, where Hindu nationalism as a social and cultural movement has been consistently more militant than the party, and where BJP leaders have chosen to personally distance themselves from militant Hindutva. This is not to say that the interests of the two have not converged at various points, or to deny the fact that their relationship has often been symbiotic; however, it has also been riven with tensions.

The BJP first came to power in Rajasthan in 1990, and since then has been engaged in a “routine oscillation of power” with Congress (Lodha 2004: 5456). Electoral competition in the state is now the definition of bipolar: the two parties have shared 70-80 per cent of the vote between them over the last twenty-five years in Assembly elections, and they have routinely ousted each other in general elections, usually after single terms in power. Most recently, the BJP has won decisive victories in both the 2013 Assembly elections and the 2014 general elections, with most commentators attributing its fortunes both to an anti-incumbency effect and the popularity of Narendra Modi, who toured the state intensively during both election campaigns and who consequently led the BJP to power in Delhi in 2014 (Iqbal 2013, Ghosh 2013).

**Table 3. Vote share (%) of Congress and BJP in Rajasthan Assembly Elections 1990- 2013.**

<b>Party</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>1993</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2013</b>
Congress	33.64	38.27	44.95	35.65	34.27	33.07
BJP	25.25	38.60	33.23	39.20	36.82	45.17
Total	58.89	76.87	78.18	74.85	71.09	78.24

*Source: Statistical Reports on General Election to the Legislative Assembly of Rajasthan 1990- 2013, Election Commission of India.*

In her analysis of Hindu nationalist politics in Rajasthan, Basu (2015) argues that under the leadership of Bhairon Singh Shekhawat (1990-1998), the BJP was able to exert considerable control over the more extreme elements of the Sangh Parivar. This was due to the fact that the BJP was a relatively cohesive party at this time with, as noted above, a relatively broad social base that was mobilised not just through an appeal to regional identity but also the government's prioritisation of rural development. As such, the party was not reliant on narrow identity politics to win support, and also had the internal strength to withstand militant pressure from the RSS. For instance, while the Ayodhya campaign garnered a significant up-swell of support in Rajasthan, attracting several thousand activists and a large amount of money, Shekhawat was able to distance himself from the movement to a certain degree. While never outright condemning the violence and allowing some related VHP activities to take place in the state, he prohibited his ministers from involving themselves in them and was also keen to retain the confidence of the state's Muslim constituencies. Towards the end of his Chief Ministership, the RSS in particular did become increasingly critical of the BJP and their lack of representation within its ranks; however, the wide base of support he commanded meant that while Shekhawat made some concessions to the RSS and VHP, he was not entirely beholden to their demands.

This changed in 1998, when Vashundra Raje assumed leadership of the party. Without the broad support and prestige of Shekhawat, Raje struggled to control factions within the BJP itself. As hard-line BJP members began to try and undermine her leadership, she relied more and more on other elements of the Sangh Parivar to bolster her position and to use their organisational apparatus to help her win elections.

As the party's electoral success became more dependent on the work of these outfits, the BJP became beholden to the movement and Raje increasingly made concessions to their more militant demands and activities. The RSS also had significant influence over the appointment of ministers, who were the driving force behind legislation such as the Freedom of Religion Bill, an anti-conversion bill that is discussed more fully below. Moreover, rather than concentrate on issues of development as her predecessor had done, Raje instead chose to mine social divisions between particular identity groups in order to gain support- this, then, provided a fruitful context for Hindu nationalists to further their program of exploiting religious antagonisms. Raje's leadership, Basu argues, thus resulted directly in an increase in anti-minority violence in the state, as this was one key way of generating politically expedient social cleavages between groups.

Raje's reliance on militant Hindutva organisations, in particular the RSS, was a double-edged sword: if it helped her to win elections, it also made them more virulently critical of any policy decisions she made that they did not sanction (ibid). This was the case, for instance, when she introduced neoliberal economic policies such as Special Economic Zones, and also when she attempted to make concessions for Muslim pilgrims on Haj by building accommodation for them on public land. By the 2008 election, the RSS had withdrawn their support for Raje as Chief Minister and actively sought to undermine her leadership; this led to factional struggles within the BJP that ultimately contributed to it losing the election to Congress. Raje returned to power in 2013 thanks to her large base of popular support and lack of other viable candidates- however, the RSS retained significant influence over key ministerial appointments.

This upturn in movement militancy, its sanction by the BJP government, and the resultant violence since 1998 has had particularly profound repercussions in southern Rajasthan, including Udaipur district, as it is in this geographic region that the Sangh Parivar has concentrated its ideological and organisational efforts, particularly during the 2003 Assembly election campaign. In order for the BJP to continue to secure election victories, it was necessary for the party to expand its social base away from its traditional core of upper-caste, middle-class voters. To move beyond the limits of this narrow demographic appeal, the Sangh Parivar was- and continues to be- extensively engaged in what Lodha (2004) calls “hyper-activism” in the adivasi-dominated regions of southern Rajasthan, with the intention of winning bases of support from amongst tribal communities, thus capturing new electoral and ideological constituencies.

This ‘hyperactivism’ has taken various forms, though key amongst them has been the involvement of various Sangh Parivar organisations in grassroots development and social outreach measures. As Lodha (2004: 5457) notes, it has been “the rigorous work done by the RSS and other saffron outfits in the fields of religion, education, health and culture [that] accounts for the expansion of the BJP’s influence in villages”. Across India’s tribal belt the Sangh Parivar has been heavily engaged in legitimizing activities such as the setting up of health and educational facilities and the systematized distribution of food, clothing and medicine (Shah 1999). These strategies have been particularly efficacious for a number of reasons. Firstly, they allow service providers to build up respect and trust in the wider community, giving them a strong position from which to promulgate their ideology (Froerer, 2007;

2009). Secondly, they give activists a vantage point from which to collect information that is helpful in the formulation of local canvassing strategies, the recruitment of new party workers, and the shaping of voter opinions (Thachil 2011). Moreover, as mentioned in the previous chapter, service provision has become an integral part of the Hindu nationalist repertoire because it allows for an appeal to be made to lower caste constituencies without threatening the interests of the BJP's core vote bank of higher caste, middle class voters (ibid). There has also been a distinct cultural and religious element to this project, with Hindu nationalist activists using educational institutions and public events to introduce mainstream Hindu festivals to tribal areas and provide instruction in 'correct' forms Hindu worship (Froerer 2007).

These activities are all in evidence in Udaipur district, and from 2003 onwards have reaped dividends for the BJP. The BJP's vote share amongst tribal voters increased from 32 to 38 per cent between 1998 and 2003, and it won fifteen of twenty four ST reserved seats in the state, compared to just two in the previous election (Basu 2015). In Udaipur district, the BJP has had fluctuating electoral success since the 1980s, but- as with other parts of southern Rajasthan- the area has seen increasingly intensive organisational efforts by the Sangh Parivar since the latter half of the 1990s as the imperatives of capturing new constituencies have become more pronounced (Lodha 2004). Their success is demonstrated particularly by the dramatic victory of the BJP in the district in 2003, where it won eight of the ten available seats away from Congress (Table 4).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The losses it suffered in 2008 reflect both an anti-incumbency effect and the factional fighting that took place within the BJP as Raje and RSS leaders jostled for influence during that election campaign, rather than any organizational failure on the part of Sangh Parivar activists (Lodha 2009).

**Table 3: Winning parties in Assembly Elections, Udaipur district, 1985-2013.**

Constituency	1985	1990	1993	1998	2003	2008	2013
Udaipur	INC	BJP	BJP	INC	BJP	BJP	BJP
Udaipur Rural (ST)	INC	BJP	BJP	INC	BJP	INC	BJP
Salumber (ST)	INC	BJP	BJP	INC	BJP	INC	BJP
Kherwara (ST)	IND	INC	INC	INC	BJP	INC	BJP
Mavli	INC	BJP	BJP	INC	BJP	INC	BJP
Vallabhnagar	INC	JD	INC	INC	BJP	INC	IND
Gogunda (ST)	INC	BJP	BJP	INC	INC	INC	BJP
Lasadia (ST)	INC	BJP	BJP	INC	BJP	-	-
Sarada (ST)	INC	BJP	INC	INC	INC	-	-
Phalasia (ST)	INC	INC	INC	INC	BJP	-	-
Dhariawad (ST)	-	-	-	-	-	INC	BJP
Jhadol (ST)	-	-	-	-	-	BJP	INC

*Source: Statistical Reports on General Election to the Legislative Assembly of Rajasthan 1985- 2013, Election Commission of India.*

In the villages in which this research was carried out, these grassroots organisational activities have been undertaken predominantly by the Rajasthan Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad (RVKP). The RVKP is a state-level branch of the VKA (Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram), which was founded in Madhya Pradesh in 1952 by RSS leaders with the express intention of countering the influence of Christian missionaries in tribal areas. In Rajasthan, the RVKP, founded in 1978 and headquartered in Udaipur district, continues to have extremely strong links with its parent organisation. Many RVKP workers and volunteers are also members of the RSS, and RSS shakhas (daily gatherings of the Sangh's *swayamsevaks*, or volunteers) act as recruiting grounds for teachers for RVKP schools, as a commitment to RSS ideology is a prerequisite for such positions. A striking visual representation of the close relationship between the two organisations is the way in which RVKP schools and hostels are adorned with pictures of prominent figures from the RSS; moreover, whenever large rallies, meetings, or *melas* are organised by the RVKP, RSS leaders are always invited to address the gathered crowds.

Its relationship with other constituents of the Sangh Parivar is often framed more ambivalently than this, though it is clear that for the most part they see their interests as aligned. A key relationship in this regard is of course the one with the BJP, although the RVKP is officially a social service organisation with no direct political affiliations. As such, its staff often state that they do not support any particular party, and instead focus only on the uplift of individuals; at the same time, however, they admit that the majority of these individuals come to be associated with the BJP (Sahoo 2013). As one member in Udaipur district put it: “we do not support any political party directly- yes, we belong to the RSS, and whichever party supports the Hindu cause gets our support” (Mondhe 2004). While, as shown above, the RSS has not always agreed with the decisions of BJP leaders, it has always been the case that in Rajasthan the BJP is ‘its’ party. This, then, highlights the active process of political socialisation that the RVKP is engaged in, bolstering support for the BJP in adivasi areas. For its part, the BJP has also actively supported the work of the RVKP. Between 2003 and 2008 the Raje government allocated over 5 million rupees a year to the running of RVKP hostels, and the Chief Minister also sanctioned their work by visiting RVKP-designated sacred sites in tribal areas and making lavish donations towards the religious activities being carried out there (Sahoo 2013).

The RVKP is highly engaged in a wide array of activities in the tribal villages of Udaipur district. According to one local RVKP I spoke to, at the time of writing it was responsible for running around 800 development projects in southern Rajasthan.

Education is a serious area of concentration, in part due to the fact that state provision is poor and also because of its centrality to the project of disseminating Hindu notions of citizenship and identity, which are ultimately aimed at “gaining power and reorienting the political arena” (Sundar 2004: 1605). The RVKP runs 31 one-teacher village schools (*ekal vidyalaya*), 50 primary schools, 2 secondary institutions, and 14 hostels throughout the region. While they do follow the state curriculum, they also act as spaces where “Hindu dharma and Hindu sanskars are asserted with pride [and] where tradition is saved and transmitted against ‘deculturation’” (ibid: 1609). This was borne out, for example, in an *ekal vidyalaya* I visited in Jhadol tehsil. Despite the fact that these open-air schools are supposed to act as supplemental education to that provided by the government, the children in attendance spent most of their time singing patriotic and religious songs and reciting prayers. At one point, they were quizzed on which Hindu holidays they should observe and how they should be celebrated; in a clear conflation of the idea of India with Hinduism, *pandra august* (Independence Day) was counted amongst these. The sound rejection of even nominal ‘western influence’ was clearly in evidence: when a young girl answered her name at registration with “yes madam” she was roundly berated, and from that point attendance was taken with all the children saying *om* instead.

The RVKP is also active in health, agricultural, and other community development projects, much in keeping with the activities of other NGOs in the area. This includes running childcare centres, immunization and tuberculosis treatment camps, village healthcare centres, water resource development programs, and technical training in agriculture and small-scale industries such as sewing. Another important element of the RVKP’s work is its sport centres and regular sports days and competitions. These

are supposed to allow for the expression of the natural strength and athleticism of Bhil youth; they are projects, then, that are geared towards the creation of strong bodies for the defence of the Hindu rashtra, while also drawing on the idea of harnessing the unique abilities of tribal people and their aptitude for physical activity. It is particularly telling that one of the key activities that it focuses on is archery. This draws on narratives of Bhil history that have long emphasised their skill with the bow, but such a focus also does important ideological work. As Bordia (2009) notes, it is precisely these narratives- found, for instance, in the Mahabharata with the story of Eklavya, and also in the tales of Bhil heroism as allies to the Rajput rulers of Mewar- that demonstrate Bhil connections to their Hindu past.

These sporting activities, then, actively work to construct the idea of adivasis- and Bhils in particular- as fundamentally Hindu. This buttresses the RVKP's most intensive focus, which is on what it calls *shradha jagran* or religious awakening. Village committees have been set up across the district in order to organise religious programs and to publicize and co-ordinate the celebration of festivals; this includes, for example, the distribution of Ganesh idols and the organisation of their immersion ceremonies for *ganesh chaturthi*, or handing out and tying threads on *raksha bandhan*. Similarly, the RVKP is responsible for organizing large mass meetings twice a year, where Hindu religious leaders are invited to speak. Activists recruit for these events by visiting adivasi villages and planting saffron flags, distributing pamphlets, and handing out calendars and lockets with Hindu deities on them. They also run programs for building temples in tribal areas. While ostensibly devotional, these activities have at their heart the aim of building a unified Hindu society: "by uniting and bringing the villagers on one platform a kind of awareness is developed to

rise above caste and creed [and] create a brotherly spirit, and they are encouraged to work towards the development of a strong society and fight against any kind of anti-national activity like conversion” (Rajasthan Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad 2012).

The VHP is also involved in similar cultural and religious activities in this district, along with its paramilitary youth wing, the Bajrang Dal. They have been most involved in the introduction of Hindu festivals to tribal areas and often work with the RVKP on the mass events mentioned above, mobilising large numbers of adivasis into attendance. They have also been engaged in *trishul diksha* ceremonies here, where Hindutva activists come to adivasi villages and distribute trishuls, or tridents, the symbol of Shiva. While ostensibly a ritual object, they also have clear performative symbolism as a weapon, especially given the militant nature of the Bajrang Dal and the context of intimidation of religious minorities such as Muslims and Christians. As such, under the Congress government of Ashok Ghelot (1998-2003) these ceremonies were eventually banned; the VHP and Bajrang Dal regularly flouted this ban, however, and Raje quickly reversed it when she became Chief Minister in 2003.

As Brosius (2008: 313) points out, the *trishul diksha* is “related to a whole range of initiatives by the Hindu Right that address the problem of ‘reconversion’ of the adivasi, awakening and consecration of the Hindu brotherhood, and seeking to codify the variety of castes Hindu sects, orders and practices into a quasi-monolithic stream”. Similarly, in 2006 the VHP organised the *shabri kumbh mela*: a large religious gathering for adivasis in the Dangs region of Gujarat, supposedly the place where Shabri, a Bhil woman, met and offered fruit to lord Ram after waiting for him during

his years of exile. The RVKP and VHP were heavily involved in mobilising and transporting people from southern Rajasthan to the *mela*, which was said to be attended by tens of thousands. The story of Shabri is obviously one that establishes the idea that Bhil people have always been Hindu, shown by her devotion to Ram. Participating in *shabri kumbha* is therefore referred to as *ghar wapsi* or homecoming, in the sense that adivasis are coming back to the Hindu fold to which they rightfully belong (Bordia 2009).

This is in keeping with the broader ideological canvas of Hindu nationalism as it concerns adivasis. In contrast to the identity projected by tribal activists, for Hindu nationalists the indigenous people of India are the Hindus: within this ideology, adivasis are constructed simply as ‘backward’ Hindus and are referred to as vanvasis (forest-dwellers) - itself a term replete with notions of savagery and wildness (Sundar 2006). Hindu nationalists, then, assert the idea that tribal groups should not be considered indigenous or original inhabitants, but instead as lost members of the wider Hindu community. In this regard, Hindu nationalists seek to deprive adivasis of an autonomous, politically valuable identity that is delinked from Hinduism.

However, this is not simply a one-way process: involvement with Hindu nationalism has also provided a means of enhancing social status and opportunities for upward mobility for many adivasis, bringing with it the language of spiritual reform, social respect and electoral ambition (Baviskar 2005).

While socialisation into the politics and culture of Hindutva has been achieved through welfare activities, education, and cultural programs, there has also been another prong to this strategy: anti-minority, and in particular anti-Christian, violence.

Here, I outline the various forms that anti-Christian violence takes as a result of Hindu nationalist mobilisation in these areas, and relate that specifically to the experiences of Christians in the villages under study.

Cultural violence against Christians is most clearly in evidence in the activities of the Sangh Parivar in Udaipur district. The RVKP and VHP periodically organise *ghar wapsi* (homecoming) ceremonies, aimed at ‘reconverting’ Christian adivasis to Hinduism. At these mass events, Hindu religious leaders ‘purify’ Christian converts through reciting prayers, singing hymns, and lighting ritual fires, while the Christians are expected to profess their remorse and sadness over leaving their true religion and promise to never again turn from the Hindu faith. After this, they are given lockets and other Hindu paraphernalia, and have red sacred threads tied around their wrists. Several VHP and RVKP activists I spoke with during my research boasted proudly of the success of their reconversion ceremonies in ‘bringing back’ Christians to the Hindu fold; one VHP leader, for instance, claimed that up to 35 families at a time are reconverted at their ceremonies that take place two or three times a year.

The majority of my respondents were aware of *ghar wapsi* ceremonies and what went on at them, and several knew people who had been involved in them (see, for example, chapter 4). Through holding these ceremonies, and using terminology such as homecoming and purification (*shuddi*), the Sangh Parivar constructs and disseminates the idea that conversion to Christianity is a transgressive and polluting act that must be rectified or reversed. The themes of Hinduism being the true religion and heritage of adivasi people, and the threat of cultural degradation thanks to Christian missionaries, are also emphasized directly through provocative speeches by

Hindu priests and prominent Sangh Parivar activists at their other mass meetings and religious programs. These messages are further reinforced in RVKP schools and hostels. Both tribal schoolchildren and teachers (often teenagers or youths themselves, particularly in the *ekal vidyalayas*) are taught that Hinduism is the true *dharm* of adivasis, and that Christianity is a grave threat to Hindu society. One young teacher told me that if a Christian ever came to her school, she would immediately tie a thread around their wrist, give them a *tilak*, and reconvert them to Hinduism. When we returned to the RVKP hostel after classes, a group of *ekal vidalaya* teachers gathered together with the hostel workers and began to provide demographic information on the villages in which they worked; while ostensibly an information-gathering exercise on the need for educational facilities, I noticed that they were being prompted to point out which villages had churches and to identify Christian households.

This, then, performs the work that Galtung describes when he talks about cultural violence: it encourages, sanctions, and legitimises other forms of violence against Christians. This was borne out in 2006, for example, where serious anti-Christian violence accompanied the *shabri kumbh* (Bunsha 2006). This characterisation of Christianity has no doubt contributed both to incidents of physical violence that Christian respondents in my study villages have faced, and the far more commonly experienced social ostracism that they encounter after conversion- for instance, people refusing to eat, drink, or perform other social functions with them- which is often couched in terms of caste pollution as well as anger that they are ruining or spoiling the Hindu religion (these issues are discussed at further length in chapters 4 and 6). As I argue above, I consider this a form of direct violence as it is enacted by certain

people upon others, and results in emotional and psychological harm to those who experience it.

Aside from social ostracism, physical violence has generally remained at a very low level in my study villages. While I did not witness any while in the field, it was certainly the case that many respondents had experienced it in some form. Both Pentecostal pastors and Catholic priests reported several incidents of having prayer meetings or other Christian gatherings in the district disrupted by Sangh Parivar activists, where vehicles were attacked and several people beaten and injured. With regard to village Christians, it is predominantly Pentecostal men who experience direct violence (this is discussed at length in chapter 6), invariably perpetrated by Sangh Parivar activists. Most related incidents of being beaten up or physically threatened with weapons, but there have been more specific incidents such as people being dragged in front of Hindu statues and forced to bow in front of them, or having liquor poured over them.<sup>23</sup>

The organisation most commonly associated with these incidents was the Bajrang Dal, the highly militant, militaristic youth wing of the VHP. Anecdotally, three RSS members I spoke to in nearby villages also admitted to having physically beaten Christian priests or pastors. The violence of these organisations also takes other forms, primarily the destruction of church property. A stark visual reminder of this was the small church near Pada that features in chapter 4, which still (almost defiantly) showcases a set of smashed windows from an attack by the Bajrang Dal. My respondents also suggested that the experience of violence was compounded by

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<sup>23</sup> Pentecostal converts are expected to give up liquor after conversion.

the failure of police to follow up on First Incident Reports filed by Christians in such cases, and their indifference towards apprehending or prosecuting those responsible for anti-Christian harassment, violence, or destruction of property.

Finally, when the BJP has been in power the state has also been implicated in violence against Christians, particularly as it became more beholden to the RSS for its electoral success. In one particularly high profile incident in 2006, the BJP government placed highly stringent restrictions on the activities of the Emmanuel Mission of Kota<sup>24</sup>, one of the Sangh Parivar's key targets in the region. After a three-year period of sustained attacks on the Mission's headquarters by VHP and Bajrang Dal activists, including raiding its orphanages, assaulting its staff, and harassing its congregation and visitors, the BJP revoked the licenses for its churches, schools, orphanages and hospitals, as well as detaining the Mission's president (Basu 2015).

The BJP has also offered institutional support to the activities of the Sangh Parivar through wider-ranging legislation. The BJP government of Rajasthan under Raje in 2003-8 took a strong stance on the issue of conversion, the clearest example of which was its 2008 proposal of the incongruously named Freedom of Religion Bill, which aimed to promote 'freedom of conscience' by stopping conversion by allurement or force, with particular reference to adivasis who are deemed particularly vulnerable to bribery or trickery on the part of missionaries. While this bill was never turned into law due to the BJP losing the election in 2008, it has still had repercussions in the villages under study, and several of my respondents recalled being hauled to police stations during this period to give accounts of their conversion and to prove that they

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<sup>24</sup> Kota is another district in southern Rajasthan with a significant tribal population.

were not forced or bribed into it. While nobody was ever prosecuted, the proposed Bill still had a profound impact on anti-Christian sentiment by effectively making all conversions to Christianity seem suspicious and illegitimate, and potentially even criminal.

Similarly, in 2004 the BJP minister for Tribal Area Development Kanakmal Katara, himself a Scheduled Tribe candidate, demanded that officials in Udaipur district should have converts to Christianity struck off ST registers as their religion meant that they should no longer have access to government reservations. As I discuss in greater depth in chapter 7, this pronouncement was based both on the logic that Christianity fundamentally alienates people from their tribal identity, meaning they can no longer make the claim to be ST, and also the argument that, as Christians, they receive ample benefits and monetary rewards from missionaries and churches and therefore cannot claim to need them from the government as well. Again, this demand was never enacted legally, but continues to affect the treatment Christians receive at the hands of local bureaucrats and state actors. In my field villages, Christians dealt with being removed from ST registers for access to land and to education and government job reservations, and were also sometimes denied other benefits, such as BPL rations (see chapter 7).

Processes of 'Hinduization', then, have had clear repercussions for Bhil identity in this area. On the one hand, they have created space for ideas of individual and community development that stress an inclusive- although still high unequal- identity located within a broader cultural landscape, rather than, as is the case with adivasi political mobilisation, an oppositional one based on cultural difference (ibid 2005).

On the other, Hindu nationalist understandings of indigenous identity have sought to fundamentally redefine what it means to be adivasi through the construction of a shared Hindu past; this has brought with it a challenge to discourses of tribal indigeneity, and has also resulted in the increased incidence of anti-minority ideology and activity within adivasi communities.

## **Bhil Christians in southern Rajasthan**

### **Missionary Christianity in colonial Rajputana**

The first Christian missionary presence in Rajputana was Scottish. India had been an early site of missionary activity for Scottish Presbyterian Churches, with the Scottish Missionary Society operating in Bombay since 1823 and the Church of Scotland sending its first missionary, Alexander Duff, to Calcutta in 1829. By the late 1850s around forty Scottish missionaries had been sent to India, and were working in Bombay, Calcutta, Poona, Madras, Nagpur and Sialkot (Breitenbach, 2013).

However, Rajputana became a focus for mission activity only after the Indian Uprising of 1857. According to George Carstairs, a missionary from Glasgow who served for some thirty years in the Rajputana mission:

It was not until, in 1857, the horrors of the Sepoy Mutiny thrilled the heart of the nation, that India became a reality to the British public as a whole. In the lurid light of that terrible episode the spectacle of Indian life stood out vivid and distinct...It has always required a quickening of the imagination to move the Church into fresh missionary enterprise, and the Mutiny served as a strong stimulant to the imagination. (Carstairs, 1926: 42)

For Christians both at home and in India the Uprising highlighted the urgent work that still needed to be done and impressed the need for further missionary zeal. Indians had shown their continued resistance to the Christian civilizing mission, succumbing instead to “childish superstition, grossest credulity, liability to panic and ungovernable excitement” (Mitchell, 1859: 10); efforts would therefore have to be

redoubled. Moreover, the Uprising was widely interpreted as a sign of Providence. As one commentator wrote:

Even if we could discern enough in the Indian revolt to warrant us in giving an opinion of its causes, that opinion would neither be so profitable nor so indisputable as the inevitable reflection that God must have had a controversy – that He has a controversy – with the British people, in reference to their management of India. (Church of Scotland Home and Foreign Missionary Record 1857, cited in Breitenbach, 2013: 79)

The Uprising was therefore cast as a result of God's displeasure with the Government of India's attitude towards missionaries, and its failure to adequately encourage the spread of the Christian religion (*ibid*). Such accounts pressed home the imperative of generating further efforts to evangelize the Empire's Indian subjects.

At the time of the Uprising, the United Presbyterian Church (UPC) of Scotland had no Indian mission of its own and so embarked on finding a suitable location in which to start its work there. At the Synod of May 1859 it was decided that a mission field would be established in Rajputana, as this region was considered to be as yet untouched by the Christian message. Later that year Dr Williamson Shoolbred was the first missionary to be sent into this new field, arriving in Beawar in March 1860. Beawar was a small town located in Ajmer-Merwara, a district which had been under direct British rule since 1818; it was therefore anticipated that it would provide an easier point of entry for the missionary than the Princely States which surrounded it (Ashcroft, 1909; Carstairs, 1926). In 1861, Shoolbred was joined in his work by fellow UPC members Dr John Robson and William Martin, along with their wives.

Following this initial entry into the field, the staff of the Rajputana mission gradually increased and three more strategic locations in the British-ruled district were opened

up for missionary activity: Ajmer in 1862<sup>25</sup>, Todgarh in 1863, and Deoli in 1864. The first entry into the Princely States occurred two years later. In 1866 Dr. Valentine, a medical missionary stationed in Beawar, was passing through the city of Jaipur when he was summoned by the Maharaja and asked to attend to his ailing wife; Valentine was able to cure her, and was consequently given access to the city's educational institutions and free rein to preach.

Missionary records describe this unexpected opening as a singular act of divine providence; the Scottish missionaries perceived great difficulty in starting their work in the Princely States, which they saw as being ruled by autocratic 'native chiefs' who were "jealous of their privileges and inclined to be distrustful of interference on the part of the British officials, with whom they quite naturally though erroneously identify the Christian missionary" (Ashcroft, 1909: 67-8). In fact, it was often the case that princes were more open to missionary activity than this portrait suggests, as they valued the forms of education and medical treatment that the missionaries brought with them (Hardiman, 2006). Moreover, the idea that any perceived link between British official and Christian missionary was erroneous should also be challenged. While establishing that for the most part the colonial state sought to distance itself from missionary activity, Hardiman has also shown that in areas with large adivasi populations the Raj was in fact keen to encourage missionary activity, with the aim of furthering their civilizing mission (ibid). This was the case, for example, following the Bhil rebellions of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. As such, princes with territories incorporating significant adivasi tracts also found themselves under pressure to allow missionaries to enter into these areas.

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<sup>25</sup> Ajmer had previously been rejected as a first point of entry for Christian missionaries, as it was assumed to be too full of 'fanatical' Muslims (Ashcroft, 1909)

## **Shepherd of Udaipur**

Mewar was the second of the Princely States to open up to the Scottish missionaries, although not until a full decade later. In October 1876 a Mission Conference was held in order to discuss expanding missionary work further into the States surrounding Ajmer-Merwara, and to this end three deputations were sent to the cities of Kota, Jodhpur, and Udaipur in order to report on their potential suitability as new Mission centres. The Udaipur deputation was made up of William Martin and Dr. James Shepherd, a physician-turned-missionary who had been working in Deoli since 1873. The visit was described by Shepherd in his diary:

We spent the few days [in Udaipur] as well as we could, in making inquiries, moving about the city, and in preaching. Although the people seemed kindly disposed to us, we could see that the prejudices of the Rajputs, and the bigotry of the Brahmans, were very much against us. This, however, was not to be wondered at, as Meywar is one of the oldest and most conservative of the Rajput States and is ruled over by a prince who is himself a priest as well as a king... We did not get a very satisfactory reply when our object was explained [to him], but still we expressed the hope that, in the event of our coming to settle in their midst, no obstacle would be thrown in our way. (Carstairs, 1926: 82)

Despite being widely considered the most conservative of the Princely States, Udaipur was chosen as the most promising of the three sites for missionary expansion. According to Ashcroft (1909), Udaipur had come to favourable attention in 1857 when the Maharana had taken in and protected British refugees after the Uprising; moreover, its conservatism was also seen as a function of its position as the most prestigious and important of the Rajput States, which made it an appealing target for missionaries

Shepherd was chosen as the pioneer for this project, and he set out for Udaipur in November 1877. Upon arrival he was granted permission to pitch a tent on the Parade

Ground outside of the city. Shepherd worked hard to develop relationships with the royal household and its officials, often through medical intervention, and over the next seven years he gradually acquired land through personal grants from the Maharana: first for a dispensary in 1877, then for a Mission bungalow in 1879, and finally in 1884 for a hospital, which was to become extremely successful. While medical work made up a large part of his early activities in Udaipur- according to one report, Shepherd's dispensary dealt with nearly 30 000 cases in a single year in 1879 (Carstairs, 1926) – he was also heavily engaged in preaching. As well as regaling his patients with the Gospel on a daily basis, Shepherd would also find an open space in the city from which to preach twice a week, accompanied by his Indian catechist Isa Das, who also made regular tours of surrounding villages in an effort to spread the Christian message further afield.

It had been the aim of the UPC to have two missionaries working in Udaipur on a permanent basis. In the event, however, Shepherd was joined only sporadically by a succession of assistants, many of who were just starting out in their missionary careers and none of whom stayed for more than a few years at a time. It was not until 1907 that the Rev. J. W. Runciman joined him on a permanent basis, and he continued to run the station after Shepherd's departure.

Other Protestant mission stations were also being established in the region during this period, including a Church Missionary Society (CMS) mission in Kherwara from 1880 and the United Church of Canada Mission that came later in 1914. Other missions also began to start work in the surrounding areas of what is now Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, such as the Jungle Tribes Mission of the Irish Presbyterian Church from 1892, and the Church of Brethren, American, from 1895.

## **The Catholic Mission**

The Catholic mission to Rajputana was initiated in earnest in 1890 by the Capuchins of the Province of St. Francis of Assisi, Paris. In May of that year the Provincial Superior of the order accepted a request sent by the Congregation of the Propaganda<sup>26</sup> to take up evangelization activities in the diocese of Agra, which at the time encompassed a massive area including Rajputana. By September five missionaries had set out from France to India, reaching the Mhow cantonment in what is now Indore, Madhya Pradesh in November. Their instructions were clear: while not neglecting the Christians already residing in the military base there, their first priority should be to “Christianise the non-Christians and prepare the way for the formation of an indigenous clergy” (Lesser, 1989: 15). In 1892 the prefecture of Rajputana-Melwar was carved out from the Agra diocese, and a missionary named Fr. Bertram was put in charge of this new mission, which encompassed the whole of Rajasthan and parts of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.

This new, relatively smaller administrative unit allowed for more efficient operation, and its personnel also grew steadily: between 1892 and 1897 an average of seven priests worked for the mission, increasing to twelve between 1897 and 1902. While previously the newly-arrived Capuchins had limited the scope of their activities to accompanying existing missionaries and learning both Hindi and English, they now became more ambitious and put greater emphasis on evangelization (Vellappallil, 1999). 1892 also saw the arrival from Angers of seven Franciscan Sisters of St Mary and the Angels. In circumstances where many women “still hid behind the veil and would not speak to a strange man”, the Fathers quickly realised that their work

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<sup>26</sup> The department of the pontifical administration charged with the spread of Catholicism, and with the regulation of ecclesiastical affairs in non-Catholic countries.

required “the female touch” (Lesser, 1989: 24). The Sisters quickly established themselves in the mission, taking on the responsibility for running schools, dispensing medicine, and attending mothers and children. Conversion rates, however, remained extremely low. Indeed, missionary activity in this area was strikingly unsuccessful until 1896, when a priest named Fr. Charles arrived in the Bhil heartland of Thandla,<sup>27</sup> which laid the foundations for the expansion of the Bhil Catholic church.

