
CHANGES AND NEW IDENTITIES IN TRIBAL LIFE AND CULTURE: A STUDY OF TRIBALS OF WEST BENGAL, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The way of life of the tribal people has always been quite different from the mainstream society and they have a singular cultural environment. Recently, in the case of Indian tribals, certain changes are taking place in the specific cultural environment in which they live. The activity of the *Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram* (ABVKA), an affiliate organisation of the *Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh* (RSS), has a special role behind this recent change in the lives of the tribals. Influenced by the ABVKA, now many Indian tribals are coming out of their own cultural environment and are leading their lives to some extent according to Hindu religious practices and as a result of this there is a change in tribal culture and a new identity is being created. The main aim of this article is to highlight the cultural changes that are taking place in the lives of the Indian tribals under the influence of the ABVKA and the new identity that is being developed among them as a result.

KEYWORDS: Culture, *Hindutva*, Identity, Indigenous, Nature, Proselytisation, Taboo, Tribals, *Vanvasi*.

RESUMEN *Cambios y nuevas identidades en la vida y la cultura tribales: un estudio de las tribus de Bengala Occidental, India*

La forma de vida de los pueblos tribales siempre ha sido muy distinta de la sociedad mayoritaria y han contado con un entorno cultural propio. Recientemente, en el caso de los tribales de la India, se ha observado que se están produciendo algunos cambios en el entorno cultural específico en el que viven. La actividad de Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (ABVKA), una organización afiliada a Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS), desempeña un papel destacado en este reciente cambio en la vida de los tribales. Influenciados por la ABVKA, ahora un gran número de tribus indias está dejando atrás su propio entorno cultural y, en cierta medida, adoptando prácticas religiosas hindúes. Por consiguiente, la cultura tribal está cambiando y

como consecuencia, se está creando una nueva identidad. El objetivo principal de este artículo es destacar los “cambios culturales” que están ocurriendo en las vidas de las tribus indias bajo la influencia de la ABVKA y la “nueva identidad” que se está desarrollando entre ellas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Cultura, *hindutva*, identidad, indígena, naturaleza, proselitismo, tabú, tribales, *Vanvasi*.

Introduction

Tribal entities have been associated with Indian culture and civilisation since ancient times. At present, India has the second-largest population of Indigenous people in the world. In India, the tribals are also known as *Adivasi*,¹ *Vanvasi*,² *Vanyajati*³ etc. The term *Adivasi* refers to the indigenous people of India in the sense that they have been long settled in various parts of the country before the *Aryan* came, and are believed to be the oldest settlers among the present inhabitants of the country. By the term *Vanvasi* or *Vanyajati* it is meant that they are the forest dwellers, and the forest is inextricably linked to their way of life. The Indian epic Ramayana and the Mahabharata also feature tribal civilisation and culture. Tribal characters like Sabari and Guhan are found in the Ramayana on the other hand; ‘Ekalavya’ a character of the Mahabharata is a representative of the tribal community. Even in India’s freedom struggle, tribal people were not left behind. There are many examples where it is seen that the tribals participated in the Indian freedom struggle. Tilka Manjhi from Bihar participated in the Manjhi revolt of 1785, Budhu Bhagat from Jharkhand was a leader of the Larka rebellion of 1832, Sidhu and Kanhu were the two main protagonists of the Santhal rebellion of 1855 apart from these there are many unsung heroes of Indian freedom struggle came from different tribal communities.

Indigenous culture and civilisation in contemporary India suffering under a crisis; the gradual extinction of tribal culture and civilisation. At present, it is observed that the tribal people are adopting the rituals, customs, and religious practices of the local dominant group and forgetting their own. There are many causes behind this transformation of tribal societies, and an important

¹ Original inhabitant of Indian subcontinent.

² Inhabitants of forest.

³ Primitive People.

cause is the role of the *Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram* (ABVKA), an affiliate organisation of the *Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh* (RSS) within tribal societies. With its various social service activities, the ABVKA is giving several opportunities for socio-economic development of tribal people and, through these activities, the ABVKA is creating its influence upon the tribal society, and inculcating different social rituals, culture, and religious practices according to the Hindu religion.

