

Saffronisation, Flag War and Hinduisation of Adivasis in Jharkhand

Anjana Singh

Department of History, Nirmala College, Ranchi University

Abstract

The politics of symbolism with its manifestations in the assertion of Adivasi identity that had resulted in creation of separate state for Adivasis had undergone drastic changes in two decades of its formation. Land alienation, mining, development projects have had been the markers of the portrait of the modern state. Religio-cultural spaces have been discussed less in comparison to the growing studies on Maoism, mining, forest and indigeneity in Jharkhand. Transfer of political power in the democratic politics between the two leading political parties Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (the party that claims to be the voice of the Adivasis) and the Bhartiya Janta Party (The right wing Hindu dominated party) has brought the issues of saffronisation, upholding of Adivasiyat and the Hindu- Christian – Sarna identification of the Adivasis to fore. Basing this study mainly on the field work done in the Chotanagpur plateau area and collection of empirical data, the paper seeks to explore these representations through flags; that are flaunted as symbols of power by the different sections inhabiting the state. The paper further looks into the denominational politics that is transforming its character under these pressures. With the recent passage of Sarna code by the State Legislative Assembly demanding separate religious identification of the Adivasi religion, the debate has become sharper and clashes are witnessed quite often. Amidst rapidly changing religio-cultural scenario, the paper attempts to explain the politics of symbolism with a historical understanding of the region.

Introduction

The imperialist ideology has never seen India as a composite nation but as a fractured land which is under the onslaught of linguistic- cultural unification since advent of Vedic Aryans (Haimendorf: 1950: 998, Risley: 1892).¹ The brand of Oriental scholars like Ghurye (1963), Anglicist as James Mill (1817) and Anthropologist as W.H.R. Rivers (1906) adhered to the notion that Indian civilisation was consolidated by slow absorption of non Aryan groups to the Aryan Vedic culture.² While Ghurye held the Hindu religion on a high pedestal, Mill and Rivers had contrary view that often resulted in abuse for the practitioners of Hinduism. Casteism and the belief of the practitioners of Hinduism on this has given them an open field

Acknowledgement: The research and field work for the paper was done with the help of the funds provided under the major research project of University Grants Commission called **Scheme for Trans Disciplinary Research for India's Developing Economy** (STRIDE- Component 1). The title of the project is "Understanding the Impact of Hinduism and Christianity on the Language and the Culture of the Tribes: With Special Reference to Mundas and Oraons". This paper is a part of a larger study being conducted in the area. Email: anjanasinghncr@gmail.com

¹Christoph Von Furer Haimendorf. 1950. pp. 997-1011.

²Carol Upadhyya, March 2002, pp. 28-57.

for criticism in which people are mistreated in the fold of their own religion for being born into a certain caste. The subaltern Adivasis have been looked upon by this lens of mainstream Hinduism and the *Hindutva* (Hindu nationalism) based organisations as ‘backward Hindus’. Sociologists as Ghurye (1963) have made a strong case of Adivasis being untouchable Hindus. Indian anthropologists who have studied Adivasis with constructive motives as N. K Bose (1953) are also of the opinion that in India many Adivasi communities were under the influence of Hindu ideology and described them as such. A person influenced by Gandhian thought, Bose extended the idea of ‘Hindu method of tribal absorption’ even before independence in 1941.³ However, the idea that forest dwelling communities should be included in caste based Hindu framework as *shudras*⁴ and *Chandals*⁵ first emerged in ancient India between 3rd to 8th centuries CE. This idea has been studied and accepted as fact by scholars like Romila Thapar, Ram Sharan Sharma, Upinder Singh, Harbansh Mukhia, D.N Jha and the likes. These tendencies have been seen as a part of growth of feudalism in India that continued to flourish till the early medieval period. Their studies further reveal that the extension of the agencies of feudalism in the early medieval India was successful largely due to the absorption of socio-economically divided populace of the nation under one politico-religious umbrella i.e, Hinduism. There are various strands of opinion regarding Hinduism. While one school of thought views it as growth of Vedic culture, other looks upon it as modernised version of Puranic tradition. We may find scholars who argue that it is combination of idol worship with *Sanatan* tradition and for many others it is standardisation of regional variations in worship under the wider idea of one religion i.e, Hinduism. This process of absorption of Adivasis into the Hindu fold has been called ‘sanskritisation’ by scholars as M.N Srinivas (1952) and by scholars as Alfred Lyall (1896) as ‘Hinduisation’.

This process that has its beginnings in the early decades of fifth century CE has found new life and wider spread in the last quarter of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty first century. The ideology of *Hindutva*⁶ that emerged as a reaction to Muslim communalism has undergone changes since independence. The growth of BJP as a political party largely rests on the use of the ideology of *Hindutva* as its ideological base. It’s manifestations in the worship of Rama and cow protection societies⁷ are widely practised by the right wing political parties and Hindu organisations in India since the 1990s. In a continually polarised polity that is creating deep divide between the Hindus and the non-

³N.K Bose visited the Pal Lahara region of Odisha inhabited by the Juang Adivasi community and proposed this idea in Indian Science Congress in 1941. Later this process was called ‘Sanskritisation’ by Social anthropologist M.N Srinivas who looked upon Hinduization of Adivasis as inevitable process. For details read, N.K Bose. 1953. Also see. Abhijit Guha, 28th September 2016.

