

MOBILIZATION THROUGH SOCIAL WELFARE: THE ROLE OF RAJASTHAN VANVASI KALYAN PARISHAD

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Abstract

*Social welfare provisions have been used by the Indian state since independence to gain legitimacy amongst the masses. They constitute an important electoral strategy for political parties. It is in this context, the political strategy of **Mobilization Through Social Welfare** used by the Sangh Parivar has been discussed in this paper in the context of Rajasthan. The focus of this paper mainly rests on three main issues: the use of social welfare as a political strategy by the Sangh Parivar; the functioning of the Rajasthan Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad (RVKP) with a special focus on Rajasthan; and finally usage of the politics of violence and the politicization of the welfare strategy to spread the ideology of Hindutva.*

Keywords: Social Welfare RVKP Caste Tribal victimhood Mobilization

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Background

The politics of identity is not new to India. Post-independence, since the days of Congress party rule, the element of identity dominated the domestic politics of the country. However since the late 1960s, early 1970s and late 1980s such a political framework showed signs of crack. During this phase, political parties began to enunciate the socially entrenched identities of society.

On one hand, the assertive politics of the Dalits and the backward castes evolved a new facet of caste politics, which challenged the dominant discourse of Indian politics. On the other hand, the politics of religion too gained widespread expression in Indian politics during this phase.

The emergence of the multiparty system in India can be identified as a manifestation of the decline of Rajni Kothari's 'Congress System'. However the concept of 'multi-polarity' here, goes much beyond the usage of the term in common parlance i.e. the presence of a number of political parties in the political sphere. Here the term refers to the emergence of the Sangh Parivar as a viable alternative to the Congress party. Such an event owed its origin the weakening of the Congress and crisis of Secularism.

Social welfare provisions have been used by the Indian state since independence to gain legitimacy amongst the masses. They constitute an important electoral strategy for political parties. Welfare services and the mechanism through which they do so provide a stage, a network and a team of activists to propagate their ideology or policy to the targeted section of population. The political parties which are basically elites base are generally employed the strategy of welfare to gain the support of unprivileged section of society. Hindu right movement is basically movement of upper strata of the north and central Indian society. Since its origin, it is dominated and driven by higher caste people of society. Here higher caste is also in the privileged position in Indian political and economic system because caste in India is not only a division of labour it is also, as B.R.Ambedkar called, 'division of laborer'.

The ideology and policy platform of the Sangh Parivar led observers of Indian politics to conclude that it would never be able to expand its profile beyond upper caste, middle class voters. Indeed the BJP came to be referred to as the 'Brahmin-Bania' party of India.¹ However, recent electoral evidence suggest several instances of counterintuitive support for the BJP from

two of India's most marginalized communities: Dalits and Adivasis. These recent inroads marked a relatively unnoticed, but fundamental puzzle in Indian politics: why were many of the country's most subjugated citizens voting for the party of its most privileged?

The BJP has tried to expand its support base among lower strata of Hindus without losing elite class's support. This strategy is based on identity driven mobilization. BJP has used sectarian mobilization in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Social services provided by grassroots supporters of the BJP were crucial in developing unexpected pockets of lower caste support for the party. From the perspective of religious identities, the BJP viewed lower caste as falling within its own 'in-group' of Hindus (Illiah, 1996). The BJP has tried to emerge as an all India level party by expanding its support base in all section of Hindu society. politically competitive environment has motivated BJP to gain support of lower strata of Hindu society.

In the beginning Sangh Parivar has adopted political methods to seek more favourable space among Dalits and Adivasis but this strategy did not get enough response. So they have turned their strategy towards social services. They have followed alike strategies as missionaries have already tested in India. In the context of Sangh Parivar, one thing should be noticed that the actual service providers themselves were not electoral pragmatists but were activist ideologues working for non-electoral wings of the movement. Sangh Parivar saw their goals as broader than simply winning elections.