### **Missions amongst the Bhils**

As noted above, missionary appraisals of tribal society largely converged with those of the colonial administration: it was wild, backward, and in desperate need of the Christian message and its civilizing influence. Indeed the assumed primitiveness of India’s tribes made them an attractive prospect for evangelization, both because of the scale of change that could be effected and the idea that, unlike caste Hindus, they were essentially a blank slate upon which to work.

This was certainly the case for Fr. Charles. Arriving in Thandla with the goal of evangelizing the region’s Bhil population, he was met by the Station Master there who warned him that the Bhils were a bunch of savage, dark-skinned bandits who would have no problems with killing him and throwing his body into the nearest ravine (Vellappallil, 1999). This appraisal did nothing to dampen Fr. Charles’ enthusiasm for the task: within a few days he was undertaking exploratory trips into the remote hills, convinced that his endeavour could only be successful if he was able to “make an on-the-spot study of the Bhils...in their natural habitat” (ibid: 46). From there he began to visit different Bhil villages almost every day, making attempts to catechize and preach to people. On top of this, he quickly established a dispensary at

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<sup>27</sup> An area which today is located in western Madhya Pradesh, just south of the Rajasthan border.

Thandla and began to provide rudimentary medical services to the communities he was working in, which he saw as particularly efficacious in allowing him to approach people and build their confidence in him.

For James Shepherd, much like Fr. Charles, the Bhils were also an object of keen interest. During the first few years of his mission he had come into contact with several Bhils when they visited his dispensary during their sporadic trips to Udaipur city for work or trade. These encounters left a clear impression on him, and he “longed to open up work among them” (Carstairs, 1926: 239). Within a few years of setting up his hospital in the city he had also opened a home for Bhil boys; this, he believed, solved the problem of accessing communities who lived in remote areas, and he was convinced that if he could instil Christianity in these “shy, wild creatures” this would provide the key to evangelizing all the Bhils, as they would go back to their villages bear witness to their families and friends (ibid: 243). Additionally, every winter Shepherd would make a tour of the Bhil- inhabited areas around Udaipur, providing simple teaching in every *pal* (hamlet) he visited. Fellow missionary George Carstairs was convinced that “it was more what they saw in him than what they heard from him that won their hearts. He was so manifestly their friend, ready to succour them in sickness, eager for their welfare and progress” (ibid: 248). He felt that Shepherd’s work as a doctor had helped to build his reputation and gain the trust of Bhils in the region.

As suggested by these accounts, the Christian mission amongst the Bhils can predominantly be characterised as a medical one (Hardiman, 2008). This was thought to be an effective way of reaching them and building their trust, allowing the missionaries a platform from which they could preach the Gospel. Most of the

missionaries that were sent to southern Rajasthan and its surrounding areas were medically trained to some degree; if they were not doctors, they were able to provide simple but effective healthcare measures such as treating wounds and dispensing quinine.

This was not, however, immediately well received by Bhils in the area. Prior to the arrival of Fr. Charles other Catholic missionaries had attempted to reach out to Bhil communities, but their efforts were often frustrated by the remoteness of the areas the Bhils inhabited, and their resistance to the intrusion of strangers. The missionaries blamed the latter on the interference of the upper castes in the area, particularly the brahmins and baniyas (money-lenders) who, they argued, feared losing their influence over the Bhils and so spread frightening rumours about the missionaries and their intentions (Vellappallil, 1999). Other accounts suggest that missionaries understood Bhil resistance to their efforts in terms that converged with widespread notions of Bhils as wild and highly suspicious of the incursions of the civilised world. Charles Thompson, a Presbyterian missionary from Durham, was sent by the CMS to Kherwara in 1880. He found the Bhils to be wary of his intentions:

I hardly dared to speak upon any topic whatever. If I inquired about the family, then how very naturally might they have looked upon me as another enumerator? If I spoke about their cattle, fields, or crops then the tax question might have disturbed their minds. To talk about God- I knew that with them, as with others, nothing could so easily or so strongly call forth their highest fears. There was, moreover, another fear to be overcome. I had hoped to have relieved sufferers, and to have gained a hearing by treating their sick. I found, however, that they were full of fear on this head also. A doctor, who had but just left Kherwara before my arrival, had succeeded, by paying premiums, in getting several Bhils into hospital to be operated on. They have now a wholesome dread of the knife. The consequence is that, although there are hundreds of sufferers lying in the villages, it is a very rare thing indeed to see a Bhil man, woman, or child, near the dispensary. Of course, they looked with suspicion upon me. (Anonymous, 1914: 17)

However, as Hardiman (2002) has shown, this suspicion was often rooted in other considerations. For one, missionaries were heavily associated with colonial administrators who were renowned for demanding labour and engaging in other oppressive behaviour; in their solar topis and breeches, speaking English, and often acting like “sahib[s] before subordinates”, this connection between missionaries and the colonial bureaucracy was easy to make (ibid: 8). Further, families were reluctant to send their children to the schools set up by the missionaries because they did not want to lose the labour of their children in their households and fields. Conversion to Christianity was also seen as a potential threat to social status, and people feared that their conversion would lead to ostracism from their communities. Finally, many Bhil elites resented the incursions of missionaries and often tried their best to undermine them; village headmen, for instance, wished to protect their own positions and ensure that power did not shift towards the missionaries, while traditional faith healers saw their medical efforts as direct competition to their status and livelihoods (ibid).

Despite these misgivings, as both Protestant and Catholic missions worked to establish dispensaries and small hospitals in the hilly tracts Bhil confidence in the *angrezi dawai* (literally, English medicine) of the missionaries gradually increased. From the turn of the century, patient numbers rose to several thousand a year, and missionaries gained a steady platform from which to preach to people as they waited for treatment or convalesced after it. This mission strategy was accompanied by their attempts to ingratiate themselves more generally with Bhil communities, spending time amongst them and learning their languages. They also engaged in educational activities. In Kherwara, for instance, little medical work was undertaken as the area already had a government hospital and dispensary, and so efforts were instead focused on opening village schools- although the missionaries often struggled to get children

to attend consistently (Anonymous, 1914). These undertakings were, of course, accompanied by church building, regular services, and open-air preaching, often aided by local, so-called native, catechists. The merits of this approach were consistently acknowledged the church authorities. Commenting on the work carried out by Fr. Charles, an Apostolic Visitor from the Catholic church noted that “you have found a good method: to live among the pagans, to participate in their sufferings, to attract them with charity, and through loving them make yourself indispensable to them. This is in fact the best method to bring them to the feet of our lord” (Vellappallil, 1999: 75). However, conversions to Christianity remained extremely rare.

In the end, it was several years of famine around the turn of the twentieth century that were to have a significant impact on the Christian missions. The southern Rajasthan mission area experienced several severe famines in 1896-7, 1898, and 1899-1902; these were accompanied by serious outbreaks of cholera. The suffering of Bhil communities during these times was acute. As one officer of the MBC reported in 1900:

It is horrible to go into the Bhils’ huts and see a row of living skeletons sitting, waiting for death. They just look up when I go in, and say “salaam, father”, and relapse into silence. Every tree capable of being used that way has been stripped of its bark for food. Every palm tree has been cut down, pounded between stones, and eaten, and now only the black rocks and sun-baked mud are left. All cattle are dead and eaten, and water is dried up in nearly all the wells. I said at the beginning of the famine that under no circumstances could more than fifty per cent escape, but unless aid of a very substantial kind comes. (Anonymous, 1914: 20-21).

In response to this situation, both Protestant and Catholic missionaries engaged in extensive famine relief work: they opened kitchens, helped to organise the distribution of grain, provided medical aid, and opened orphanages to house the hundreds of Bhil children who had lost their families to starvation and disease. This

work was seen as a clear opportunity for the spread of Christianity. It meant that the missionaries had greater audiences for preaching as they dispensed food and medicine, and it was thought that in times of struggle people would be more receptive to their efforts. The biggest impact in terms of increasing the numbers of converts, however, came from the orphanages: all of the children that were taken in by the missions were raised Christian, which swiftly swelled the ranks of the Christian community in the region. Proceedings of the CMS, for instance, suggest that the number of converts in their Bhil mission had risen to 400 by 1908, while the Catholic Bhil mission in Thandla numbered close to 600 by 1913 (Church Missionary Society, 1908; Vellappallil, 1999).<sup>28</sup> Census data shows 237 enumerated 'native' Christians in Mewar district by 1911 (Kealy, 1912).

One of the key challenges facing missionaries and Bhil converts following this increase in numbers was the issue of what should happen to the boys and girls who had grown up in missionary orphanages once they reached adulthood. Initially, the missionaries hoped to marry the orphans off to one another, creating Christian family units, and then acquire land for them to settle on in nearby villages. It was thought that these families would set a good example to the non-Christians with whom they lived, and that this would work to bring more people to the church. This evangelical endeavour was decidedly unsuccessful and very few new converts were won; moreover, it was often the case that the young families faced some level of ostracism and hostility as they tried to settle back in the villages. Additionally, the churches had strict rules surrounding marriage, in particular that Christians should only marry other Christians and should not pay bride price. However, it soon became evident that there

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<sup>28</sup> These missions included areas in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh as well as southern Rajasthan, but give some sense of the growth of the Christian community in the region.

were simply not enough Christian women available for marriage given the small size of the Christian population, and this meant that many young men would either leave the church or forcibly take women as wives. As a result, Protestant missions quickly mediated their stance on the matter of bride price, giving their orphans the necessary amount of money to pay it under the stipulation that the new bride should convert to Christianity as soon as possible (Hardiman, 2008).

These kinds of compromises and negotiations are reflective of broader struggles over the process of inculturation that took place between Bhil converts and missionaries: how Christian beliefs and practice were presented, adapted, and made meaningful within this particular cultural context. For the missionaries, this often centred on which traditions, rites, and beliefs were an ‘innocent’ part of tribal culture and could therefore be retained or practiced after conversion, and which were incompatible with Christian belief and therefore had to be stopped. In terms of ritual practice, attempts at inculturation were high on the agenda. By 1903 the Catholic church had incorporated several Bhil rites into its marriage ceremonies and allowed the drinking of alcohol as part of the celebrations, which was at least partly due to the desire to build acceptance for Catholic families within the non-Christian community (Vellappallil, 1999).

Similarly, in the CMS mission:

The worship in church is as Indian as possible. All the congregations sit on the floor. The canticles and hymns are in Bhili metre, set to Bhili tunes, and are sung in Bhili fashion. The precentor sings each line alone, and the congregation sing it after him to the accompaniment of drum and cymbals. All sit while singing. Our Church of England services, when thus modified, seem as suitable as could be desired, and never lose their deep spirituality. The great difficulty is to translate the prayers into language simple enough for illiterate people. It is hoped that the Psalms may soon be put into Bhili metre, and then even the most illiterate will be able to sing them after the precentor. The Bhil Hymnal contains a hundred hymns, of which about half, and those the favourites, are original hymns written by the Bhil converts themselves. The rest are borrowed, with kind permission, from older missions in Gujarat (Anonymous, 1914: 75- 76)

At the same time, however, the CMS Church council of 1907 passed strict resolutions forbidding the practice of idolatry, drinking alcohol, participating in ‘lewd’ song and dance, and following superstitions such as belief in omens and spirits- in the early 1900s, a spate of excommunications from the Protestant church occurred, wherein “a number of persons were cut off from Christian fellowship for having deliberately taken part in heathen festivals, the exorcism of evil spirits, and other heathen rites” (ibid: 77). However, as Hardiman (2008) notes, missionary strictures did relax as they resigned themselves to the fact that this was likely to be a common occurrence, and that their rules could not be enforced strictly; this, along with capitulation on matters such as bride price, shows that Bhil converts were also able to impose their own values onto the missionaries. In this sense, then, Christian belief and practice took on a particular character in its interactions with local Bhil cultures, values, and interests.

In his analysis of missionary Christianity in this region in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Hardiman (2008: 30) also argues that during this period missionaries were “manoeuvred into largely accepting that this was essentially a Bhil church operating in the interests of Christian Bhils”, contrary to their own desires to build an inclusive, universalistic church. He shows that the Bhil communities rejected the missionary’s vision that the church should be open to all castes, instead policing the boundaries of Christian identity and using it as a means of assertion for their own community. While increased educational opportunity, access to resources, and financial stability did form a part of this equation, such assertion was not necessarily realised through material or economic uplift. For instance, in his analysis of class relations amongst the Bhil of southern Rajasthan, Rao (1988) finds that there is wide economic differentiation

within the Christian community, and that Christian Bhils are not necessarily better off than non-Christian Bhils as a group. Following this, my own research shows no uniform socio-economic stratification between Christians and non-Christians in my field sites. While there are certainly individuals and families who have benefitted educationally or economically from association with the church, Christians and Hindus are not spatially separated in these villages and most Christians continue to have comparable incomes, land holdings, and occupational profiles as others living in the village. A key aspect of this community assertion, then, has instead been the idea of moral reform:

In many important respects, the new ethos that the Christian Bhils forged for themselves accords with what Foucault understands as a ‘technology of the self,’ in that it incorporated crucial Enlightenment values, such as a rejection of malign spiritual influences, as well as the modern bourgeois values of self-improvement through hard work, sobriety and thrift. It acted to inculcate a constitutional democratic polity and self-governance...forging and internalising such values involved a prolonged struggle of self-discipline. (Hardiman, 2008: 30)

This shows the ways in which being Bhil and being Christian have interacted historically, resulting in processes of identity formation which specifically articulated the desire of converts for self-improvement and moral uplift. These ideas, along with the inculturation strategies that find their genesis in the early contestations described above, continue to have a significant impact on Bhil Christian discourses and identities in this region today, and are a central theme of this thesis.

### **Pentecostalism in Udaipur district**

From the 1950s onward, Protestant missionaries of various denominations from south India began to arrive in Rajasthan and were engaged in various evangelistic activities across the state including church planting, setting up schools and orphanages, and establishing Bible institutes (Lukose, 2010). Pentecostalism began to gain significant

momentum in this region in 1963, with the arrival of pioneer missionary Thomas Mathews from Kerala. Mathews came from a Syrian Christian background, but had a profound born-again conversion experience after being saved from drowning in a river at the age of nineteen. After this, he left Kerala to work independently as a missionary in Rajasthan, a region he chose deliberately because he considered it particularly unreached by the Christian message. He settled in Udaipur and began the task of learning Hindi, while also visiting villages with K.V. Philip, a fellow evangelist who had been working in Rajasthan for two years with little success. Heavily discouraged, Philip left Udaipur just a few months after Mathews' arrival, but Mathews decided to stay on and continue his work. In 1965 he returned to Kerala for a short period to marry Mary, a devout Christian woman who was also fiercely committed to missionary work. Once back in Udaipur they steadily built up a Pentecostal congregation, which came to be named the Filadelfia Fellowship Church of India (FFCI), at first in the city itself but gradually expanding their work in the rural areas nearby. By 1980, nine more churches had been established in villages throughout the district (including Pada), and in 1981 the Filadelfia Bible College (FBC) was founded to offer theological and practical training for missionaries. By 2000 the FFCI had spread further into neighbouring states and the number of congregations had grown to around 750; recent estimates suggest it now stands at over 1500.

The Pentecostal church here clearly bears the hallmarks of the Pentecostal movement more generally: worship is lively, personal, and emphasizes spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues and divine healing (Lugo et al., 2006). In contrast to the missions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is a dynamic, fast-growing church that continues to gain members and plant churches across the region. In the initial stages of the Pentecostal

mission many converts came from other mainline churches, in particular the CNI, but now it attracts a large number of converts from Hinduism, with its highest concentration in Udaipur district. The FBC has trained nearly 1400 students, many of whom are sent on to rural villages to preach, build churches and establish new congregations. While the Pentecostal church here is expanding its 'social mission' through developmental activities in education and health, its heaviest missionary emphasis is on direct evangelism and sharing gifts of the Spirit; experiences of divine healing have been absolutely intrinsic to its rapid spread in this area. The Pentecostal church is also predominantly Bhil in its membership, as it is these communities that have been most responsive to these evangelistic strategies (this is discussed in detail in chapter 5). Today, the FFCI is the largest Pentecostal church in Rajasthan, and Pentecostalism is also the fastest growing Christian denomination in the state (Lukose, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the historical processes that have influenced and contributed to the construction of Bhil identity in Udaipur district, and how these have interacted with both Hinduism and Christianity over time. This serves to contextualise the remainder of this thesis as it goes on to engage with contemporary articulations of Christian identity, which are informed both by experiences of anti-Christian violence that have been a result of the spread of Hindutva ideology in this area, but also by a longer history of dialogue between Bhil and Christian identity that has been on-going since the missionary encounters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **4. Resisting cultural violence: the role of discourse and counter-discourse in the construction of Christian identity**

This chapter seeks to elucidate the relationship between Hindu nationalist discourse and Christian identity. While acknowledging that the latter is in some ways shaped and constrained by the former, it argues that Christians engage with this discourse in creative ways, and challenge the otherness that Hindu nationalists seek to impose upon them. It therefore looks primarily at the counter-discourses that Christians deploy as they seek to appropriate, negotiate, and repurpose anti-Christian discourse in asserting their own identities.

##### **Hindu nationalist discourse and the construction of Christianity**

Social constructionist theory holds that identity is constructed through discourse, both because discourse creates particular subject positions for people to inhabit, and because people are involved in the process of ‘doing’ identity work in the way that they use language to talk about themselves and others (De Fina, 2011). At a basic level, discourse can be considered as “a systematic way of using language to make sense of things” (Schram, 1993: 251). In this regard, Hindu nationalist discourse can be understood simply as the way in which Hindu nationalists talk about Christians and Christianity; that is, how Christians are constructed narratively and textually.

As Sarkar (1999: 1691) notes, the Sangh Parivar has always relied upon the construction of an enemy ‘other’ to “consolidate into an aggressive bloc the ‘Hindu community’ which it claims to represent and seeks to constitute”. While anti-Muslim sentiment has generally been the master narrative underpinning Hindu nationalist ideology (Varshney, 2002), since the mid-1990s the Sangh Parivar has also directed significant and sustained attention towards Christians. The anti-Christian sentiment

propounded by the Hindu right in India has often been based heavily on the issue of conversion. That innocent Hindus, in particular poor adivasis and dalits, are either being tricked by missionaries into converting to Christianity or else are being offered material inducements to do so, and that this is part of a foreign conspiracy that seeks to “destroy ‘Indian’ culture and destabilize the ‘Indian’ polity”, are common elements of the Hindu nationalist discourse surrounding Christianity in India (Menon 2003: 43).

To some commentators, this rhetorical insistence that conversion lies at the root of Hindu-Christian tension is actually little more than a convenient pretext: a justification for violence that is retroactively deployed by Sangh Parivar ideologues and activists who are responsible for fomenting such violence in order to achieve particular socio-political ends (Panikkar, 1999). Sarkar (1999) argues that the anti-Christian campaign in India has necessarily rested on the question of conversion because, unlike with Muslims, there are few memories of communal hatred or incidents like partition for the Hindu right to effectively draw upon; in this sense the trope of conversion is foregrounded in part due to pragmatic necessity, because of a lack of communal memory to tap in to.

However, despite its obvious rhetorical utility in this regard it is also clear that the Sangh Parivar has not simply manufactured the ‘threat’ of conversion in order to legitimate its actions towards Christians in recent years (Kim, 2007). Rather, conversion has long been a source of intense controversy and debate in India, and the subject continues to resurface frequently in public spaces such as the political arena, the media, and in the courts (Claerhout and De Roover, 2005). It is therefore necessary to understand what makes conversion a persuasive “imaginative magnet”

for the Hindu right (Khilnani, 1997: 161), and how this particular discourse has constructed Christianity- and by extension Christians- as a threatening other to Hinduism in specific and compelling ways.

The idea of conversion as violence has a long precedent in Indian history, embedded in its experience of colonial rule. Given that coercion, assimilation and the erasure of identity are notions embedded in colonial desire, conversion in India has been assigned “a set of meanings rooted in violence” in India because of its association with British rule (Viswanathan, 2000: 7). Since the 19th century, missionary efforts in India have been producing a backlash amongst various organisations projecting an image of Hinduism under attack from western interference (Menon, 2011), and these themes have continued resonance in contemporary debate.

The anxiety being projected here is both demographic and cultural. Hinduism has long been portrayed as a non-proselytizing religion, in contrast to Christianity and Islam. Since the calls from Hindu lobbies to ban conversion during the Constituent Assembly debates of 1946-50, it has been argued that allowing other religions to engage in proselytization constitutes a threat to the numerical strength of Hinduism (Viswanathan, 2000; Bauman, 2008). Conversion to Christianity implies, therefore, not only a loss of Hindus to another faith, but also “a loss that cannot be recuperated, and so particularly unfair” (Sarkar, 1999: 1963).<sup>29</sup> This loss is also cultural. The destruction of (Hindu) Indian culture, and its damaging effect on the Indian psyche, is a strident theme of this discourse. According to Shourie (1994: 6), the impact of missionary education in India has been one of supreme cultural imperialism: “the

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<sup>29</sup> This is of course something of a distortion, as Hindu nationalist groups are also involved in what can be understood as proselytizing activities, particularly amongst dalits and adivasis.

child is taken to school, and the first thing he learns is that his father is a fool, the second thing that his grandfather is a lunatic, the third thing that all his teachers are hypocrites, the fourth that all the sacred texts are lies”. This critique is applied to the impact of conversion more generally, and various Sangh Parivar groups often call on the government to ban conversion in order to ‘protect’ Hindu culture. As noted in the previous chapter, these ideas draw on a longer history of anti- Christian rhetoric propagated by organisations such as the Arya Samaj, which was fiercely critical of conversion to Christianity due to the threat it posed to Hindu civilization (Jaffrelot, 2007)

The cultural anxieties bound up in conversion are inimically related to the portrayal of Christianity as a foreign religion. This had its most forceful explication in the work of the Hindu nationalist ideologue Savarkar, discussed above, who in seeking to define a Hindu- that is, a true inhabitant of India- concluded that it was a person for whom India was not only a fatherland but also, crucially, a holy land (Savarkar, [1923] 1989). This conception of Indian nationhood clearly excluded both Muslims and Christians, and suggested that their true allegiance lay not with India but with other nations that constituted a holy land for them. The idea of Christian foreignness and of suspect allegiances was compounded by the presumed closeness between missionaries and the colonial administration. Christianity has therefore been constructed by Hindu nationalists as a religion that is not only foreign to India, but is also intrinsically anti-national.

This is part of the broader discursive trend in Hindu nationalism in which “cultures (Hinduism) are unproblematically inscribed onto territory; conversion thus becomes a metaphor for the invasion of national territory by foreign, and indeed illegitimate,

religions” (Menon 2003, 50). The idea of threatened territorial integrity has long been a feature of the Hindu right’s rhetorical arsenal, most obviously in relation to Muslim ‘separatism’ with regard to Pakistan and Kashmir. However, it has also become a key facet of the Hindu nationalist attack on Christianity in recent years. The conversion to Christianity of large numbers of tribal people in India’s politically sensitive north-eastern states has been a notable development in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Downs (2003) argues, conversion has been one way in which people in this region have been able to galvanize a cultural and political identity that articulates resistance towards the Indian nation state. In this context, it has been mapped by the Sangh Parivar on to the threat of separatism and insurgency in this region, and framed as part of a conspiracy in which agents of foreign religions seek to divide India further along religious lines (Sahoo 2013).

Conversion is an interesting device to use in othering because in much of the literature on ethnic violence, the recourse of ideologues and political leaders to particular identities is assumed to be efficacious because it appeals to a sense of deep and eradicable difference between ‘them’ and ‘us’; ethnic difference is of course not primordial, but it often feels that way to those who subscribe to it (Turton, 1997; Kaufman, 2001; Suny, 2004). This is not, and indeed cannot be, the case with conversion given that it is inherently concerned with the changeability of identities. Yet it is precisely this that makes the spectre of conversion uniquely threatening and compelling as a rallying cry for Hindu nationalists. As Viswanathan (2000) argues, conversion embodies the idea that the boundaries between one identity and another are porous, and this challenges at a fundamental level the fixed, essentialised concepts of ethnicised identity that Hindu nationalism has traditionally made recourse to. This means that conversion is conceptually threatening because it fundamentally

undermines the attempts of the Sangh Parivar to construct a culturally homogenous and religiously synthesized Hindu India (Clarke, 2002).

However, there is also a sense that when Hindu nationalists use conversion as the prism through which to construct anti-Christian sentiment, what is being stressed is an otherness that is all the more disturbing because it disrupts what should be an inherent sameness. This pertains in particular to its myopic focus on dalit and adivasi communities, who make up over 70 per cent of India's Christian population. As discussed at greater length above, a central claim of the Sangh Parivar is that dalit and adivasi Christians are still basically Hindu, but have simply been ripped from the fold by unscrupulous missionaries, either foreign themselves or receiving funding from foreign sources. This idea is made manifest in the discourse and practice of *ghar vapsi*, mass ceremonies orchestrated by Hindu nationalist organisations in which adivasi Christians are 'reconverted' - or, to use a literal translation of the Sangh Parivar's terminology, returned home- to Hinduism. It is somewhat ironic, given that conversion to Christianity has often been used by both dalits and adivasis as a mode of self-assertion (Forrester, 1980; Bayly, 1989; Mosse, 1999) that in Hindu nationalist discourse, all agency is removed from these communities by an insistence that conversion is always the result of trickery, bribery or force, and must therefore be righted by bringing those who have 'strayed' back into the Hindu fold. Conversion thus becomes an act of violence not just enacted on Hinduism itself, but also on India's most helpless and vulnerable citizens.

These discourses are obviously pejorative, but where they become implicated in violence is when they become objectified as truth, upheld and reproduced by structures of power. Hindu nationalist discourses have been able to gain significant

purchase in the Indian public sphere thanks to the Sangh Parivar's access to institutional, cultural and political centres of power such as national and regional government, legislatures, the media, and networks of education and social service provision. They are in turn used to legitimise and bolster that power. In this sense, I argue that Hindu nationalists have been able to establish a 'regime of truth' around the issue of Christianity and conversion: where anti-Christian discourses have become widely accepted and functionally true, and in which the narratives of Christians themselves are necessarily suspect.

When discourses are stabilised and become 'true' in the social world in this way, disparaging or derogatory discourses become embedded in relations of power, making certain identities more valuable than others (Schram, 1993); under this discursive regime, Christian identity becomes undesirable and 'other'. This clearly has the potential to affect processes of identity formation for Christians in India because of the way in which Hindu nationalism has been able to shape the discursive world in which they must operate. As Jensen (2011: 65) puts it, "the theory of identity formation inherent in the concept of othering assumes that [those who are othered] are offered, and at the same time relegated to, subject positions as others in discourse". This is a process, then, by which a dominant group seeks to define supposedly inferior groups (Schwalbe et al., 2000).

Of course, agency then becomes a key consideration in this discussion. While processes of identity formation are inevitably influenced and conditioned by the discursive regimes that are operationalized and sustained by the dominant group, this is complicated by the fact that the targets of such othering discourses do not simply

accept the subject positions assigned to them: they may embrace, appropriate, resist and reject them in various ways (Jensen, 2011). Acknowledging this, this chapter looks particularly at the counter-discourses that are deployed by Christians in Udaipur district. By this, I refer to the discourses they construct and employ as they seek to engage with and subvert the dominant discourses about Christianity that are propounded by the Sangh Parivar, and that circulate widely in the social world in which they find themselves.

### **The local context**

In southern Rajasthan, the majority of the Christian population is adivasi; as such, discourses about innocent tribals being tricked or, more often, bribed by missionaries to convert are particularly prevalent, and are propagated aggressively by Hindu nationalist organisations working in this area. Take, for instance, the picture presented to me by Vikas, a prominent VHP leader in Udaipur city:

VS: So far as the missionaries are concerned, they are working in tribal areas and they are converting the Hindus into Christianity. A mass community of priests from abroad, from the UK and US, they are functioning in tribal areas and just converting the tribals... financially we are very badly off in comparison to the missionaries. They are getting foreign aid.

NK: So what work do you do in these areas?

VS: We try to stop this Christian conversion... In many places, many places we have brought them back [to Hinduism]. Three or four months back we have brought 35 families back to this religion. We are trying our level best against the conversion. We are trying to bring them back also.

He went on to describe how the missionaries operate in adivasi communities:

Suppose you are having some difficulty, financially. They will give you a little bit of money- 20, 40, 50 rupees, that's a big amount for those people. Then they start their prayers. If you had a fever they would just give you a tablet of paracetamol, and they will say this is a Prasad of Ishu – you take it. So the paracetamol would work! And they would say that this is by the grace of Christ that the fever went away... Plus these adivasis are fond of liquor and non-veg. [Missionaries] use this to make them gather. They prepare mutton pulao, or in the shape of Prasad they serve liquor. They gain their confidence.

I can teach you anything, but first of all I have to gain your confidence...and when the tribals come near to them, then they start preaching, regarding Christ.

His account here is strikingly on-message. He invokes many familiar tropes of Hindu nationalist discourse about Christianity: that missionaries are foreign, that they receive funding from western countries, that adivasis are duped through tricks, plied with alcohol, or else bribed with money to come to the church, and that they must ultimately be brought back to Hinduism where they belong. There is also a sense of this being a numbers game, with the VHP and its affiliates in a constant battle to stem the tide of conversion.

These messages are spread by Hindu nationalist activists working for organisations including the BJP, VHP, RSS, Bajrang Dal and the RVKP. The BJP government of Rajasthan (2003-8) took a strong stance on the issue of conversion, the clearest example of which was its 2008 passing of the incongruously named Freedom of Religion Bill, which aimed to promote 'freedom of conscience' by stopping conversion by allurement or force.<sup>30</sup> It also sought to put stringent restrictions on the activities of evangelical churches, most notably the Emmanuel Mission operating in nearby Kota district. Locally, anti-Christian, anti-conversion discourses are spread through political rallies and other forms of electioneering, and are used as a justification for violence. They are also propagated through networks of social service provision: for instance, during one visit to a village learning camp being run by the RVKP, I was assured in no uncertain terms by the teenage girls in charge of lessons that they would never let a Christian come to their school, because India is a Hindu country and Christianity does not belong there. Finally, anti-conversion discourses are

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<sup>30</sup> After initially stalling in 2006, the bill was passed in 2008 but was not enacted after the Congress took over the state government in that year.

a prominent feature of the large-scale cultural revival programs held by these organisations (Sahoo, 2013a), and underpin (ironically) the mass ‘reconversion’ (*ghar vapsi*) ceremonies that they carry out.

This clearly has its intended effects, as these discourses have considerable traction within adivasi communities in this area. In interviews, Christians often echoed them almost exactly as they sought to explain why they had been targeted for violence. As one Pentecostal convert succinctly put it: “they say that [Christians] are ruining the Hindu religion, that they are teaching Hindus wrong things, that they are trying to convert them all. They say that Christians are bad. They say that the Christians are giving money to people to make them Christian”.

### **Conversion discourse, proselytization and intra-Christian difference**

The impact of Hindu nationalist discourse on Christian identity is shown most clearly in the construction of intra-Christian difference in this area, predominantly along the fault line of proselytizing and non-proselytizing denominations. In my initial interviews with church leaders in Udaipur city, nearly everyone I spoke to impressed upon me that one of the most positive outcomes of Hindu nationalist violence had been the increased unity and ecumenicism of the different denominational churches working in Udaipur. Certainly, a shared experience of persecution has led to these churches coming together to support one another in various ways. The Udaipur Christian Fellowship (UCF) is an umbrella body incorporating most of the churches in the area. Under its banner, biannual events are held wherein leaders from different denominations preach in each other’s churches, and joint functions are organised such as Christmas carol services and ‘peace rallies’, where Christians come together and process through the streets of Udaipur at Christmas and Easter. It also acts as a body

that links up churches if they need support when approaching authorities with reports of violence and discrimination (see chapter 7). The aim of this organisation, then, is to build a joint Christian community, both to promote inter-denominational unity and understanding and to enhance political effectiveness. However, while good relationships at an institutional level have been forged between the churches, as I spent more time in the field it was also evident that there were some underlying tensions between them. This was particularly the case at the village level, which is where the majority of the Christian population in this district lives and where direct violence against Christians is most likely to take place.

Reverend Arjun is the CNI pastor at Nai, although he lives in Udaipur city and commutes to the church to hold the weekly service there on Sundays. One week early in our acquaintance, he offered to take me with him so that I could see the service and meet some of his congregation. As we drove through the hilly, rural landscape of Girwa tehsil, he pointed out a small, run-down looking church on the side of the road: a simple white-washed building with a wooden cross perched on the roof- and smashed windows from an act of vandalism by the Bajrang Dal. “You see that?” he asked me. “They use that building to keep cows and goats in. These [Pentecostal] organisations come, and they keep building all these churches just for the sake of it. You will find so many like that here”. I had, in fact, visited the church in question on previous occasions and spoken many times with the pastor there, an elderly Pentecostal convert named Lalu Ram who was fiercely committed to his religion. Contrary to Arjun’s claims, the church is used for services on a regular basis and certainly was not built just for the sake of it: Lalu Ram, who had previously had to walk several miles in both directions to attend weekly services, specifically requested

funds from the main church so he could build it, and himself donated the land on which it was constructed.