⁴The lowest caste in the four fold division of Aryan tradition called Varnashram is the shudras. Earlier the system was based on division of work which transformed into hereditary division with the passage of time.

⁵In the Gupta period we find another caste or the fifth varna being added to this varnashram structure called untouchables or Chandals. They did menial works, were mistreated by the society and had to live their life in lots of restrictions and discomfort.

⁶The ideology of *Hindutva* is almost a century old and emerged as a reaction to Muslim communalism. This ideology advocates that Hindustan belongs to Hindus and the people who are born in Hindustan and consider it as their fatherland.

⁷The concept of cow protection societies originated in the pre independence period as a means to bring diverse section of Hindus under one umbrella and to preach hatred against the Muslims who were looked upon as beef eaters.

Hindus, Adivasis have been at the receiving end. In the Adivasi dominated states as Odisha, Chhatisgarh and Jharkhand where Hindus are in majority; parties as Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) are increasing their presence both politically and socio-culturally and are leading the process of 'absorption/assimilation' of Adivasis into the Hindu fold.⁸ In the neighbouring states with substantial Adivasi population as Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, the popular means adopted by the party promoting the agenda of Hindutva is 'Ghar wapasi' (back to the original faith) or reconversion of Adivasis⁹ through elaborate ceremonies of Shuddhi (purification) done on mass scale. In Jharkhand, the most popular method is that the Adivasis are not converted but treated as Hindus and are made part of the religious programmes organised by these parties.

The 'religious and cultural' nationalism has become a part of the mainstream debate especially since the Hindu right wing political parties have consolidated their political positions at the national and the regional level. They are trying to bring widespread changes in the ideological makeup of the nation, by giving religion primacy over caste and absorbing larger India into its fold. This has been considered strategic by them to offset the emergence of caste as the prime mover in Indian politics after the rise of Mandal Commission Politics¹⁰ in the 1980s. Emergence of regional parties, whose winnability largely depends on making right caste equations in their region, has been the determining factor since then. Since the 1990s with the emergence of the issue of construction of Ram Mandir at Ayodhya, religion has taken centre stage and there is polarisation of political parties around this agenda. Termed earlier variously as absorption, assimilation and homogenization of the Adivasis of central, eastern and north eastern India by the anthropologists as S.C Roy, K.N Sahay and L.P Vidyarthi, this tendency has more or less been opposed by the Adivasis. They are not opposed to integration with the national mainstream politically per se but they don't agree to the notions that have been deliberately constructed around them. A misconstrued perception is that the cultural isolation and economic backwardness has led to an inferiority status amongst the Adivasis and they assume themselves of belonging to low status.¹¹ The essay argues that the notion that Adivasis are suffering from a distinct inferiority complex especially in religious affairs is far from reality and their belief in their ancestral faith has kept them rooted to it through ages against all odds. The consolidation around their religiosity and cultural distinctiveness has been slow, but this has only gained momentum since the Jharkhand movement started for creation of separate state for the Adivasis. Furthermore, the paper argues that the changing realities have generated an increased awareness amongst them

⁸Amit Mitra & Nitya Rao. 2021.

⁹Manjari Katju. 2015.

¹⁰B.P Mandal headed Mandal commission was constituted in 1979 by Janata Party government led by PM Morarji Desai to give its report on Backward classes and measures to improve their lot. The commission recommended extending the idea of 'Reservation' which was previously enjoyed by Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to the Other Backward Castes of India. Attempts at implementing these provisions undertaken by PM V.P Singh led to huge uproar by the upper castes in India and polarisation of castes in India. The politics has not left its sheen even to the present day.

¹¹Surajit Sinha.1990.

and in recent times Adivasis are not easily wooed either by Hinduism and Christianity; rather they are celebrating their cultural distinctiveness with more vigour and strength.

The article is divided into three parts. The first part tends to explore the influence of Hinduism and Christianity on the Adivasis of Jharkhand since the historical periods. This section would give an account of how Adivasis were converted into Christianity in large numbers during the British period. The section also deals with the attempts at redressal of land issues and spread of education amongst the Adivasis as the major tools for persuading them for conversion into Christianity in the colonial period. Post-independence the democratic politics slowly based itself on the 'politics of identity' in which the Adivasis of central and eastern India and that of the North Eastern states resorted to upholding their ancestral identity and grouped themselves together by mitigating the intra tribal line of differences in following their faith. A case in point is that of the Donyi-Polo movement¹² in Arunachal Pradesh and Sarna movement in Jharkhand that aims at bringing the diverse sections of the Adivasis under one religious umbrella by institutionalising their ancestral faith and coding their practices.

The Second section explores the increasing saffronisation¹³ of the Adivasis in Jharkhand. Saffron is a colour that shows renunciation in Hinduism and is also associated with Buddhism and even Sikhs, who look upon it as a colour of sacrifice. Presence of saffron in tricolour in independent India has made it the colour of nationalism; lately this colour has been related to refer right wing Hindu political parties in political circles. The politics of India after the 1990s has experienced the rise of right wing Hindu parties. These parties have been using Hindutva ideology by embracing the sections on the margins into its fold as low caste Hindus. There is a distinct Hinduisation drive where many political and cultural parties are trying to appropriate the Adivasis as Hindus. The essay throws light on some of these tendencies through the study of Adivasi- *Sadan* (backward castes Hindus claiming to be *Moolvasi* or original inhabitants of the state) relationship and how it is being redefined in the wake of aggressive Hinduisation, mob lynching, massive construction of temples, flags and pictorial representations in Adivasi spaces and classifying them as Hindu. Third section analyses the reaction of the Adivasis to these conversion/categorization drives in the politics of symbolism in Jharkhand. In this backdrop, as the symbols of identity, flags have been flaunted in a big way both by the Hindus and Sarna Adivasis. This has been evident in celebration of religious festivals in town and villages. The conclusive section sums up the activities of right wing parties in Jharkhand, Odisha and Chhatisgarh and discusses the effect of religious celebrations and upholding of cultural symbols in the socio-religious map of Jharkhand.

