



The Coming of the Devi Adivasi Assertion in South Gujarat (Western India)

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The Devi movement of the 1920s represents a genuine adivasi revolt, the first of its kind that has been recorded in this area. It began in palghar and moved all the way up the coast to Umargaon in south Gujarat and beyond. The movement was an effort at self-assertion and self-protection against their most hated exploiters at this time - the Parsis. However, the movement was co-opted by the Gandhians into the national movement that was sweeping through the area at the time, and the British then suppressed it rather ruthlessly, as law and order problem, and perceived as a revolt against the colonial government. Today there is not much trace and few memories of this movement, especially in thane district.

David Hardiman's reconstruction establishes the religio-cultural inspiration for this revolt against economic explanation. The movement originated as smallpox propitiation ceremony to mother goddess associated with soil fertility, salabai. It began in palghar taluka and moved north through Dahanu and Umbargaon into the Gujarat and Dangs, where it was most intense through it had little effect in Maharashtra. This was a religious movement concerned with the propitiation of a supernatural force. However a large number took it to have a very different meaning, seeing it as a call for the adivasi to change their existing way of life and adopt a set of new social values. For them the Devi was the herald of a whole new way of life. Why did so many adivasis interpret the Devi in such a manner at this particular juncture?

As a religious movement it experienced no, opposition, but as soon as wage demands and social boycotts were added to the agenda it became a threat to the status quo and was vigorously opposed, especially by the Parsis against whom it was largely targeted. For their control over these tribals was the most direct and brutal. The message was simple and direct, as described by Hardiman: no alcohol, vegetarianism, non-violence, cleanliness, boycott of the Parsis.

The significance of this movement lay elsewhere : it was led by the adivasis themselves, at least until the Gandhians took it over, and it was founded on a self assertion that began with as an expression of a religious ritual concern and went on to embrace a new secular political consciousness. To ignore such religiosity among the tribals, then, is to miss this hidden potential. For a religious/cultural appeal has been an effective motivation and mobiliser among tribal and folk communities and it has not always been merely repressive. The political right has been quick to use this religious – cultural appeal for their revivalist and fundamentalist political agenda to co-opt people to their cause, even as the political left has too easily ignored the secular potential for political liberation and economic justice embedded in such religious-cultural movements.

To conclude with Hardiman

All the religions consist to a large extent of assimilated folk-beliefs. It is this which gives them their mass appeal and great pertinacity over time. Religions are highly ambiguous, with seemingly identical sets of doctrines being made to serve quite contradictory causes. It is an elitist form of socialism which can view religion as merely an imposition from above.

The Devi Movement

Devi movement is also referred to as Sarla Devi movement. Some of the oldest residents claimed that a saintly person Sarla Devi had visited this region during 1921-22 and motivated the tribal's of this area to reform themselves. This movement took place at the time when Indian National Congress was preparing to organize meetings in Surat and valsad district to mobilize the tribal's of Rani-paraj for the support to their demands for Swaraj. The efforts bore fruits and Rani-paraj Parishad was formally organized for this purpose. This organization represented the tribal section of the society and remains effective till early forties of 20th century.

Meetings organized in Rani-Paraj with the collaboration of Indian National Congress

Sr.	Year	Venue	President
1.	1992	Shaikhpur (Mahuwa)	Smt. Kasturba Gandhi
2.	1924	Vadchi (Valod)	Sh. M.K. Gandhi
3.	1925	Surali (Valod)	Sh. Nana bhai Desai
4.	1926	Khanpur	Sh. M.K. Gandhi
5.	1927	Tarsan	Sh. M.K. Gandhi
6.	1929	Unai (Vansda)	Sh. Ballabh bhai Patel
7.	1937	Magarkui (Vyara)	Sh. Ballabh bhai Patel
8.	1938	Vadchi (Valod)	Sh. Ballabh bhai Patel
9.	1939	Mhuria	Sh. Bala sahab Kher
10.	1940	Walda	Sh. Morarji Bhai Desai
11.	1941	Umna (Mahuwa)	Dr. Jeevraj Mehta