The main service arm of Sangh Parivar is the *Vanvashi Kalyan Ashram* (VKA). The VKA was founded in 1952, Jashpur, situated in northern Chhattisgarh. Its headquarter is now situated in Jashpur and is functional in all the states of India. It is reportedly working across 240 tribal communities in 299 districts, and in 53,750 villages through 12,378 programs.ⁱⁱ

It is in this background, the new political strategy of **Mobilization Through Social Welfare** used by the Sangh Parivar has been discussed in this paper in the context of Rajasthan. The focus of this paper would mainly rest on three main issues: the use of social welfare as a political strategy by the Sangh Parivar; the functioning of the Rajasthan Vanvashi Kalyan Parishad (RVKP) with a special focus on Rajasthan; and finally usage of the politics of violence and the politicization of the welfare strategy to spread the ideology of Hindutva.

Rajasthan Vanvashi Kalyan Parishad : A Case Study:-

The RVKP is a state level voluntary organizational unit of Vanvashi Kalyan Ashram and is registered under Rajasthan state society act of 1958. Due to ideological affiliation with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) together with its commitment to make India a Hindu Rashtra, the RVKP has been opposing the propagation of Christianity in the tribal region of Rajasthan. Its commitment to the ideology of Hindutva stands against the liberal pluralist values, tolerance, liberty and equality of the Indian constitution.ⁱⁱⁱ Established in 1978, the RVKP is presently working with tribals of the state, across 13 tribal district of Rajasthan.^{iv}

Tribal people, inhabitants of the hilly areas in the state, seek jobs as unskilled wage earners, in the society. The predominant culture in this society is Brahmanic. Thus, in order to gain respect and in the absence of a strong democratic movement of the laboring masses, the tribals are forced to adopt such a culture. It is in this vacuum that Sangh Parivar has attempted to seek entry in the tribal belts of the state.

Over the years, there has been a gradual shift in the tribal loyalty from Congress to the BJP in Rajasthan.^v The Sangh Parivar, which mainly constitutes of the RSS, VHP, Bajarang Dal, and the RVKP, have been responsible for inciting communal violence in the state. The tribal population too has been instigated to act with suspicion and violence against the minorities or the “threatening others”. Interestingly they have found this “violence is empowering”. Organizations such as RVKP, now sought to negotiate with the government in exchange for support from the tribals.^{vi}

The mobilization based on ideology having met with failure in the 1980s, the Sangh Parivar has identified the depoliticized discourse of ‘service’ as a key entry point for it, to reach out to communities that have been historically distrustful of its political agendas. This pro-poor policy of social service has served the interest of certain disadvantaged sections without threatening that of the elites.

Quite clearly, the RVKP has capitalized the idea of ‘tribal victimhood’. Consequently, through the process of political socialization and developmental change they have strengthened their

legitimacy in tribal societies in Rajasthan as well as enhanced the prospect of BJP's electoral gain in the forthcoming elections.^{vii}

The strategy of 'social service' was not merely restricted to the exchange of goods to seek support for electoral victory. It also the activists to regularly interact with lower caste villagers and tribals. Such interaction with the targeted audience created an informal bonding between them. Thus, changing their perception about the Sangh Parivar and the BJP, as elitist political formations.^{viii}

Strategy of Social Welfare : A Historical Account

As eminent scholar Sarajit Sinha has aptly put forth, the 1950s and 1960s in Indian politics marked the height of 'tribal solidarity movement'. At this point of time demands of the tribal states became powerful. Christian missionaries were primarily blamed for the tribal 'unrest' and 'separatism' in the country.^{ix}

In the post-emergency period (1977 onwards) there was vehement uproar with demands for separate states being stated in various parts of the country. A case in point is the rise of such demands in the Christian dominated eastern regions of India. Another example is the state of Madhya Pradesh where demand for a separate state of Jharkhand became pronounced. This was a state where there was considerable influence of the Christian missionaries. Such demands came out in the open when Chief Minister, Pandit Ravi Shankar Shukla was greeted with black flags in Jashpur nagar, as a sign of protest and was asked to go back.^x

In India conversion to Christianity and Islam has resulted in complex situations and debates, in which Hindu nationalists have taken dedicated anti-conversion positions. These range from compilations of anti-conversion laws in several BJP-ruled states; to Vajpayee's political call for a national debate on conversion in 1998; and alleged incitements to violence against Christians in India.