Colonial Construction of the Adivasis and their religion

Colonial construction of the British about the Adivasis and their religion changed according to the needs of their imperialist designs. For a very long time since the British occupied

¹²For more on this see. Sarit Kumar Chaudhuri, 2013.

¹³Saffronisation here is used primarily to discuss the political ideology of right wing parties, who have been using saffron colour as a symbol to extend their idea.

Bengal, they visualised Adivasis as ‘savages’, ‘pests’ and ‘lowest of the Hindoos’.¹⁴ There was absence of tribal policies regarding the group who were looked upon as primitive aborigines practising animism or were the lowest in the caste hierarchy prevalent amongst the Hindus. Dasgupta (2019: 108) Devalle (1992: 50), Sen (2018:23-27) argue that the construction of Adivasis as ‘ethnic’ and ‘primitive’ savages initially aimed at their marginalization and therefore no specific policy for them was framed in this period. Later when Christian missionaries started penetrating the area with the aim of proselytisation, they were looked as a group distinct from mainstream Hindus and the Muslims and victims of their neglect (Horo: 1976: 155-292). Colonial records of the period represent them as communities in relative isolation, excluded from the culture and civilization of the mainstream and practising subsistence economy. This gave the colonialists a perfect alibi to practise their ‘culturization’ drive by Christianising them and extending their imperialist ideology of ‘white man’s burden’.

Christianisation as defined by imperialist scholars as Mill (1817), Coupland (2006: 1025-54), Haimendorf (1950), was an attempt by the white Europeans to civilize the animists and bring the light of divine blessing to them.¹⁵ Interestingly, Bihar, a state that included Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana of present Jharkhand, saw opening of first Christian mission in 1745 in Bettiah. Exactly, a century after this the Adivasi areas became the zone of activity for Christian missions, largely because European attempts at Christianising caste Hindus did not succeed. Christoph Von Furer-Haimendorf (1950) is of the opinion that despite a millennia of Hindu dominance Adivasis (he calls them aborigines) were not completely swayed by the Hindu religion and maintained their social- cultural distinctiveness even in the colonial period. This was largely because the Hindus of ancient India had created barriers on intermarriages and interdining and they did not allow the Adivasis to be a part of their culture and religion. This helped the Adivasis in retaining their cultural and religious distinctiveness. Nationalist historians believes that colonialist constructed an image of primitiveness of the Adivasis in India and portrayed them as communities that needed ‘civilizing missions’ to suit their requirements. The anthropologists and ethnographers, who studied them further, developed the image of Adivasis as ethnic groups. This notion largely upholds that wherever Adivasis were naive, dwellers of the land and the forests and wherever they were exposed to economic penetration by an advanced population it has resulted in their land alienation (Haimendorf: 1950: 1006).

Anthropologist like K N Sahay (1998), who lived a lifetime in the Chotanagpur region, holds that the major Adivasi communities of the area as Santhals, Oraons and Mundas have taken to settled agriculture long back and they have been exposed to outside influences as Hinduism. His studies on the shrines of Chotanagpur assert that Hinduism had made deep

¹⁴E T Dalton (1872) and T.R. Metcalf (1995) talks about Adivasi issues as the matter of law and order. These issues are neither dealt sensitively nor are they looked upon as ethnographic matter, which later becomes essential part of their narrative. It is assumed that these issues need to be tackled through feudatory chiefs and indirect rule. British refrained from making any policy about them till they discovered the mineral and forest resources of the area and started exploiting them for the best of their use.

¹⁵Interestingly, the first Christian mission to enter the region was a German mission named Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Society in 1845, The Santhal Mission of Northern Churches (1866) Roman Catholic Mission in 1868 and so on. For more on this see. Jose Kalapura , 2014.

inroads inside the land and its influences can be seen in Adivasi lifestyles and habits.¹⁶ . It is also believed that many Adivasi communities that settled in the area as Mundas, Oraons, Santhals and others have chosen this as their homeland at different points of time. In the process of their settlement in Jharkhand, they have left undistinguishable impacts on the lives of each other.