Arjun's dismissive attitude towards this type of church was not grounded in any particular antipathy towards the Pentecostal movement as a whole. He has good relationships with the FFCI leadership at Pada, reflecting the ecumenical efforts described above. Moreover, he often remarked that Pentecostals had a very strong faith that he wished he could see in his own congregation, and it was interesting that his own services bore distinct hallmarks of Pentecostal practice. His problem, then, was not with Pentecostalism itself but with the particular type of church he had pointed out: small, rural, and under the local leadership of converts. He was fond, for instance, of making the joke that in Jhadol tehsil all you had to do was stand and throw a stone and you would surely hit a Pentecostal pastor: another pejorative reference to the villagers who assume leadership roles in the churches in their own localities.

Part of this was undoubtedly his own sense of belonging to a church with a long history, established traditions, and a firm grounding in Christian theology, and the concomitant assumption that these new churches with their untrained pastors could not be practising Christianity 'properly'. This attitude was reflected by Arjun's colleague, Rev. Tadvi, another CNI pastor. Tadvi is a third generation Bhil Christian from neighbouring Banswara district, and while he now runs the church's operations in Kherwara he was previously the Presbyterian-in-Charge at the central Shepherd Memorial Church in Udaipur city, making him a prominent leader in the CNI in this area. In one wide-ranging discussion we had at his home in Kherwara, I asked him

whether or not it was important for Christians to share their faith with others. He explained:

No church can force anyone to convert – this is the first and most important principal of any Christian church. The person himself must want to convert, they cannot be forced or induced to convert. That is the first thing and a fundamental to being a Christian. People have to come to Christ of their own free will. However, the ways of spreading the message may differ between churches...I am no one to convert you, you convert yourself. We only give the knowledge and spread the message; it must be in your heart, your wish and your desire to convert to Christianity. The Pentecostal church is more enthusiastic, that is their way of functioning... We will never push or hurry someone. Everything takes time and we give people enough time to think about things and reflect before they want to join the church. It must be done willingly and with full knowledge, even if it takes one, two, five or ten years. The Pentecostals like doing this quickly- it is their way...some churches go fast, some prefer going slow.

His insistence that nobody can be forced to convert speaks clearly and straightforwardly to Hindu nationalist discourse; however, he emphasizes this specifically through reference to the differences between the CNI and the Pentecostal church. His suggestion here is that the CNI does things properly: they do not rush people into conversion, and they make sure that that converts have a thorough understanding of Christianity; his implication, couched in the language of fast and slow, is that the Pentecostal church does not hold converts to such a high standard. This attitude was clearly echoed in the voices of his congregation in the village. During one focus group interview in the village of Adapur, Kherwara tehsil, Jamna, a middle-aged nurse from an old Christian family, was particularly dismissive of the new converts joining the nearby Pentecostal church:

They do a lot of Hindu things. In the CNI, we do not do that. The Pentecostals do that, especially the new ones...they follow all Hindu customs, they light incense sticks, they use garlands and coconuts, they celebrate Holi and Diwali, they walk around the fire when they get married...Once they are well<sup>31</sup> they go back to these things. They might go to church, they might not. They do not have full faith [pura vishwas].

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<sup>31</sup> She is referring here to the experiences of healing which bring the majority of converts to the Pentecostal church.

Again, there is the sense here that, unlike the long-established CNI community, new converts are simply not ‘proper’ Christians. Certainly, these respondents are constructing their identities here as old Christians who have had their religion passed down through several generations and who are intimately familiar with its teachings and traditions, in contrast to these new Christians who, either out of ignorance or lack of faith, do not practice the religion correctly. Yet beyond the sense of doing things ‘right’, both the CNI pastors and congregation clearly betray some of the key anxieties about conversion to Christianity that are a such a prominent feature of Hindu nationalist rhetoric: uneasiness at the proliferation of new churches in the area and the rapid growth of Christianity without an appropriate spiritual grounding or understanding of the religion: conversion, then, simply ‘for the sake of it’, in pursuit of numbers, and for reasons other than sincere religious belief.

What those reasons might be were more explicitly articulated in a conversation I had with Sister Ganga, an adivasi nun from Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh who has been working at the church in Jhamliya for over a decade. She presented a picture of the Pentecostal churches in the area that was strikingly reminiscent of that of the Hindu right:

These [Pentecostal] people- they convert, that is their reason. They force them, they preach, and because of them others also have to hear [accusations from Hindus]. We will not force them; if you want to, come, if you don’t then don’t come. Now, this one local [Pentecostal] church they will select one person, and this person has to convert ten people, ten families. So then that person will get 5000 rupees or 3000 rupees per month... Again they will go to another village and convert ten families, so they are spreading like that. And they [the convert] will get something: they will give them a goat or something. So they are getting some profit. They are feeling that they are receiving something, so they convert.

The key themes that she brings out are clearly in congruence with Hindu nationalist understandings of conversion: the idea that people are converted by force, or by

material inducement, and that there is a large stream of money being channelled through the Pentecostal church purely for the sake of converting people. Underlying this understanding of Pentecostal activity there is a sense of frustration: the idea that the behaviour of the Pentecostal church is inciting the anger of Hindu nationalists, and all Christians have to suffer as a result of this. Similar thoughts were also expressed to me by a senior member of the Catholic clergy in Udaipur city, Fr. Joseph, who suggested that the Pentecostal church had caused trouble for the Catholic church because of its focus on conversion activities. Again, he argued that it is Pentecostals and not Catholics who engage in proselytization, but the Catholic church- longer established, and much more visible thanks to its substantial institutional presence in schools and charitable organisations- which has to bear the brunt of the inevitable backlash against this, for instance having their buildings vandalised and their personnel harassed.

The efforts seen here to build explicit contrasts between Catholic and Pentecostal Christians are clearly very similar to those drawn by the leadership of the CNI, if more overtly critical.<sup>32</sup> Both churches, then, seek to create an image of themselves as non-proselytizing, and in this way are at least in part demonstrating processes of identity construction that are shaped and constrained by Hindu nationalist discourse. What is striking, though, is the way in which this has led them to actively define themselves against those who ostensibly share their religion: another Christian denomination. It seems therefore that Hindu nationalist discourses are not rejected outright by the Christian community as a whole, but are instead projected onto the Pentecostal church. Here we see both elements of reproduction, in the obvious use of

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<sup>32</sup> It is worth noting here that the difference between the institutional Catholic and Pentecostal churches is of course exacerbated by the Catholic/Protestant divide, which is not the case with the CNI church.

the same tropes that characterise Hindu nationalist discourse, but also of resistance, as these very tropes are deployed in order to assert the fact that, even if they may be true for others, they do not hold true for *us*.

### **Pentecostals and proselytizing**

Concomitantly, this process also means that Pentecostalism is constructed as an aggressively proselytizing faith not just by Hindu nationalists but also by other Christians. Certainly, it is the case that evangelism is an important facet of the identity of the Pentecostal church in Udaipur. It is worth noting at this point that in practice I saw little evidence of a concerted or aggressive evangelical effort in the villages in which I worked, and it seems that Catholicism has spread in this area through much the same channels as Pentecostalism, largely as a result of sharing healing experiences rather than any organised attempts at proselytization (see chapter 7). Nonetheless, the act of sharing one's faith and bringing others to it is given great significance by Pentecostal leaders, in contrast to those belonging to the CNI and Catholic churches. The Pentecostal church does not claim to be non-proselytizing, and given the weight not only of Hindu nationalist discourse but also its characterization by other denominations, this is an issue that it has had to confront in the way it seeks to present itself and its activities.

### **The Native Missionary Movement**

From its very inception, Pentecostalism has been characterised by a heavy emphasis on the necessity of evangelism, and evangelistic outreach is given high priority as part of Pentecostal mission strategies (Anderson, 2004). Seeking to fulfil this imperative to spread the Christian faith, the FFCI runs a Bible College in Udaipur city, in which it seeks to train new Christian leaders to engage in mission work and church planting

and growth activities across Rajasthan and north India. This college, founded in 1981, is part of what the church calls the Native Missionary Movement (NMM), a mission organisation that seeks to train up missionaries from the local area with the understanding that they are best equipped to work amongst their own communities because of their knowledge of local languages, culture, and customs. This, it is argued, makes them more effective and successful missionaries than either their western or even south Indian counterparts.

Of course in one sense this is simply a pragmatic mission strategy, and it is one that has long been recognised by the Christian church. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century the CMS emphasized the importance of training indigenous missionaries, who were supposed to form the backbone of new ‘native churches’ in order to allow western missionaries to move on and spread the Gospel in new pastures. Certainly, this was in part driven by necessity, as financial and personal constraints often meant that western missionaries relied heavily on the help of indigenous converts, but it was also acknowledged that they often had more success in their evangelical endeavours than did their non-native counterparts thanks to their local knowledge (Bradford, 2012: 71). Indeed, missionary histories of Christianity in Udaipur demonstrate these attitudes. For instance, in his biography of James Shepherd fellow missionary George Carstairs (1926) frequently acknowledges the particularly effective evangelical work carried out by the native catechist Isa Das, who was often a pioneering figure in the more remote and inaccessible parts of the region.

For the Keralan missionaries that first came to work in southern Rajasthan in the 1960s, the imperative of training up evangelists from the local area, who spoke the local languages and were familiar with existing religious traditions, was just as

pressing. The development of the NMM, then, should certainly be seen as a time-tested mission strategy with considerable history. However, it is also the case that it has acquired new resonance given the circulation of Hindu nationalist discourses on missionaries and conversion in this region. When asked about the NMM, the director of the Bible College explained:

The philosophy behind it is that Indians are better missionaries than any other missionaries in India. Natives can reach their own community; they are culturally more adaptable to the situation. So people should not think that this is a foreign religion. Even we are all St. Thomas Christians, so its two thousand years ago- before even caste Hindus came to the South, there was a Christian presence. So this is just continuing what we have already. We have no hierarchical connection with any other church outside India. Our leadership is here.

Here, it is clear that he seeks to make explicit links between the work and purpose of the NMM and the fundamental indigeneity of Christianity; given this, it is difficult to read his forceful assertion that Christianity is not a foreign religion as anything other than a refutation of the accusations of the Hindu right. In confronting the issue of proselytization and missionary work, the Pentecostal church has had to assert the legitimacy of Christianity as an Indian religion because the two issues are so intrinsically related in Hindu nationalist discourse: Christian evangelization is framed as an act of violence against the Hindu nation precisely because it is fundamentally concerned with imposing a foreign religion and culture on to those who convert. He makes the point, then, that Christian missionaries in India have, for centuries, *been Indian*, but there is also another significant layer to his characterisation of the NMM in this area that pushes this argument even further. In this part of southern Rajasthan, he explained, much of the church leadership in the villages is drawn from the local area, and indeed the Pentecostal movement here has strong foundations in a revival that began in Banswara (a predominantly adivasi district bordering Udaipur), which

produced a number of ‘indigenous’ missionaries who went on to become influential leaders.

The use of the term indigenous has specific connotations here. The key point he is making about evangelical activity is not that it is driven by Indians, although that is of course important; it is that it is driven by local, often tribal Indians. This is significant because, in this formulation, the nature of the missionary has distinct repercussions for the nature of the Christianity they propagate: many Pentecostal leaders espoused the idea that drawing on leaders from Rajasthan itself, and in particular from the districts and villages in which they work in southern Rajasthan, has resulted in a distinctively local form of Christianity that is both informed by and responsive to existing cultural practices. As such, ‘native missionary’ knowledge of local culture and practice is discursively framed as an asset, not so that they are more effective in challenging and eradicating it, but because of the church’s acknowledgement- even desire to ensure- that ‘traditional’ tribal culture will remain a fundamental part of adivasi Christian identity even after conversion.<sup>33</sup>

### **Indian Christianity: locating Christian indigeneity in Hindu religious tradition**

The idea that Hinduism and Christianity should not simply be considered ‘other’ to one another in the ways that Hindu nationalism suggests was taken up in a particularly distinctive way by another Pentecostal preacher, Fr. Rathore. I met Fr. Rathore while attending a Pentecostal church service in Kherwara. From a Rajasthani Rajput family, he attended a mission school as a boy but was quickly disillusioned by

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<sup>33</sup> There are of course caveats and limitations to this, and the way that this assertion plays out on the ground is rather more complicated than these statements suggest. This issue is looked at in more depth in subsequent chapters, particularly chapter 6.

the bad habits, drinking, and smoking of the missionaries who ran it; however, despite their indifference a curiosity about Jesus was instilled in him. After some struggles in his youth, including the death of his father and subsequent financial hardship, he hit a crisis point and was considering taking his own life. Soon after this, as he was out walking one day he met a group of Christian worshippers and as he talked with them he had a profound spiritual experience, which resulted in his conversion. For the last forty years he has worked as a preacher in and around southern Rajasthan; he is currently affiliated with the FFCI (although prefers to think of himself as an independent, almost freelance pastor) and is a founding member of its Tribal Christian Welfare Society.

When we sat down to talk after the service, on hearing the purpose of my research he immediately began to expound on the fundamental indigeneity of Christianity to India. His interpretation of the subject, however, was one that I had not encountered before:

The Gospel of Jesus is very, very old in India. Before the birth of Jesus several sages in India also spoke about his birth. And there was no idol worship in ancient India. All the religious system in India today, what we call Hinduism, is actually...the roots are found in Babylon, because Babylon started idol worship...In India, they never worshipped any gods and goddesses. These imaginary things started because everybody wanted to copy Babylon- that had a great influence on India, and so all the corruption came. But ancient India believed in a creator god- God the Father, the Supreme Father. It says here [in the Vedas]: the world is imperishable, and he is the creator of this world...it is written that the incarnation without blemish will come, and he will be borne by a Virgin. So belief in Jesus is already found in ancient Indian literature, religious literature.

He went on to quote many passages from Vedic literature that corresponded to teachings about the nature of god that are found in the Bible.

In some ways his arguments echo those of many other commentators on anti-Christian violence. The suggestion that Christianity is a foreign religion is one that has been seized on by many who seek to confront and discredit Hindu nationalist claims: the counter-argument- that Christianity has a long history in India, dating back nearly 2000 years- has become a familiar trope in this regard. Puniyani (2006) exemplifies this when he writes that Christianity “is an age-old Indian religion. In 52 AD St Thomas established church on the southern coast...even before [Christianity] came to the West”. That the beginnings of Christianity in India predate its arrival in the west is the key point of this argument; this line of reasoning serves to delink Christianity from its association with British colonial rule, and stress its character as an ancient Indian religion that has developed independently from its western counterpart. However, while Rathore does point out that Christianity arrived in India long before it did in the west, the fundamental point he is making is that Christianity should be considered indigenous to India not because of its early geographical spread, but because of its theological origins. Christianity is therefore Indian not because it has been present in India for millennia, but because it shares its historical, spiritual and philosophical underpinnings with those of ancient Indian religious tradition.

Rathore’s ideas on this subject do find articulation in certain existing theological enquiries that have sought to elucidate the similarities and parallels between Hindu and Christian teaching. Wolfe (1995) points to the numerous stories, themes and symbols that are shared by the major world religions, arguing that this is the result of the interaction and amalgamation of many different strands of philosophical and theological thought that took place in Europe and Asia from the first century AD. Several apparent similarities between Hindu religious texts and the Bible are highlighted in support of this claim: the Svetasvatara Upanishad, for example, talks of

Brahman as the omnipotent divine lord and creator; the story of Nachiketa in the Katha Upanishad has parallels with the life of Jesus, and has resonance too with the parable of the prodigal son; descriptions of Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita bear similarities to the way in which Jesus is described in the Bible; and there are a litany of moral teachings that find expression in both religious scriptures (ibid). These authors suggest that Christianity did not arise within an isolated Hebraic context; rather, it is possible that the Christian apostles had come into contact with Hindu and other non-Judaic teachings due to the spread of knowledge through the Middle East (Pagels, 1981).

Rathore's interpretation of the Indian-ness of Christianity is not necessarily novel, then; nor is it born directly in response to anti-Christian discourses of the Sangh Parivar. However, it clearly has new resonance, and indeed pragmatic utility, in this context. As he explained, this approach has helped him with regard to preaching in the villages:

I have never had any opposition yet, because of this way of presenting the Gospel...I speak to them from Hindu books. Things like...that supreme God whose name is supreme, he is having no idol. That is written in one of the Vedas. So in Hinduism itself there are so many things that they can understand. So I speak to them from the Hindu books, I don't open the Bible on the spot.

By framing Christianity in terms of its shared origins with Hinduism, then, Fr. Rathore claims that people have been more receptive to his message and he has been able to evangelize without being met by hostility. It is interesting, though, that he makes this claim in the terms he does: suggesting that the predominantly adivasi communities he works with can understand Christian teachings better when they can be shown to have originated in 'their own' (Hindu) religious traditions. This idea is not new when it comes to Christian proselytization; it reflects the widely

acknowledged strategy of changing the meanings of people's existing beliefs and practices so that they can be incorporated into Christian ritual and worship. As will be seen in later chapters, this is clearly in evidence in the Christian communities in this study. However, this is not necessarily what is happening here. While Bhils in this area refer to themselves as Hindus and the influence of certain caste Hindu practices has been evident since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is still the case that for the most part Hindu norms are combined in various ways with highly localized practices, rituals, and forms of worship (Weisgrau, 2013). Thus while it may be fair to suggest that the people living in these villages might have more familiarity with stories from Hindu texts than Christian ones, this kind of Brahmanical Hinduism with its grounding in the Vedas does not characterise the religious understandings of adivasi communities in this area. It is, however, the type of Hinduism that the Sangh Parivar endorses and is keen to propagate.

What Rathore is doing, I suggest, is fashioning a discourse in which Christianity is explicitly placed within the religious universe of Hinduism according to Hindu nationalists. This demonstrates the duality inherent in the relationship between discourse and identity construction: that discursive regimes create conditions that constrain processes of identity formation, and yet at the same time they can also be used as constructive resources in articulating identities in new ways. On the one hand, Rathore's construction of Christianity is one that is ultimately informed and shaped by Hindu nationalist discourse: the idea that a religion only has legitimacy in India if it can be considered 'Indian', and that it can only be considered Indian if it finds its genesis in India. On the other hand, it is this very formulation of Christian indigeneity that appropriates and subverts their discourse: he engages Hindu nationalism on its own terms in his construction of Christian identity, effectively delinking Hindu and

Indian identity by finding a place for Christianity within the Sangh Parivar's own conception of what it means to be Indian. This also has an effect on what it means to convert people to Christianity. Here, there are resonances of the Sangh Parivar's notion of *ghar vapsi*: if Christian belief is built on truths that are also the foundation of Hinduism, then conversion to Christianity is simply a *return* to this more universal religious understanding, in its original form and before it became corrupted by polytheism.

### **The assertion of agency amongst Pentecostal converts**

While the Pentecostal leadership have tended to focus on the nature or character of Christianity (that is, as fundamentally indigenous in various ways) when engaging with Hindu nationalism, the counter discourses employed by Pentecostal converts in the villages instead foreground ideas of personal agency. This is perhaps unsurprising, as anti-Christian discourse explicitly denies this to adivasi converts with regard to their own religious choices. While it is church institutions and missionaries that bear the brunt of the Hindu right's ideological ire, by suggesting that adivasi Christians are so backward and uneducated that they are easily tricked, that their poverty induces them to convert for financial or material gain, or even that they can simply be swayed by the promise of food or liquor, Hindu nationalist discourse consistently asserts that they do not – indeed, cannot- genuinely make their own decisions in converting to Christianity.

Given this, Pentecostal converts are keen to offer narratives that reassert their agency in conversion. In the villages, by far the most common accusation levelled against Christians by non-Christians is that they are offered money or some other kind of payment to convert- although as seen above, it is also one that is sometimes aimed at

Pentecostals by other churches.<sup>34</sup> This idea was strongly challenged by many informants, who all stated unequivocally that they received no money or material inducement from the church, and that it was their own choice to convert.<sup>35</sup> Kalu Ram, for example, is a Pentecostal man in his late forties, who converted to Christianity approximately ten years before this research took place. He is a farmer who now also gets occasional work driving the minibus for the church. He told me:

People say to me that you're getting money from the church, and that's why you're going. People ask me: how much money are they giving you in church? I tell them they don't give me money; I have to give money in church! When you go to temple you have to spend money on coconut, flowers, incense. Here we don't need any of that- we give money by our own wish [iccha se].

Here he directly refutes Hindu nationalist discourses about the nature of conversion, but he does so not simply by stating that he did not receive any money to convert; instead, he builds further meaning about his own identity as a Christian into the statement. By referencing the money he is expected to *give* to the church<sup>36</sup>, Kalu Ram is not merely illustrating the fact that the assumed relationship between church and convert is, in actuality, reversed, but showing the strength of his own religious convictions because he has chosen to take on this extra financial burden. If, as Hindus claim, being paid to join the church is a sign of a lack of true faith, then inverting that discourse works as a testament to the strength of his faith. In addition, he makes the point that he gives this money freely and willingly, without obligation, explicitly using the language of his own desires/wishes (*iccha*) to emphasize his agency and choice in the transaction.

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<sup>34</sup> On first starting my research, I was struck by the fact the whenever I broached the topic of my enquiry to non-Christians they almost all responded immediately with variations on the theme that churches were deliberately targeting poor people; nearly everybody had a story to tell about somebody they had heard about who had converted to Christianity and immediately gotten a new motorbike, a better house, or some other financial reward.

<sup>35</sup> The motivations behind conversion are discussed in chapter 5.

<sup>36</sup> Officially, the Pentecostal church asks for tithes of 10 per cent of a person's income; usually contributions were considerably less than this, generally 1 or 2 rupees given in service collections.

This sense of choice speaks specifically to his experience as a Christian, in direct contrast to that of Hindus. Here, he draws on themes that were a frequent feature of Christian discourse in this area: the idea that Hindus follow a religion that forces them to engage in superstitious behaviour- expensive, time-consuming, but functionally useless. This included sacrifices and offerings made to Hindu gods as well as forms of ritual practice, and it was widely referred to as blind belief (*andh vishwas*). Of course, there is a religious value judgement here: to Christians, any actions that are not carried out in the name of Jesus or the Christian god are necessarily superstitious rather than religious acts. However, in terms of counter-discourse there is a definite sense of inversion here. When Christians talk about Hindus having to spend money on ineffectual paraphernalia in their worship – particularly where this is invoked in direct contrast to Christians, who give money to the church because they want to- it is Hindus who are constructed as gullible, who lack understanding of or are not in charge of their own religious practice, or who do things just because they are told to. There was also a more direct inversion of Hindu nationalist discourse that surfaced in Christian narratives, generally concerning the activities of Sangh Parivar organisations. Shankar Lal is a former sarpanch of Pada and a member of the Pentecostal congregation there. During one interview, he came on to the subject of the BJP and its work amongst adivasi communities:

They say it is social service [seva], but it is not actually. They take a lot of money from the government to run their organisations. Anyone could do that...it's not true service. They are not devoted to their work, they are just earning money.

As a local political actor, Shankar Lal has been a staunch Congress man for several decades, which no doubt influences his appraisal of Sangh Parivar activities.

However, the idiom in which he chose to express his opposition is telling, drawing as it does on the idea of financial motivation over ideological conviction; precisely the kind of language used to disparage missionaries and church institutions in this area. Other respondents used similar rhetorical strategies in direct relation to the question of anti-Christian violence. Mangilal is a Pentecostal lay preacher working in the area around Pada, who during our interview brought up the subject of *ghar vapsi* or ‘reconversion’ ceremonies that are held by Hindu nationalist organisations in this region:

ML: Last year the RSS gathered the whole village and distributed a statue of Rama and Sita to everyone. They want to spread Hinduism. The BJP and the RSS have their gatherings here. The RSS and the Bajrang Dal organise a mela every year and call all the village people, and they teach them about Hinduism. They do reconverting [dharm parivartan] there, on that day. It happens every year. They convert Christian people into the Hindu religion.

NK: Why would a person go to that, if they were Christian?

ML: People will go if they’re weak [kamjor]. There is inducement [lalach]. They give blankets and money to them...[so they] bow in front of the Hindu gods, and tell the gods that I’ve made a mistake, please forgive me.

Here he makes the assertion that Hindus are the ones engaged in aggressive proselytization, and consequently he is able to redeploy the same discourses that they do about conversion in order to discredit Hindu nationalist organisations. Again, what is evident here is the way that Hindu nationalist discourse is not outright rejected, but is instead appropriated and subverted. Of course, by failing to reject entirely the Hindu nationalist meanings attached to conversion, he is complicit in constructing the same idea of the poor tribal that it does: one that draws on susceptibility to bribery and a lack of true religious understanding and conviction. Whether or not this figure actually exists, it remains a useful construct for Mangilal’s sense of identity as a Christian as he projects it onto those outside of the Christian community: the flip side of this is that those who remain are true converts, who refuse to compromise their religious identity even when there are incentives to do otherwise. This much is made

evident by his suggestion that those who are vulnerable to such incentives are ‘weak’; the agency of Christians is asserted at the expense of those who choose to reconvert.

In one sense, then, his comments are intended simply to criticize Hindu nationalist organisations for their aggressive and unscrupulous tactics. However, they also echo the discursive constructions operationalized by the CNI leadership above, in that it creates an ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ dynamic *within* the Christian community: those who are true Christians, and those who have converted for reasons other than faith and can be easily enticed in one direction or another. He is therefore circumscribing what makes a ‘proper’ Christian, and in doing so uses the mechanisms that were evident in the discussion above: it may be true for some, but it is not true for us.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to demonstrate the ways in which Christians deploy counter-discourses that challenge the cultural violence propagated by the Hindu right, and in doing so demonstrate processes of identity construction which are inherently shaped by, but at the same time creatively appropriate and resist, anti-Christian discourse.

First, I argue that the pervasiveness of anti-conversion narratives in the public sphere has clearly affected the processes of boundary-making that have taken place at an institutional level amongst Christian churches in Udaipur: when it comes to asserting a particular Christian identity in this context, they draw clear lines between proselytizing and non-proselytizing Christian denominations. In this regard, it is Pentecostalism that has become a crucial ‘other’ to the CNI and Catholic church, as they seek to distance themselves from the discursive construction of Christianity by the Hindu right.

The Pentecostal church, in contrast, does not seek to portray itself as non-proselytizing. Instead, by arguing that Christianity cannot be considered foreign or ‘deculturing’ because of its philosophical origins, history, and the way in which it has developed particular local characteristics thanks to the use of native missionaries, the Pentecostal church seeks to reformulate the assumptions and meanings attached to the idea of missionary work and conversion. Here, an emphasis on continuity is used to undermine the focus on rupture that characterises Hindu nationalist discourse. Of course, there are many ways in which Pentecostals seek to construct Hindu-Christian difference, and these are a focus of the other chapters in this thesis. However, it is also evident that anti-Christian discourse has actually led church leaders to emphasize elements of connection or similarity between the two; either in a common religious past, or in the cultural similarities between adivasi Christians and Hindus that persist after conversion.

Finally, I show that for Pentecostal converts a key strategy in challenging cultural violence is the inversion of the anti-Christian discourses that underpin it. Respondents argue, for instance, that Christians do not receive money from the church but are expected to give it; that it is not missionaries who seek material gain but Hindu nationalist organisations; that it is Hindus and not Christians who are duped into believing things that are not true; and that it is in fact the Sangh Parivar which is engaged in aggressive proselytizing and conversion activities. These counter-discourses are also ones that foreground the assertion of personal choice and agency of Christians, which speaks overtly to Hindu nationalist accusations of missionaries converting by force, bribery or trickery. However, it is also the case that in seeking to assert this agency Pentecostal converts themselves often draw on these tropes, projecting them instead onto Hindus and ‘backsliding’ Christians. In this sense, there

is a certain tension inherent in the counter-discourses used by Christians: they are, to some degree, engaged in reproducing the anti-Christian discourses of the Sangh Parivar, even as they seek to resist and subvert them.

## **5. Sickness, healing, and conversion**

This chapter explores the role of conversion narratives in the construction of identity among Bhil Christians. It seeks to show how the primacy of the healing experience in these narratives has important functions, not just in terms of the religious identity of the converts themselves but also in the mediation of inter-group relationships between Hindus and Christians. First, I demonstrate that the idea of conversion as a means to pursue good health is one that allows Bhil Christians to contest and resist the ‘disease of poverty’ that is a result of the structural violence that often shapes adivasi lives in this region. Second, I argue that a focus on healing has the potential to make conversion more acceptable to non-Christians, both because it speaks to pre-existing ideas about the causes of sickness and how to treat it, and because poverty and sickness, broadly defined, are an endemic feature of many people’s lives here; as such, it is easier for them to understand why a person may choose to convert as a health-seeking strategy. This also changes the meanings attached to conversion. For Hindu nationalists, conversion entails the changing of identity from ‘Hindu’ to ‘Christian’, a transformation that is conceived of as inherently threatening. The narratives of converts, however, suggest that a fundamental aspect of conversion is actually a change of identity from ‘afflicted’ to ‘healed’, which therefore has potential to undermine the discourses on conversion being circulated by the Sangh Parivar.

### **The conversion narrative and the construction of identity**

As Claerhout and De Roover (2008) point out, a fundamental problem in the study of religious conversion has been one of identification: how do we know we are looking at religious conversion given the vast array of social and ideological contexts in which it might occur? Traditionally, academic analysis of religious conversion has drawn,

even if inadvertently, on Christian imagery; this has tended to see conversion as a rupture, or radical shift away from an old set of beliefs and associations in favour of a new theological outlook (Buckser and Glazier, 2003: xvi). This has been challenged by a growing body of work on the anthropology of conversion, which instead understands conversion as “a fluid process of changing affiliations of religious beliefs and traditions with a range of possibilities” (Robinson and Clarke, 2003: 8). This broader definition of conversion informs the way in which it is conceptualised here. For Bhil Christians, conversion does not necessarily involve a complete rethinking of their previous worldviews and associations; on the other hand, it is necessary to acknowledge that conversion is “a deliberate change with definite direction and shape” - it is neither a complete rupture nor completely syncretic (Austin-Broos, 2003: 1-2).

Conversion is of course intimately linked with the idea of identity, involved as it is in the construction of new selves both publicly and privately (Viswanathan, 2000). Much of the literature on conversion focuses on the internal psychological processes and transformations of individual consciousness (Sremac, 2010; Buckser and Glazier, 2003). However, just like other processes of identity formation, it is embedded within a specific social context, and the act of conversion is “constituted and reconstituted through social practice and the articulation of new forms of relatedness” (Austin-Broos, 2003: 9). Later chapters will deal more explicitly with the idea of social practice and how it contributes to the construction of identity in converts. This chapter draws on aspects of discourse theory to facilitate a narrative approach to analysing conversion. It focuses on the specific ways in which people relate their experiences of conversion, and how and what this contributes to the formation of their identities as

Christians. This is based on theories of “narrative identity” which hold that identity is the product of the reflective process that occurs when people tell the stories of their lives or experiences (Ricoeur, 1988).

As Stromberg (1993) argues, conversion is a process of identity formation that is clearly reflected in the language and discursive forms of the conversion narrative. Moreover, in her study of Nigerian Pentecostalism Marshall (2010) describes giving testimony as a central technique of the self, a reflective practice by which a person seeks to transform themselves in certain ways and adhere to particular modes of conduct (Foucault, 1982). This can be understood in terms of Abdelal et al.’s (2006) notion of constitutive norms, which they see as a key constituent of identity: they are the normative guidelines for practices or behaviours that a person is expected to engage in as a member of a particular social group and play a regulatory function in determining individual and group behaviour. As such, sharing testimony becomes “the principal mode of creating new identity and collective belonging” (Sremac, 2010: 18). However, we should also remember that conversion narratives do not simply construct identity; they are themselves constructed in the context of particular social interactions and discursive frameworks (Popp-Baier, 2002). As such, an analysis of conversion narratives can reveal not only how the convert seeks to relate their own experience, but also about how they mediate and engage with the social and cultural world in which they live.

### **Healing and conversion to Christianity**

More than any other factor, experiences of divine healing have come to be a crucial marker of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity across the globe (Brown, 2011).

Based on a ten-country survey of Pentecostal Christians, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that in eight of the ten countries surveyed, more than 70 per cent of Pentecostals reported that they had either experienced or witnessed miraculous healings (Lugo et al., 2006). These experiences are closely related to conversion, as Pentecostalism and related renewalist movements are among the fastest growing within Christianity (ibid). Healing has been key to the rapid growth of Pentecostal churches in many parts of the world because it has acted as an evangelistic ‘door opener’, favoured by missionaries and evangelists as a means of demonstrating celestial power (Anderson, 2013). Moreover, as Brown (2011: 7) points out, Pentecostalism has tended to grow fastest “in those regions of the world where poverty and sickness seem most overwhelming, and where traditional religions and biomedicine alike have seemed insufficient in meeting practical, everyday needs”.