Our study is based both on primary and secondary sources. Our primary sources include the oral statements of the participants, which were collected through the interviews in four different districts of West Bengal i.e. Jhargram, Purulia, Birbhum, and Darjeeling. The researcher interviewed three different groups of people, which are, a) tribal students who are residing inside the hostels (*Chattrabas*) run by the ABVKA, b) the tribal villagers living in the villages that come under the jurisdiction of ABVKA's activity area, and c) the officials and supporting persons of the ABVKA. The official documents of the ABVKA also come under the category of primary sources. The secondary sources include books, journals, articles, newspaper reports, and TV news related to the activities of the ABVKA.

The objective of the study is divided into two parts, The first one is to study the different activities of the ABVKA in different tribal areas of West Bengal and the final objective is to find out the cultural changes that are taking place in the lives of the tribal people and the new identities that are being developed in their lifestyle under the influence of the ABVKA.

The theoretical framework of the study is based on two different but nearly interrelated theories, which are, a) the theory of Nirbakisation and b) Sanskritisation. The Nirbakisation theory gives us an idea about how the tribal culture is gradually disappearing due to the cultural domination, invasion, and cultural ragging of the larger cultural group, where a "culture of silence is generated through a systematic cultural invasion for a long period with forceful cultural violence, and thus causing a cultural *memocide*.⁴" (Mahato, 2000: 18). The basic postulate of the theory of

⁴ *Memocide* means an attempt to eradicate an existing idea.

Sanskritisation is how the tribes or castes placed lower in the caste hierarchy gradually assimilated into the upper caste by adopting various social practices of the upper castes (Jayapalan, 2001: 428).

Who are the Tribals

Before returning to the main discussion, one must understand who the tribals are. The term 'tribe' refers to a historical and cultural concept; and it usually refers to a social group generally with a definite area, idiom, cultural commonness, and unifying social organisation having different sub-groups. Different scholars have tried to define the term 'tribals' in different ways, A.B. Bardhan defines tribes as, "a group of socio-cultural entities at a definite historical stage of development" (Bardhan, 1973: 16). D.N. Majumdar explains the term tribes as "a collection of common groups of people having a common surname and the members of that particular group occupy the same territory, observe certain taboos regarding their different social activities and speak the same language" (Majumdar, 1961: 367). According to P.G. Krishnan, the tribe is "a social group, members of this group speak a common language, reside in a common place, act together for a common purpose, and have the same surname" (Krishnan, 1985: 45). There are several authors who have narrated the term 'tribes' by different nomenclatures, S.T Das called them 'Submerged humanity' few named them Aborigines, Primitive tribe, *Adimjati*, *Pahari* etc.

Cultural Identity of the Tribals

The lifestyle and customs of the tribal people of the country has a unique tradition which differentiates them from the main population of India. Each tribe has its own way of thinking, behaving, acting, its own traditions, customs, values, morals and its own religious beliefs. Cultural integration is a significant feature of Indian tribal society, from Indo-Tibetan to Aryan and Dravidian language groups collectively form a distinct cultural identity among the different tribal communities. Cultural integration sometimes leads to a cultural complexity, which reflects both similarities and dissimilarities among the tribal societies, for example, some of the tribal communities share the same language but they are diverse in their religious beliefs. The Santal tribes of West Bengal speak in the Santali language but if we talk about their religious beliefs, we

can find that a number of Santal families follow their traditional religious practices while others follow the path of the Christian missionaries, or worship Hindu deities. In fact, India has been inhabited by tribals and non-tribals for a long time and the cultural exchange between them has created such a complex (Xaxa, 1999: 1520).

A varied feature can also be observed among the various social festivals and events of the tribal society. The tribal festivals including marriage and other social programs which display colourful and joyous celebrations. Traditional dance and playing of traditional musical instruments are an important part of any tribal festivals, consumption of local liquor is also a part of all these festivals. There is indeed some regional heterogeneity in the way of life among the tribals as well but apart from those heterogeneities, it is found that there is homogeneity in the way of life among the tribal people of India as a whole.