Besides these legal, political and violent reactions, reconversion to Hinduism of the formerly converted people has acted as a Hindu nationalist response to Christian and Muslim proselytizing activities.

Advocates of Hindutva, portray the Christians as anti- nationals. However, scholars have argued that besides providing welfare, what encourage missionaries to enter tribal regions was idea of “white man’s burden’ as the mission of “civilizing the savage.”

In this context, the VKA became a resilient force which sought to deal with ‘the intimate enemy’ or as Jaffrelot has described the ‘threatening others’.The “others” or the potentially ‘disruptive’ forces here, are primarily the Muslims and Christians who propagate values that threaten the idea of Hindu Rashtra, and secondarily, the elites supporting “westernization” .

In this context, the then RSS Sarasangh Chalak, Blashahab Deoras, suggested the spread of the organizational framework of VKA to other parts of India. Therefore with principle objective to prevent the conspiracy (Sadyantra) of foreign forces, especially the missionaries who aimed at divide the country, several state level branches of VKA, saw the light of the day.^{xi}

However contrary to the claims, neither did the tribals officially convert to Christianity, nor did they accept Christian names. This was a planned move, as it would deprive them from claiming quota offered by the Indian state to these scheduled tribes.

In line with its ideology, both the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Vanvashi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) have been organizing mass reconversion ceremonies. This involves the processes of *Diksha* (oath taking), *Paravartan*(returning), *Shuddi*(purification), *Gharwapsi* (homecoming). The RVKP has reconverted 103 tribals in 11 villages of Mangaleshwar(Banswara); 225 tribals in 24 villages of Timmeda (Banswara) and 160 tribals in 13 villages in Amba (Udaipur).^{xii}

“Hinduisation”-Bridging the Gap Between the Mainstream Hindus and the ‘Adivasis’:

The historical narration of the alienation and exclusion of the tribals from the mainstream society has put them geographically and socially outside the caste ridden Hindu community. The operations of the RVKP in Rajasthan, is meant to break this historical distantness of the ‘vanvasis’ from that of the broader Hindu unity. Savarkar’s Hindutva had pointed to such a program which has not materialized due to the complexities of the Indian politics.^{xiii}

A reading of Savarkar would show that he had a dual strategy of exclusion and inclusion. The former meant to exclude Muslims and Christians from the Hindu nation for they did not reflect the ideas of *pitribhumi* and sacred birth (purity of race). The latter projected the broad framework of Hindutva, which meant the inclusion of Sikhs, the lower castes, and tribals into the fold Hindu.

The state led development initiatives has not successfully percolated into the realm of tribals in the state of Rajasthan. This is primarily due to, hierarchal structure of public administration, alarming bureaucratic corruption, and huge network of patron- client relationships. Consequently, the tribal populations in Rajasthan and other states suffered from widespread poverty and marginalization, and were deprived of their citizenship and welfare entitlements.

To substantiate this point the RVKP runs various development projects. For instance, the RVKP currently runs 813 development projects, 248 *Gram Samitis* (village committees), art *Shahari Mahila Samiti* (urban women committees) in Rajasthan. (Bappa Rawal, April 2006:17). RVKP is operating 15 hostels, 2 secondary schools, 4 higher secondary schools, 20 primary *Vidya Mandir*, 45 *Ekal Vidya Mandir*, 285 *Bal Sanskar Kendra*, 12 coaching institutes, 284 sports centre, 545 *Shardha Kendra*, 56 self help groups, 1 hospital, 1 mobile hospital, 1 weekly health camp in Kotra, 1 monthly health camp in rest of areas, 129 *Arogya Raksha Kendra*, 2 agriculture development centre and 1 small industry centre. RVKP also contributed to 3585 well digging and 32 Annicut constructions.^{xiv}

It may be interesting to note that it now works with almost all six major tribal communities (Bhil, Meena, Damor, Khathodi, Garaasia and Shariya) in 50 blocks and 3000 tribal villages of Rajasthan.^{xv}