The references to the presence of these cultural and religious symbols can be seen in colonial ethnography. These records which are in the form of ethnographic reports, remembrances,, administrative papers and village records contains rich references to the presence of Hindu shrines, idols and cultural symbols. This persuaded colonialist as Dalton (1873), Risley(1892), O'Malley(1938) to call them 'Hinduized tribe'. As per the estimate of Dalton (1872: 169), nine Adivasi communities, namely Kharwar, Chero, Parhaiya, Malpaharia, Binjhia, Bedia, Bhumij, Bathudi and Kisan, had been very close to the Hindus and could be called Hinduised Adivasis. Mundas, Santhals, Oraons and Kharias as well appear to be influenced by Hinduism. The process of Hinduisation of the Adivasis has been described by them to be swift and gradual. The close association of the Adivasis with the Hindu culture was observed largely due to the settlement of lower castes Hindu inhabitants like Mahto, Gwala, Ghasi and other castes. These castes often performed those functions that were not carried by the Adivasis. The cultural and religious exchanges that followed as a result of centuries of co-habitation resulted in many Adivasis considering themselves as Hindus as well as practitioners of their ancestral faith. This is manifest in the Adivasi areas of Jharkhand, where nature and ancestral worship as well as visiting the shrines go hand in hand. Furthermore, Adivasis have adopted many cultural symbols of the Hindus as putting vermilion, tying sacred thread, indigenised Hindu festivals and celebrating them and the likes. In many areas, they have transformed their *Killi* (Gotras/clan) into *Gotras* (as believed by the Hindus) and imitated Hindu form of lifestyle.¹⁷

The issues of categorization of Adivasis as Hindus, Christians and Sarna are therefore an outcome of present political development, where each section is trying to increase its democratic might. Adivasi religion which is labelled as 'Adi Dharam' by Ram Dayal Munda and is also called Sarna dharma in Jharkhand is practised by the largest percentage of the Adivasis in the state. It is this population that has been the prime object of the proselytisation activities of Christian missionaries and absorptive tendencies of Hindu organisations. In past three decades, the attempts at Hinduisation and saffronisation of the Adivasis of Central India in general and Jharkhand in particular have acquired a place in the national debate where political parties are looking upon them as the support base in the democratic politics. The politics of Hindu nationalism attempts to fit Adivasis in their politico- ideological framework where they are not just indigenous but hinduised groups as well.

¹⁶See . K.N Sahay. 1975.

¹⁷Dr. Ram Dayal Munda Tribal Welfare Research Institute, Ranchi, Jharkhand; a government organisation that looks into the affairs of the Adivasis and conducts study on their language, culture, history, welfare, law, medicine, art, craft, music and dance frequently gets application for identifying certain groups as being Adivasis or not. In their attempts to verify it, they monitor the cultural and religious behaviour of the community. In my field work that spreads across the districts of Ranchi, Gumla, Lohardaggaa, Khunti and Latehar from March 2020 and is ongoing, I have come across several symbols that can commonly belong to Adivasis as well as Hindus.

Hindu Nationalism and the Adivasis

The word 'Hindoo' was first used by Raja Ram Mohun Roy in 1816, later Alexander Duff used this term frequently from 1829, Max Muller in 1858 and Monier- Monier Williams in 1877. In the second half of nineteenth century this word was frequently used by the British.¹⁸ The term 'Hindu Rashtra' (nation for Hindus) appeared in 1924 when Swami Shajananda, an Arya Samaj leader, described it in a pamphlet.¹⁹ This concept was venerated in pre-partition politics when the concept of a 'Hindu Rashtra' (Hindu nation) as opposed to a 'Muslim Rashtra' (Muslim nation) emerged gradually. The idea became clearer with the coinage of word 'Hindutva' by V.D Savarkar, a Hindu ideologue. He wrote a book '*Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*' in 1923, which became the charter of Hindu nationalism. Jaffrelot (2007: 5) observes that this ideology assumes that Hinduism defines national identity in India. Indian culture is Hindu culture and the minorities would be assimilated into it if they pay allegiance to its symbols. While Bhargava (2003: 12) believes that the key aspect of Hindu nationalism is a conservative, upper-caste ultra-traditionalism, driven by the anxiety to preserve a beleaguered cultural and social order. He describes Hindu nationalism as fundamentalists, traditionalists, anti- modernists and right wing conservative thought.

This ideology is based on hatred for the Muslims and Christians and assumes that they are responsible for conversion of Hindus in India. Christianity and their organisations being strong in the Adivasi areas since the colonial period have garnered the interest of organisations as Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in these areas since independence. RSS considers Adivasis as *Vanvasi* (forest dwellers) as they do not accept them as indigenous people. Their ideological standpoint is that 'Aryans' are the original inhabitants who drove away the Adivasis or conquered them.²⁰ In the colonial period, organisations as Hindu Sabha, Arya Samaj, Divine light mission, Academy of Indian culture and others, tried to work with the Adivasis of Jharkhand and bring them under their influence, but their attempt was aimed more at assimilation and not proselytisation of the kind practised by the Christian missionaries.²¹ An organised attempt by RSS to counter the activities of the Christian missionaries in the Adivasi areas started since 1952 when a movement Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA- Centre for Tribal Welfare) began in Adivasi areas with headquarters in Maharashtra.

The idea developed by the ilk of Shraddhanand, Hegdewar, Golwalkar, Savarkar, Upadhyaya²² and the likes is that the Hindus are in danger because of the growth of the

¹⁸Arpita Mitra, 2019. p.2.

¹⁹Gyanendra Pandey, 1991, pp. 2997-3001, 3003-3005, 3008-3009.

²⁰Christophe Jaffrelot, 2007. p.18.

²¹S. A Rizvi, 2014, 139-156. He attempts to throw light on the activities of the local zamindars and the Rajas, who tried to counter the activities of the Christian missionaries by giving land, support and respect to these Hindu organisations that came to work in their area.