Socio-Economic Conditions of the Tribals in Indian Context

According to the latest census of India, the numerical strength of the tribal people in the country is 10, 42, 81, 034,⁵ which is 8.6 per cent of the total population (Census: 2011). This total number comprises 705 different tribal groups. The highest number of tribal people reside in Madhya Pradesh (14.7 per cent); Maharashtra is in the second position in terms of tribal population (10.1 per cent), Odisha constitutes 9.2 per cent tribal population which is the third highest in India. Tribals constitute a large portion of the population, but they lag far behind the rest of the Indian population in terms of their socio-economic conditions. The socio-economic backwardness of the tribals has been in effect since the British Period. During the British rule, several measures were taken by the Government which was responsible for the socio-economic underdevelopment of the tribal people, such as land encroachment, introduction of a new forest policy, new revenue system etc. which made the lives and livelihood of the tribal people much more difficult (Guha, 1983: 1883).

⁵ Ten crore, forty two lakh, eighty one thousand and thirty four people or more than one hundred and four million people

Socio-Economic Policy towards the Tribal People after Independence

After independence, the new Indian Government took several steps for the socio-economic betterment of the tribal people, but the conditions of the Indian tribes have not improved that much, either before or after independence. Poverty, marginalisation, and limited access to health care and education continued for the tribal people even in an independent, democratic country. The Congress government took multiple initiatives for the socio-economic and political betterment of the Indigenous people such as the establishment of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, introduction of the Tribal Sub Plan (TSP), and Tribal Development Projects (ITDP), formation of special multi-purpose Tribal Development Blocks etc. (Sen, 1992: 80).

The objective of the socio-economic policy towards the tribal people in the post-independence period was the integration of the tribal society by respecting their own cultural identity. This approach of the government was guided by principles like ensuring tribal rights, promoting tribal development, encouraging tribal participation in local governance etc. The government has redacted various schemes and policies to improve tribal education, healthcare, literacy, and economic opportunities.

Forest Rights of the Tribal People and Government Policy

Among the steps taken by the government to improve the socio-economic conditions of the tribal people, one of the important steps is to restore the forest rights of the tribals which were taken away from them during the British rule. In 2006 the Indian National Congress (INC) led UPA (United Progressive Alliance) government passed the “Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act”, 2006 which is also known as the “Forest Rights Act” or FRA. The FRA came into effect in 2008, which initiated the correction of historical injustice against forest dwellers in the British era, and in independent India, the Act recognises forest dwellers’ individual rights over their land and a villager’s right to manage and conserve the forest (Rosencranz, 2008: 660). The Act conserves individual forest rights and the community forest rights, under the individual forest rights any person belonging to a tribal community can claim the right to live in and cultivate up to 4 ha. (hectare) of land if he occupied and depended on

it as of December 13, 2005. The community forest rights recognise the right of a *Gram Sabha*⁶ over forest land within the village boundaries or seasonal use of landscape for pastoral communities. This Act allows the tribals to be close to nature and entitled the tribal villagers to own and collect, use and dispose of minor forest produce besides timber, including the right to use grazing land and water bodies and the right to protect and regenerate any community resource among others (Bandi, 2014: 65).

NREGA Act: A Step towards the Economic Empowerment of the Tribals

NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) is another important step taken by the Government in post-independent India to economically empower the tribal people. This Act was passed by the UPA government in 2005, and it is also known as “Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act” (MGNREGA). A key feature of this Act is, it legally guarantees 100 days of employment to the household whose family income is very low; the tribal people of different states come under this Act. Through this Act, the government ensures several things like confirmation of 100 days of work to every household, wage payment within 15 days of work, infrastructure development of the society etc. As per the data of the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, at present 0.14 crore (14 million) households including the tribals are the beneficiaries of the MGNREGA scheme.