As the first step to gain a stronghold over these tribals and consequently to “Hinduise” them, the RVKP has declared them as an integral and indispensable part of the Hindu social and religious order. It preferred to refer to them as Vanvasis (forest dwellers), away from Gaonavasis (village dwellers), shaharvasis (urban dwellers) and defied the colonial painting of tribal identity as Adivasis.^{xvi} Thus portrayal of the shared identity of the tribals and the Hindus, together with upholding the rich history of the Hindus became an important strategy of tribal inclusion to the

Hindu fold. Also Hindu religious practices such as vegetarianism, reincarnation, karma, prevention of consumption of alcohol were promoted.^{xvii}

To add to it institutions that promoted the health of the villagers were brought to the fore. A case in point are the Shakti Kendra (power center), *Ekal Vidyalyayas*, *Satsanga Kendras*, *Bhajan Mandalis*, *Shraddha Jagaran*, *Village Religious Committee* (Gram Satsang Samiti)- which tried to ensure that necessary action be taken in village conflicts, economic and developmental problems- thereby attempting to instill patriotism and a feeling of nationalism among the tribal youth and to socialize them into the politics of Hindutva.^{xviii}

In order to further integrate this tribal identity as Vanvasis Hindus, the RVKP talked provided references to popular narratives from Hindu sacred texts such as the Ramayana, the Maharatna, the Gita and Puran. Amongst the very many initiatives that were undertaken to bring about Hinduisation of Adivasis, the most prominent are : the *Ramshila Pujan*, *Rathyatra* of Advani, *Ramjyoti* and *Kar Seva*.

To add to it, Hinduisation has taken the form of establishing quasi-religious residential schools, building temples in all villages of Hanuman and Ganesh as well as endowing these temples with enormous funds to organize festivals in which a large number of people are fed. Other tactics include the usage of Adivasi politicians, Bhagats, Sarpanchs, Police Patels and some primary school teachers to spread Hindutva ideology and to instigate communal riots.

Also through the various Hindu *shakhas* – *Hindu Milan Mandir*, *Swaminarayan*, *Swadhyay*, *Ram Krishna*, *Radha Krishna*, the message of Hinduism is propagated to convince these Adivasis that the latter would benefit from Hinduism.

Instances such as the demolition of the Babri masjid is proudly recounted by the RVKP as part of its “cherished collective memory” of the organization.^{xix} Thus through these techniques, RVKP redefined tribal identity as per the ideology and politics of Hindutva. It generated not only a sense of patriotism but also respect for Hindu rights, rituals and beliefs, including “mother India” and “Holy cow”.

Also through the polarization of identity as “us” and “them” and by taking a negative approach towards non Hindus as the “intimate enemy” the outlets of this organization has tried to regenerate a sense of tribal selfhood and heroism in Rajasthan.

With obvious attempts to superimpose Hindu symbols on the tribal landscape, the Sangh Parivar has glorified tribal heroes and their association with Hindu kings and warlords. For instance, the example of legendary Bhil chieftain Rana Punj, who helped Hindu ruler Maharana Pratap to fight the Mughals, is often sighted.

To add to it, practice of *Swanusashan*(self-discipline), *Swadesh prem*(patriotism), *Swacharitrata*(good character) , *Sadbyabahaar*(good behavior), *Swabalamba*(self-reliance), *Matru- Pitru bhakti* (respect for parents), *Guru bhakti* (respect for teachers), chanting of *Bhojan Mantra* (food prayer) were ingrained in the daily routine of Adivasi students. Ideas of commitment and the inclusion were incorporated in the school textbooks. Excerpts from the Hindu texts of Gita ,Veda and Upanishad were ingrained into the young minds of the Adivasi students by the RVKP.^{xx}

Having discussed the tactics used by the RVKP to bridge the gap between the mainstream Hindu population and the tribal in the state, let us now focus on the social welfare activities undertaken by the organization.

Social Welfare Activities of RVKP

The RVKP sought to enter the tribal society in the state of Rajasthan through welfare activities in the realm of: education, health services and economic development program.

Education:-

Education has been identified as an area of special attention by the RSS since its inception. It followed a strategy of ingraining the young cadres through ideological work and providing facilities for physical training.