²² Swami Shraddhanand was an Arya Samajist who believed in the making of the Hindu nation and therefore he formalised the concept of *Shuddhi*(purification) to reconvert people into the fold of Hinduism and *Sangathan*(organisation) to develop the bonds of unity amongst the diversified Hindu groups. K.B Hegdewar founded RSS in Nagpur in 1925 for creation of a Hindu Rashtra. V.D Savarkar is a right wing leader who developed the ideology of *Hindutva* and also played an important part in the freedom struggle by creating awareness about the glorious past of the Hindus and gave numerous sacrifices. M S Golwalkar succeeded Hegdewar as the head of the RSS in 1940 and gave an extremist and rigid form to the ideology of Hindu

Muslims and the Christians. Savarkar saw Adivasis as Hindus who were not yet fully "integrated" with the mainstream (Keer: 2012: 77). As per his discourse, the Adivasis who have been converted to Christianity have been denationalized and therefore Hindu organisations need to bring them back to their fold. Later, another organisation the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) came up in 1964. The organisation created by RSS leaders M.S Golwalkar and S. S Apte aimed to protect the Hindu Dharma by doing social service and building and renovating Hindu temples. Golwalkar's labelling of Hinduism as national and other religions as non-national, and Savarkar's discourse of the denationalization of Adivasis by conversion to Christianity have been continuously elaborated by the VHP. It is opposed to cow slaughter and caste system as well. VHP insists that the forceful conversion of the Adivasis must precede their actual reconversion. Antagonism to Christianity has been their staple agenda in Adivasi dominated states of central India. This had a double advantage of portraying Christians as westerners and therefore oppressors and also restricting 'outside influences' in the era of globalisation.

Froerer (2006) argues that since the 1990s the politics of the Hindu Right wing organisations in the Adivasi dominated states of India has largely revolved around two facts. First, was to reveal Adivasis their 'true Hindu identity' and second, to counter the Christians through aggressive politics bordering on violent confrontation and starting propaganda against them. Initially, they attempted to do this by their tried and tested formula of raising sentiments in favour of cow protection and labelling the Christians together with Muslims as beef eaters. This tendency has its reverberations in the politics of the partition era. These cashed on the 'Gau Rakshini Sabhas' (cow protection association) which developed conservative strand of Hinduism. However, this agenda had to be underplayed in the Adivasi dominated states due to some basic dietary habits.

The issue of cow protection and anti-beef eating propaganda that woos the caste Hindus cannot be very successful amongst the Adivasis of Jharkhand. In Jharkhand, the predominant Adivasi population are meat eaters and relishes it in all forms. A quick ride to any village in Jharkhand would not only expose a visitor to the Adivasi population but also to the cattle population that is there in abundance. However, these cattle wealth is of inferior breed and does not give sufficient milk. Adivasis in Jharkhand are neither fond of milk based sweets nor milk nor it's by products as ghee, curd and cheese. These cow and oxen are therefore not sustaining a milk based economy but an economy based on flesh. The meat of these cattle fetches a good price to the poor farmers living on subsistence farming. This flesh forms an important dietary item for the Adivasis along with *Handia* (rice beer). Adivasi life in Jharkhand revolves around song, dance, *Handia* and various kinds of meat. So, it was necessary to look for other agendas and proper support groups that would help the organisations at the grass root level.

This necessity gave importance to the Hindu *Sadan* castes, also projected as the *Moolvasi*(original inhabitants) in the state politics. There is fairly large number of Hindu

nationalism. Deendayal Upadhyaya gave political form to this ideology and was instrumental in the formation of the political party Jana Sangha, which remained opposed to the ideology of Congress and Nehru.

settlers who have been living with the Adivasis for a fairly long time known as 'Sadans'.²³ The population and its closeness with the Adivasis in the villages had made Hinduism a practise which was known to them and commanded influence since ages. Worship of *Mahadeva*, *Burha Mahadeva*, *Manda Puja* (worship of Mahadeva or Shiva in various forms) and worshipping local deities in *deoris* (small temples) has been in practise in the region, amongst the Adivasis since ages. The Hindutva politics that has grown across the country through its veneration of Lord Rama tried to encapsulate it in the villages of Jharkhand through these cultural symbols known to the Adivasis. Saffron flags, Mahaviri Patakas and portrayal of Lord Hanuman as the son of the soil of Jharkhand²⁴ helped them in building this rhetoric. Reorientation of this radical version of Hindu nationalism as demanded by electoral politics however became necessary.

Saffronisation, Flag war and Adivasi responses

The debate of appropriating Adivasis into the fold of Hinduism or recognising their separate religious and cultural existence took a turn in the last decade of the twentieth century. The idea of Adivasiyat started shaping up, decimating the line of inter-Adivasi differences and upholding the traits of common identification. In Jharkhand where there are 32 Adivasi communities recognised by the state, each Adivasi community has its own social and cultural distinctiveness. As the decade of 1990s experienced solidification of Jharkhandi identity on the basis of Adivasiyat, the communities came together flouting their line of difference. In this quest of building a strong movement for separate statehood in which Adivasi would be the centre of politico-administrative structure cultural symbols that were associated with the Adivasi communities were highlighted. White flags with red stripes in a triangular shape emerged in this period. Interestingly, the shape of the flag was triangular as is the shape of religious flags of Hindus, mainly saffron in colour.