Political Participation of the Tribal People

In pre-independent India, only the upper caste people had the privilege of being appointed in the government activity, the lower caste people, including the tribals, were excluded from meaningful participation. The scenario changed somewhat after the independence through the reservations and affirmative action adopted in the Constitution. Due to the reservation system, the tribal people obtained the opportunity to participate in legislative bodies and governance. The political activism of the tribal communities and the Fifth Scheduled of the Indian constitution which provides the

⁶ *Gram Sabha* is a village-level legislative body consisting of all adult residents (voters) of a village, defined under Article 243(b) of the Indian Constitution.

provisions for special governance in designated scheduled areas increased the tribals' political engagement.

At present several seats in the Parliament of India, State Assemblies, and urban and rural level institutions are reserved for the ST people. At present, 47 seats are reserved for the ST community in the *Lok Sabha*⁷, in the case of State Legislatures, the number is more than a hundred, even in local-level constitutional bodies, thousands of seats are reserved for the ST people (data collected from the official website of the Election Commission of India: <https://www.eci.gov.in/term-of-the-houses/>). There are also many States in India where the post of Chief Minister has been held by the tribal people. The current president of India is also a woman from the tribal community. All this suggests that in the current situation, people from the tribal communities are getting the opportunity to actively participate in political activities. However, challenges like inadequate implementation of policies, lack of literacy, deficiency of political knowledge, social barriers and obstacles still hinder the full integration and political empowerment of the tribal people.

Tribals of West Bengal and Their Present Socio-Economic Conditions

As per the census of 2011, the total tribal population of West Bengal is 52, 96, 953⁸ (5.8 per cent) of the whole state. Recently there are 41 (forty-one) different tribal communities living here. According to the “Scheduled Tribes Order” section 342 of the Indian Constitution proclaimed by the President of India in 1950, only 7 (seven) tribal groups from West Bengal were mentioned, which are: Santal, Oraon, Munda, Bhuitia, Lepcha, Mru and Mech. In 1956 the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment Act) was introduced according to this order another 12 (twelve) tribal groups were enlisted, those are: Lodha, Ho, Kharia or Kheria, Kora, Chakma, Mal Pahariya, Hajong, Bhumij, Magh, Garo, Rabha, and Mahali. After the reformation of the Scheduled Tribes Order 1956, 22 (twenty-two) more tribal communities were included in the Scheduled Tribes population in West Bengal, which are: Asur, Bagia, Birhor, Birjiya, Chero,

⁷ *Lok Sabha* is the lower house of the Indian Parliament.

⁸ Fifty two lakh, ninety six thousand, nine hundred and fifty three people or more than five million people

Gond, Chick Barik, Karmali, Gorait, Khond, Savar, Tamang, Kharwar, Kisan, Gorait, Toto, Korwa, Limbu (Subha), Lohara, Sauria Pahariya, Bedia and Dukpa.

There is a basic difference between the socio-economic structure of tribal communities and the non-tribal or advanced groups of people. The tribal people have a very simple way of life, which fits very well with their conservative outlook and ecological surroundings. Historically, the people of tribal communities of India have lagged far behind the mainstream people in terms of education, income, social status etc. The tribals of West Bengal are no exception in this case. Yet in the context of West Bengal, an unproportional number of the tribal people are victims of socio-economic underdevelopment. Although various government schemes have been launched for the socio-economic development of the tribal people, the benefits have not yet accrued to the tribal society.

For the socio-economic betterment of the tribal people the Government of West Bengal launched several important schemes, like:

- Educational Schemes;
 - Post-Matric Scholarship to Scheduled Tribes (ST) students;
 - Centrally Sponsored Post-Matric Scholarship to ST Students Reading in Class IX And X;
 - *Banarhat* Residential Hindi High School for Tribal Girls;
 - Hostel Facilities;
 - Merit Come Means Scholarship Schemes;
 - *Ekalavya* Residential School;
 - Pandit Raghunath Murmu *Abasik* School;
 - Belpahari Residential Government High School;
- Social Security Schemes;
 - *Kendu* Leaves Collectors Social Security Schemes 2015;
 - *Jai Johar* (Old Age Pension);
- State Development Schemes;
- Schemes with Central Assistance;

- Special Central Assistance (SCA) to Tribal Sub Plan (TSP);
- Grants under Article 275(1);
- Schemes for Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).