This is certainly true in Udaipur district, where experiences of healing are the key factor in seeking to account for people’s decisions to convert to Christianity. Of course, as established in chapter 3 the close relationship between healing and conversion does have a longer history in this region, given that the missionaries of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century were heavily engaged in medical work. However, it is striking that the provision of biomedical treatment is not a theme that comes out strongly in people’s memories and knowledge of Christianity in this area. This is due, I believe, to the fact that conversion rates during this period remained extremely low, meaning that it was not the case that medical provision was ever particularly successful in bringing significant numbers of people to the Church, and also that there is very little- if any- Christian medical infrastructure remaining in this area. Instead it

is divine healing that has been key to the growth of the Christian community here, driven initially by the Pentecostal church.

However, it is now the case that the primacy of healing in the conversion narratives of Christians is not just restricted to those belonging to Pentecostal or charismatic denominations. Both the Pentecostal community in Pada and the Catholic community in Jhamliya are made up primarily of converts to Christianity from Hinduism<sup>37</sup> - although a small number of Pentecostals converted from the CNI- and an experience of miraculous healing was a pervasive trope in all of their testimonies. The practice of the Catholic Church here does not conform easily to the idea of a charismatic movement: there is no routine practice of spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues or prophecy, and the liturgy remains clergy-centred and very traditional. However, healing is still at the centre of many converts' religious identity and belief.

It seems, then, that typically Pentecostal or charismatic theological paradigms and practices have come to permeate the wider Christian culture of the region. This is perhaps not surprising given that Pentecostal churches vastly outnumber those of other denominations; there are an estimated twelve Pentecostal churches in Jhadol tehsil alone, with just two Catholic churches and one CNI church.<sup>38</sup> However, as I will argue over the course of this chapter, a focus on healing has also become pervasive due to its relevance to the life experiences of poor adivasis in this region, and also because of its functional utility in negotiations of Christian identity here. The

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<sup>37</sup> These conversions have largely taken place within the last twenty years, and on an individual basis; while word of mouth is the main route through which people come to the church, there have been no conversion movements involving large numbers of people at one time.

<sup>38</sup> It is difficult to get anything other than an estimate of the number of Pentecostal churches operating in this area: they range from large, purpose-built structures to out-of-hours school halls to congregations held at people's houses, and have an overlapping membership. Understandably, the parent church organisation does not keep any detailed records of church or congregation numbers.

particular appeal of healing is therefore instrumental both to the proliferation of Pentecostal churches and to the nature of the influence they have had over the experiences and expectations of Christians from other denominations. In the case of Catholic converts, their frameworks of belief centre on divine healing even while Catholic church practice, ideology and ritual remain obviously distinct from that of the area's Pentecostal churches. The concept of divine healing has thus become a ubiquitous facet of Christian converts' experience, discourse and identity regardless of denomination.<sup>39</sup>

In its discussion of healing, this thesis does not seek to provide answers as to whether, or by which means, people are 'truly' healed. Instead, it engages with what the experience of healing means to people: how it affects their self-perception, their understanding of their religious identity and that of others, and how it is used to negotiate concepts of insider and outsider, similarity and difference, in the social world of the convert. These questions will be taken up in the remainder of this chapter.

### **Conceptualising sickness and healing**

If healing is the outcome prompting or resulting from conversion, then it is naturally the case that such conversion narratives should start with an experience of sickness. The concept of sickness is a wide-ranging one, and requires some explication here. In basic biomedical terms, sickness is defined as "a disturbance in bodily or behavioural function in ways determined by the physician", and can be diagnosed independent of

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<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, this also extends to CNI Christians whose families have been Christians for generations. Some people expressed the idea that their forefathers became Christians because they had experienced miraculous healings and not, as the literature on medical mission suggests, because missionaries had given them access to western biomedicine.

the patient's experience or judgement (Hahn, 1995: 7). However, many scholars have found this approach problematic, and have sought to expand the conceptual framework within which we understand sickness through the application of anthropological and social science concepts to clinical medical theory and practice. In this vein, Kleinman et al. (1978) make a crucial distinction between 'disease'-abnormalities in the structure and function of the body which is constructed, diagnosed and treated by modern physicians- and 'illness'-experiences of disvalued changes in states and being and social function, which is suffered by patients. The latter is, essentially, the human experience of sickness, which they juxtapose with the objective data required and used by Western biomedicine. In this sense, a person can experience illness without having a disease and vice versa.

They go on to link this understanding of sickness to the issue of healing through the lens of medical anthropology, suggesting that traditional healers are effective because they are largely concerned with the treatment of illness; that is, they provide the sufferer with a meaningful explanation for their illness and in various ways respond to the personal, familial and community dimensions of experiencing illness (ibid). Their formulation highlights the fact that is necessary to consider further the implications for healing given a more holistic understanding of what it means for a person to be sick. By delinking disease and illness, sickness becomes a phenomenon "associated with physical illness, emotional or psychological disturbances, and difficult life circumstances, without any presence of diagnosable physical or psychiatric illness" (Priya, 2012: 217).

Building on Kleinman's idea of disvalued changes in states and being, Hahn (1995: 6) argues for a broad definition that conceives of sickness as "a condition of the self [that

is] unwanted by the bearer”. This could include biomedical disease, social conditions such as unemployment or poverty, and even unwanted personality characteristics or emotions. The nature of sickness obviously has repercussions when it comes to the meaning and practice of healing. Within this framework, healing is about more than simply the alleviation or amelioration of physical problems (Brown, 2011), even when we consider the impact these have on a person’s personal and communal life more generally. It also encompasses relief from social strife- for example alcoholism, domestic problems, or unemployment (Chesnut, 2011; Bomann, 2011). It may also be conceived of in even broader terms, as a general “restoration to wholeness” of a person, including personal and communal well-being, unity between the natural and the supernatural, and a sense equilibrium and balance in a person’s relationship with others and the world around them (Omenyo, 2011).

These are important considerations in seeking to make sense both of sickness accounts and healing narratives, and the meaning that they hold both for converts and their wider communities. It is also necessary to consider the constructed nature of illness. As Kleinman et al. (1978: 141) argue, illness experience is fundamentally culturally constructed because it is “an intimate part of social systems of meaning and rules for behaviour”. This means that sickness is imbued with meaning because particular societal cultures construct it in specific ways; they give different sicknesses names, causes, moral significance, and dictate appropriate responses (Hahn, 1995). Important in this regard is that fact that accounts of sickness and healing are elements of broader cultural systems that hold to, and produce, certain understandings about the way the world works; they therefore embody particular assumptions about the sources and means of medical knowledge (ibid). This is a key consideration when analysing the intersection of healing, conversion, and identity amongst Bhil Christians. It is

evident that the experience of Christian healing, while taking place within a new spiritual context, is actually part of the shared cultural and religious universe of sickness and healing present in their society, and this has significant implications for the nature of Christian identity in this area.

### **Health in the context of rural Rajasthan**

As noted above, every story of healing necessarily starts with sickness. A striking feature of the stories of the converts I spoke to is the remarkably uniform way in which their conversion narratives begin: either they or a member of their family were experiencing serious illness. The following testimony was told by Omkar Lal, a forty year old farmer who began attending the Pentecostal church around fifteen years prior to this research taking place, and it exemplifies many of the key elements of conversion narratives given by Bhil converts in this area:

My son got very sick [bahut bimar tha]. I took him to so many places: temples and hospitals. We took him to the bhopa and did a lot of black magic [jadu tona] to try and help him. But none of it worked. There was a padre who lived nearby. One day he was walking around near my house, and my son was really crying out because he was so unwell. I wasn't at home then, but my wife was. The padre [pastor] heard the noise and came and said to my wife: I can pray for your child, but it won't work unless you truly believe [sach me vishwas]. My wife said: my child is very precious- if you can make him better then I will definitely believe...then he prayed. There was an instant effect on my child. He started to get better. Then the padre came again the next day and prayed, and my child was completely better. So we started to believe... Now we have full faith in God, that he will protect us and keep us safe.

Taking this as an example, it is worth outlining the general features of the testimonies people gave in order to elucidate their basic content. While they each contained their own specific details, most followed a similar pattern:

1. The person experiences a serious illness. If not the respondent themselves, then the story begins with the illness of a child or close relative.

2. They make several visits to the *bhopa*, mandir, and in many cases a doctor or hospital, generally at great expense. None of these proves effective.
3. They come in to contact with a priest or pastor who advises them to pray to *ishu masih* (Jesus) for healing, or are encouraged by a family member or neighbour who has already converted to try visiting the church.
4. The sick person in question is healed, either instantly or over the course of days or weeks.

These narratives raise obvious questions. Why is sickness such a pervasive theme in the narratives of Bhil converts? Why has healing been such a key driving force behind conversion, and indeed a fundamental feature of Christian belief and discourse more generally?

Part of the answer lies in an appraisal of the health status of people living in rural areas. Udaipur district is one of the poorest in Rajasthan. There is a wide literature that shows that poverty has very concrete links to poor health outcomes. As Stevens (2004: 4) notes, “most of the disease burden in low-income countries finds its roots in the consequences of poverty, such as poor nutrition, indoor air pollution and lack of access to proper sanitation and health education”. This is, of course, not necessarily true just of low-income countries, but applies to poor populations in any context. An array of studies has shown that socioeconomic status is a strong predictor of variations in health outcomes: lower socioeconomic status is clearly associated with poorer health status (Bunker, Gomby and Kehrer, 1989; Adler et al., 1994; Williams and Collins, 1995). The link between poverty and illness is made not just through the ‘social’ nature of diseases, which sees them spread more rapidly where nutrition, sanitation and access to healthcare are poor, but also because the poor “are not only

more likely to suffer, they are also more likely to have their suffering silenced”: the inequality and structural violence inherent in poverty leads to a lack of social and economic rights, and lessens state willingness to both reduce risk and treat disease (Farmer, 1996: 280; Farmer, 2003). There is also a strong link between poverty and mental illness. Again, various studies have found that psychopathology- that is, both diagnosable mental illness and psychological distress- are more prevalent among low-income and low socioeconomic status individuals (Holzer et al., 1986; Funk, Drew and Knapp, 2012). As Belle (1990) notes, this is hardly surprising given that poverty imposes severe psychological stress on both individuals and families, both in terms of acute crises and persistent, undesirable life conditions.

The themes in this literature are certainly relevant to the situation pertaining in the area of study in question. Table 5 shows a comparison of some key indicators of health for Udaipur district, Rajasthan, and where possible India.

**Table 4. Selected health indicators at district, state and national level, 2011.**

	<b>Udaipur District</b>	<b>Rajasthan</b>	<b>India</b>
<b>Infant Mortality Rate (per 1000 live births)</b>	62	62	45
<b>Under-5 Mortality Rate (per 1000 live births)</b>	88	79	59
<b>Maternal Mortality Rate (per 100 000 live births)</b>	364	331	200
<b>Persons suffering from acute illness (per 100 000 population- rural)</b>	6507	3962	-
<b>Persons suffering from chronic illness (per 100 000)</b>	2522	2427	-

<b>population- rural)</b>			
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*Source: Annual Health Survey 2010-11 Fact Sheet Rajasthan; World Bank World Development Indicators 2011*

Banerjee, Deaton and Duflo (2004) have carried out an extensive survey on health indicators and healthcare provision in Udaipur district. Using a limited range of direct measures of health, they found high incidences of low body mass index, anaemia, and low lung capacity.<sup>40</sup> They also found that symptoms of disease were widespread, and that adults self-reported a wide-range of symptoms, including colds, fevers, body aches, fatigue, and vision problems. The same study was also concerned with assessing the quality of health services available to people in this locality. The provision of public healthcare facilities is more or less in line with official policy, with around 35 Primary and Community Health Centres, and 108 smaller sub-centres in the District. However, they suffer from high levels of absenteeism, are open infrequently and highly unpredictably, and in practice do not always provide free service. As a result most people seeking health care turn to private practitioners, but this sector is largely unregulated. According to their own self-reports, 41 per cent of these ‘doctors’ do not have a medical degree, 18 per cent have no medical or paramedical training, and 17 per cent never even graduated Class 12. The authors conclude that “the picture painted by our data is bleak: villagers’ health is poor despite the fact that they heavily use health care facilities and spend a lot on health care. The quality of the public service is abysmal and unregulated, and private providers who are often unqualified provide the bulk of healthcare” (Bannerjee, Deaton and Duflo, 2004: 77).

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<sup>40</sup> Over 50 per cent of both men and women had haemoglobin levels indicating anaemia; 93 per cent of men and 88 per cent of women had a BMI of less than 21 (considered a cut-off for low nutrition); and the average peak flow lung capacity measurement for adults was 316 ml per expiration (with anything below 350ml for an adult of 1.6m in height considered an indicator of respiratory difficulty).

The idea that people are heavy users of health care facilities resonates with many of the conversion testimonies I heard, which often referenced visiting doctors or hospitals but to no avail. To some extent, then, the inadequacy of public healthcare provision and the incompetence of private ‘doctors’ may go some way towards explaining why the church, and its potential for miraculous healing, becomes an attractive alternative proposition for those suffering from sickness. It is precisely these issues that Oblau (2011: 315) points to in his study of conversion to Pentecostalism in rural China, arguing that a “scandalous” absence of sufficient medical provision for the majority of the population means that conversion testimonies reflect the very real socioeconomic problem of exhausting scant resources on doctors or hospital treatments that simply did not help. In this sense, conversion to Christianity is an avenue for meeting serious physical needs when other options have been exhausted.

### **Bhil perceptions of sickness and health**

However, a lack of access to adequate healthcare is far from the whole story being told by Bhil converts here. The literature on the relationship between healthcare provision and religious healing has tended towards an assumption that where conventional medical care is unavailable, “seeking healing from a spiritual source [does] not represent a philosophical preference, but the only available option” (Brown, 2011: 15). However, this presupposes an understanding of illness that is rooted in the physical body, which is not always congruent with Bhil knowledge about sickness and healing.

In the villages under study, Bhil people have various understandings of the source of disease and illness, each of which requires a specific type of therapy. Speaking

broadly, some ailments such as minor coughs and colds, headaches or stomach aches are attributed to natural causes (Bhasin, 2007). These can be treated biomedically, with home remedies, or by a *jaangar* or herbalist, who has specialist knowledge of local medicinal plants and prepares remedies from them. The causes and cures of these illnesses are located in the natural world. More serious or persistent illnesses, however, are attributed to supernatural causes: the evil eye (*nazar*), black magic (*jadoo tona*), or the actions of malicious spirits or *bhut* (ghosts) entering a person's body. These types of illness are understood to be a result of social offences or transgressions against the living, the dead, or the celestial world (Bhasin, 2003). As such, they require different treatments- for instance, visiting the *khoont* (temple priest) or the *bhopa*, a traditional or spiritual healer. The *bhopa* acts as a medium: when treating a patient, he is possessed by spirits who use him to communicate the necessary rituals or sacrifices that must be made in order to appease the *bhut* or deity causing a person's sickness. He can also act as an exorcist, and is able to propitiate supernatural entities or remove the evil eye through various ritual practices.

Within this broad framework, it should also be understood that the theories of disease that exist in this locality are often multi-causational, and can encompass any combination of biological, natural or supernatural causes (Jain and Agrawal, 2005). As such, responses to health problems are generally characterised by multiple sequential or even simultaneous therapies; when it comes to treatment any or all of the above therapies might be used in tandem; people may, for example, choose to seek medical treatment from hospitals but also visit the *bhopa* alongside this (Bhasin, 2003).

As such, depending on the cause of the illness, biomedicine may not always be deemed an appropriate treatment. In their narratives, a number of converts described physical and psychological problems that were the consequence of *bhut* entering their bodies. On the one hand, this is straightforwardly problematic when it comes to biomedical intervention; as one woman explained, you simply can't get well from a doctor's medicine if you have a spirit inside you. However, it also highlights the fact that for these communities sickness is often understood as an affliction of the social body rather than the physical one, even though the illness may manifest itself in the latter. One man described how after coming to church he had been able to give up alcohol, since which time he no longer felt any ghosts entering his body and causing him problems. For him, then, healing was not about curing the physical manifestations of illness, but of eliminating the problematic aspects of his life that had allowed malign spirits into his body.

Many people also told stories of being the victims of black magic, or having the evil eye cast on them. Two narratives are illustrative in this case. The first is that of Gopal, a forty-year-old Pentecostal man from just outside of Pada, who gave this testimony of his conversion:

I joined [the church] just four or five years ago. I was very sick at that time, I had a lot of pain in my legs and I was seeing snakes everywhere...someone had done some black magic on me. I went to so many temples, asked so many gods, sacrificed [balidan diya] six goats to try and fix it<sup>41</sup>...some people had been going to the church so I started to know about it. Somebody told me that I should go there, because there is a *bhopa*-pastor there and he will pray and you will get better.

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<sup>41</sup> This indicates the particular severity and intractability of the problem: the *bhopa* will usually recommend the sacrifice of chickens, before moving on to goats if this proves ineffective. Goats are extremely expensive- the cost of a male goat can run to several thousand rupees.

A second account of healing comes from Laxmi, a middle-aged woman who converted to Pentecostalism after her youngest son experienced a prolonged illness. Prompted by her sister-in-law, already a convert herself, she reluctantly visited the local pastor's house and asked him to pray for her child, who proceeded to recover from his illness. She told this story, about the experience of another of her relatives:

My relative's daughter was appearing in the Class 12 examination. Close to the exams she suddenly could not see anything. She improved and started seeing as a result of prayers, and could take her exams. However, they suspect that she stopped seeing because she was a pretty girl, and all the local boys were eyeing her and cast the evil eye on her.

These narratives are informative because the particular sicknesses that they describe are intrinsically embedded in people's social worlds and their relationship with both the people and the supernatural forces around them. The *bhopa* is particularly important in these instances, because it is his job to mediate these relationships through religious and ritual practices. Where the *bhopa*'s treatment fails- or, for instance, a visit to the mandir to propitiate a malevolent deity proves ineffective- it makes sense that people would turn to another spiritual or religious agency with the power to cure sickness by restoring the equilibrium between the person, their community, and the supernatural. Indeed, this link it made completely explicit in the testimony above, where the convert refers to the pastor as a *bhopa-pastor*. As one Pentecostal leader in Udaipur explained:

Here this is a pluralistic world isn't it? There are multiple gods, many gods, and in India people love to worship gods which are more favourable towards them. So then Jesus becomes the prominent god amongst those gods...so then you have a powerful god that takes care of your life in a different way – you experience it and you then become a follower.'

Of course, it is well-recognised by both academics and evangelists that charismatic Christian healing and indigenous forms of traditional healing share many features

with regard to explanations for the cause and cure of disease, as both are concerned with navigating the relationships with the natural and spiritual world (Hayward, 1997; Brown, 2011). Usually, however, this recognition underlies a process of reinterpretation on the part of the church, part of a “time-honoured...strategy of ritual incorporation of indigenous practices, based on acceptance of their existential reality but negation of their spiritual value” (Csordas, 2011: 343). What is interesting about the narratives of the respondents of this study was the absence of this sense of reinterpreting their former beliefs: there was no suggestion, for instance, that the spirits inhabiting them, or the supernatural forces causing illness, were Satanic in a Christian sense. Instead, when it came to explicating the reasons for sickness, they still adhered largely to the discursive frameworks operating in the wider Bhil community more generally. Jesus, then, was a spiritual power who happened to be effective within this existing context.

Some scholars have argued that this places the Christian god within a non-Christian cosmology, implying either a fundamental incompatibility of belief or an inherent competition between gods of different traditions (Martin, 2002). However, it is perhaps more useful to see this as an example of a process of identity formation wherein adivasi Christians do not inhabit multiple worlds- as suggested by the analyses mentioned previously- but in which they are constructing an identity for themselves that is both “authentically tribal [and] genuinely Christian” (Raj, 2002: 41). By this I mean that they do not reject or seek to distance themselves from existing local- in this sense, Bhil- understandings of and knowledge about sickness and health; instead, Christian healing is simply another avenue for seeking to engage with them.

This is an important consideration when it comes to negotiating questions of collective identity for Bhil Christians in this area. As noted above, conversion stories tend to follow a very similar and recognisable pattern. Some observers have suggested that such regimented, standardized narratives are evidence of people being forced to mould their individual stories into a socially sanctioned pattern wherein form reigns over content (Oblau, 2011). There may well be some truth in this; it is of course possible that not everyone I met had in fact experienced a miraculous healing, but were utilizing standard narratives to talk about their conversion experiences. I argue, however, that this is a constructive rather than reductive process; moreover, we should not assume that the 'real' function of conversion narratives is to state the truth of individual experience. As Sremac (2010) argues, religion is in itself fundamentally collective- therefore becoming part of a spiritual community means conforming to certain shared truths. Where there is a sense of de-individualisation in conversion stories, this can be read as a means of constructing a particular collective identity. These testimonies clearly signal a belonging to a particular community, one whose acknowledged truth is that God has the power to heal.

Certainly, I do not mean to suggest that this ability to heal accounts for the totality of Christian belief amongst new converts; however, it is usually heavily foregrounded, and its ubiquity in conversion narratives shows that in seeking to construct a Christian identity it is a highly significant marker of Christian experience and knowledge. This is itself a departure from other understandings, even those of the local clergy, of what constitutes Christian truth, and is therefore a specificity of Bhil Christian identity in this area. In terms of constructing difference, it leads them to reject other spiritual authorities, particularly the *bhopa*, and Hindu gods and priests. However, at the same time as their testimonies adhere to new religious understandings, they are

underpinned by pre- existent beliefs that are often largely unmodified. Thus, they both construct and affirm a common cosmological universe that means that the shared truths of their new religious community do not negate certain shared truths of their broader cultural community; in this case, those that relate to sickness and healing. In Christian discourses, while prayer to Jesus becomes the effective means of dealing with it, the influence of spirits and other malign influences on people's health still holds clear explanatory power. In telling these conversion narratives, then, converts are relating experiences that are comprehensible both to insiders- other Christians- and outsiders- non-Christian members of their community- negotiating an identity that is Bhil and Christian simultaneously.

### **The disease of poverty**

A second consideration is that when listening to the narratives of Bhil converts it becomes evident that it is necessary to look beyond medical definitions to understand what people mean when they talk about being healed. Alongside biomedical illness, there is a wide variety of “unwanted conditions of the self” which are ameliorated or alleviated in the experience of Christian healing; when people talk about being healed, they do so in the holistic sense laid out in the previous section. Table 2 shows a sample of the various problems that are described by people in conversion narratives. Even while recognising that there is plenty of overlap between the categories- for instance, socioeconomic and behavioural problems might be closely linked, or physical problems manifesting in the body might find their source in the mind or spirit- this clearly points to the fact that the ideas of sickness encompasses much more than standard medical measures of health. As a result, so must healing.

**Table 5.Types of sickness reported by converts to Christianity.**

<b>Physical problems</b>	<b>Problems in the mind or spirit</b>	<b>Behavioural problems</b>	<b>Socioeconomic problems</b>	<b>Reproductive problems</b>
Stomach pain Nausea/vomiting Throat pain/ inability to eat or swallow Pain in the legs/lameness Dizziness/fainting Unconsciousness Bleeding	Lethargy/ inability to get out of bed Seeing things 'Burning' in the soul/spirit Suicidal ideation/visions of death Possession Madness	Alcoholism Domestic violence Aggression/getting into fights	Financial pressure Unemployment	Impotence Infertility Infant deaths Not having a sons

Consider, for instance, the testimony of Babu Lal, a fifty year old farmer and Catholic convert:

Of course, I came [to Christianity] because of my illness. I wasn't able to farm my land for a whole year because of illness. I kept lying around all the time and I couldn't get out of bed. I could not even undertake casual labour- I didn't have a single paisa in my hand and no food in the house. I was very worried [bahut pareshan tha] because of the illness and how I would manage. There was a man in the village that used to go to the church. I went to him myself and said, "Arre bhai, you are going there, how is it? Does it take away your troubles [pareshani dur ho jayege]? Do they ask for something or is it free?" He said, "It's first class, it's totally fine". So I picked up my wife and son and brought them to the church. From there my wife and son all got better.

Trying to make sure I had understood, but also clearly making assumptions about the nature of illness, I asked: "so who was actually ill- you, or your wife and son?" He replied:

My wife was ill. But if she was ill, how could I do everything and also work? I was so busy doing everything else, trying to get money, see healers and seek advice. No one would give me money or help me, so I had to do it all and had no time to farm. There was no one to support me. Somehow I managed. Today my wife is still alive and I have got my son married, so I am at peace [meh shant houn].

Thus it became evident that his wife and son's illness formed part of what he sees as a period of sickness in his own life: a time of financial hardship, isolation, stress, worry, and fatigue.

This highlights the broader issue that while poor (medical) health might be one source of concern for adivasis in this area, their lives can be- and often are- precarious in a number of other ways. A recent study of Udaipur district has shown that over 34 per cent of households can be considered chronically poor (Krishna, 2011); others have suggested that around 40 per cent of rural households live below the national poverty line (Bannerjee, Deaton and Duflo, 2004). Most of the households in this district rely on a combination of subsistence-oriented farming, labour work, and small-scale animal husbandry in order to meet basic consumption needs. Some farmers are occasionally able to produce a small amount of marketable surplus, but this depends on rainfall and access to water. The majority of converts I spoke to were in this position; they consumed what they could grow, and usually there was not much extra to sell. A lack of water to grow decent crops was a commonly expressed anxiety. Overall, Udaipur district is one of the most food insecure in Rajasthan (World Food Program, 2009). Participation in government schemes- in particular the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and the Public Distribution System- play an important part in income generation and meeting nutritional needs, but they are often riddled with inefficiencies (Singh and Garg, 1997; Anchlia and Motwani, 2012).

Migration is a livelihood strategy for most households in the district, and nearly all of my respondents mentioned it when asked about their work or that of their husbands. Migration to the city of Udaipur for construction work is common, while many children and adolescents go to work in the cotton fields of north Gujarat. While it allows for the reproduction of valued agrarian lifestyles, labour migration is often characterised by relationships of exploitation: adivasi migrants are vulnerable to wage theft, harassment and violence by contractors, employers, and urban authorities (Mosse, 2007).

As discussed above, insofar as illness can be defined as a state of being associated with difficult life circumstances (Priya, 2012)- and the physical, psychological and emotional toll these can take on people, whether medically diagnosable or not- the various economic and social insecurities that are a feature of the lives of poor rural adivasis can themselves be considered constitutive of sickness in its broadest sense. More importantly, they are implicitly understood as such by the Bhils who have converted to Christianity. This becomes evident when considering people's accounts of how their lives changed after they converted. These typically invoke a sense of general well-being:

Everything is good now, in our house and in our health.

All is well, in the family, the farm, with the children, their health.

In our daily lives we feel peaceful, and there is happiness in our house. Our children, home, farm, animals-all is well with them.

This is not, I suggest, a manifestation of the prosperity gospel that is often associated with Pentecostalism, which holds that material or financial blessings come to those who are faithful to God (Coleman, 2000). Only two Pentecostal converts expressed a

sense that God had specifically blessed them with wealth, per se, or made them materially better off than they otherwise would be. Contrary to Hindu nationalist accusations, joining the church does not tend to impact much on people's material circumstances. Instead, these are more obviously narratives of health than wealth- of restoring a sense of wholeness or wellness to personhoods which have been damaged by an experience of poverty or distress (Cassell, 1991). We can best understand healing, then, as a means by which people acquire greater spiritual, psychic or psychological resources in seeking to ameliorate their suffering. As Suraj, a young farmer and recent Catholic convert put it:

Of course I have suffered hunger and troubles, but having taken up this faith I am standing on my own two feet to this day. I am busy, well, and happy. I have no troubles in my heart.

As Chesnut (2011: 182) argues, the healing experiences of converts therefore entail a turning away from the contagions of a diseased social body in order to restore their social, physical and spiritual integrity: "the omnipotent God...does not transform the world, but, through conversion, restores the health of his believers and inoculates them against the most common pathogens of poverty".

### **Poverty, healing, and inter-communal relations**

If conversion is a process of constructing new selves, then the new selves that are constructed in the process of conversion to Christianity in this area are healed and healthy ones. Although many people, particularly Pentecostal converts, did describe a deep personal relationship with their new God, their conversion narratives were still accounts of having sickness removed from their lives: of having problems solved.

While acknowledging the healing experiences that converts have had for what they are- transformative events in their lives- it is also possible to argue that this aspect of

conversion, and its prominent place in conversion narratives, has an important function in the mediation of group relations and the mitigation of conflict.

The experience of chronic poverty and marginality play a key role in this process. We have seen the impact that these can have on experiences and understandings of illness, but what effect do they have when it comes to ideas about healing? Of course, a lack of material resources will limit people's health-seeking behaviour in obvious ways if they cannot afford to make trips to the hospital or temple, to pay doctors, or to purchase the necessary items for sacrifice when propitiating a deity or spirit.

However, critical medical anthropology seeks to take this idea further and the insights it yields are very relevant here. According to Singer (1989), the main contribution of this subfield has been an examination of the social processes that lead to ill health and disease, and grounding this analysis within the context of particular economic systems, the role of the state, and social structures and relations. It holds, then, that there are numerous barriers to achieving physical, mental and social well-being when these are considered; fundamentally, it argues that national and international economic systems and capitalist social organization have generated inequalities that permeate down to a local level, resulting in an "unequal societal distribution of sickness and healing" (Hahn, 1995: 72). In this context, health would be defined as "access to and control over the basic material and non-material resources that sustain and promote life at a high level of satisfaction" (Baer, Singer and Susser, 2003: 5). This is something people often lack due to factors such as oppression, discrimination, poverty, structural violence, state incapacity, social trauma, relative deprivation, physical environment and so on (Ember and Ember, 2004).

This is certainly the case for adivasis in this region, and indeed in much of the rest of India; as was laid out in the introduction of this thesis, they face structural violence, disproportionate levels of poverty, and marginalisation on a number of intersecting fronts. These are the kind of processes that undergird the precarious and often difficult life circumstances of many of my respondents, and elucidate clearly the kind of social, economic, and political dynamics that are relevant to the concerns of critical medical anthropology. It obvious to see, then, why people may feel that they lack control over, or access to, the resources necessary to maintain life at a high level of satisfaction- that is, to live healthy lives.

A sense of constraint and lack of options or was sometimes explicitly articulated in discussions about conversion. In one group discussion with Catholic converts, a consensus was formed around the fact that people come to church as a last resort when they are in trouble:

No one would have come if all was well and they had no problems. That is for definite. All of them have come because they were troubled by problems. All of them are suffering from troubles and sorrow...no single person came because of faith [vishwas]. All had some illness or the other. They might be different illnesses but everyone was ill...no one comes purely for devotion [bakhti]. No one comes to the church if they are happy.

There was general agreement from the people around on this assessment, including the local priest. Conversion can thus be conceived of as a way to seek health, whatever that might mean to an individual, where other options are closed off or inaccessible. It therefore becomes a way for people to exert a sense of control and agency over their own health and well-being. This is enhanced further by the fact that no intermediary is necessary when it comes to obtaining divine healing. While people are frequently taken to church when they are sick to be prayed for by a priest or pastor, most converts expressed the idea that God listens to the prayers of individuals-

these prayers can be done at home, without an intermediary, and without the necessity of making expensive sacrifices or large monetary donations.

There is a sense, then, that Christian healing is preferable because it is a low-cost option for healing where resources are scarce; they therefore extricate themselves from the influence and expense of the *bhopa* or priest. However, as will be argued in chapter 6, it is not the case that people view conversion to Christianity as a means of avoiding particular financial obligations that are linked with Hindu religious practice or other aspects of communal life. As such, it is also possible to discern a sense of the ‘liberation effect’ of Christian healing here. As one Pentecostal convert succinctly put it, “now whenever anything happens, we pray and everything is fine.” There is a clear sense of an individual’s own agency in responding to sickness expressed here. In this sense, conversion to Christianity entails the acquisition of agency in determining your own health and well-being in a context where other options are often limited. As shown in previous chapters, conversion to Christianity has historically been one method by which adivasis have sought to resist exploitative power relations and assert their own dignity and self-respect. Healing, then, offers a new perspective on this phenomenon, as we may look at conversion as an avenue towards divine healing and the alleviation of sickness as one of the many forms of resistance that adivasis are engaged in across India, albeit at the micro-level.

How, then, does this relate to inter-communal relations? The context of structural poverty- that is, the pervasiveness of sickness and suffering, and the constraints and limitations that people face in pursuing health-seeking behaviours- contributes to managing and even alleviating conflict that might otherwise be generated within the community when a person converts to Christianity. One clear example of this was a

story CNI pastor Rev. Arjun told me about a woman who had been lame for several years. In despair, she had called the pastor to come and pray for her, and she was miraculously healed; immediately after the prayers she had stood up, and within weeks was fully well. He said that prior to this, the Christians in her locality had been subject to a lot of anger and harassment, but after such a visible miracle occurred, it all stopped. Everybody in the village, he explained, had decided that Christians were right not to leave a God who could help them in this way.