Adivasis, especially Oraons, have had a tradition of having a village flags and *Parha* flags that acted as emblems of a village or *Parha* in *Jatras* or local fairs (Roy: 2012: 230). These flags called *Chandi Jhanda* were installed in the *Pahan's* (priest) house during Sarhul and were stored in a bamboo box round the year (ibid: 196). These flags bore different symbols and were of different colours. The red striped white flag much like their songs, dances and *Handia*

²³ Normally they can be labelled as OBC (other backward castes) and Scheduled caste Hindus as per the categorization of Hindus in the constitution of India. These includes the castes as Yadavas, Mahtos, Kurmis Saws, Teli, Lohra, Sundis and others.

²⁴ Aanjan is a small village about 18 km away from Gumla via Toto. The name of the village has been derived from the name of goddess Anjani, mother of Mahavira Hanuman. Anjani cave is at 4 km from the village upon a hill. Here mother Anjani used to live. There is an idol of mother Anjani with Hanuman in her lap near Anjani Gufa (cave). It is known as the birth place of Mahavira Hanuman. <https://gumla.nic.in/tourist-place/anjan/>



Fig 1: Sarna Flags

(rice beer) became a cultural symbol of their identity of late. The Adivasis who are nature worshippers are using these flags as their cultural symbols.

Since the formation of the state, the entire idea of religion and its outlook has undergone change in Jharkhand. The rise of BJP genre of saffron politics is an attempt to bring religion in the mainstream of political debate. ‘Jai Shree Rama’ (Hail, Lord Rama) is the most repeated slogan of the times. Ram Mandir issue and the politics of saffronisation have made it politically the most repeated slogan in Bengal, U.P, Bihar, Karnataka, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand especially after BJP won the Parliamentary elections of 2014. This strong all-India wave generated by the right wing organisations around devotion for Lord Shree Rama that centers around Ram temple at Ayodhya, has resulted in the creation of many *Mahavira Nyasa Samiti*, *Mahavira Mandal*, *Mahavira Akharas* in Jharkhand, especially in the area under research.²⁵ New techniques are being tried to galvanise people into a solid group that moves in the name of Shree Ram and can be later used politically to support the party that is building the Ram temple at Ayodhya. Since 1984, VHP has raised its slogan of protection of sacred sites related to Ramayana on its agenda and polarisation of Hindus has started in which lord Rama has become the epitome on which the entire narrative of Hindutva rests.

Jharkhand with its potential importance of being politically BJP ruled state, as has been the case for many years since its formation, has become a field of heightened activity for VHP and RSS. Villages of even interior areas of Jharkhand have witnessed construction of new temples of Lord Hanuman, often depicted in fiery and furious forms nowadays; whereas a

²⁵The area under research includes Burhmu, Namkum, Argora, Kanke, and associated places of Ranchi district, Mahuadanr, Garu, Kottam of Latehar district, Arki and Khunti block of Khunti district and areas of Gumla district.

few years back he was depicted as benevolent and soft, being on his knees in the service of the lord Rama. It is assumed that worship of Hanuman would be more appealing for the Adivasis in the state for two reasons. First is that he is viewed as 'primitive tribal'. Second being that the entire logic of Hindutva since 1984 is based on veneration of Rama and Hanuman has been portrayed as the subordinate of lord Rama whose worship would bring prosperity and cure the disease. Cultural imagery of mainstream Hinduism therefore can easily fit the Adivasis in the brackets of subordinates and *Rambhakt*s (devotees of Rama).²⁶ It is therefore not an aberration that Adivasi areas with substantial Sadan population celebrate Ramnavami (festival of birthday of Lord Rama in the month of April) with much fanfare and gaiety. There are places in the local markets of a block headquarter or a big village market as that of Sosai, Umedanda, Khunti, Latehar, Mahuadanr and others which is kept for meeting place of *Mahaviri Patakas* (flags of Hanuman) of various *Akharas* (traditional weapon training and practise center). These flags are of different sizes but in the shape of a triangle generally red, yellow and saffron in colour with the image of Hanuman patch worked on it and 'Jai Shree Ram' written on it. Meanwhile, the spaces around becomes witness to the flag war.



Fig. 2 Ramnavami celebration with Mahaviri Patakas

Flags have been intrinsic part of observation of Hinduism and Sarnaism in Jharkhand. Incidentally, the two biggest festivals of the state i.e, Ram Navami of the Hindus and Sarhul of the Adivasis are celebrated close to each other largely in the month of April. Both these festivals are marked by huge display of strength on streets of villages and towns alike. Initially, the attempt of the Hindus was to display their strength *vis-a-vis* Muslims, in response to the huge processions during Muharram in Jharkhand in which they carry *Tazias*

²⁶While scholars have been talking about this phenomenon during my field visits to many districts of Jharkhand as Ranchi, Khunti, Gumla, Latehar, Simdega and Hazaribagh I witnessed that the upcoming temples are majorly dedicated to Hanuman in Adivasi areas and the adivasis of the areas had stories to narrate of how their health and evil eye on their family members were cured by the blessings of Hanuman once they started worshipping him.