In an article entitled, 'We and Our Students', M.S. Golwalkar outlined the Sangh educational perspective. He proposed a system of education that was fundamentally religious in character, with much emphasis on tradition, discipline and military training.

The RSS has been engaged in implementing these ideas by following a two-pronged strategy. One, infiltrating the existing educational institutions with their proposed ideology; second, organizing a network of schools of its own.

During the last two decades the Sangh Parivar has made major gains in both these areas. The access to power in Rajasthan state has provided the scope of controlling the educational institutions and of revising the curriculum in consonance with the perspective of Hindutva. Various outfits of Sangh Parivar, particularly RVKP and VHP are also playing a major role in this sphere.

The Sangh Parivar has tried to introduced a Hindu curriculum by revising the text books. Subjects like history, literature and civics are being main targets of this attack. History is used by Sangh Parivar to demarcate the Hindus as a nation and to stigmatize the Muslims and the Christians as 'anti-national'. There projection of history is not related with the known facts of history. They consider that Aryans were the original inhabitants of India, that Indian culture and civilization are the works of Aryans, that ancient Indian culture is the true Indian culture. They have glorified the achievement of ancient India in the field of science, mathematics and other branches of knowledge.

The map of India drawn in all these books is that of Akhand Bharat, not only with Pakistan and Bangladesh as part of it, but the entire region of the Bhutan, Nepal, Tibet and Mynamnar also included in it(secular and democratic education).^{xxi} It has tried to imbibe a communal consciousness in the minds of young children. BJP led government in northern states have tried to introduce Vedic mathematics.

A linkage has been recognized between the Indian state's expenditure on education and growing number of RSS schools. Constant decreasing public expenditure on schooling has helped RSS to increase its number of schools. State with greater resources diverted to public schooling in India from 1990 to 2000, such Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, had far lower enrolments in RSS schools then states at the lower end of the spectrum, such as Orissa, Jharkhand and Madhya

Pradesh. Private schools in India have increased in a large number due to failure of state's responsibility. Private education is unaffordable for lower class children which has turned them towards RSS schools.^{xxii}

Learning from the Christian missionaries, the need to combine such processes of religious acculturation with education and health services the Sangh Parivar has been building schools and health establishments under the name of *Vanvasi Kalyan Ashrams*, or *Ekal Vidyalayas*. These promise to provide the tribes access to modern education and health facilities which 50 years of independence could not provide them. Not only are these funded liberally by the overseas financiers of the Sangh Parivar but also by the various parties in power, including the Congress Party.

In practice, the VKA mainly reconverts through education. The residential schools and hostels for the Vanvasis are not merely the centre of academic education. They instill also the noble Hindu ideals into their young minds. It runs at present, 15 hostels for 380 tribals students in 13 places of Rajasthan.^{xxiii}

Health:-

Through *Arogya Rakshan Kendra* (health promotion centers) for primary diseases, volunteers of RVKP have been active in villages. Their task is to create awareness amongst people and distribute medicines to them. 60 such centers are running in Rajasthan, at present. Here people are treated for minimal fees. Such centers also educate the masses about health issues and spread awareness about the medicinal purpose of different forest products. These activities modernize the tribals by introducing to them, modern health systems such as Allopathy. Recently, the 13th free health camp was organized which was attended by more than 1200 patients.^{xxiv}

Economic development activities:-

Considering that the livelihood of the people in Rajasthan are majorly dependent on agriculture and it being a drought prone zone, RVKP has promoted the usage of traditional methods of rainwater conservation. In this regard, it received a financial assistance of 10 million (1997-2003) under the Innovation Project of the Government of India.

The propagation of their ideology and activities such as improvement of agriculture and water conservation, RSS idea of the Hindu Rashtra, conversion activities of the missionaries, the role of tribals in nation building, and legitimization of their agenda especially among the educated tribals and Hindus is done by the organization through their monthly magazine Bappa Rawal.

Source of fund of the RVKP

The most important aspect of an organization is its source of funding. The funding of the organization is largely dependent on the contributions of philanthropic Hindus in India and abroad as it does not accept funds from the international donor agencies.