Even where healing was less dramatic, similar themes emerged from many of my interviews. Gautam and Kamla Bai are a middle-aged couple who make a living from their small plot of land, supplemented by some manual labour. They both converted to Catholicism six years before I met them, when Gautam was healed from a persistent fever. When I asked them how people had reacted when they converted, they explained that nobody was against it because people simply wanted him to get well again; everyone was pleased and relieved that he had been healed. I heard similar stories many times over the course of my research. The experience of suffering and the desire to alleviate it, particularly in constrained circumstances, is something that is instantly recognisable to others. Somraj, a lay preacher from Pada and Pentecostal convert of seven years when this research took place, shared a heartfelt testimony that elucidated this dynamic well:

My wife had ten children and they all died. At that time the villagers were all with me, and praying for me, because they knew how sad [dhuki] I was. Now [after converting] I have six children, but I still carry this pain- that's why my faith is so strong [vishwas bahut majboot hai]. The villagers who were with me, they understand why I became a Christian.

In some cases, then, healing makes conversion understandable from the start.

However, this is not always the case, While converts face a range of responses when they become Christian- elucidated further in the following chapter- the most common

and immediate is usually some degree of social ostracism: family and friends demand to know why they have converted, argue with them about it, and refuse to visit or eat with them, or drink their water. However, even where they had faced these problems, it was sometimes the case that a person's healing experience led to people coming to accept their conversion. Kalu Ram, the Pentecostal convert and sometime driver of the church minibus, explained his experience, linking this to broader social processes that prevail when people convert in his village:

For two or three years [after I converted] they did this discrimination [bedh bav kiya]. In the beginning they wouldn't invite me to any functions, but now they do. For about three years they wouldn't let me in their houses. My own father and other family were against me like this. The people in my village said that whatever happens to you, we won't come to your house in any circumstances. If your own family is discriminating against you, then of course everybody else is going to. But slowly people started to become more understanding. Slowly more people started believing. When somebody got sick, people thought that oh, he was sick and he went to the church and got better. They saw that I was very sad before, but now I am very happy and living well with a lot of peace and love for everyone. So people have seen how my life has changed, and they started going to church as well.

In his narrative, not only does healing make conversion acceptable, it also has the potential to make it to some extent desirable, as people actively seek out the church at times of sickness. Of course, it could also be the case that a desire to repair relationships after this kind of social ostracism occurs is simply couched in the language of observing a positive change in a convert's life; either way, I suggest that healing experiences are one avenue through which conversion is made acceptable to non-Christians, either actually or discursively.

It is also possible that Christians overstate this level of acceptance, or that it does not come at all; as will be seen in chapter 6, Pentecostal converts in particular do experience various forms of direct violence as a result of their choice to become

Christian. However, even here it is clear that the experience of being healed is one that gives converts both strength in their faith, and a rhetorical arsenal with which to deflect opposition. Some converts thus used their experiences to actively respond to opposition or hostility. One Sunday after church, I was discussing people's antagonism to Christianity with Ramesh, a young labourer and painter who had recently converted to Pentecostalism along with his wife.

I have just one answer for them. My troubles were very big, and nobody could fix it. But my God could fix it. That's why I follow this religion. I only say this one thing: when I was dying, could you save my life? No. So you can't say anything to me.

His friend, overhearing our conversation, jumped in to add:

The *bhopa* can never fight with me. I told him clearly, if you can fix me then I won't go to anyone else. So this is all your fault. I had to go because of you. He couldn't give me a reply.

Here, they construct a discursive space in which conflict can be headed off because those who oppose them simply cannot argue with the choices they have made in seeking better health. However it is framed, in all these conversion narratives it is the lived experience of healing that stands as a testimony to the legitimacy of the person's decision to convert, and this is both understandable and acceptable to non-Christians because of a shared experience of pervasive sickness and lack of options for healing that are a result of structural poverty. The idea that conversion to Christianity represented one more choice in a context where these were limited was exemplified in the words of one Catholic women, who remarked: "people can't say much because they know that if something happens to them they might have to go to church one day too". An appreciation of the value of any source of healing is clearly a feature of the life of these communities, and one which has the potential to undermine the discourses on conversion being circulated by the Sangh Parivar that seek to construct conversion as threatening, forced, or otherwise undesirable.

## **Conclusion**

The conversion narratives of Bhil Christians significantly alter the meanings attached to conversion from those which are promulgated in public discourse by Hindu nationalist organisations. For Hindu nationalists, conversion entails the changing of identity from 'Hindu' to 'Christian', a transformation which is conceived of as inherently threatening, and in terms of a rupture between one mode of belonging and another. The narratives of converts, however, suggest that a fundamental aspect of conversion is actually a change of identity from 'afflicted' to 'healed' - moreover, this transformation occurs within the conceptual space of a shared cosmological universe. These two factors contribute to making the meanings attached to Christianity in this context ones that have the potential to make conversion at least understandable, and in many cases acceptable, to non-Christians. As such, they are key to understanding not just processes of identity construction, but also the mediation of collective identities, for Christian Bhils.

## **6. Boundary-making and the cultural construction of identity: a comparison of Pentecostal and Catholic converts**

In this chapter I compare the experiences of Pentecostal converts in Pada and Catholic converts in Jhamliya with regard to anti-Christian violence, and use the fact that they have faced different levels of direct violence as a point of departure to examine the different cultural constructions of identity and patterns of boundary-making that pertain between the two communities.

For the most part, Catholics reported that they had not faced any significant violence following conversion: half of my interview respondents said that they had not faced any problems or opposition after they had converted to Christianity, while the other half said that while there may have been some initial anger or protest from their Hindu neighbours, this had reduced over time. Such anger was usually expressed in the form of harsh words and threats of social ostracism, such as stopping eating, drinking, and visiting with them. While there were some instances of long-term alienation from family members or neighbours, these were often tied up with bigger inter-personal issues; for the most part, respondents said that other people had come to accept their conversion without too much conflict. In contrast to this, more than three quarters of the Pentecostal converts I interviewed reported some experience of anti-Christian violence, including direct physical violence, harassment from Sangh Parivar activists, social ostracism, and damage to church property. Men were the most likely to have experienced physical violence, and most (around 70 per cent) had stories of being beaten or physically threatened as a result of conversion. Women often recounted this violence but did not experience it themselves; for them, violence was largely enacted through processes of social ostracism such as people refusing to

eat with them, enter their homes, or use wells or water sources at the same time.

These practices were referred to as *bhed bhav*, invoking ideas of caste-based discrimination.

Concomitantly, another clear point of divergence between Catholic and Pentecostal converts emerged from my interview data. When asked questions about the differences between Hindus and Christians, Catholic respondents uniformly answered with a statement that suggested there was no real difference between the two. When differences were identified, these were generally centred on belief or religious practice: that Hindus worshipped their own gods (*devi devta*) while Christians worshipped Jesus, or that Christians go to church rather than the temple. In contrast, the majority of Pentecostal converts stated that there were many differences between Hindus and Christians. For the most part, these invoked familiar themes with regard to conversion to Christianity: most commonly, the idea that Christians, unlike Hindus, do not engage in 'bad' habits such as drinking, smoking, and fighting. Other issues were brought up with less regularity, such as the idea that Christians were harder working, more interested in education, more sensible with their money, and cleaner in their habits. Alongside this, other socio-cultural differences were also evident. For instance, while Christmas, called *bara din* or *mota tyohar*, is celebrated by both Catholic and Pentecostal converts as the main Christian festival, all Catholic respondents reported continuing to attend and participate in non-Christian festivals as well, including *holi*, *diwali*, *raksha bandhan* and *navratri* which are all celebrated widely in the villages in this area. In contrast, over ninety per cent of Pentecostal converts stated that they no longer attended any Hindu festivals.

Two key observations emerge from this: that Catholics experience low levels of violence and express a high level of socio-cultural *similarity* with Hindus, while Pentecostals experience higher levels of violence and express a high level of socio-cultural *difference*. This chapter seeks to account for this variance by examining the relationship between violence and Christian identity in this area, considering both the nature of the institutional churches here and the actions and agency of converts themselves.

### **Inculturation and the church in India**

A wealth of literature exists on the negotiation of Christian identity where converts are embedded primarily in non-Christian cultures, and the various ways in which Christian similarity and difference is constructed with reference to those existing cultures. This is referred to as inculturation, meaning the process of contextualizing Christianity with regard to local cultural norms and practices. This has been a key theme in the discussion and practice of Christianity in India. According to Mosse (1994: 79):

The encounter of non-Western societies with Christianity is often viewed as inextricably bound up with the spread of colonial power. Christian converts are perceived as living firmly within the orbit of the mission's influence, decultured and alienated from their religious and cultural roots. Symbolized by its European-style churches, Western clerical dress and liturgy, Christianity in India has also been judged as a legacy of the colonial past. Many Indian Christian thinkers today within both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches share this concern about cultural rootlessness and are anxious to free the church from its colonial heritage and missionary paternalism, and to develop a truly Indian form of Christian spirituality, worship and church organization.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> These efforts have also gained momentum recently as a result of Hindu nationalist discourses that have sought to portray Christianity as a foreign, denationalising and deculturalising religion. In response to this, there has been a concerted effort on the part of many church leaders, commentators and scholars to emphasize the fundamental Indian-ness of Christianity in India, foregrounding processes of indigenization, syncretism, and inculturation (Hedlund, 2000; Dempsey and Raj, 2002; Robinson and Kujur, 2010).

These developments are congruent with changes that have taken place in the church more widely. Particularly since the Second Vatican Council 1962-5 (informally known as Vatican II), the Catholic Church has reformulated the relationship between Christianity and local cultures, encouraging inculturation and indigenization (ibid). For the church, this meant in particular that the Christian message was not tied to particular languages or cultural forms, but could be effectively adapted into local idioms; moreover, it was held that it would be better understood if people could access it on their own terms (Stewart and Shaw, 1994: 16). The Church's policy of inculturation therefore held that as much as possible of the local culture should be incorporated into the life of the church (Pickering, 1992).

Inculturation, then, is usually concerned with delineating the boundaries between aspects of existing local culture and belief that are benign and compatible with Christianity, and those which are idolatrous or sacrilegious and which must therefore be abandoned if people are to be 'true' Christians. These boundaries are by no means fixed, and where and how they are drawn is a key point of consideration for this discussion. It is clear that Catholic and Pentecostal converts have delineated them in very different ways. For Pentecostals, the 'proper' practice of Christianity has necessitated a withdrawal from several aspects of their previous cultural lives and adherence to lifestyle choices that are visibly different to those practiced by the wider Hindu community. Catholics, on the other hand, have continued participation in more of the cultural norms that pertained in their pre-conversion lives, as they have not been deemed antithetical to Christianity. These choices have, I argue, had a clear impact not only with regard to processes of Christian identity-making, but also on the levels of anti-Christian violence the two groups have experienced.

Certainly, church institutions play an important role in determining where these boundaries have been drawn, and as such I focus on these in the first part of the chapter. However, there has been a recent analytical turn in the wider scholarship on Christianity in India, which focuses specifically on the way in which Christianity has been taken up by various groups and how they have made it meaningful in their existing cultural contexts. In a recent volume of essays on popular Christianity in India, Dempsey and Raj (2002: 1) foreground the need for a “presentation of Christianity from a ‘popular’ perspective, one that stands outside of institutional prescription”, and which focuses on “the experiences and expressions of the people on the ground”. Similarly in their edited volume on dalit and tribal Christianity, Robinson and Kujur (2010: 9) seek to move away from missiological history and instead “turn the lens on the contemporary and ever-changing face of dalit and tribal Christianity, the different inflections in practice and the shifts under the influence of political movements, identity assertion [and] cultural revivalism” (Robinson and Kujur, 2010: 9).

With regard to adivasi Christianity, then, various authors have sought to engage with more popular expressions of inculturation as a bottom-up process, particularly by looking at ritual practice. Although his study does look at the role played by the institutional church, Kujur (2010: 32) clearly points towards these themes in his account of the Oraon church in Jharkhand when he suggests that the church’s move towards ‘Indianization’ was influenced by the “unofficial adaptations of the tribal Christians to the local culture”. As such, what emerged was a twinning of adivasi and Christian rites -for instance, Oraon initiation rites were incorporated into baptisms- and the selective adaptation of Oraon festivals to make them compatible with

Christianity; this innovative “re-symbolization” was what made Oraon identification with the church possible (ibid: 11). Moreover, he argues that official attempts at inculturation by the church itself were in fact jarring to the Oraons, as it meant that the liturgy was translated into Hindi rather than the local Mundari language- what emerged from this is what he calls an adivasi-izing of the Catholic rite as it was changed into their language and made meaningful for the local context.

In a comparable study, Raj (2002) makes a much more explicit case for foregrounding inculturation from below in his fascinating work on Santal Catholics in Jharkhand. He describes the way in which significant rites of passage for Santal Catholics are marked by multiple sets of rituals performed in both the church and in sacred tribal settings; Catholic prayers are offered in a village’s sacred grove after a burial, for instance, and on the other hand Santal ceremonial prescriptions have come to play an important role in Christian priests’ ordination rituals. He describes this as a process of “popular inculturation”, pursued by the laity and offering the only viable avenue for meaningful inter-religious dialogue between Christians and non-Christians. It acts, he argues, as an explicit corrective to elitist forms of institutional inculturation, which are often divorced from the existential human and spiritual experiences of many Indian Christians (ibid: 56).

These works have yielded interesting insights with regard to tribal Christianity in India, highlighting the various ways in which Christian theology and practice are adopted, adapted, and made meaningful in the lives of adivasi converts. I seek to build on this existing work by examining the impact that Hindu nationalist violence has had on such processes, while maintaining a similar analytical emphasis that foregrounds the perceptions and motivations of adivasi converts themselves.

## **Inculturation and the church in Udaipur district**

Even with this emphasis in mind, in order to provide a comprehensive examination of the differences between Pentecostal and Catholic converts described above this chapter first looks at the character of the institutional churches in this area and the role that they play in influencing the nature of Christian practice amongst converts.

The Catholic church at Jhamliya bears many marks of institutional inculturation. The church itself is a relatively new but simple square building, with little to identify it as a religious building aside from the cross that hangs outside on the door; it lies in the centre of the church complex which includes accommodation for the priests and nuns, a school that serves the local area, and dormitories for orphans and school boarders. The campus also has a small amount of agricultural land for growing vegetables and dal, and is home to a few cows and several chickens; both the children who live there and hired help from the village work the land and participate in animal husbandry. Thus while it is marked out in terms of large *pukka* structures and non-local personnel, in some ways it is also clearly in congruence with the local landscape and livelihood practices. The main church service is held early on Sunday morning and usually has a congregation of around fifty to seventy people.<sup>43</sup> Inside, the church is relatively bare. Its main features are traditionally Catholic: there is a raised platform at the front where the lectern and altar stand, backed by a large painted picture of Jesus that is recognizable from Western Catholicism; around the church, classical pictures of the Stations of the Cross are hung (though these are decked in plastic bunting). The priests wear simple white vestments over shirt and trousers, while the

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<sup>43</sup> There is another service on Saturday evening, although this is significantly less well attended with often just a handful of people stopping by.

nuns wear plain brown saris; Indian, certainly, although very different to the style worn by women in the village.

There are, however, features of the service that are clearly influenced by the drive for inculturation. As such, it is marked by the interplay of universal Christian practice with more obviously Indian, Hindu, or local practices. Shoes are removed before entering the church, and there is no seating- everybody sits on the floor except the priests, who use plastic chairs, and the nuns who sit on cushions. Women and men sit separately, with women (and small children) on the right and men on the left hand side of the church. The service is held completely in Hindi. People do make offerings of money, but just as often bring sacks of flour, vegetables, or small bottles of oil to the front of the church at the beginning of the service. The hymns are adapted to the style of music practiced in the village, using familiar instruments, melodies and singing styles. At one point in the service, a silver tray with burning incense and flower garlands is circled around the picture of Jesus, in a clear echo of 'Hindu' forms of worship such as *aarti*.

At the same time, the church retains something of a regimented liturgy: it is punctuated heavily by calls and responses that everyone has to learn, and the recitation of collective statements of faith such as the Lord's Prayer, the Rosary and the Creeds. There is also a demanding sequence of standing, sitting and kneeling throughout the service, particularly when the Eucharist is being consecrated.

However, there is also a dedicated section of the service where people can say or request prayers for themselves or other people facing particular difficulties; this is more spontaneous, although usually dominated by church elders who seem to be primarily responsible for making these requests on behalf of the congregation.

Outside the church itself there is a shrine to the Virgin Mary, in front of which people place offerings of flowers and coconut. After the service, the congregation lines up in front of it to receive an individual blessing from the priests, after which they take *prasad* of puffed rice and sugar. As people leave they use the Christian salutation, grasping hands and saying “*jai ishu*”.<sup>44</sup>

Inculturation was a theme that often came up both explicitly and implicitly in my conversations with the clergy and nuns who worked here. Fr. Andrew is the assistant priest at this church. Originally from Kerala, when I met him he had recently finished studying at university and had been posted first to Ghatol, the one other Catholic church in the tehsil, where he stayed for around a year before coming to work here. He was keen to talk to me about the idea of inculturation, and framed it as the best means by which the Catholic church could come to accept other cultures and share its own culture with others. For him, it was not just about church practice; inculturation was also a necessary “attitude and approach of the mind” that the clergy should possess in order for them to fulfil the mission of the Church in the best way possible. Moreover, he linked it explicitly with the need to understand not just the culture of the people amongst whom he was working, but also their socio-economic situation and the material reality of their daily lives. It is this understanding of the term, I believe, that has had some influence on the way in which the idea of inculturation has extended beyond the ritual life of the church. For instance, as noted above Catholic converts at this church continue to participate in non-Christian festivals. Fr. Anand, the head priest at Jhamliya who is originally from Jharkhand (although not tribal himself), explained it in the following terms: “they are tribal festivals. They belong to

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<sup>44</sup> This is used when greeting other Christians in the village in general life as well, replacing phrases such a *hari om* or *ram ram*.

the tribal category. Except for the faith aspect which is going to the church, the rest [of the festivals] are all common”.

The example of participation in Hindu festivals is therefore a case of renegotiating the boundaries between religion and culture on the part of the church: what was classed initially as a religious activity, and thus antithetical to proper Christian behavior, has been redefined as an aspect of tribal culture rather than Hindu belief, and therefore something that is acceptable for converts to continue participation in. However, it is worth noting that there was also a strong sense that this was something the priests simply had to accept if they wanted people to continue coming to church, an activity which is considered to be of ultimate importance in terms of defining the membership rules of being a Catholic. At times both the priests and nuns seemed almost resigned to the current status quo, where Christians continued to participate in non-Christian village rituals, did not always come to church for important functions such as marriage, and kept up their practices of drinking alcohol and other ‘bad’ habits. It is evident, then, that in the Catholic church there is a significant element of popular or bottom-up influence on the degree to which Catholicism is adapted to the local culture, particularly in terms of providing an impetus for negotiation and redefinition of what is acceptably ‘cultural’ and what is not. This idea will be picked up again in the next section of the chapter.

The idea of inculturation is slightly less straightforward when it comes to the Pentecostal church, as there is not the same sense of a straightforward introduction of a religious system from a Western to a non-Western setting. While most traditional understandings of Pentecostalism do see its origins in the North American Azusa Street revival, more recent scholarship has criticized this view of the spread of the

religion, arguing instead for a history of Pentecostalism that acknowledges its multifaceted and global nature (Bergunder, 2005). As Anderson (2004: 2) notes, “the present proliferation and growth of Pentecostalism (and indeed its inherent character) are linked directly to the efforts and vision of its pioneers, who were by no means always westerners”. In India, for instance, the origins of the Pentecostal movement have been traced to charismatic revival at the Mukti Mission in Kedgaon, near Poona, in 1905; this predates the arrival of any American Pentecostal missionaries in the country (Bergunder, 2005). More than is the case with ‘western’ Christianity, then, the character of Pentecostalism in various parts of the world has, from the beginning, been a product of the cultures in which it has spread. As a result, the vocabulary of rupture or a break from the past is more common in the literature on conversion to Pentecostalism than the idea of inculturation. Ultimately, however, deciding what form this break should take can still be understood as “an exercise in boundary drawing- in being able to say what counts as Christian or traditional [un-Christian] and on what grounds” and so shares many analytical features with the idea of inculturation as it is used here (Engelke, 2010, 184).

In terms of ritual practice, the Pentecostal church at Pada certainly displays many elements of rupture from Hindu forms of worship. Here, the church is large and imposing; it is the biggest building in the immediate area by some margin and is maintained in excellent condition, as well as being topped by a huge cross.<sup>45</sup> Built around five years ago it is easily identifiable as a purpose built place of Christian worship, although the building that served as a church before this one still stands next door and is a far more simple mud and brick structure. Inside, the church is plain with

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<sup>45</sup> Indeed, it was by spotting this church from the bus as I travelled to a different village that I first learnt of its existence.

a slightly raised platform at the front with a lectern on it, and virtually no decoration except a simple cross on the wall behind this. Services here are far less structured than at the Catholic church. Men and women sit separately from one another on the floor; however, here the floor is covered in mats for people to sit on and there are a few rows of chairs for those with special positions within the church, for instance the family of the pastor, lay preachers, members of the church committee, and sometimes visitors from the main church or Bible school in Udaipur. These are the people who will often stand up to preach during services, although they are primarily led by Ram Pargi, the head pastor. A Bhil from Banswara, he was an early convert to Pentecostalism in this area and is now one of the most prominent Pentecostal leaders in southern Rajasthan.<sup>46</sup> Again, preaching is carried out in Hindi, although sometimes punctuated with short sentences in English.<sup>47</sup>

The feel of the service is spontaneous and overtly charismatic: preachers often walk around as they speak, raising their hands and their voices, singing, and frequently shouting hallelujah. Their sermons are full of personal experience and anecdote. The congregation is constantly encouraged to praise Jesus by shouting hallelujah and *masih ki jai* (praise the lord), lifting their hands, joining in with prayers and songs and so on. This means that prayer is not silent and individual, nor by rote as it is in the Catholic church: led by a preacher, the congregation adds their voices and it builds and builds into a loud crescendo. However, it should be noted that this elicits varying degrees of enthusiasm, and many people new to the church can be reluctant or obviously shy when it comes to this kind of participation. Music is a very important

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<sup>46</sup> While it is usually men who dominate the preaching, sometimes pastor's wives or female students from the Bible school will speak as well.

<sup>47</sup> In some cases whole sections would be repeated in Hindi and English; while this was common practice in the main church in Udaipur, in the village setting this was clearly being done for my benefit.

element of services, and songs will often be sung for more than an hour before the service begins, as well as punctuating it. In Pada, microphones and speakers are used by those leading worship, and while local percussion instruments are used, so too are the electronic keyboard and tapes of background music. The songs are upbeat and energetic— some are based on popular tunes, while others come with actions. At the end of the service, people will come to the pastors or preachers to be prayed for; this is a tactile experience, where hands are placed firmly on the head, or children are held and kissed. Exorcisms, where a small group of preachers pray loudly and expressively over those possessed by *bhut* (spirits), are also a frequent feature of these post-service rituals.

This, I believe, illustrates the paradox identified by Mosse (1994), who notes that charismatic Christianity is at once more radically separate from the Hindu religion than non-charismatic denominations, and yet in its ideas about healing and spiritual power is more deeply rooted in a shared popular religious culture than ever before. In worship, Jesus is invoked constantly as the one true, all-powerful saviour and any belief in Hindu deities is antithetical to this. At the same time, the service is imbued heavily with the idea of Jesus as healer, exorcist, and protector from evil or malign forces and spirits. This kind of Christological inculturation was evident in some of the beliefs espoused by Pentecostal preachers. For instance, Pastor Ram explained to me that Christians should not eat food that had been dedicated to Hindu gods<sup>48</sup> because this entails giving an offering to the evil spirits who live in Hindu *murtis*; by giving it food you are inviting it into your house where it can come and catch hold of you. In this sense, it seems that theological concerns are treated somewhat more flexibly by Pentecostal preachers than they are in the Catholic church, and are actively made

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<sup>48</sup> Called *dhupwalle khana*, this is discussed in more detail below

meaningful in the context of people's existing beliefs. The extent to which beliefs such as this would be espoused by the church leadership even in Udaipur is certainly questionable, although they do seem to passively accept the inevitability of what they call an 'ordinary person's theology'.

Where the idea of rupture was most evident was in the insistence of the Pentecostal leadership on conversion entailing what was ubiquitously referred to as 'lifestyle change'. This focuses largely on abstinence from alcohol, but also includes changes such as stopping smoking and chewing paan. This leaving behind of 'bad habits' is conceived of as having further knock-on effects on the life of converts: for instance, if a person stops drinking then he will have more money as he is not wasting it on buying alcohol; he will be more likely to get work; domestic violence will be reduced; he will be able to send his children to school, and so on. The other key aspect of a person's former life that, according to church leaders, they should leave behind upon conversion is attending festivals. Unlike in the Catholic church, these are considered an element of religious rather than cultural life, and as such Pentecostal Christians are expected to stop participating in them.

### **Conversion, cultural distance, and violence**

These attitudes are clearly reflected in the narratives of converts themselves, as was shown above. As such, the nature of the church that a convert attends is clearly one variable in the forms that their Christian practice and identity takes. Given this, we might also consider the role that the nature of the institutional church, particularly when it comes to the demands placed on converts, plays in contributing to anti-Christian violence. In her work on anti-Christian violence in rural Chhattisgarh, Froerer (2010) proposes one link between Hindu nationalism and what she terms Christian piety. She shows how Catholic priests in this region reacted strongly against post-Vatican II inculturation measures, instead choosing to enact a stringent system of

sanctions and fines designed to discipline members of their Oraon congregation thought to be engaging in un-Christian behaviour. These actions were aimed at turning the Oraons into 'proper' Christians, but had the unintended consequence of bolstering the emergence of Hindu nationalism:

By drawing attention to [the Oraons'] Christian status and distinguishing them more visibly from their Hindu neighbours, then, the strategies implemented by the priests have served to amplify the cultural distance between the two communities, thereby paving the way for the RSS's own process of Hinduization and the inculcation of 'Hindu-ness' amongst local Hindu adivasis. (Froerer, 2010: 140).

This analysis provides an insight into why Pentecostal Christians might face a higher level of violence than Catholics in this region. Here, the Pentecostal church has stricter membership rules than the Catholic church, in that it encourages greater changes in people's lifestyles such as stopping festival attendance and the rejection of conspicuous habits such as drinking and smoking. Even recognizing the ambivalences inherent in the relationship between Pentecostal theology and existing belief systems, it is also the case that conversion to Pentecostalism involves engaging in forms of worship that bear fewer ritual resemblances to Hindu practice than does Catholic worship. As such, distinct cultural distance is created between Pentecostal converts and the non-Christian members of their communities, and this occurs to a greater extent than for Catholic converts. Here, the constitutive norms of Pentecostalism- that is, the normative guidelines for practices or behaviours that a person is expected to engage in as a member of a particular social group (Abdelal et al., 2006)- serve to define clearer and more exclusionary boundaries between Hindu and Christian than do those of Catholicism.

As a result, the potential is created for Hindu nationalist discourses to be made more meaningful and gain purchase, especially, as is the case in this area, where they

emphasize the threat that conversion to Christianity poses to Hindu culture. There is of course a complicated relationship between discourse and violence, and I do not mean to suggest that those who commit violence are simply responding unreflexively to the discourses deployed by Hindu nationalists who seek to use it to their advantage. However, even while acknowledging that people may have a range of motivations for engaging in violence against Christians, I follow Kaufman (2001) in suggesting that pre-existing knowledge of the Other- in this case, the understanding that conversion to Pentecostalism entails a visible series of ruptures from their previous socio-cultural lives- has the potential to lend greater credence and validation to the claims of cultural deterioration made by Hindu nationalists, and thus creates an environment in which anti-Christian discourses are more easily translated into violence. This draws on Tambiah's (1996, 192) concept of transvaluation: the "process of assimilating particulars to a larger, collective, more enduring, and therefore less context-bound, cause or interest". A convert's decision to refuse a drink at a social occasion, to stop attending festivals, to engage in new and distinctive forms of worship, or simply to assert how much his lifestyle has changed, can be co-opted into a broader narrative of the conspiracy of Christian conversion stealing people away from their own culture and denigrating the Hindu religion. Here, it is evident that Pentecostal Christians are the most obvious embodiment of the legitimating discourses for anti-Christian violence that are deployed by Hindu nationalists, and as such this has the potential to make violence against them seem more justifiable, acceptable, and ultimately more likely.

Indeed, it is these discursive formations that find a prominent place in the attempts of Pentecostals to understand why they have been targeted for violence. When seeking to explain their experiences, converts routinely said that they had been told by their

attackers that they were ruining the Hindu religion, that it was wrong of them to leave the Hindu religion, or that they want to rid India of Hinduism. Moreover, I believe that this is also reflected in the forms anti-Christian violence takes. For example Gopal, the Pentecostal man who had converted after being healed of seeing snakes, related an incident in which he was grabbed by three men who attempted to force open his mouth and pour *daru* (locally-brewed alcohol) into it, trying to make him drink. This was of course an overt response to Pentecostal abstention from drinking, in a context where alcohol not only plays a significant part in community sociality but is also an important feature of ritual life (Hardiman, 1987; Shah, 2011). His friend Ramesh described being dragged in front of a Hindu *murti* (statue) where his assailants tried to make him bow his head in front of it. This was clearly a punitive act of violence based specifically on attacking Christian forms of piety, which are likely to be more pronounced amongst Pentecostal converts. These examples are in keeping with a body of literature that shows that the types violence inflicted on the body are neither random nor lacking in cultural forms (Appadurai, 1998).

However, to suggest that Pentecostal cultural difference is the result only, or even predominantly, of institutional prescription does not give us the complete picture. As Stewart and Shaw (1994: 18) note, hegemonic practices such as those propagated by the Christian church are never simply absorbed passively in the process of cultural contact; “at the very least, their incorporation involves some kind of transformation, some kind of deconstruction and reconstruction which converts them to people’s own meanings and projects”. Various scholars have noted the fact that discussions of acculturation or inculturation have often sought to classify religious behavior in terms of its origins (whether ‘traditional’ or ‘Western’), but this does little to explain how, why and to what degree religious synthesis actually happens, and how it is

understood by Christians in non-Western settings; in effect, it does not get at the heart of “the process of making Christianity one’s own” (Peel, 1968: 140; Meyer, 1994: 43). The following section takes this up, examining the idea of constructing Christianity from below and the ways in which Catholic and Pentecostal converts themselves exert agency in choosing the form that religious beliefs and practices take, and determining their level of engagement with aspects of existing local culture.

### **Rupture and continuity in the Pentecostal church**

While Pentecostal converts’ assertions of difference do closely mirror those encouraged by the church leadership- for instance in their claims that Christians do not engage in various bad habits, unlike Hindus- the ways in which they are framed actually diverge significantly from the discourses on inculturation, continuity, and rupture circulated by Pentecostal leaders themselves. Take, for instance, the account of Mary, a prominent foundational leader in the FFCI in Udaipur:

We would advise people who come to the Lord to keep their identity. If they are Bhil, let them be Bhil...we don’t change their names, and we don’t ask them to change their culture, other than idolatry...they have the same lifestyle, eating, staying together. The only thing is they are not doing idol worship, and they stop their drinking habits...all other things they can keep the same.

In a similar vein, when discussing this topic the principal of the Bible College in Udaipur insisted that the church in no way encouraged the severing of ties with a convert’s former life, and that actually they should not change much in terms of their culture. What exactly characterized this culture remained somewhat nebulous, but seemed to be defined in similar ways as above: eating habits, ways of dressing, attending functions, maintaining existing relationships and so forth. A final example of this clear, if somewhat non-specific, attitude regarding the importance of continuity was given by pastor Ram, who asserted:

Living, dressing, that's all the same, there's no change. The only change is in spiritual things... they have brotherhood. The generation is the same. All are tribes, tribals. That's why there's no difference.

Certainly, this is true to some extent; no Pentecostal converts would argue that their conversion in any way negates their adivasi identity, which remains a point of fundamental similarity with their kin and communities- this point will be further developed below, and is also taken up again in chapter 7. However, this attitude is interesting for a number of reasons. First, many existing analyses of Pentecostalism hold that transformation and radical discontinuity are the hallmarks of Pentecostal Christianity. In his overview of the anthropology of Pentecostalism, for instance, Robbins (2010: 160) suggests that the Pentecostal church requires converts to embrace discontinuity in their personal lives, their sense of themselves, and the cultural realm; that “disjuncture [is] a constant theme in the practice of everyday life” and that this is a device used by the church to “seal off” believers from the wider society to which they belong. The position of the church leadership in this area shows that this is patently not the case here. This demonstrates that the widely-held idea that “the kinds of transformations [Pentecostalism] sets in train look in many ways to be the same [across the world]” (ibid, 158), while useful in some respects, might in fact serve to obscure the different forms and emphases that Pentecostal Christianity takes on in different settings. This speaks to the importance of contextualization in seeking to understand Pentecostalism as well as the forms of Christianity that are more readily associated with processes of inculturation.

Here, their insistence on cultural continuity is, I believe, a direct function of the necessity of operating the church in an area in which Hindu nationalist discourse circulates widely and there is both the threat and experience of anti-Christian

violence. In contrast to the Catholic clergy of Froerer's (2010) study, Pentecostal leaders here are keen to emphasize that conversion does not, and should not, create divisive cultural distance between converts and the non-Christian members of their wider community. In contrast to studies that suggest that one characteristic of Pentecostal culture is the way in which it feeds off and exacerbates tensions that arise with existing cultures (Droogers, 2006), they instead perform discursive work that seeks to minimize and head off such tensions.<sup>49</sup> Their position also reflects the necessity of maintaining and foregrounding an adivasi or ST identity in a context where Hindu nationalism has challenged the right of Christian adivasis to access ST reservations and other government benefits- this issue is discussed more fully in chapter 7.