(a replica of the tomb of Husain, the martyred grandson of Muhammad) together with huge green flags with white star and crescent moon and display their traditional weaponry and skills. As, the politics of identity consciousness unfolded with the demand of creation of a separate state of Jharkhand on the basis of Adivasi identity, celebration of Sarhul has become a big affair. The magnitude, enthusiasm and display of strength by the Adivasis have been increasing with every passing year as if to show their strength to the mainstream faiths and challenge the stereotypical portrayal of their religion. The Adivasis gather in large numbers and dance to the accompaniments of *Dhol*, *Mandar*, *Narsingha*, *Baja* (drums and musical instruments) and others. Dance and songs fills the atmosphere as does the flags the skyline. Many Adivasi groups from different parts of the region come in their fineries, musical instruments and dancing groups to join the procession. A huge procession is taken out from different parts of the state capital of Ranchi in which the dancers take hand in hand and fill the main streets with their song, joy and huge sarana flags. The streets are strewn with these sarana flags hanging from all poles, cods, rope and billboards close to Sarhul. Political parties, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian religious organisations, Adivasi social-cultural organisations extends a helping hand by providing water, snacks, medical help and all kinds of assistance. The occasion becomes a huge event with Adivasis attempting to bring the question of upholding their Adivasiyat. The miniature version of this kind of procession is carried out at many towns and block towns of the Chotanagpur plateau. In this three dimensional contestation of might, flags that were once a part of Adivasi culture for a long time have become a weapon of identity assertion through cultural symbolism.

A section of the Hindu majority residing in the state quickly responds to this by upholding a more gala procession during Ramnavami. To make the celebrations a big event of display of strength, the preparations of the Hindus starts much in advance. *Mangalwari Jhanda* (Tuesday flags) are taken out in week preceding Ramnavami in which weapon strength is displayed around the Akhara and new *Mahaviri Pataka* is installed. Ram bhakts take out procession from different Akharas that get active in this period. These Akharas functions partially from the *chanda* (subscription) collected from the devotees, but largely from the support of right wing political parties and religio-cultural organisations. These Akharas organise giant pujas from donations by political leaders especially of right wing Hindu parties and businessmen who support them. They decorate Mahavira Hanuman and Ram Mandirs and put many flags all around their locality and walk in form of a massive crowd carrying many huge, big and small flags bearing the image of Mahavira Hanuman often in saffron and yellow colour. These flags are sometimes 50-100 meter long and the poles are as high as 30 feet to 100 feet. These flags are taken out in form of procession throughout the main street of the towns and villages. In the case of Burhmu block of Ranchi district, the area under research, the flags and processions of 84 Mauja meets at Mahavira temple, Indwataand, Umedanda. Umedanda is one of the six villages mentioned in the folk songs of Adivasis from which the Mundas entered Chotanagpur. The area now has fairly large number of lower caste

Hindus or Sadans, Oraons, Mundas and other Adivasi communities.²⁷ In these processions, Adivasis also participate with great enthusiasm.



Fig. 3 Saffron flag with the National Flag

As the identity politics is gaining strength amongst the Adivasis in Jharkhand especially in post state formation public life the assertion of Adivasi identity can be seen clearly. The Adivasis of the state also leave no stone unturned to display their strength during Sarhul. Following closely the different kinds of flags that are there in Hinduism, the period has witnessed Sarna religion²⁸ being symbolised by red and white coloured striped flag. The Oraon *Pahans* (Sarna priests) say that the red colour of the flag symbolises bravery and the white colour symbolises peace. The interpretation of the Pahans is that the Adivasis are peace loving people and they live in tandem with nature but once anybody tries to harm them or disturb their peace they can be fierce warriors and challenge the might of anyone concerned. The celebration of Sarhul has therefore emerged as a huge occasion of display of strength in the state. Close to the festival when rituals as crab hunting, fishing and other rituals²⁹ starts in the villages of Chotanagpur in the week preceding the festival, in the urban centres red and

²⁷ Umedanda village has 25.41 % Scheduled Tribes and 11.50 % Scheduled castes and the remaining population consists of primarily Sadans according to 2011 census.
<http://www.onefivenine.com/india/villages/Ranchi/Burmu/Umedanda>

²⁸ The word Sarna Dharam to denote the ancient religion of the Adivasis of Chotanagpur was accepted at a conference of Adivasis organised at Chaibasa in 1932. For details see. Mathew Areeparampil, 2002, p.218-219.

²⁹ The rituals of crab hunting, fish hunting, collecting Mahua and other are intrinsic part of the festival and are carried out by the Adivasis with slight variations. For more on these rituals see. S.C Roy, 2012. Oraon: Religion and Custom, New Delhi, Gyan Publishing House.

white flag of the Sarna fills the street. The phenomenon is getting stronger with each passing year and what was once organised only in the state capital of Ranchi, is now witnessed in each district and block headquarters of the state. With every passing year, the flag posts are getting higher and the flags bigger.

Thomas Hansen (2001) believes that the veneration of Rama has been utilised by the right wing political organizations to boost the religious sensitivity of the Hindus in India.³⁰ Rajeev Bhargava (2003) argues that one of the reasons for the Hinduization drive is the new found money brought by the neo liberal economy in the twenty first century to both rural and urban India.³¹ This has been one of the reasons for the new trend but there are more reasons to it as satellite revolution, mobile phones, strengthening of democracy, newer ideas for polarisation of people, economic strength and politics of identity and better understanding of religion. What was visible for Hindus in the last decade of the twentieth century and first two decades of twenty first century became true for redefining Adivasi identities post formation of Jharkhand in 2000. Scholars as Stephen Fuchs (1992), Singh (1992), Heredia (2002) and others believe that the process of integration is better suited as the Adivasi societies cannot be kept away from the development and the changes induced therein for a long time. In this process, they are bound to get influenced by the mainstream forces. However, in this contestation of cultural symbolism and assertion of identity, flags have become the most visible and intrinsic element of new cultural realization in Jharkhand.