After 1941 no meetings took place and this movement under Rani-paraj Parishad for the upliftment of the tribals was dissolved. Thus we see that the coming of the Devi and the meetings organized under the Rani-paraj Parishad almost coincided. One is tempted to believe that one of the lady Congress members might have been instrumental in initiating the movement. However, repeated enquiries revealed that except Kasturba Gandhi none of the lady members of the Congress had ever visited these areas. Writing on Devi movement Mr. R. B. Lal (1977) mentions that Devi Business was a brain wave of Amar Singh who had earlier failed at mobilizing the tribal masses through his teachings. After repeated probing into this affair, we arrived at the point that the Devi movement was the strategy adopted by the members of Rani-paraj Parishad to emancipate the tribals from the bonds of traditionalism. Contrary to Lal's account of a couple visiting this area from Khandesh, we found that the first worshippers of Devi came down from the hills of Dangs, Ahwa where Devi's temple was stated to be situated. These men were referred to as gauri or mukhia-bhagat of the Devi. The first two Gauri visited Songadh, Vyara and Mahuwa tallukas. Admist the village gatherings, the Gauri would violently shake from head to toe and go insane and would speak for the Devi. The orders relayed through the medium were as follows:

1. Use of lota while going for disha. Earlier, the tribals used to wipe themselves with leaves after deification but the Devi commanded them to carry water in the lota while going for disha.
2. To bathe every day.
3. To abstain from eating non-vegetarian food. The Devi would further order to release all the animals by opening the cattle-pen door.
4. To abstain from drinking water liquor.
5. To cover their bodies with adequate clothing.

The first of these two gauri were Kuknas and they held their first meeting at Kanjhar village of Songadh taluka. Continuously for five days communal feast was held for the entire villagers and they were told that in case they disobeyed, the Devi would punish them. An appreciable response was met with by these gauri and the first wave of gauri movement had the entire village Kanjhar converted in the new format. After this episode five agewan from different groups were reported to go to Ahwa for consultation with the pujari of the Devi temple. Gradually, the Devi movement swept the entire Rani-paraj and people conjured various legendary tales and episodes along with the coming of the Devi. While discussing this point with enlightened Dodhias it was revealed that this movement may have had some connection with the Congress social workers who having had failed in their efforts of tribal upliftment selected some educated tribal youths and sent them up at Dangs. After training them they were deported to plains and started the gauri wave which ultimately affected the life style of the people drastically. On scrutiny of the effects of the Devi movement as seen today, we find that drinking of liquor is not really wiped out and people still brew and drink it. Poultry food, if reared, at farm are mostly sold out in the market and rarely consumed by the members of the households. As regards personal hygiene and clothing, the tribals admit that their present habits are mainly the result of coming of the Devi. Thus the tribals who were wholesale sold out to their oppressors derived a lot of support and strength from the Devi movement which came along the Quit India cry of Gandhi and the entire sub-continent got involved in it. Through the sentiments of nationalism the local leaders could enthuse the populace permanently for the betterment of their society. The struggle is still on and at present though their individual tribal committees like Samast Dhodia Samaj they keep the movement alive.

Besides the above movements, the wave of Bhakti movement had swayed the entire Gujarat and the residents of Rani-paraj were not left out from it. The most popular of these are 'Sat Kaiwal', 'mokshamargi', Satipati or Arti Samaj, 'Sanatan Dharam Seva Sangh'. 'Kalwadia pant' and 'Swami Narayan sect'. most of these sects are conversionist but with no interest towards social reform or solution towards political and social problems. The leaders of the sects are charismatic personalities who mobilize the mass through persuasion, heightening the emotions of the individuals and are able to create an aura of apparent peace, tranquility, love and brotherhood which arises out the immediate needs, problems and difficulties of the followers. In a nutshell these Bhakti cults promised for the people a spiritual and moral upliftment in their mundane existence which was so far devoid of philosophies and intellectual interpretation of religion.

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