However, what is also interesting is that the statements of church leaders on this subject are so at odds with the narratives of converts themselves. According to its leadership, the Pentecostal church demands clear lifestyle changes of their converts but this is not supposed to affect or alter their relationship with their existing communities in profound ways; in this sense, refraining from drinking or avoiding Hindu festivals are coded as religious choices which should not fundamentally impinge on whatever they define as 'being Bhil'. For converts, understandably, these are not simply benign lifestyle changes, but shifts in their socio-cultural lives that distinctively and deliberately set them apart from Hindus. Moreover, the way their assertions of difference are framed suggests that the respondents are positioning themselves as what Bamberg, De Fina and Schiffrin (2011) call "agentive self-constructors". When they talk positively of their new lifestyles and the improvements

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<sup>49</sup> Although in practice there is some ambivalence between their discursive insistence on continuity and the actual reality of what they expect from converts in terms of lifestyle changes.

they are making in their lives- particularly when compared to what they see as the poor choices of Hindus- Pentecostal converts do not give the sense that they are constrained or compelled in their attitudes and behaviours by an institutional church apparatus that ultimately holds the influence and power over their lives as Christians; rather, they give the impression of purposive choice and self-determination. Indeed, this explicit trope of uplift and betterment, particularly when framed in the language of self-determination, may also account for why Pentecostals are more frequently on the receiving end of Hindu nationalist violence. As Bauman (2013) suggests, in many cases anti-Christian violence can be at least partly attributed to the backlash on the part of more 'forward' communities to the assertion and social transformation of previously marginalised groups.

### **Anti-syncretism and the construction of difference amongst Pentecostal converts**

When Pentecostal converts are keen to draw clear boundaries between Christians and Hindus what we see, I suggest, is a kind of 'anti-syncretism', defined as an antagonism towards religious or cultural synthesis shown by agents concerned with the defence of religious boundaries (Stewart and Shaw, 1994: 16). As we have seen above, existing literature on the subject of adivasi Christianity in India has heavily foregrounded an impetus towards inculturation, particularly from below: it has dealt largely with the ways in which adivasi Christian actors have been active in processes of combination and syncretism that have indigenized the Christian church and brought it more into line with their existing worldviews and culture, suggesting that it is through this process that Christianity is made meaningful in new contexts and for new converts. This research shows that, in this particular setting, there is in fact an impetus in the opposite direction. For Pentecostal Christians in this region, what makes their Christian identity meaningful is instead the drawing and maintaining of clear

boundaries between Christian and Hindu: an emphasis on difference rather than similarity or shared practice. This rests on well-defined distinctions not just between their current and former lives but also, crucially, between them and their Hindu neighbours; moreover, highlighting these distinctions is a key way of asserting the moral uplift- even superiority- of Christians compared to their non-Christian counterparts.

Certainly, these are themes that resonate strongly with the well-established idea of conversion to Christianity as a technology of self-assertion for low caste communities. As Mosse (2010: 183) puts it, Christianity has historically offered “ideas, stories or symbols with which to contend with caste-based inferiority [and] a way of thinking about improving change”, and conversion was often a means of acquiring a socio-religious identity that signified the possibility of dignity and autonomy for communities otherwise defined by service and subordination.

Conversion to Christianity has long been considered a means of uplift for Bhil communities, incorporating an ethos of self-improvement, sobriety, thrift, and discipline (Hardiman, 2008). Clearly, the narratives of Pentecostal converts reflect this when they speak of giving up ‘bad’ habits, being more careful with money, and being less prone to violence than Hindus. Indeed, the idea of non-violence is a particularly clear example of this. As discussed in chapter 3, Bhils have historically been constructed as violent and wild, particularly through colonial and missionary ethnography and classification. This has carried forward into contemporary discourse and practice; indeed, “popular representation in the city of the ‘tribal’ regions is that one cannot travel after 5pm as drunken tribals roam around and are excessively violent” (Bordia, 2009: 212).

In keeping with these representations, many priests, pastors, and nuns told me that tribal people are prone to anger and violence, and would fight or even kill each other without thinking twice. In this sense, I would argue that they still see themselves as engaged in a 'civilizing mission' that would be recognisable to the European missionaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, by emphasizing non-violence in expressions of Christian identity themselves, Bhil Christians are involved in reclaiming this civilizing discourse for their community. Moreover, it acquires important connotations in the context of anti-Christian violence. While some analyses have tended to suggest that Christians have simply been unable to stand up to or defend themselves Hindu nationalist aggression (Chatterji, 2004), these respondents instead recast a lack of retaliation to violence as an active choice: non-violence does not make them a weak, passive minority, but instead denotes the community's moral strength and character.

It is worth noting at this juncture that, when interviewing converts to a church with such clear guidelines, it is possible that what people say is not necessarily what they do (Engelke, 2010). Certainly there is the possibility that their answers to my questions about the differences between Hindus and Christians reflect some bias, in particular the feeling that there was a 'right answer' that they should be giving to my questions and that 'good' Pentecostals behave in certain ways. Several respondents, for instance, suggested that while they no longer drank or participated in Hindu festivals, they knew of others who still did, usually as a result of bowing to pressure from friends and family. These anecdotes were generally used as a way to accentuate their own good habits, but it is certainly possible that in some cases continuing such practices serves as a useful way of keeping the peace or mitigating conflict.

However, even while acknowledging that it may be the case that the lived reality of some Pentecostal converts' lives show more cultural continuity than interview answers suggest, this above analysis still stands for a number of reasons. First, Pentecostal converts also frequently identified key points of continuity with their previous lives, which are discussed more fully below. These were not simply straightforward narratives of rupture. More importantly, it is necessary to consider the significance of discursive constructions of identity, particularly when it comes to identity as a relational phenomenon. The key point to be made here is that identity is often expressed by both individuals and groups in terms of oppositions or complementarities with others, and that when people seek to define themselves in terms of being different or similar to others they employ various discursive strategies in order to do so (De Fina, 2011). The way that they talk about themselves in relation to others is therefore an important component in the process of constructing identity.

When Pentecostal Christians emphasize difference over similarity in relation to Hindus, they are very much involved in 'doing identity work' (ibid); that is, through their discursive choices they produce a Pentecostal Christian identity, delineate its membership rules, and as an extension of this work affirm their distance from non-Christians. This is in direct contrast to Catholics, who instead affirm their closeness to Hindus. The point, to paraphrase Robbins (2007), is not that there are no continuities between Pentecostal Christians and their Hindu neighbours, but that they have chosen to emphasize the discontinuities. It is evident that rupture, and distance from a previous life and many of its concomitant social and cultural practices, is a critical point of identification and identity-making for Pentecostal converts in a way that it is not for Catholics. It is important not to erase this by suggesting any sense of rupture is 'just' discursive.

Why has the idea of difference from Hindus become so pronounced amongst Pentecostal converts? Certainly, where conversion to Pentecostalism “appears to speak the language of liberating a person from a past where identity is locked in bonds relating to certain socio-cultural environment” (Van Dijk, 2001: 219), and in particular where that past has been characterized by poverty, misfortune or suffering (as discussed in the previous chapter) it makes sense both that converts would seek to establish distance from that past life, and that this would be coded as ‘Hindu’ in contrast to their new Christian lives. Where Pentecostal identity becomes a mark of self-betterment, and this is linked explicitly not just to belief in a new God but also to the lifestyle changes demanded by the new religion, then it is understandable that converts wish to emphasize difference and distance from their old lives.

At first glance it may seem intuitive that the difference between past and present lives are coded as the difference between Hindus and Christians- that in seeking to distance themselves from their pasts, Pentecostal converts are keen to construct and maintain a strict dichotomy between their former and current identities. However, data collected from Catholic converts indicates that this is not necessarily inevitable: they too identify conversion to Christianity as a key point at which their lives and fortunes changed for the better, and yet this change is not coded in the language of Hindu versus Christian in the way that it is by Pentecostals. While, as we have discussed, the nature of the church they belong to plays a role in this, it does suggest that these realignments can be made in a convert’s worldview without the necessity of othering Hindus in the way that Pentecostals do.

Given this, I argue that the role of violence should be considered when it comes to understanding the construction of Pentecostal identity here because of its potential to harden group boundaries between Hindu and Christian. This draws on existing literature that has sought to show the effects of violence on individual and collective identities. This literature has shown that experiences of violence often act as catalysts in the construction of identity, as they have the potential to increase the perception of difference between groups and reduce fluidity and ambiguity in group identifications. While ethnic violence is usually articulated in terms of ineradicable and irreconcilable differences between two groups, various scholars have pointed out that in fact it is actually violence itself which can serve to create or increase the salience of ethnic identity and strengthen ethnic self-consciousness; as such, ethnic identity can emerge as a result, rather than a direct cause, of violence (Smith, 1981; Vulliamy, 1994; Turton, 1997). Put simply, “violence has the effect...of constructing group identities in more antagonistic and rigid ways” (Fearon and Laitin, 2000, 846).

Indeed, much of the scholarship on communal violence in India has, even implicitly, this conception of the construction of ethnic identity at its core. Several analyses have understood ethnic- predominantly Hindu-Muslim- violence as a mode of carrying out ‘politics by other means’: they focus on the functional utility of riots in fomenting the idea of minority communities as a threat to the lives and livelihoods of the majority, thus polarizing the electorate along ethnic lines and consolidating constituencies and vote banks in favour, usually, of the parties and politicians of the Hindu right, who claim to be able to protect the interests of besieged Hindus (Engineer, 1984; Brass, 2003; Wilkinson, 2004). The idea that violence can be used to consolidate a unified Hindu constituency (Sarkar, 1999) clearly acknowledges the role it plays in the

hardening of ethnic identities, albeit usually from the perspective of the majority community.

The construction of identity on the part of minority religious communities who have been on the receiving end of ethnic violence in India has received less attention, but existing scholarship points in similar directions. Hansen has examined the impact of anti-Muslim violence in Mumbai in 1992-3 on the city's Muslim community, noting that amongst some sections there was a strong impulse towards the internal purification and discipline of the community along religious lines, and a sense of self-enclosure from both the Hindu community and the state that was seen to represent it; this was the assertion of a self-sufficient Muslim identity that drew meaning from Islamic doctrine, practice and ethics. Similarly, Robinson (2005: 187) looks at the impact of ethnic violence on Muslim survivors in Mumbai and Gujarat, and describes the way in which, for some, it has led to "a search for meaning in terms of a stronger religious identity", and the further accentuation of signs of Muslim identity. There are various factors behind this, including the desire to better understand and own the difference being projected on to them, seeking solace in religion, and the demonstration of community pride in the face of antipathy and violence.

This echoes the narratives of many of the Pentecostals I spoke to. Take, for instance, the attitude of Mangi Lal, a middle-aged lay preacher from Jhadol, who was one respondent who spoke to me at notable length about the animosity he faced as a Christian and the violence he and others had been subjected to because of their religion. He was also one of the most vociferously opposed towards the idea of attending Hindu festivals, explaining:

[Festivals] happen in my village but I never participate. I never even go to watch. Why would we go? It's not that special...there's nothing to see. It was part of a religion that we don't follow any more, so what's so special about it?

Others emphasized the fact that their belief in God had been made stronger in the context of the opposition and violence they had faced, and the idea that one's faith should not waver in the face of trouble was a strong theme. One revealing exchange occurred with Shanti, an elderly woman living close to Pada who converted to Christianity along with her husband over twenty years ago; they live with their son and his family, and make their living as farmers selling surplus produce from their land. We were shown to her house by Bheru, a young man we met by chance on the road and who, it turned out, had at one point converted to Christianity but had then left the religion due to pressure from his family.<sup>50</sup>

B: I used to be Christian, but I'm not any more.

NK: Why is that?

B: People told me that if I was ever in trouble, or there was some emergency, then they wouldn't come and help me. They said that ok, only the Christians should come, we won't help you.

NK: And you were worried about that?

S: Yes, he was very scared of them! We have never been scared like that.

Later on he took the opportunity to explain himself further, but with no more sympathetic a response:

B: People were always telling me that we won't come to your house, and we won't even take water there.

S: So what if they don't drink? Why should you get scared and turn back [piche hatna]?...If you come to this religion then you should stick to it, otherwise don't come at all!

Kalu Ram, the church minibuss driver, had experienced several altercations with the local Bajrang Dal and told me:

The just come here and make the rounds, saying bad things...they come and give us all these big warnings and then go back. If they see a pastor come, they say that if you go in any Hindu's house then we will kill you in that house. And they say, if the pastor comes in your house then we're going to kill you. But I tell them, let's wait and see what you'll do...we will never be afraid of you because the only one we fear is God. You have to be strong. They can't do anything to me because I stay strong.

He then reflected on this further:

[When I converted] people had a big problem with it. They said that I should never go to their house...they said you are a very low caste [niche jati] now. But whatever I am, I am devoted to God. I said, I will keep worshipping and praying to God. You might leave me, but God will never leave me...they threatened me with guns and swords, but I never went back. I still keep believing.

In this way, Christian identity becomes more heavily foregrounded and pronounced as a direct result of violence from Hindus. Given this, it makes sense that the identity of Pentecostal Christians should be constructed more explicitly in opposition to Hindus, and that they will seek to draw clear boundaries between them. This, I suggest, is because they are conceived of and constructed as Other by Hindu nationalists and those who enact violence against them, and also because an experience of violence leads to the desire to emphasize difference to and distance from- even superiority over- the perpetrators of this violence. Moreover, I would also suggest that the experience of violence has made Pentecostals hold faster to lifestyle changes that might otherwise be amended or moderated, and less likely to engage in joint activities such as festivals. It is through this process that, as Robinson (2005: 73) puts it, "attributed differences are duly actualized; real ambiguities turn into reified certainties". This in its turn creates the potential for further violence, as cultural distance becomes more pronounced and Hindu and Christian identity becomes more polarized.

### **Emphasizing similarity: the case of Catholic converts**

This has not been the case for Catholics in part because they belong to church which has been more open and adaptable to processes of inculturation, and has to a greater

degree allowed for the continued participation in the existing social and cultural life of their communities. However, the nature of the Catholic church here should not be considered a given, as in various ways it has been shaped ‘from below’. As noted above, even while doing little to challenge them, the Catholic priests and nuns in Jhamliya often complained that Catholic converts were too lax in their practice of Christianity. Moreover, it should not be assumed that by enacting these facets of inculturation Catholic converts are simply engaged in forms of ‘unconscious syncretism’ as they unreflectively adapt their new religion to existing forms of popular piety (Rudolph, 2005). Instead, much contemporary scholarship has shown that ordinary people “do often innovate syncretic strategies, especially if it furthers group interests” (Stewart and Shaw, 1994: 16). This insight is relevant here, with the syncretic strategies in question including participation in festivals, the acceptability of inter-faith marriage, the lack of sanctions on drinking, smoking and so on, and forms of worship that bear more ritual resemblances to Hindu worship. While Catholic converts from this church reported very low levels of violence enacted against them, it was still the case that most did experience some form of backlash and ostracism after conversion, even if this was minor or short-lived. Additionally, Hindu nationalist violence against Christians was still very much a feature of their cognitive landscape: almost every informant gave an example of violence happening to other Christians in a different village, if sometimes these examples were rather non-specific.

It seems, then, that in continuing to engage with key features of community life such as festivals and functions, effecting limited lifestyle changes, and consistently affirming the fundamental similarity between Christians and non-Christians, Catholic converts are actively seeking to minimize the distance between them and their Hindu neighbours, meaning that the appeal and credibility of Hindu nationalist discourse are

muted or more easily neutralized.<sup>51</sup> Among the many instances of Catholics telling me that nothing had really changed much in terms of their lifestyles and practices after conversion, the comment of Kiran Devi, a Catholic woman in her forties who had converted five or six years before this research took place, made the point particularly clearly:

KD: We celebrate mota tyohar (Christmas), and Holi and Diwali too.

NK: So that didn't change?

KD: No, nothing changed. We have to live within this community, so we celebrate the festivals the same.

Her husband added emphatically: "we have to live together, don't we? So we all do that, Christian and non-Christian." This demonstrates that Catholic converts have not been any less purposive in the way they construct their Christian identities than have Pentecostals, but in this instance the perception of the potential for violence, as opposed to the direct experience of it, has exerted force in the opposite direction and led them to emphasize continuity over rupture, similarity over difference.

In this sense, it seems that Catholics are involved in the maintenance of what Varshney (2002) refers to as 'inter-ethnic engagement' in ways that Pentecostals are not. Such engagement, he argues, means that tensions can be managed between two groups even in contexts where Hindu nationalists try to foment violence, because it facilitates the development of trust, co-operation and mutual understanding between two different groups that has the potential to transcend communal narratives and the incitement of hatred. This effect was clearly described by Prabhu, the secretary of the CNI church in Nai, who explained the lack of violence against (CNI) Christians in his village in the following way:

We live together in our community. It doesn't matter what politicians or the RSS or the Bajrang Dal say. If any of them ever tried to say anything about us, then people wouldn't listen to them because they know that we are good people. The sanghwalle say that they should get rid of Christians, kill Christians, and they say yes, yes we will do that but they never actually do because they like us. People who live nearby us in our village, they know us. So they never make trouble for us...we are part of the community, we all live together.

Here he is referring to CNI Christians who converted several generations ago, but his claims have resonance when it comes to the two groups of new converts that are being discussed here. Catholics, as we have seen, seek to manage religious difference by making choices about their religious lives that allow for acceptance and continued participation in their existing social networks after conversion. However, it is also the case that while Pentecostal converts often choose to enact various ritual, cultural, and discursive ruptures with their previous lives, it should not be assumed that this translates into complete social rupture either. In the following section I use marriage celebrations as an example to demonstrate this point. I seek to show that while the relationship between religion and marriage is constructed differently by Catholic and Pentecostals, shown in particular by their divergent attitudes towards the acceptability of making non-Christian marriages, fundamentally both groups remain invested in fulfilling their social obligations to their communities and to maintaining engagements across religious divides.

### **Religious boundaries and social cohesion: the example of marriage celebrations**

This section looks at the performance of marriage rituals in my field sites as a means to demonstrate the ways in which Bhil Christians of both denominations are engaged

in maintaining a level of social cohesion in their villages, whilst still at various points asserting their separate religious identity.<sup>52</sup>

### **Religious endogamy in marriage**

For adivasis in this region, all marriages are *phala* (hamlet), village and usually *gotra* (patrilineage) exogamous. They are also patrilocal, with women moving out of their natal village and into their husbands' after marriage. With regard to the question of Christians in particular, we might also add a further variable: that of religious endogamy. In keeping with the discussion above, this is an important consideration for Pentecostal converts and another area in which they seek to emphasize difference from Hindus, while Catholic converts do not consider it a particularly significant issue.

For the most part, Catholic converts agreed that Christians can marry non-Christians and that it is up to the couple if one of them chooses to convert to the other's religion. Shiv and Basanti were a Catholic couple I met shortly after the weddings of two of their daughters. Seeing their heavily decorated house, I asked about the celebrations that had just taken place. They explained that although they were Christian only one of their daughters had been married into another Christian family; the other's husband and in-laws were Hindu. As such, and because they could not afford two sets of rituals, both girls had been married according to Hindu tradition (*riti rivaj*). The following exchange elucidated the dynamics of the Hindu-Christian match further:

NK: So there's no problem with Christian and Hindu people marrying each other?

B: No, there's no problem.

NK: Can your daughter continue to practice Christianity?

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<sup>52</sup> While I focus here specifically on marriage celebrations, it is the case that these observations are broadly relevant also to other life-cycle rituals such as funerals.

B: Yes, she can continue, and she can still come back here to go to church with us.

NK: Will your daughter's husband also adopt Christianity or not?

S: It's up to him.

NK: What if they say your daughter has to become Hindu?

S: What can I say? I have no problem with it.

This attitude was corroborated by Sister Ganga, a Bhil nun at Jhamliya originally from Jhabua in Madhya Pradesh, who contrasted it explicitly to the Christian-Christian marriage norms in her home village where the Catholic community is much older and firmly established:

There are a lot of mixed families living together. Here you will find that only. Here, now some parents are Christian and children are Hindu. They are not coming to church also, they are following that [Hindu] way. Here there are many. Some are coming to church, some are not coming. Now there is one lady, she comes very often to church but her husband doesn't. No problem! This I noticed here.

There are limitations to this, particularly when it comes to gender. While it is considered acceptable for a Christian man to marry a non-Christian woman, several people expressed the expectation that she should convert to Christianity either before or after marriage in this instance, although the husband may still decide that this is not necessary. This approach to the issue illuminates the gendered dynamics prevailing in these communities. However, even in this case conversion is framed as a matter for negotiation within the framework of marriage, and as shown above, for the groom it is very much construed as a matter of personal choice. As such, the Christian identity of one party is not a fixed point around which a choice of partner, or even the religion of the new family unit, must necessarily hinge.

In contrast, many Pentecostal converts expressed a preference for intra-faith marriage.<sup>53</sup> For Shanti, the elderly Pentecostal convert mentioned above, finding Christian partners for her children was a lasting source of pride and she was keen to speak to me about it:

I had six girls, so people told me that I would never find boys for them all- they said, you'll have to go so far to find grooms and let's see what happens to you then. I married all my girls into Christian families...they're all very rich and they have big houses with two floors.

Her son had also been married to a Christian woman from a village in the neighbouring tehsil. For her, finding partners of the same religion for her children was very much a part of her duty as a Christian parent, and it was clearly an obligation she felt she had fulfilled successfully.

Various other reasons were given for the preference for partners of the same faith. Mohar, the owner of a bicycle repair shop near Pada and a convert of just two years when this research took place, explained that he would look for Christian matches for his children both because this was what his religious beliefs demanded, and to reduce to possibility of conflict:

They can't marry people of other religions, otherwise what's the point? If they were to get married in a different religion then it would cause problems, there would be fighting about it. I would only choose a Christian family.

Mangi Lal, the lay preacher mentioned above, put forward a further consideration when he explained:

They can't get married in a non-Christian family. Other people won't understand, but if they are Christian everybody understands: the sitting, standing, singing, dancing. Hindu people don't understand all this.

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<sup>53</sup> Intra-faith in this instance generally referred to other Christians of any denomination- it did not specifically have to be Pentecostal.

While he was referring specifically to styles of worship, he makes a broader point that is linked to the discussion above: the desirability of inter-Christian marriage for Pentecostals is clearly bound up in an understanding of the distinctiveness and difference of their lifestyles vis a vis Hindus, and the concomitant desire to find a partner able to fully understand and participate in this lifestyle. On the other hand, Catholic converts do not see their post-conversion lives as significantly divergent from those of non-Christians; it follows, then, that marrying outside of the Christian faith is therefore considered less problematic.

However, it was telling that even for Pentecostals a Christian match would not be pursued to the extent that it would subvert existing rules governing village and *gotra* exogamy. Mohar, for instance, acknowledged that there can be a need for compromise, going on to tell me that although his first choice would be for his children to marry into Christian families he would consider a Hindu family if this was really not possible. This brings us onto the next point to be made here: that an assertion of difference and the enacting of specific ruptures do not go so far as to violate important existing social norms, such as those related to marriage and the attendant relations of obligation, reciprocity, and support bound up in it.

### **The marriage ritual: performing Bhil and Christian identity**

Despite the fact that one of the key points of pressure that Hindu kin put on Christian converts is the threat of nobody wanting to visit them, eat with them, or attend their functions, all respondents- both Catholic and Pentecostal- said that Christians continued to attend and participate in the weddings of Hindus and that Hindus did the same for them. In practice, Christian marriages do not tend to differ significantly from non-Christian weddings, and this was one area in which even Pentecostal converts

stated that things remained more or less the same. In this locality, both Hindu and Christian marriages tend to last ten to twelve days. Marriage discussions are usually initiated by the boy's father, who approaches the head of the girl's family. Consultations on the suitability of the match are carried out by members of both families and other key figures in the local community, in particular the *gameti* (headmen) of each village; however, there is also a degree of involvement and flexibility with regard to the wishes of the parties being married (Majhi, 2010). After these initial approaches have been made, negotiations are then formalized when the groom's father visits the bride's home. It is at this point that *dapa*, a bride price paid by the groom's family, is agreed, which is anything from several hundred to several thousand rupees. While historically Christian churches have been averse to the idea of paying bride price, Catholic converts were open in their discussions of the matter. Pentecostal converts, however, tended not to call it bride price; instead, they talked about a voluntary gift that the groom's family would pay to the bride's, although it clearly serves the same social and economic function.

Throughout this process, and in the months leading up to wedding, a complex set of exchanges takes place: when formalizing the match, the groom's family will take food, liquor and gifts to the bride's home, and from then on both families are periodically responsible for hosting their new relations and their large retinues; this goes some way towards equalizing marriage expenses for both sides (Weisgrau, 1993). The pattern of exchange demanded by marriage negotiations may also account for Pentecostal Christians' preference for partners of the same religion, as they report higher incidences of non-Christians refusing to take food or drink in their houses.

The ten days leading up to the wedding are punctuated further by various gatherings and gift-giving ceremonies in both the bride and groom's villages. Retinues from both sides travel between villages with accompaniments of music, singing and dancing. These are all adhered to by Christians as well as non-Christians. Often, though, there are differences in the particular rituals and rites that are carried out in Christian marriages. This is an example of what Raj (2002) calls inclusion: a strategy of inculturation in which Christian elements are incorporated into tribal practices and vice versa, more or less in their original forms and without significant changes in their meaning. This type of inclusion was demonstrated vividly in a *pithi* ceremony I attended, which took place for a Catholic brother and sister who were both due to be married in the coming days. The ceremony involves the rubbing of *haldi* (turmeric) onto the bodies of the bride and groom-to-be and is a widely practiced feature of the marriage ritual in this locality. In this instance, however, it was carried out in a church; customary songs from their village rather than Christian hymns were sung as the *haldi* mixture was rubbed vigorously into their skin, but at the same time portions of this mixture were poured onto a tray and circled around a picture of Jesus, much the same as during mass. The priests said a Catholic blessing as seeds were tossed over the siblings. They were then given a *tika* on their foreheads, though in the shape of a cross.

Similar processes are at play in the marriage ceremonies themselves. It is rare for these to take place in the church, and most often the priest or pastor is called to the bride's village where the ceremony takes place; this results in rather a punishing schedule of travel from village to village during the wedding season. The Christian priest takes the place of the *sadhu* priest in non-Christian weddings to officiate over proceedings. In some cases, rather than the *phera*- where the bride and groom circle a

fire seven times- the priests will say prayers and blessings for the new couple. Rings can be exchanged, although not always. Singing and dancing take place at both Christian and non-Christian weddings and everybody participates in these; at Pentecostal ceremonies, however, it is often the case that traditional village songs are replaced with Christian ones, and they are also supposed to refrain from singing traditional songs if they have any religious Hindu content.

After the ceremony, a feast is held for all of the guests, and again this occurs in both Hindu and Christian weddings. Even Pentecostals, who reported higher levels of food and drink-based discrimination (*bhed bhav*) from Hindus, stated that this was an occasion on which Hindus will eat food with them, although some suggested that this was because in marriage celebrations it is usually the case that cooks from outside will be called in to prepare the food. Christians are also able to partake of food and drink at Hindu weddings, although again with some qualification. At many village festivals and functions where feasts are held, including weddings, it is often the case that a portion of the food that has been prepared is separated from the rest and is burnt over a fire with *dhup* (incense) as an offering to a Hindu deity or ancestor spirit, thus dedicating the remainder of the meal to them. This is referred to locally as *dhupwalle khana*. Both Pentecostals and Catholics said that they would refuse any food that had been treated in this manner; that is, they cannot eat *dhupwalle khana* because it has been specifically dedicated to non-Christian entities. On the one hand, this is seen as a way to protect oneself from the potentially malign influence of these deities and spirits. On another, it is interesting that they choose to foreground this particular strategy for the affirmation of Christian identity at communal events.

Rules and restrictions regarding food and drink are an important way of ordering hierarchical caste-based relationships in this region. While certain elements of hierarchy do exist between different Bhil clans, they can all eat and drink together. Bhils, though, will not accept food or water from Megwhals, a Scheduled Caste group, or eat in their homes; conversely, they do not enter the kitchens of Rajput families, and though they may be given food or drink it must be taken with separate plates or utensils (Weisgrau, 1993). It is often the case that when people convert to Christianity, Bhil neighbours and relatives refuse to eat or drink in their homes; in extreme cases, they also refuse to enter the house. Many informants explained that their neighbours and relatives had used the language of their becoming *niche* or low caste after conversion. As discussed above, for the Catholics of Jhamliya this was usually a temporary situation that pertains for only a short period of time. For many Pentecostals, it has been a longer-lasting issue. For both groups, though, there is a sense that in refusing to eat *dhupwalle khana* Christians are engaged in an inversion of this enforced hierarchical relationship, asserting their own agency in choosing not to eat with Hindus. In Jhamliya, it has even been the case that some Hindus have stopped making *dhup* offerings at functions because they know that Christians cannot eat if they do. In a context in which Catholics change relatively little about their socio-cultural lives after conversion, this is one way of asserting a specifically Christian identity and subverting discriminatory norms and behaviours.

**“We have to live together, don’t we?” Christian identity, social networks, and communal obligations**

Despite the ways in which converts seek to perform a specifically Christian identity in joint rituals, the basic point remains: while some ritual elements are modified in order to satisfy specifically Christian religious requirements for marriage, at the same time

these are socially ratified by their inclusion into existing local marriage rites and practices, and as such remain embedded in socio-cultural life of the broader Bhil community (Raj, 2002). This is important, because events such as marriages- along with other life cycle rituals such as funerals, which Christians and Hindus also continue to attend together – have a particular functional value in village life. As Baviskar (1995) notes, for adivasis in central India a marriage has many different aspects, from sentiment and the expression of sexuality to social reproduction, political alliance and economic transaction; these aspects are all in some way enacted in the events and rituals that surround a wedding. In the tribal villages of Udaipur district, for instance, they are clearly played out in the joint negotiations that go on before a match is finalized, the setting of bride price, the many instances of gift and monetary exchange that go on between the two parties before the wedding itself. All of these are adhered to by Christians, even if with some modification where necessary. Marriage, then, largely retains the same meanings and functions for Christians as it did before conversion.

By continuing to perform marriage in recognizable ways and as a joint celebration with the wider community, Christians remain engaged in the moral politics and economy of their villages, even where they are finding new sources of religious morality. Marriages produce particular relations of support, obligation and reciprocity. Not only do one's new relatives become a key source of financial and economic help, but elements of the wedding itself structure certain forms of reciprocity that must be observed by those participating: wedding guests, for instance, give gifts of money in envelopes that are clearly marked with the name of the family and the amount being given, in the expectation that this will be paid back at their own functions. Converts to Christianity are therefore already embedded in networks of

reciprocity that it is not easy, nor necessarily desirable, to extricate themselves from. Performing a marriage ‘properly’ is also about the accumulation of symbolic capital, as celebrations such as this act as mechanisms wherein social status is demonstrated and reified- they signal whether or not a person is a ‘good’ member of society who has fulfilled their proper obligations (Rao, 2001). Using this terminology, I argue that even though Christians may choose to emphasize difference and rupture through certain discursive or ritual practices, fundamentally they seek to maintain their status as ‘good’ members of the village community and maintain a level of social cohesion through a fundamental continuity in the way they carry out life cycle rituals such as marriage.

This is further supported by the fact that even where they will not be participating in a particular function, Christians will still make monetary contributions to it. For instance, Pentecostals who do not attend Hindu festivals will still give the *chanda* (donation) expected of all the villagers, which is used to fund communal festivities. Speaking to the idea of maintaining status, Rajubai, a middle-aged Pentecostal convert, explained: “I’m not interested in going to any of those festivals, but I do give donations because if I don’t give then people will comment on it”. Similarly, even where Catholics do not expect to be able to eat at a communal feast because of the restriction on eating *dhupwalle khana*, they still give the required donation for food. They are, therefore, still making sure to meet the financial expectations of such events, and remain a part of the networks of obligation and reciprocity that function at these times. As Tulsi, a young Catholic woman put it- echoing Kiran Devi above: “we won’t eat, but we give money. We live in the village after all, so we have to give, don’t we?”