Conclusion

Above pages have sought to unfold some trends in the public domain of Jharkhand. Religious organisations connected to Hinduism as well as Christianity have been active in the Adivasi areas of Jharkhand. If colonial period was the era of conversion of Adivasis to Christianity, these are the period of absorption of Adivasis into Hinduism and Adivasi assertion around Sarnaism. In the complex politics of conversion, assimilation and assertion of Adivasi identity there are many players. Religious organisations, political parties, non-governmental organisations and Adivasi leaders in the villages, blocks and province act as catalysts in this process. What was once an open field for Christian missionaries in the colonial period to impress Adivasis with their work, support and ideology and get converts is getting challenged from within the ranks of the Adivasis. The demand of Sarna code for identifying the religion of Adivasis as a separate religion is testimony of this assertion. While for almost half a century after independence Congress (I) has more or less treated the Adivasis as semi-hinduised tribes the saffron brigade led by BJP has politically depicted Adivasis as already either disintegrated or backward Hindus. There appears to be an attempt by political parties to augment the numbers in the politics that is trying to bring religion rather than caste as the main agenda that drives politics in India. Hindutva politics is part of this phenomenon. Despite the fact that there are a number of Adivasis who do consider

³⁰Thomas B. Hansen, 2001, p. 174.

³¹Rajeev Bhargava, 2003, pp. 11-17.

themselves as Hindus, there is far greater number of Adivasis who consider themselves as belonging to the Sarna faith. The BJP in Jharkhand believes that Adivasis are Hindus anyway so there is no need for organisations such as the Vanvasi Kalyan Sangh to convert them.³² The RSS sees them as vanvasis or backward Hindus who need to be reformed, and not converted.³³ In this religiously polarised atmosphere the issues of the Adivasis have emerged increasingly more important in public domain.

The stereotypical imagination of Adivasis as ‘lesser’ community who are under the influence of ‘greater’ religions as Hinduism and Christianity and are prone to conversion gets challenged by the scholars who have in depth idea of the Adivasi socio-cultural practices. Joseph Bara (1997: 785) elucidates that the Adivasis have been exposed to the cultural influences since ancient period³⁴ and yet have been able to maintain their cultural vitality against all odds. This has been so because of the process of their internalisation through acceptance and use of all these influences as per their convenience. This has helped them to retain their basic cultural ethos and accept these religions in their own way.³⁵ The notion of inferiority was so deeply imposed on the Adivasis that till late the Adivasis presented themselves as backward and deprived classes before government commissions. This tendency was helpful for the Christian missionaries in the colonial period but in the contemporary period it is helping the parties promoting the idea of Hindutva.

Formation of Mahavira Mandals, display of flags and transforming the basic nature of celebration of festivals and transforming them into occasions for display of strength is a part of this process. This however is not unchallenged and the newly acquired economic power by the Adivasis due to reservation in government jobs and the increase in the percentage of educated Adivasis has resulted in their modernisation and upliftment. This is evident in the flag wars, growing magnitude of Sarhul-Karma celebration and increasing voices raised by the Adivasis to protect their religious spaces or *Sarna sthals*. In the politics of religion and cultural symbolism in the state, Adivasis have ceased to be sleeping partners but have emerged as conscious defenders of their cultural ethos. Upholding cultural symbols and mitigating intra- Adivasi divisive lines are new realities of the changing world. Saffronisation

³²*Hindustan Times*, Delhi, 22 Jan. 1996.

³³Ghanshyam Shah.1999, pp.312-318.

³⁴Recent archaeological excavations carried out at Benisagar, Hazaribagh, Sahebganj, Giridih and other places reveals that the region was under strong influence of Jainism and Buddhism in the ancient period. Hinduism was also prevalent and there are many sights in Jharkhand that can be related to the story of Ramayana. For example-birth place of Lord Hanuman is believed to be Aanjan Dham in Gumla district of Jharkhand, however there are similar claims made for them in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka and many other places as well. Similarly, according to Ramayana Lord Parshuram met Lord Rama, both incarnations of Lord Vishnu; during the svayamvara ceremony of Sita. It was then Lord Parshuram decided to throw his weapons and return to baikunth, the abode of Lord Vishnu. The weapons that he dropped are found at Tanginath in Gumla district of Jharkhand. Interestingly, this place has hundreds of Shiva Lingas scattered on the mountains and the iron weapons that are in the shade of the tree and has been exposed to water, sunlight, moisture and humidity have not rusted. This is a place surrounded on all sides by Adivasis who practise Sarnaism but also worship shivalingas in true Hindu fashion and tradition.

³⁵Joseph Bara, 1997, pp. 785-790.

and the assertion of Adivasiyat are the reflections of these tendencies that are transforming the Adivasidom³⁶ at the grass root level.

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³⁶ Adivasidom is an idea extended by the popular Adivasi leader Jaipal Singh Munda. He discusses at creating a state/ kingdom where Adivasis are dominant. For more on this see. A.K Pankaj, 2017.

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