The VKA in India are reportedly funded by the India Development Fund (USA) and Sewa International (UK).^{xxv}

Although initially the RVKP rigidly upheld its principle of non-acceptance of government funds to maintain the spirit of volunteerism and avoid government restrictions,^{xxvi} yet over the years this policy has become flexible, owing to the fact that Christians and Muslims utilize these government funds to propagate their religion and elaborate their activities. Now RVKP gets fund from government of Rajasthan for various development projects in the tribal region.

State Government Institutions Patronage

Over the last few decades the Congress Party and the other parties in power have been actively engaged in promoting the drive of Hinduization of the tribal people both in the Central India and in the North East. A number of religious organisations like the Ramakrishna Mission and subsequently clones of the Sangh Parivar under neutral sounding names like the Vivekananda Society have been promoting the Hinduisation process with substantial state funding and connivance.

However over time, the state as an institution has become a tool in the hands of the Sangh Parivar. Infact the Rajasthan government has allocated up to Rs 50 lakh per annum to the Vanwasi Kalyan Parishad, an NGO affiliated to the Sangh Parivar to run hostels for tribals, which are nothing but training camps for Hindu extremists.

Under state patronage during the BJP rule the organization ran as many as 168 Shiksha Karmi Schools in Rajasthan. However, in 1998 when the Congress came to power in 1998 this financial support was withdrawn as a result of which Shiksha Karmi schools were discontinued in 2001.^{xxvii}

Further the police, a vital constituent of the structure of State is extremely bias against these Adivasi masses. D.K.Singh has aptly cited the statement of Father Walling Masih of Bijalpur village (Banswara district), which summed up the relationship between Hindu extremists and the official machinery.

“Cops are completely biased against Adivasi Christians. There have been several incidents of attack against Christians here but people don’t report them to the police any more. The cops either don’t register the FIR or don’t act at all.”

The BJP government under Mrs Vasundhara Raje has allocated 5 million rupees per annum to the RVKP to run hostels in Rajasthan. These hostels are nothing but shelters of Hindu extremists. Thus proving the state government’s support to such communal ideology which in the long run long lead to a state of violence.^{xxviii}

Thus the RVKP, which functions as a non-governmental organization, has been able to enhance its legitimacy and expand its socio-political support base, amongst the tribals through a well-articulated and planned process of ‘Hinduisation’. This process has been carried out in many basic ways: utilizing development projects as a means to spread the ideology of Hindutva, bringing religious and political awakening and organizing mass reconversion programs, redefining indigenous identity and creating a sense of ‘tribal hood’ among the tribes of Rajasthan, constructing the dichotomy of ‘us’ versus ‘other’. RVKP has created a culture of fear and violence in this region.

The legitimacy of the RVKP has been strengthened by the active financial and political support of the BJP led government in Rajasthan. Such active support by the state and its institutions of the Hindutva project has created a sense of fear and insecurity among the minority communities.

Thus it is clear that the politics of the state in Rajasthan is partly responsible for the increasing legitimacy of civil society organizations like the RVKP, which has not only spread sectarian

politics of violence at the margins but has also demonized the religious minorities as ‘ the other’ and threatened the cultural diversity and pluralism of Indian civilization.

As a consequence, public life has been polarized on the basis of ethno- religious identity , and such polarization has proved positive for the populist politics of Hindutva. However, it acknowledges the tribal populations are ‘backward Hindus’ and need to be brought into the mainstream and be properly integrated within Hindu society. As a result, it has launched systematic campaigns like *Tu Mein Ek Rakta* (tribals and Hindus belong to the same blood); *Vanvasi Hindu Samaj Ka Avinna Anga Hei*(tribals are an indispensable part of Hindu society); *Vanvasiyon Ko Desh Ki Mukhya Dhara Mein Jodna Ekta Aur Akhandata Ke Liye* (to bring the tribals to the studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism) etc. to improve the Hindu- tribal relationship.

The BJP led developmental state has thus facilitated the ethnification project of the RVKP. This organization through its strategy of mobilization through social welfare turned the tribal heartland in southern Rajasthan into an important site of ‘saffron’ politics.

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