This suggests that by continuing to fulfil particular cultural and social expectations in their behaviour, in this case related to life cycle rituals or satisfying communal financial obligations, Christians remain engaged in fulfilling the particular moral injunctions that allow them to participate in the economy of reciprocity that pertains, at least to some extent, in village life. Despite growing numbers in some villages, for the most part the Christian population is relatively small in size and has a fragmented geography; it follows, then, that Christians have not been able build entirely separate alternative moral communities, and still need access to broader social networks when it comes to considerations such as help with agricultural work, getting credit or access to labour markets, finding marriage partners, or receiving help at times of acute household crisis, as well as considerations that are sometimes overlooked in such analyses such as companionship and emotional support. Nor should they necessarily want to: affective ties are important in and of themselves, and we should also consider the desire of converts, where possible, to maintain the relationships that were a feature of their pre-conversion lives. Despite the ways in which they seek to mark themselves out from Hindus or define themselves specifically as Christian, converts do not cease to be social beings, nor do they simply disconnect from their previous lives or the relationships in which these were embedded (Lindhardt, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to elucidate some of the ways in which processes of boundary-making and the cultural construction of identity for Pentecostal and Catholic converts are influenced by experiences of direct violence on the one hand, and the moral and social obligations they have to their wider communities on the other. Certainly, where conversion to Christianity entails a greater transformation in

terms of lifestyle and religious behaviour, alongside a withdrawal from some key elements of cultural life, the potential for violence against Christians increases. This is reflected in the experiences of Pentecostal converts, as compared to Catholic converts, where conversion does not entail so many elements of rupture. Violence in turn reduces fluidity in group boundaries and behaviours, as Pentecostals become more active in expressing the 'otherness' that has been assigned to them and seek to distance themselves from the dominant local religious culture. However, this effect should not be overstated. While Christian converts use different discursive, cultural and ritual spaces to construct and perform their identities, both Catholics and Pentecostals do seek to preserve associational ties with their Hindu neighbours and to remain embedded in the communal life of the village. Their continued participation in the moral and social life of the community has the potential to diffuse the emergence of tensions and grievances that may then lead to more serious or prolonged violence.

## **7. Christian adivasis, subjectivity and the state.**

This chapter explores the relationship of Christian adivasis to the local state. It focuses on the strategies employed by adivasi Christians as they seek to negotiate the discrimination they face at the hands of local political actors, bureaucrats and administrators when trying to access government schemes and reservation benefits. Here, the analytical framework of identity shifts predominantly to their identity as subjects of the state; however, it is also evident that their everyday interactions with the state are informed and shaped by their Christianity, which is also used instrumentally in various different ways. This chapter starts with a discussion about the relationship between Scheduled Tribe reservations and Christianity in India, as this is the issue around which discrimination against adivasi Christians crystallizes. It then goes on to look at both the ways in which Christians experience and understand the state, and how they seek to respond to it. It argues that while the particular type of discrimination they face at the hands of the local state can be directly linked to their identity as Christians, the way in which they engage with the local state- and the inequalities of power that determine the outcomes of this engagement- resonate with the experience of adivasi communities and the rural poor in India more generally.

### **Christianity and the issue of reservations**

The relationship between conversion to Christianity and access to reservation benefits is fraught with controversy in India. The issue has become highly politicized, particularly since the 1990s, due to the struggles of dalit Christians to secure reservation rights for their communities. The Indian government has been consistently resistant to extending Scheduled Caste reservations to Christians on the grounds that caste discrimination was a unique feature of Hindu society, and that consequently

nobody professing a religion other than Hinduism should qualify for SC status. However, many church organisations and dalit Christians have pointed out that caste inequalities persist within the Christian community in India; not only do churches continue to follow caste-based practices- for instance using separate seats, vessels and cemeteries for dalits- but most converts also continue to face the social and economic disadvantages associated with their caste status (Jenkins, 2001). When, in 1990, the National Front government amended the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order to include Buddhist dalits in the SC category, it acted as a catalyst in spurring a strident campaign for the extension of SC status to dalit Christians as well. The last two decades have seen consistent activism on this issue. In 2004 the Government of India referred the matter to the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (Ranganath Mishra Commission), which recommended that dalit Christians and Muslims be given access to SC reservations. The same year, Christian organisations filed a writ petition through the Centre for Public Interest Litigation asking that dalit Christians be granted SC status. As it stands today, the Indian government has failed to file a response to this petition and the issue remains unresolved.

The campaign for dalit Christians to be granted SC status has seen a strident backlash from the Hindu right. As Hasan (2009) points out, the idea that Sikh and Buddhist dalits should be counted as SC while Christians and Muslims are not is tied heavily to the discourse of indigenous and non-indigenous religions; as such, resistance to extending SC status to the latter groups is fundamentally premised on “the quintessential logic of majoritarianism”. Various scholars have sought to explain the upsurge of violence against Christians from the late 1990s with specific reference to the growing assertion of dalit Christians. In his insightful analysis, Zavos (2001)

argues that anti-Christian sentiment has resurfaced as a key facet of Hindu nationalist discourse because the dalit Christian campaign represented the independent assertiveness of marginal groups, which was inherently threatening to the interests of the dominant ones represented by, and constitutive of, the Sangh Parivar. Moreover, as dalit Christian identity was politicized it led to an mobilizing vision based heavily on the unity of SCs of all religions- dalit Christians began to understand and articulate their identities within the framework of a broader, pan-dalit affiliation (Jenkins, 2001; Hasan, 2009). By cutting across religious boundaries, emphasizing dalit unity, and signalling a move towards a new cultural and political dalit identity that was effectively delinked from Hinduism, dalit Christian activism also represented a tangible obstacle to the Hindu right's discursive conception of a culturally homogenous India (Zavos, 2001; Clarke, 2002).

### **Being Christian, being Scheduled Tribe**

The Hindu nationalist antipathy towards granting SC status to dalit Christians has also bled into the issue of Scheduled Tribe reservations. As the benefits granted to ST groups under the Constitution are not linked to an experience of marginalization under a Hindu social order, ST converts to Christianity are not, in theory, excluded from reservation quotas. However, the dynamics in the relationship between Hindu nationalist groups and dalit communities outlined above are also observable when it comes to adivasis. First, the Sangh Parivar has been active in their attempts to 'Hinduize' tribal groups through various means; as such, the assertion of a non-Hindu Scheduled Tribe identity, manifested in Christian tribals claiming ST status, can also be seen as antithetical to the ideology and interests of Hindu nationalists. Second, adivasi activism might also be considered under the framework of the threat posed to

Hindu nationalism by the 'assertive margins'. Such analyses highlight the role of anti-Christian discourse and violence in attempts to avert the creation of adivasi solidarity. As Chatterji (2004) notes, in so far as the self-assertion of adivasi groups is a struggle to rewrite histories of forced assimilation their mobilization is necessarily in opposition not just to the state but also to Hindu ascendancy.

While Hindu nationalist mobilization has politicized the question in recent decades, negotiations of tribal Christian identity and its relationship with Scheduled Tribe status have a longer history. In his discussion of the dynamics of Scheduled Tribe status amongst sarna and Christian adivasis in Jharkhand, Kujur (2012) highlights a case study from 1962, wherein a tribal MP, Kartik Oraon, called for the de-scheduling of Christian adivasis after being beaten by a Christian candidate in an ST constituency. His argument rested on the fact that the tribal Christian community had no connection to the animistic faith and customs of tribal people. In this sense, then, he was demarcating fixed and mutually exclusive boundaries between being tribal and being Christian: by embracing Christianity, converts were negating their tribal- and therefore, Scheduled Tribe- identity.

In this area of southern Rajasthan there is also a long history of contestation between ST status and Christianity. Many Christians here have encountered problems in obtaining access to government services and benefits for STs, and this is particularly the case for members of the CNI community, whose families have been Christian for many generations. In these cases, *esai* (Christian) is often put down as a person's caste in official records, and as such many CNI Christians have had trouble even getting documents such as Scheduled Tribe certificates issued to them. This has been an on-going problem for these communities; older members told me that it had been

an issue since the first conversions occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As discussed in previous chapters, negotiations between Christian and adivasi identity have a long history here, and these accounts suggest that this is also the case when it comes to Scheduled Tribe status.

As such, this struggle cannot solely be linked to the increased presence of Hindu nationalist groups in this region. However, it has clearly been a factor in facilitating and exacerbating what has now become an endemic feature of state practice towards Christian adivasis here. In 2004, the BJP minister for tribal area development, Kanakmal Katara, called for officials in Udaipur district to have converts to Christianity struck off of ST registers, and while this was never enacted legally on the grounds that it was unconstitutional, his pronouncement has had a lasting effect on the attitudes and practices of government officials at a local level (Srivastara, 2004). Moreover, it seems the discourse surrounding the issue has shifted in recent decades. Rather than overtly challenging the ‘tribalness’ of Christian adivasis, those who seek to deprive ST Christians of their access to reservations and other constitutional rights, such as those to land, have tended towards the language of what Kujur (2012) calls "double beneficiaries". This was clearly in evidence in my research area. While in some cases the ST status of Christians was challenged with the rhetoric of Christians being a higher caste, in many others local officials tried to restrict the access of Christian adivasis to various government benefits by claiming that they have no need for them because they receive so much money from the church. As one Pentecostal woman I interviewed succinctly put it: “they say we are trying to make profits off both sides”.

What is interesting in this regard is that many Christian respondents had experienced problems with, or expressed anxiety about, losing access to benefits that are not necessarily solely targeted only at ST groups; they talked not just about reservations, but about being refused Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards and allowances, having to pay extortionate bribes for basic utilities, and being denied the ability to participate in other social security schemes such as work programs. It is evident, then, that denying Christian adivasis access to state resources has become about more than questioning their right to ST status; it has become heavily tied up in the discourse about conversion that is propagated by the Hindu right, which claims that adivasis are being offered financial and material incentives to convert, and that money is pouring into Indian churches from foreign sources. Christian adivasis are therefore constructed by local state officials not just as bearers of an inherently non-tribal identity, but also as recipients of undeserved wealth that makes them ineligible for any government assistance.

Any fundamental incompatibility between being Christian and being ST is roundly rejected by adivasi Christians themselves. Sometimes this was expressed in terms that resonated with the idea of constitutional rights. Bharat- a university-educated, devout young Pentecostal man living and studying in Udaipur- explained:

You change religion, not caste. The main thing is belief, and people from any caste can become believers. This does not mean that they change their caste; the question of Hindu and Christian does not apply there. Religion is a matter of what you believe in, but the law of reservation is law, not belief.

Many people expressed similar sentiments, though not always with recourse to the language of the law or rights. Despite this, however, it was evident that they feel that they have to deal pragmatically with hostile officials in their everyday encounters

with the local state. It is necessary, first, to clarify what these encounters entail. When people talk about the state they refer to it as *sarkar*, which is also the Hindi word for government. The idea of *sarkar* is useful here, because conceptually it encompasses the two figures who appear again and again in people's narratives on this subject: the patwari and the sarpanch. The patwari is a minor revenue official employed by the state, who maintains the village land records. When a person wishes to obtain a Caste Certificate- needed for access to ST reservations and land rights- they must first obtain a report from the patwari to prove that they are from a Scheduled Tribe. The patwari therefore has the potential to make this difficult- if not impossible- for Christians by changing their caste in his records or refusing to issue a report. The sarpanch is the elected head of the gram panchayat, a village level institution of rural governance; as such, they are not a state official or employee in the same way as the patwari. However, due to the nature of devolution in Rajasthan the sarpanch acts as a key mediator in access to state resources such as BPL cards, cash stipends and employment. As illustrated above, Christians have increasingly been denied this access as well. As such, both types of official are invoked here in the idea of the local state and its administration.

In confronting these issues, one valuable strategy employed by new converts to Christianity is to make sure that their religion is not changed on any official documentation. Mangi Lal, the Pentecostal lay preacher from Jhadol, told me:

We have no problem because in the government records we're registered as Hindu...that's the only reason we don't have a problem- it says that we're adivasi, Hindu. If somebody was to change their religion to Christian, then they would definitely face problems...recently in one village people came from the government to count how many Christians were there and nobody said they were Christian.

This practice is something that is encouraged by leaders in the Pentecostal church. They urge converts to use the term ‘believers’ (*vishwasi*) rather than Christians, and the majority of people in the Pentecostal community refer to themselves simply as *vishwasi* when talking about their religious affiliation. Lalu Ram, the pastor of the small village church mentioned in chapter 4, was resolute in his approach to this problem:

In our records and in our ration cards we are just ST and we are not going to change it. We are Christian only in belief, not in an official way [sakari niyam se nahi]. We are Bhil.

The way in which both men talked about this issue reveals that their interactions with and understanding of the local state have led to the conclusion that, as far as the *sarkar* is concerned, there is an inherent contradiction between being ST and Christian; when discussing the attitudes of the administration, Lalu Ram asserts that they are ST and *not* Christian- implying that you cannot be both- while Mangi Lal uses the terms adivasi and Hindu synonymously. However, it is also evident that this contradiction has not been internalized. By choosing not to change their religion in official documentation, these communities are engaged in a political act in which they reject Christianity as a primary classificatory identity. Instead, they choose to interface with the state as adivasis, and specifically STs.

This has been observed in other studies of dalit and adivasi Christians. Kumar and Robinson (2010), for example, describe the way in which Lutheran dalits in Andhra Pradesh have maintained ‘legally Hindu’ identities in order to avail of reservations and other forms of legal protection. Similarly, Bauman (2010) shows that many Christian Panas in Khandamal, Orissa had tried to hide or deny their religious identities in order to preserve their reservation privileges, and this contributed to the eruption of tensions that resulted in the anti-Christian riots that took place there in

2008. Certainly, there is an element of pragmatism here that highlights the fluidity of identity dependent on context; Bhil Christians foreground their identity as ST in their interactions with the local state because it is this categorisation that allows them access to government benefits. However, I would challenge the idea that this denotes a “dual religious identity” (Kumar and Robinson, 2010: 150) or Christian identities that are, as Bauman (2010: 273) suggests, “in flux” or “unstable”. Here, what is evident is not a pragmatic ‘switching’ of identities or a suppression of Christian identity; instead, we again see the construction of identities that are *at once* authentically Bhil (ST) and authentically Christian, without the kind of dissonance that other authors have suggested.

Bhil Christians here have been able to overcome this dissonance through operationalizing a public/private dichotomy when it comes to their religion. It was constantly reiterated to me that being Christian was simply a matter of faith, of what was in your heart, a personal choice regarding what you believed in. This idea of religion as belief means that it exists intact outside of the realm of recognition or quantification by the government; in this context, where other identity-based claims are at stake, it does not need to exist in the public sphere or assume a public form, and is instead firmly located in a private, moral and apolitical realm. As such, the failure to enumerate themselves as Christian in government records does not constitute a disavowal of their Christianity on the part of these converts; rather, they reconceptualise and discursively construct their religious identity in terms that mean it is simply not the state’s business. In this sense, while the function of the state as a recognition-granting authority to some extent constrains the identity choices of Christians - they must be counted as Hindu in order to secure access to government

benefits- it is also the case that they have responded creatively to this in authoring their own interpretation of what it therefore means to be Christian. In a context in which agents of the local state have sought to render the two mutually exclusive, this has allowed converts to maintain their status as ST without undermining their own religious understandings as Christians.

### **Adivasi Christians and the local state**

While this was a viable strategy for some, it was also the case that people did encounter problems as it became common knowledge that they had converted, even if this was not reported on any official documentation. Moreover, it was not an option open to many people from older Christian families, who had never converted and who had been enumerated as Christians for generations. This was particularly the case for CNI Christians in this region, who are the descendants of 19<sup>th</sup> century converts. The following sections look at the experiences of Christians who have faced problems accessing reservations and other government benefits, and uses this to examine the relationship between Christian adivasis and the state.

Prabhu is the caretaker of the CNI church in Nai. In his early sixties, like the majority of adivasis in this area he is a farmer and also worked as a labourer in the nearby zinc mines when he was a younger man. According to him, his grandfather was one of the first converts in the area and his father became the right-hand man of Rev. David Spowart, an English missionary who worked in the area during the 1950s and who was responsible for building the first church in the village. Prabhu holds an important position in the church here. He looks after the building, files the records of church meetings, and often stands up to preach or lead worship in services. There is currently a new church being built in the village, and he is responsible for overseeing its

construction. In the absence of the CNI pastor, Rev. Arjun- who lives in Udaipur and usually only comes to Nai on Sundays- he is a first point of contact for the local congregation. In his own words, he has effectively been running the church for the last fifteen years.

During one interview I carried out with Prabhu, I asked him whether Christian people ever had any problems accessing government services. He told me that even though he is Pargi<sup>54</sup> as far as his jati (caste) is concerned, the local patwari had changed his surname to Esai in his records and put down Christian as his caste. He was told that Christian was a *savarna* (high) caste, and as such he wasn't entitled to the facilities that should be given either to the poor or to STs. This was a problem a number of Christians in the area were facing, and it was a particularly worrying state of affairs as far as their children were concerned because they were not getting access to reservations either in education or in government employment. He also noted that the patwari had tried to extort large sums of money from him to rectify the situation. He went on to explain, though, that a man from the main church in Udaipur had come to the village and held a meeting, taken their signatures and documents, and was trying to rectify the situation for them. However, no progress had been made as yet. I asked him why, if this man was doing such a bad job, he didn't just go himself and tell the patwari to change it. He looked at me and laughed: "no, we can't do that. How can we go alone? They would never accept what we're telling them. They don't listen to us." Following this exchange, I was struck by the fact that although Prabhu was a respected and authoritative figure in the church and amongst the local community, this clearly failed to translate into his interactions with the local state. Instead, he was

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<sup>54</sup> A Bhil *ghotra* or patrilineage

reliant on ‘the man from Udaipur’<sup>55</sup> to interact with the state on his behalf, on the understanding that his own voice would not be heard.

This sets the experience of Christian adivasis within a framework of structural violence that shapes the relationship between adivasis and the state more generally. The endemic poverty and marginalization experienced by the majority of adivasis in India often means that they lack the social conditions necessary for engagement with the state as full citizens; this has meant that at a local level the state has the capacity to become directly exploitative as “state functionaries browbeat the illiterate poor into submission” (Jayal, 1999: 99).

Prabhu’s assertion that the administration would never listen to him- that the local state acts in not only discriminatory and exploitative ways but is also inaccessible and unresponsive- resonates with recent ethnographic work on this subject. In her work on the Munda adivasis of Jharkhand, for instance, Shah (2010) shows that the state is treated as an object of suspicion and fear by most rural Mundas, as it is enmeshed in a local economy of corruption and oppression by local elites. This mistrust is rooted in the fact that in Jharkhand the state has largely been represented by high-caste Biharis, who have regarded adivasis as *jangli* (wild) and acted in an exploitative and violently repressive way towards them. As such, the adivasis in this region have for the most part come to expect nothing from the state, and seek to have as little as possible to do with it. Similarly Nilsen (2012), working in rural Madhya Pradesh, characterizes the relationship between adivasis and the state as one of ‘everyday tyranny’, wherein agents of the state are implicated in imposing a coercive regime of extortion on local

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<sup>55</sup> Indicating an individual belonging to the educated, urban elite.

Bhils who are often forced to transgress forest laws in order to preserve their livelihoods.

In southern Rajasthan, adivasis do not necessarily seek entirely to distance themselves from or disengage with the state. My fieldwork was carried out in what are often described as ‘highway’ villages, which denotes villages which are less remote and better connected to roads and nearby urban centres than their ‘hilly’ counterparts (Majhi, 2010). As such, while it is not necessarily the case for adivasis living in more remote areas, people in my field sites could describe themselves with reference to categories such as BPL and, to a lesser extent, ST - often using the English acronyms. There is fairly widespread knowledge of local government schemes, and it was often the case that even where people were not directly sure what I meant by reservations or Scheduled Tribes, they were generally aware that adivasis should have access to certain benefits and development schemes.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, tribal people in this region are interacting with a state whose institutions and personnel constantly seek to generate an idea of adivasis as inferior and incapable of understanding the law (Bordia, 2009); the state can also be an extractive and exploitative entity. People complained frequently about government officials (*bara aadmi*) ‘eating up’ (*khaa jaate hai*) any benefits that the government was supposed to provide for them, and deliberately making life difficult for them.

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<sup>56</sup> As this chapter deals specifically with experiences of anti-Christian violence as they relate to the issue of access to Scheduled Tribe benefits, it necessarily focuses on respondents who were aware of their right to reservations and of the fact that right could be revoked or challenged due to their Christianity. While it was beyond the scope of this thesis to undertake a systematic look at who benefitted from ST reservations and who did not it is worth pointing out here that this was not a type of anti-Christian violence that was experienced universally by Christians, due to the fact that some did not have much knowledge of or access to reservations in the first place.

Their attitudes towards the state, however, were often discursively framed in ways that invoked the idea of the state as a disaggregated entity, intuitively speaking to the Foucauldian conception of the state as a set of ‘dispersed practices’ rather than a single entity (Corbridge et al., 2005). As Gupta (1995) notes, for the majority of Indian citizens, particularly in rural areas, the most immediate context for encountering the state is provided by their relationship with government bureaucracies at the local level; as such, representations of the state are usually effected through the everyday practices of government institutions and agents. It is important, then, to study these practices in seeking to understand how rural people experience the state in India. However, these experiences are also influenced by the discursive constructions of the state that circulate in public culture: in India popular knowledge about the state is tied firmly to ideas about corruption, and in particular individuals in the middle- and lower-level bureaucracy who thwart the implementation of government programs through their corrupt practices (Gupta, 2012).

These insights are certainly relevant to the way in which Christian adivasis talk about their interactions with the local state. Even while Christian respondents spoke to me of the discrimination they faced at the hands of the local state, they were also easily able to identify the various kinds of work that the *sarkar* was responsible for carrying out in their villages: the provision of reservation benefits, social security, employment, infrastructure and education. The majority of respondents therefore articulated an overarching conception of the state as a provider of social goods, even as they were deprived of access to these same goods and at times they were dismissive of their quality. This disjuncture is perhaps best explained with reference

to Hansen's (2001) notion of the sublime state. He argues that the imagination of the state in India is characterised by a split between its profane dimensions- the partiality, incoherence and banality inherent in the technical side of governance at play in the local state- and its sublime ones- the higher designs, resources and forms of rationality that are imputed to its more distant counterpart. In Mumbai, where Hansen's work is based, the idea of the state as an elevated entity is consolidated through a repertoire of public performances such as military parades and imposing buildings. In the villages of southern Rajasthan, I believe, it is a rural landscape dotted with the distinctive architecture of government schools, development offices, and primary health care centres, and the seasonal visibility of NREGS programs.

The clear gap between the perceived role of the state as a provider of welfare and development on the one hand, and their lived experiences of it on the other, was consistently articulated by my respondents through reference to corrupt or prejudiced administrators who made the functioning of the state opaque and inaccessible to adivasi people, and rendered their access to the government benefits difficult and in some cases impossible. This is in keeping with many other analyses of the interactions of the local state and the rural poor in India more generally. Corbridge et al. (2005) argue that this is in part a function of the limited nature of the engagement with the state in rural India, where individual relationships are key and as such the personal characteristics of particular office holders loom large in the minds of poorer people. Gupta (1995) points out that it is also a result of the ubiquity of the corruption discourse that circulates widely in the Indian media and in the public sphere more generally. This ties in neatly with Hansen's typology: on the one hand, repressive encounters with the local administration play a crucial role in forming conceptions of the local state as extractive and unjust- the state as it *does* work; on the other hand it is

precisely these encounters, along with widely disseminated, mass mediated discourses about corruption, that work to produce images of a spatially separate ‘translocal’ state, which is imagined as an altogether more just and benevolent entity- the state as it *should* work (Sharma, 2008).

This framework also structures Christian narratives when they talk about the problems they face accessing reservations and other government benefits. Their stories consistently focused on the personal actions of individual office holders. For example, one group of Pentecostals in Pada told me that around five years ago their village had a sarpanch who was very hostile to Christians, and as a result they faced a lot of trouble when they needed anything from government offices. However, things improved considerably when this sarpanch was replaced by one who was better disposed towards Christianity. Thus they located their issues in the failings and prejudices of a particular individual, and not in the institution of the state itself. A young CNI member, Laxman, Prabhu’s grandson, made this point clearly during one interview:

Actually, it depends on the person- who the patwari or the sarpanch is. If he is angry about the religion, or he is against Christianity, or he wonders: why is he becoming Christian? Then he will make trouble for you. As far as the government is concerned, you are free to believe in any god.

Certainly at face value these understandings of the way the local state works are very much in keeping with the wider analyses outlined above: the sublime or translocal state here is one that upholds the right of Christians to freedom of religion, but is subverted by the actions of corrupt and discriminatory office-holders at the local level. However, while the narratives of Bhil Christians draw heavily on the familiar discourses of corruption circulating in India’s public culture, they also contain certain elements that suggest the need to think critically about positing any clear dichotomy

between the local, profane state and its sublime translocal counterpart. The most obvious indication of this was the fact that when Christians talked about individual sarpanches or patwaris who had made trouble for them, they were invariably associated with the BJP. Who was likely to discriminate against Christians, then, was not simply arbitrary; it was in fact associated firmly with a particular political party and its ideology. This clear association between anti-Christian discrimination and what is ultimately a translocal political movement with reach into the heart of India's political establishment complicates the idea that people simply assume that the highest levels of government are always the domain of rational, benevolent politics. Similarly, the fact that they choose to enumerate themselves as Hindu on government records also demonstrates an understanding of anti-Christian discrimination that- thanks to the access of Hindu nationalists to the machinery and institutions of the state at various levels- is systemic and not simply based in individual partiality or brutality. It seems, then, that underlying these discourses about corrupt individuals was some sense of the fact that if the local state acts in profane ways, that profanity is rooted in broader cultural, social and political forces at play in the region and in India more generally.

The dichotomy is further eroded by the way in which Bhil Christians link their experiences of anti-Christian discrimination to broader processes of marginalisation and disenfranchisement. This was articulated by Prema, a middle-aged Pentecostal woman from Pada. Despite being relatively well educated herself (to 10<sup>th</sup> standard), and with a husband who had secured work with a local NGO, she still expressed intense frustration at the workings of the local bureaucracy:

To get any government facilities we face big problems. That's why I don't even try any more. To sort out even the smallest problem they'll call you about five times for signatures. We can't go every time, so why go at all? I've been denied things many times. They don't want to help poor people – they don't explain anything. They make everything difficult. Yes, it is worse if you are a Christian, but it happens all the time!

This is useful to this discussion for two reasons. First, it suggests that while rural people may not have a clear vision of a unified state (Gupta, 2012), it does not necessarily follow that it is understood in a totally disaggregated fashion either, despite what they say. While they may complain about the corrupt actions of specific government officials, this does not mean that people believe that the treatment they receive from them is actually arbitrary; rather, to use Prema's words, *it happens all the time*. This sentiment is also reflected in Prabhu's conviction that local administrators don't listen to "us". References to how difficult poor adivasis specifically find it to engage with the state, I believe, speak to the idea of a structurally violent state; there is some acknowledgement here of a political and administrative culture that results in systematic discrimination against these groups, not simply bad luck when a particularly prejudiced administrator is in charge. As such, while the violence the state enacts might be *described* as arbitrary by those who experience it, it is often actually *understood* in ways that speak to its structural nature.

Second, this helps to conceptualise the political subjectivity of Bhil Christians further. While the particular experience of adivasi Christians is of being denied reservations and benefits specifically because of their religious identity, it is also evident that they locate their inability to confront this injustice not simply in terms of being Christian, but in terms of structural inequities that mean that they are unable to effectively access the machinery of the state. Academic work in this area bears out the fact that, for the Bhils in this district, the state is an entity that remains unreliable as a source of

economic and social resources thanks to corruption and its impermeable bureaucratic structure (Weisgrau, 1993). This resonates clearly with the ways in which Christians articulate their problems with accessing the state, relating them to a broader context of marginalisation and dispossession even where they seek to illustrate a specifically Christian experience. Here, then, we see the interplay of two different subject identities constructed with reference to the functioning of the local state. Adivasi Christians in this area face a set of challenges when it comes to their interactions with the local state that are based specifically on their religious identity and understood as such: we are denied reservations because we are Christian. Concurrently, however, these challenges are placed within the framework of the state being inaccessible and an unreliable provider of benefits in the first place; experiences which are intrinsically linked to being poor and adivasi, not simply Christian. In this sense, even as Bhil Christian subjectivity acquires dimensions that relate specifically to an experience of anti-Christian violence, it is still fundamentally shaped by the structural violence enacted by the Indian state against poor, rural adivasis more generally.

### **Challenging the state: the successes and limitations of Christian advocacy**

Although being Christian leads to discrimination and exclusion when it comes to engagements with the local state, it also has the potential to generate social capital that can be used in seeking to overcome this. When facing these problems, adivasi Christians are often able to activate links with the broader network of Christian organisations operating in southern Rajasthan. To illustrate this I use the example of a CNI community in Adapur village, Kherwara tehsil, which began to face problems around 2003 because, in a familiar narrative, the patwari had recorded people as *esai* in his books and therefore made them and their children ineligible for ST reservations in education and jobs. However, they had been successful in confronting this issue,

and quite literally setting the record straight. They achieved this through their involvement with an umbrella organization called the Christian Association: every year a meeting is held in the village where members of the congregation come together and compile a list of any problems they have had, after which a village representative, usually a church elder, attends a larger meeting of the diocese in Udaipur, where the grievances of various villages are compiled by the church leadership. When a critical mass of complaints has been recorded, this leadership then takes up these issues with the administration at a district, state and sometimes even national level on behalf of the villagers. In this instance, the Christian Association had been successful in ensuring that Christians were once again able to get ST status in their locality through putting pressure on the district collector.

This example is illustrative of a key avenue of resistance open to Bhil Christians in the face of discrimination enacted against them by state officials. Where they have been deprived of access to reservations or land, and also where local police have failed to respond to incidences of harassment and physical violence, it is possible for them to tap into wider Christian networks that have emerged at least in part as a result of increased intimidation and harassment from Hindu nationalist groups. As CNI pastor Rev. Tadvī explained, church associations have become an important instrument in engaging with the government at state and national levels about Christians issues: “who will listen to a single voice? But united our voice is strong, and it is heard”. Organisations such as the Christian Association, the Udaipur Christian Fellowship, and the Rajasthan branch of the All India Christian Front operate in Udaipur and other tribal districts of the state. These are inter-denominational organisations made up primarily of the leadership of the various churches in Udaipur and surrounding areas. They are the Christian elite of this region;

in contrast to the vast majority of Christians in the district, they are well educated, urban-based, often non-tribal, and for the most part English speaking. They are engaged in a range of advocacy activities aimed at confronting violence and discrimination against Christians in villages. When people contact them about any trouble they are facing, they operationalise networks of contacts in the higher levels of the bureaucracy and government, putting in calls to Collectors and other district officials to discipline lower-level officials, lobbying MLAs and MPs at a state and national level, and gathering information and contacting members of the Minority Commission to set investigations in motion.

This activity mirrors the type of advocacy with which the Christian church in India has long been associated and involved. Early missionaries were often heavily engaged in various types of advocacy on behalf of adivasis, advising them on how to deal with court cases and litigation regarding their rights to land, and helping them to confront extortionate police officers and money-lenders (Aaron, 2007; Froerer, 2007). Some scholars see this kind of social action, alongside the wider provision of education and healthcare, as part of the democratizing impact of missionary Christianity in India (Lumsdaine, 2009; Woodberry, 2012; Lankina and Getachew, 2013). Others have sought to extend this idea into analyses of contemporary Christian activity in tribal areas. In his discussion of evangelical Christianity amongst Bhils in the Dangs, Gujarat, Aaron (2009) describes the work of the Gujarat Christian Workers, an organization which alongside evangelical work has helped local adivasis to gain information about local government schemes, bargain with money lenders, petition the police about crimes enacted against them, and other similar activities. He argues that this type of advocacy work has explicit democratizing and empowering effects for adivasi communities, as it encourages ideas about respect and fair treatment,

challenges existing power structures, and generates a modest degree of situational governmental accountability.

To some extent, similar processes are at play in Udaipur district: successfully contesting the corrupt and discriminatory practices of petty officials and the police obviously has the potential to raise awareness amongst Christian adivasis about their constitutional and legal rights; moreover, agents of the state are forced to become responsive to the interests of adivasi communities in a context where this is usually not the case. However, as Aaron (2009) acknowledges the accountability generated is limited. While some church leaders talked proudly about the successes they had achieved in securing land and reservation rights for Christian adivasis, others expressed frustration with the same issues, noting the slow progress and arbitrary nature of implementation even where they had nominal support from state and central government.

Further, I argue that in this context the democratizing effects of these interventions are significantly limited. Fundamentally, what is at issue is the fact that these demands on the state are made *on behalf* of adivasi people and not by the people themselves. As such the advocacy of Christian groups, while often ameliorating the situation of adivasi Christians facing state violence, is not part of a program of broader socio-political change that empowers adivasis to engage with the state on their own terms. Certainly the churches are making attempts to do this; for instance, they have been involved in teaching Christians how to file First Information Reports and encouraging them to approach the police if they experience problems. However, interviews with church leaders revealed a blunt pragmatism underlying these efforts

that undermines their potential for empowerment. As Fr. Rathore, a priest affiliated with the Pentecostal church pointed out:

If fanatics come and make trouble, then first of all people should go to the police. But the police are not going to hear anything. So they have to come straight away to us instead. And once they have called us, on the spot we can call the collector and they will give orders to the local police station. You know, police...they never hear. They don't hear people. I have to bring pressure.

Here he was talking particularly about physical violence against Christians, but his comments raise broader issues about the way in which the relationship of adivasi Christians to the state is conceptualized- and therefore reproduced- by Christian elites. One prominent female leader in the Pentecostal Church- was matter-of-fact when she described the situation to me:

Every day we receive phone calls- almost every day. Either we will go [to that village] or we contact some officers or some authorities. We approach the higher authorities, and those officers inform the lower officer: "I am getting complaints, what is happening there? Take care of it!" Because, you know, when they know that some city people, or some educated people are involved in this, then they know that they will be in some trouble if they don't behave properly- that we can take it to court. So that part is definitely there.

The church leadership therefore acts as a key intercessor when it comes to the access of adivasi Christians to institutions of the state, and they not only facilitate this access but also mediate it. Fr. Rathore, for instance, went on to explain his working process when called to a village:

Say some tribals lost their land, or they did not get a job, or some atrocity [happened]...when anything happens to somebody I have to study the whole case first, thoroughly...I will make a report, I will have discussions with the collector. I will sit and talk to people, hear what they have to say...I am not for any religion; I am for truth...I want to get to the root. But many people want to take advantage of my leniency and I don't let them do that. I have to study the case. What really the case is. And sometimes I chase them out.

This is not to suggest that he would necessarily act against the interests of the people who had sought his help. However, it is illustrative of the fact that in this context church leaders are in a position to become arbiters of whether or not a case is legitimate, and whether it is pursued.

Equally, where the church leadership assumes the role of mediator, adivasi Christians themselves can become sidelined even when action is being taken. Patli is a village in Kherwara tehsil just a few kilometres away from Adapur, and is also home to a CNI community of Christians. However, their experience has been vastly different to that of their near-by village. They too related an experience of losing land and school places because they were not listed as ST, and this had not yet been resolved. When I asked whether they had heard of the Christian Association it turned out that they had not. This congregation gave the palpable feeling that there was nobody to listen to or advocate for them, and that there was nothing to be done about their situation. When I later brought this up with their pastor, he explained that the Christian Association had been lobbying the district office about it but their efforts so far had been frustrated by local officials. It was clear, then, that the Christians of Patli were not active participants in the process of claiming their rights; moreover, the impression was given that it was not particularly important that they were. When I tried to engage the pastor about what they had told me, he fell back on familiar tropes and argued that they were uneducated and simply did not understand what was going on.

Social capital seems to play a key role in accounting for this difference. Adapur is a village striking for its high levels of occupational mobility. This is in part a function of the fact that the socio-economic status of adivasis living in the highway villages of Kherwara is generally higher than those of other tehsils, thanks to the main road that

runs through the area which serves as the main artery between Udaipur and Ahmedabad. This has allowed for greater income diversification, a process that has been intensified in Adapur due to its proximity to the large green marble mines of the nearby Aravali hills. The availability of work in the mines has reduced reliance on subsistence agriculture and increased average incomes here, and this seems also to have had a knock-on effect on the access of families in the village to education and other forms of employment. Adapur has a strikingly high percentage of people in government jobs (25 per cent) and low levels of reliance on agriculture and labour (3 and 4 per cent respectively) (Majhi, 2010). The Christian community in Adapur reflects this: even during my short time there, I met with four families with several members in government jobs, including teaching, nursing and working for the water board, and with children either in, or en route to, higher education. The pastor here had spoken often to me about his pride in the relative sophistication of Christian Bhils in this area compared to their non-Christian counterparts; as such, I was not surprised when he was particularly keen for me to meet and speak with these families, and himself had a familiar and friendly relationship with them. Indeed, it illustrates the point quite clearly: these members of the Christian community had developed high levels of social capital with the pastor thanks to their educational and occupational status. This was not so apparent in Patli, where people were still predominantly engaged in agriculture and casual labour and there were few in government employment.

It was interesting, then, that relatively high levels of education and even economic resources were not the direct mechanism through which these Christians were able to redress their issues with the patwari. Instead, they provided a sort of 'linking' social capital: ties between the group and people in positions of authority and influence,

allowing for increased access to institutional resources outside of the immediate community (Grootaert et al., 2004). In this case, a closer relationship with the pastor meant that he was more willing to advocate on their behalf and engage them in the process of doing so. This in itself is illustrative of the problematic aspects of the intercessory role played by the church leadership in this process, as not all groups have the ability to form these relationships. However, even the most effective linking social capital speaks to the idea of unequal power structures, as key to its efficacy is access to somebody with greater authority and resources than you. As such, even where this type of social capital has been instrumental in achieving positive outcomes for a particular community, as in Adapur, by its very nature it remains embedded in asymmetries of power.

Finally, the idea of meaningful empowerment for Christian adivasis is undercut by the fact that even where they are successful in reclaiming their rights as STs through the actions of Christian organisations, they can end up facing further problems as a result. Rev. Tadvī, for instance, remains somewhat sceptical about their ability to enact meaningful change in villages. He described a situation in which appealing to higher officials was often counter-productive, as even where they successfully put pressure on local administrators to change their practices with regard to ST Christians, this would often breed resentment and retaliation in other forms: demanding endless signatures and visits to government offices, delaying bureaucratic processes, verbal harassment and so on. To his mind, the Christian Association “interfering” often causes more problems than it solves for the people on the ground. This suggests that while church activity might generate a degree of accountability with regard to administrative practice, it does not fundamentally alter the nature of power as it plays out on a local level.

## **Capturing the state: Christians and Panchayati Raj Institutions**

Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) have played a key role in shaping the political landscape in this region. The Panchayati Raj movement gained momentum in postcolonial India in recognition of the need for a degree of democratic decentralization that would allow for local-level political agency, wherein village communities could find representation and leadership could be provided for implementation of development programs. The Balwant Rai Mehta Commission set out recommendations for the introduction of PRIs in 1957. It called for the establishment of the now-familiar three-tier system of Panchayati Raj institutions: the gram panchayat, operating at a village level (with an electorate of at least 1500 people), the panchayat samiti, at the tehsil or block level (consisting of a group of gram panchayat), and the zilla parishad, at the district level. This tiered system would, it was anticipated, establish institutional links between the village leadership and the government at both district and national levels, and would make trusted local leaders responsible for translating government policy into action. State governments showed differing levels of commitment to the implementation of these recommendations; in the event, Rajasthan was the first state to implement legislation with its 1959 Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad Act. However, over the next two decades the momentum behind the reforms, as well as funding, dried up, and the functions of PRIs were significantly scaled back as a result.

No major changes were made to this system until 1993 when the Indian government passed the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the constitution, which formally enshrined the authority of panchayat institutions in law. The provisions of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment stipulate that representatives of all three levels should be elected every five years, that one third, that one third of seats should be reserved for women, and that seats should also be reserved for STs and SCs proportional to their population. It is also within the jurisdiction of individual states to provide reservations for OBC groups. Moreover, the gram sabha, the electorate in each gram panchayat area, is constitutionally recognized as a deliberative body at the village level, and serves as a mechanism for transparency and accountability (Johnson, Deshingkar and Start, 2005).

The specificities of the particular functions and responsibilities of PRIs are also left to the discretion of state governments. The functions that were transferred to PRIs under the Rajasthan Panchayati Act, 1994 are laid out in Table 7 below.<sup>57</sup>

**Table 6. Departments with specified functions transferred to PRIs in Rajasthan.**

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Agriculture, including agriculture extension.</li> <li>2. Land development—implementation of land reforms, chakbandi, and soil conservation.</li> <li>3. Minor irrigation, water management.</li> <li>4. Fisheries.</li> <li>5. Social and farm forestry.</li> <li>6. Minor forest produce.</li> <li>7. Rural housing.</li> <li>8. Drinking water.</li> <li>9. Fire wood and fodder.</li> <li>10. Roads, buildings, bridges, culverts, ferries, water ways and other means of communication.</li> <li>11. Poverty alleviation programmes.</li> <li>12. Education including primary and secondary education.</li> <li>13. Markets and fairs.</li> <li>14. Women and child development.</li> <li>15. Social welfare including welfare of disabled and mentally retarded persons.</li> <li>16. Welfare of weaker sections, in particular Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Schedule Tribes (STs).</li> <li>17. Public distribution system.</li> <li>18. Maintaining community assets</li> </ol>
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*Source: Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Gov of India 2012*

Since then, there have been further developments in the working of Panchayat institutions in the state. In 1999 the Rajasthan Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) was passed, which provides for a degree of ‘self-rule’ in Scheduled areas: it devolves management over certain natural resources to tribal communities, and allows for the resolution of disputes using customary methods.

However, in Udaipur district, as in many areas, it is yet to be implemented and there is still very limited awareness of the purpose and regulations of the Act (Menon and

<sup>57</sup> It is worth noting that while these areas fall under the jurisdiction of PRIs this does not signal operational or financial autonomy; under this legislation PRIs have little influence in setting their own development agendas, and are primarily funded through government grants.

Sinha, 2003; Sahoo, 2013a). Most recently, in the 2010 election cycle the Rajasthan government increased reservation for women to 50%, and transferred full administrative control of primary education, health, agriculture, social justice, and women and child development to PRIs.

The sarpanch is the directly elected head of the gram panchayat, which consists of between five and fifteen other elected officials. There is some debate in existing literature about the nature and extent of the sarpanch's control over panchayat functions, and given the prominence of the figure of the sarpanch in Christian narratives it is worth visiting it briefly here. As Palaniswamy (2010) points out, many studies that have sought to understand the impact of reservation on local government practice have started from an implicit assumption of the 'sarpanch raj': by seeking to determine what impact the identity of the sarpanch (for instance, as a woman or SC/ST) has on the implementation of public provision schemes or the targeting of anti-poverty programs, they project the idea that role of sarpanch is the one through which effective power is wielded. However, some scholars have challenged these assumptions, arguing instead that the gram panchayat is a body in which more than just one elected representative has a voice, and members other than the sarpanch are involved in the process of decision-making (ibid).

While this offers an important perspective when it comes to the functioning of PRIs, I argue that the role of sarpanch does remain key in the context of my research, particularly in its role as a broker: distributing patronage, allocating resources and finance, and- of key importance here- mediating access to state programs and benefits. The key institutional factor accounting for this is that in Rajasthan

sarpanches are directly elected by voters, unlike in some other states where he or she is elected indirectly by the other elected members of the gram panchayat (Kerbar and Sivakumar, 2005). This gives the sarpanch greater personal control over the functions and finances of the panchayat. This was borne out by the perspectives of my informants, who as we have seen were explicit in their understanding of the sarpanch as the primary source of authority in the gram panchayat.

Respondents frequently referenced the fact that they had problems with BJP sarpanches. Although panchayat elections are not officially party-based, I found that people were keenly aware of the political affiliations of their sarpanch, and sarpanches tended to talk about themselves with reference to their party. This is because it is generally the case that local leaders elected through PRIs are directly nominated or supported by particular parties, on the basis of their ability to mobilize sections of their community. This symbiotic relationship with particular parties, in which local leaders profess ideals congruent with said party, has helped to entrench the authority of the sarpanch in southern Rajasthan (Bordia, 2009). In this context it makes sense both that the sarpanch would have the authority to act unilaterally, and that one connected to the BJP would espouse discriminatory attitudes towards Christians, in congruence with the mobilizing tactics of the Sangh Parivar in this area.

This discussion serves to highlight the fact that the position of sarpanch is of key importance when it comes to mediating access to government schemes and the distribution of benefits. I turn now to a case study of the Pada gram panchayat, where Christians were able to capitalize on this in order to confront and redress the discrimination being enacted against them.

The Pada panchayat is made up of three villages, and the population is almost entirely Scheduled Tribe. As noted previously, Pada is an important centre for the Pentecostal movement in Udaipur district, and the work going on there is considered a great success story of the Pentecostal mission in Rajasthan by the FFCI.<sup>58</sup> The landscape here is dotted with several churches, and the Christian community is large and continues to grow- estimates for the actual population are hard to come by (explained previously) but I estimate that the number may be as high as 40%. This community is generally affiliated with the FFCI, although other evangelical groups such as the Emmanuel Mission have made a few modest entries into the area.

Since 2010, Pada has also had a Christian sarpanch. I met Jagdish Katara by chance while sheltering from the rain under a bus stop one afternoon. Having heard about my research from Pastor Ram he came over to talk to me, and proceeded to tell me the story behind his election:

The last sarpanch was BJP, and he made a lot of protest [virodh] against Christians. He even wrote down that people were Christians for their ration cards. Everyone is ST here, but in the place where you should put *jati* he would put Christian [esai] so that they couldn't get access to government programs. I decided I would run for this position because Christian people were facing so much trouble. I didn't have any intention to get into politics, but due to all the trouble I thought that I should be in politics, I should fight the election. The last sarpanch put up such resistance towards Christians. He was saying who will come in front of me, who will challenge me? That's why I decided to do it. [Christian people] gave me a lot of support [saath diya]. Half the people here are Christian. The other sarpanches, in the past, they won by 100 or 150 votes, but I'm the only sarpanch who has ever won by 700 votes.

Since becoming sarpanch, he says he has worked to reverse the actions of his predecessor: he has ensured that Christians are listed as ST in official records, and that they receive the benefits that they are entitled to.

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<sup>58</sup> The FFCI maintains several links with churches in the UK and the USA, and when foreign visitors from these churches come over they are generally brought here to witness the spread of the Christian message in rural India.

Whether or not the figures are strictly accurate, this provides an interesting insight into adivasi Christian political activity in this region, when existing literature on the subject discounts the community as an electoral force. As Mosse (1994: 80) notes, prevailing conceptions of the Christian community in India have tended to see it as “politically passive”. In the context of Hindu nationalist violence, Christians are often referred to as demographically insignificant, and therefore “hardly a political player” (Aaron, 2002). This type of analysis is framed by the ‘votes and violence’ thesis that has gained significant traction in studies of communal strife in India (Wilkinson, 2004). When anti-Christian violence began to gain visibility in the late 1990s, it was argued that this was because anti-Muslim violence was considered an electoral liability by the BJP, and as such the Sangh Parivar’s anti-minority ideology was redirected onto a new, much smaller, less electorally significant group (Sarkar, 1999). Other commentators noted that this was concentrated on Christians in north and central India, and not states like Kerala and Goa where the Christian minority is more demographically significant (Chatterjee, 1998). While of course these analyses refer to national and state-level political configurations, they have tended to circumscribe enquiry into the ways Christians behave as political actors in the context of Hindu nationalist violence more generally.

The outcome of the gram panchayat election in Pada suggests that the parameters of this conversation need to be shifted, and that a focus on village level politics might prove more useful in seeking to understand how Christians in this region use political institutions in seeking to safeguard their own welfare, and that of their community. Jagdish is a staunch Congress man, and often talks of this affiliation, but his narrative shows that this forms only part of his political identity. Thanks to the demographic

balance playing out at this local level he was able to mobilize a specifically Christian electorate based on issues related to their religious identity; concurrently, Christian people were able to vote for a Christian leader in explicit protection of their own interests as a disaffected group. Consequently, a sarpanch was elected who was able to enact policy decisions that ameliorated the situation for their community, and ensured a more equitable distribution of public goods and services. This shows that we must consider the political agency of Christians in selecting leaders with the potential to represent their interests, and not simply assume that they are a voiceless or silent minority.

However, there was also an ambivalence in the way that Jagdish sought to fashion himself as a leader, and this was shared by others in the Christian community in this area. For instance, even as he explained the support he received from other Christians he was also quick to tell me that Hindus voted for him too, because he had previously worked in a local government office and had helped people out with their everyday problems. Similarly, when I brought up the issue with Pastor Ram and suggested that the vote of Christians had helped him to win, he quickly interjected: “Behaviour- it was his behavior! He behaved very well when he worked in that office and everybody liked that”. The key points that they were keen to stress were that the sarpanch was not a partisan candidate- unlike his predecessor- and that his election was not about mobilising vote banks but about the character of the man himself. This can of course to some extent be explained by his affiliation with Congress, a party that at face value seeks to present itself as secular. However, it also suggests that whatever the relative strength in numbers, it is still not a wise or viable political strategy to identify *solely* as a Christian candidate. This much also became evident through talking to other Christians in the area and was corroborated by other interviews: when I asked them

about their sarpanch, many Christians said that having a co-religionist in this position was a good thing, particularly because they now had access to government benefits, but were also quick to stress that there was no partiality in the way he acted- that he was fair to everybody.

Bordia (2009) has examined the narratives of former adivasi sarpanches in southern Rajasthan in order to understand processes of ‘ethical self-making’ amongst tribal leadership. She finds that once local leaders became sarpanch and were affiliated with Congress, they began to profess development ideals which were congruent to ideas of upliftment, the ability to rise above politics, and duty towards one’s community. This theme emerged strongly from an interview I carried out with Shankar Lal Katara, Jagdish’s uncle and also a former sarpanch. He too is Christian, initially CNI but now a devout Pentecostal convert. He spoke at length about his success as a businessman, and how he had been able to open a factory that provided many villagers with work during a period of drought. His contribution to the welfare of his community is what had made people elect him as sarpanch, and he defined this very much in terms of being a Congress man who worked for the uplift of adivasi people, no matter their religion. Yet the same time, this discourse was clearly linked to his identity as a Christian. He explained:

I am very honest and loyal, I never eat even a single rupee that’s meant to go to anyone else...Christians are honest people, they never lie. They never curse or abuse people. When people fight, Christians don’t fight back. We sort out people’s problems. If somebody is fighting then we try to solve the problem, and we make them stop the fight. That’s why we don’t have any discrimination, because even in our panchayat we have some Christians and some Hindus and they all work together.

There is an interesting insight into the nature of Christian adivasi leadership in this area and how it seeks to portray itself. Christian sarpanches, and other members of the

Christian community, are keen to emphasize that what makes them good leaders is the fact that they do not favour Christians and are impartial when it comes to religion; this is of course in direct contrast to BJP sarpanches, and is partly a function of their affiliation to the Congress party. At the same time, their ability to govern in this way is fundamentally linked to the fact of their Christianity: it is used as a marker of their honesty, integrity and hard work. It is therefore a central facet of their self-fashioning as leaders as well.

The example of Pada is certainly an instructive one, but by using it I do not mean to suggest that PRIs provide a straightforward solution to the problem of democratization and representation for marginalized groups; this avenue is not one that is open to all Christian communities in this region for various reasons. Firstly, it is of course dependent on the demographic mass of Christians in the electorate. Admittedly, voting as a Christian would hold little weight in villages where they make up a small proportion of the population, or where Christianity has a marginal influence; as shown above, Pada is a village in which the Pentecostal church has strong foundations and a large following. Secondly, as discussed previously, the position of sarpanch is a powerful one in this area because it is generally monopolized by established local leaders. Jagdish is the grandson of the late *mukhiya* (village headman), and- as mentioned above- his uncle is himself a former sarpanch. While I was not able to dig deeply into the specificities of the most recent panchayat election, it is probably the case that Jagdish was able to draw not just on a Christian vote but also the social networks and relations of power afforded to him by his family status and connections. What is more, all of these men were converts to Christianity, meaning not only is he part of an entrenched local leadership but also that there is a

previous history of Christian leadership in this constituency, even if it was not so acutely politicized before.

While it is important to recognize the context that facilitated his election, it is still the case that Jagdish specifically relates his entry into politics, and his electoral success, to the task of confronting Hindu nationalist violence. As such, the example of Pada stands as a useful corrective to existing literature on anti-Christian violence in India, which fails to engage with the ways in which Christians operationalize their identity in electoral politics. Moreover, this might be seen as more genuinely empowering than the strategies employed by Christian organisations discussed in the previous sections. For one, the act of voting for a representative constructs adivasi Christians as political agents, able to assert their own interests rather than rely on others actors to do this for them. Second, while both may result in Christians gaining their rightful access to reservations and other benefits, the mechanisms through which this occurs are important. As argued above, while it may have some successes, the advocacy of Christian groups does not fundamentally alter structures of power at a local level. Conversely, as Witsoe (2012: 48) argues, the types of brokerage and mediation in which sarpanches are engaged are “not just about patronage for its own sake, or about entrepreneurial politicians taking advantage of their ability to allocate state resources at their discretion (although [they are] all of these things), but also about struggles over dominance and subordination within local sites”. In this instance, Christians have made a claim to political dominance; in doing so, they have challenged the dominance of anti-Christian networks of power. The Christian sarpanch, then, embodies the access of Christians to new forms of power within their localities, and the subversion of political structures that seek to construct and reify their marginality.

## Conclusion

This chapter has examined the political subjectivity of Bhil Christians. In some ways, this is profoundly shaped by the categorisations of the state and the way it functions in granting recognition and conferring benefits. This is shown by the fact that they continue to foreground an ST identity, even where it requires them to identify as Hindu in official records. However, this also shows that Christians should be understood as political actors with a sense of their rights and entitlements vis-à-vis the state. They are also engaged in various creative strategies as they seek to assert those rights, particularly in response to forms of anti-Christian violence that seek to curtail their access to them, such as denying ST Christians reservations. One of these strategies is to try and access church networks that carry out advocacy activities on behalf of village Christians; while sometimes efficacious, I argue that this approach is ultimately limited because it fails to address the issue of power inequalities that structure the interactions of adivasis with the state. This idea is reflected in the narratives of Christians themselves, who locate their inability to confront these problems without the help of intermediaries in terms of a structurally violent and inaccessible state. This speaks to the subjectivity of poor and rural adivasis in this area more generally, even while this particular form of violence targets Christians specifically. However, I also show that Christians have, to a limited extent, been able to gain access to forms of institutional power through gram panchayat elections; in this case, Christians have been more effectively empowered in securing access to benefits and confronting Hindu nationalist violence on their own terms, articulating Christianity as a specifically political identity.

## 8. Conclusion

The objective of this thesis has been to examine the construction of identity amongst Bhil Christians in Udaipur district in the context of anti-Christian violence, contributing to existing literature on this subject by explicitly focusing on Christian experiences and understandings of violence and elucidating the ways in which they engage with, mediate, and respond to it. This resituates Christians as agents in the construction of their own identities, even where Hindu nationalists have sought to impose ‘otherness’ upon them. I have looked at the ways in which Christian identity is expressed in relation to various forms of direct, cultural and structural violence, and how this has interacted with longer histories of identity-making for Bhil Christian communities in this region.

I demonstrate that the discursive frameworks that Christians employ in their representations of themselves and their religious community are often ones that emphasize, in various ways, autonomy, social improvement, and self-assertion. This is evident in the narratives of Christians with regard to the cultural violence of Hindu nationalist discourse on conversion, as they seek to emphasize their own agency in converting to Christianity and freeing themselves of reliance on blind belief, superstition, and corrupt mediators such as *bhopas* and temple priests. It is also particularly clear in the way in which Pentecostal Christians construct their identities in contrast both to Hindus and their past Hindu lives. The tropes they employ in framing the normative values and behaviour associated with Christian identity all speak explicitly to the idea of individual and community uplift and betterment: stopping drinking and other damaging habits, working hard, and being less violent. However, it is also apparent, even if sometimes implicitly, in the stories of healing

and health that are such a pervasive feature of Christian conversion stories in this area. Conversion to Christianity can be understood in these narratives as a means of asserting agency over one's well-being, of proactively pursuing avenues towards good health in a context in which sickness, broadly defined, is an endemic feature of daily life and in which options for ameliorating it are limited.

Certainly, these themes have a long history when it comes to the motivations and experiences of adivasi Christians. There is a significant literature showing how conversion to Christianity has “signified autonomy as a social possibility to people historically defined by service and subordination” (Mosse, 2010: 184) and it has acted as one means by which adivasis have sought to assert their own dignity and self-respect. This has been true of Bhil communities in this region since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, these discourses acquire new resonance and meaning in the context of anti-Christian violence. First, the ideology promulgated by Hindu nationalists in this area is one that seeks to deprive converts to Christianity of agency over their decisions, insisting instead that conversion is always the result of bribery, greed, force, or even trickery. These discourses are reinforced and made credible by both the poverty experienced disproportionately by adivasis, and the cultural and institutional construction of them as backward and uneducated. By making agency a key theme in the expression of Christian identity and articulating it as a means of furthering their own interests- for example in ensuring good health or engaging in moral reform- Bhil Christians not only resist the lived experience of marginalisation and poverty, but also the damaging characterisations of Christians deployed in the public sphere by the Hindu right. It also provides Christians with both a psychological resource and a rhetorical arsenal with which to confront opposition from their families, neighbours, and communities. By deploying the vocabulary of healing and uplift, they are able to

defend and justify their religious choices to themselves and others in terms of the various improvements that have occurred in their lives, and also in some cases to assert moral superiority over those who enact violence against them.

It is also evident, however, that the Christian community in Udaipur district cannot be treated as a monolith; moreover, it is the case that different expressions of Christian identity are linked to different experiences of violence. These differences are most clear along the lines of denomination, particularly when comparing Pentecostal and Catholic converts. I argue that converts who experience higher levels of direct violence are also those for whom the constitutive norms of their identity generate more pronounced cultural distance between Christians and Hindus- in this case Pentecostals. Conversely, those who experience very low levels of violence, or none at all, are also those who report low levels of cultural difference- this was true for Catholic converts. We should not assume, though, that this distance or lack of it is simply a result of the institutional prescriptions of the church that they belong to; rather, much of it is constructed, both discursively and in practice, by converts themselves, either as a result of their need to assert the strength of their faith and their moral integrity in the face of violence, or, on the other side of the coin, their desire to minimise the potential for it. When we talk about anti-Christian violence, then, it is necessary to be alert to the fact that the neither the Christian community nor its expressions of identity are homogenous; instead, Christian converts of different denominations are engaged in active, but decidedly different, strategies of identity construction that delineate and negotiate various boundaries between Christian and non-Christian dependent on their understandings and experiences of anti-Christian violence.

Further to this, anti-Christian violence has the potential to solidify the boundaries not just between Hindu and Christian, but also between different Christian denominations. Rather than outright reject the violent discourses about Christianity deployed by the Hindu right, some Christian leaders have sought instead to project them onto other churches, most notably when it comes to the issue of proselytization and conversion. This has led the CNI and Catholic church to portray themselves as non-proselytizing denominations, in explicit contrast to the Pentecostal church. For its part the Pentecostal church does not reject this proselytizing label, but instead seeks to alter the meanings attached to it. It emphasizes the 'native' character of its missionary work and a desire for converts to retain many elements of their existing culture, which directly resists the discursive constructions of Christianity as inherently de-culturing that are propagated by Hindu nationalists. What we see here is the deployment of counter-discourses that further complicate the idea that anti-Christian violence serves to construct Christianity as Hinduism's 'Other'. On the one hand Pentecostal leaders are to some degree actually engaged in asserting the continuities between Bhil Christians and their Hindu counterparts. On the other, the non-Pentecostal churches assert a particular Christian identity by drawing a firm boundary between proselytizing and non-proselytizing denominations; in this context, it is actually Pentecostalism which becomes a critical Other to these churches as they seek to define and represent themselves in the context of Hindu nationalist violence.

This thesis has also shown that while Christian identity in this region is closely tied to ideas of uplift and self-assertion, it is not the case that these ideas are expressed in ways that seek to distance or alienate Christians from a fundamentally adivasi identity. Of course, this is in itself an act of construction: in making this argument I do not mean to essentialise any particular idea of being Bhil or tribal, but instead

show that in many cases Christians actively work to maintain and even foreground elements of this as central to their socio-cultural identity, and in doing so to retain ties with their existing communities. This is done in various ways, and speaks to both external and internal processes of identification. With regard to the former, the idea of being adivasi is one that specifically speaks to political subjectivity and categorization by the state. This is most evident with regard to the issue of being Scheduled Tribe, and the way in which Christians are unanimous in asserting the fact that their being Christian in no way negates their ST status; that they are not incompatible identities and that they can- and should- be held simultaneously. From a different perspective, we can read similar conceptions of compatibility into processes of identity formation within the Christian community itself, in particular the popular theology that surrounds spiritual healing. I have argued that experiences of divine healing are a cornerstone of Christian belief and identity in this area, and Christians construct and understand these experiences in way that are- to paraphrase Raj (2002)- both authentically Bhil but also genuinely Christian. By this, I mean that Christians do not necessarily consider themselves caught between two competing or mutually exclusive belief systems: traditional on one hand and Christian on the other. They do not seek to delegitimize, contradict, or even distance themselves from existing local beliefs related to the causes of consequences of sickness, but instead conceptualise conversion to Christianity an alternative avenue for engaging with them.

I also use the idea of adivasi as an overarching social identity to describe notions of belonging to the local community. I demonstrate this with particular reference to the ritual life of Bhil Christians of all denominations, who to varying degrees seek to socially ratify Christian rites of passage such a marriage through a process of 'inclusion' wherein certain adaptations are made in order to incorporate selected

Christian elements into existing tribal practices. This means that such rites remain embedded in the social life of the whole village, not just the Christian community. This occurs even where they may seek to create certain types of distance from Hindus, either discursively or in practice; moreover, Pentecostal converts who do not attend festivals continue to contribute to established village practices such as giving monetary donations for them, and will prepare and eat food in joint events and celebrations. This shows that far from attempting to free themselves from financial and other obligations to the community after conversion, Christians remain engaged in fulfilling these obligations as 'good' members of village society. As such, even where they may discursively emphasize elements of rupture, it is evident that in many cases Christians seek, as far as possible, to maintain relational ties and a level of social cohesion with their wider communities. In doing so, they are active in resisting- often successfully- the attempts at othering that are carried out by Hindu nationalists, suggesting that it is necessary to look critically at any straightforward ideas of 'divide and rule' that are often present in existing analyses of anti-Christian violence.

To some extent this speaks to the ways in which Bhil Christian identity is shaped by various external factors, which have the potential to influence and limit the choices people make with regard to how they perform their identities. The subjectivity of Bhil Christians is clearly shaped by the power of the Indian state to grant recognition and resources based on belonging to a Scheduled Tribe. The strong insistence of many of my respondents that conversion to Christianity did not take away their ST status is of course legally true, but can at least in part be read as a result of the fact that they are incentivised to identify strongly as tribal due to the categorisations imposed on adivasi communities by the state and the benefits that are conferred through that process of categorisation. I have also demonstrated the fact that Bhil Christian

political subjectivities are constrained by the discriminatory relationship between the state and rural adivasis, and that this state of affairs is not significantly altered by advocacy that takes place on behalf of Bhil Christians, but which ultimately fails to alter power inequities that exist on the ground.

Alongside this, the desire to perform Christian identity in ways that facilitate the maintenance of social ties with their community is, to an extent, rooted in their need to maintain engagement in existing social networks, which act as invaluable resources when it comes to considerations such as securing jobs, accessing benefits, and finding help at times of acute economic crisis. This is necessary as people seek to cope with the precarious livelihoods and potential scarcity that are a result of the endemic poverty experienced by adivasi communities in this region, itself a form of structural violence (Gupta, 2012). It is important to recognize, then, that despite my emphasis on Christian agency there are certain structural constraints that act on and influence processes of identity construction in this area.

However, I have also shown that while they may limit the choices available to Christians in the performance of their identities, in some cases shared experiences of poverty and structural violence can actually serve to mitigate anti-Christian violence. The fact that non-Christians continue, for the most part, to attend the weddings and functions of Christians, that often the periods of ostracism after conversion are short-lived, and that inter-religious marriages between Christians and Hindus can and do take place all suggest, I believe, that it is not just Christians who are invested in maintaining their social networks and that there are clearly similar incentives for non-Christians to do so as well. However, where this comes across most clearly is with regard to the strong link between conversion and healing. I argue that the narratives of

sickness and healing that are a feature of nearly all the testimonies I heard change the meanings attached to conversion: instead of being conceptualised predominantly as a threatening transformation from a person's rightful religion to a foreign, illegitimate one, it instead becomes a mode for achieving good health. This has the potential to make conversion to Christianity more acceptable to other members of the community, who also experience the types of suffering associated with the 'disease of poverty' (Chesnut, 2011) and thus can understand why people choose to become Christian when it proves successful in redressing this. In some cases, then, this has worked to undermine the discourses circulated by the Hindu right and to reduce conflict related to conversion.

Overall, this study has demonstrated that far from simply being passive targets of Hindu nationalist violence, studying processes of identity construction amongst Bhil Christians shows that they are actively engaged in negotiating and contesting it in various ways. This involves the assertion of both difference and similarity: drawing boundaries between Christian and Hindu, but also emphasizing a common adivasi identity. As I have shown throughout this thesis, difference is usually asserted in ways that speak to both individual and community uplift: for instance the personal agency inherent in the decision to convert, in contrast to the blind beliefs and superstitions of Hindus; their enhanced ability to pursue healed and healthy lives; and of course the ways in which Christians exhibit improving morals and values in their lifestyle choices and behaviour. These assertions of Christian identity are forms of resistance that speak not just to the cultural and direct violence perpetrated by Hindu nationalists, but also the structural violence that adivasis in this region find themselves subjected to more generally. However, it is also evident that the construction of 'same-ness' is an important feature of Christian identity here, from

their subjective understandings of themselves as Scheduled Tribe and the way in which they perceive their relationship to the local state, to the ways in which Christians seek to maintain a sense of collective identity and belonging with their communities. This is realised through the broadly inclusive and recognisable forms that their ritual practices and theology take, and through their continued engagement in the social life and networks of obligation that operate in their villages. These processes play a key role in enabling Christians to engage with and negotiate Hindu nationalist violence. By constructing their identity in these ways Christians have been able to undermine and subvert the meanings that Hindu nationalists have sought to attach to Christian identity, while at the same time fostering a strong sense of agency, assertion, and pride in the face of anti-Christian violence.

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