(Data collected from the official website of the West Bengal Tribal Development Department: <https://adibasikalyan.gov.in/>)

For the overall development of the tribals of West Bengal, all these above-mentioned schemes have been taken up by the West Bengal Government, but it is found that the socio-economic conditions of the tribal people have not changed much.

As per the *UDISE (United District Information System for Education Plus) Report: 2020-21*, the school drop-out rate for children in West Bengal is 7, 33, 692, which is the second in India after Uttar Pradesh. Among these, a large number of students, come from different tribal communities. As per the *Report of Ministry of Tribal Affairs: 2019-20*, in West Bengal 50.1 per cent of rural people are living under the Bellow Poverty Line (BPL), while 44.4 percent of urban people come under this category, many of whom are tribals. As per the data given on the official website of the Tribal Development Department of West Bengal only 18.6 per cent of tribal households having drinking water sources, 24.4 per cent of tribal family have their house in good condition (pucca house or semi-pucca house), 20.6 percent tribal household have latrine facility within premises (data collected from the official website of Tribal Development Department, West Bengal: <https://adibasikalyan.gov.in/>).

From the above data, it can be observed that despite various efforts made by the Government the overall socio-economic conditions of the tribals of West Bengal have not improved enough. Taking advantage of this socio-economic underdevelopment of the tribals, various non-governmental organisations are trying to penetrate the tribal society; the ABVKA an affiliate of the RSS is prominent among them. All these organisations aim to spread their ideology among the tribals by carrying out several development activities. The next part of this article will discuss how the ABVKA is creating its ideological impact on the tribals of West Bengal by conducting several social service activities.

The *Akhil Bharatayiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram* (ABVKA)

The *Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram* or ABVKA is an important affiliate organisation of the RSS; it works for the overall socio-economic development of the tribals of India. The ABVKA was founded in 1952 in Jashpur Nagar, Chhattisgarh by former RSS activist Shri Balasaheb Despande. Since its establishment, it has basically been operating according to the ideology of the RSS.

Apart from conducting social service activities in remote tribal areas, the ABVKA is also considered to be a key part of the anti-conversion activities. During British rule, a huge number of tribals were converted to Christianity by the Christian missionaries (Shullai, 2017: 326). The RSS was totally opposed to the religious conversion of these Indian tribes by the missionaries. To put an end to this conversion process, the RSS started various activities in different parts of India; one of them was campaigning against conversion and making the indigenous people aware of their own culture (Chaturvedi & Venugopal: 2016). After independence, the RSS started a project to convert the converted tribal back to Hinduism which is known as Mission *Ghar Wapsi* (return to home). Here 'home' is referred to as Hinduism, because RSS believes that Hinduism is the only religion of this land, all others are foreign religions. Allegiance of people who believe in religious other than Hinduism is not to this land but to any other territory outside this country (Jaffrelot, 2007: 98). As an affiliate organisation of the RSS, the ABVKA was entrusted with the task of implementing this mission *Ghar Wapsi* (Sundar, 2009: 128). The activities of the ABVKA have two aspects; one is to conduct welfare services in the tribal societies for the socio-economic betterment of the indigenous people, while inculcating Hindutva ideology among the tribal people is the second aspect of ABVKA's activities.

Social Service Activities of the ABVKA

The ABVKA is dedicated to uplifting the socio-economic conditions of the tribals. To reach this goal they run various social service projects in remote tribal areas all over India. In West Bengal, the ABVKA is known by two different names. In the southern part of the state, it is known as *Purvanchal Kalyan Ashram*, and the name *Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram* remains the

same in the northern part of the state. In our article we employ both the term *Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram* (ABVKA) and *Purvanchal Kalyan Ashram* indiscriminately; both organisations are one of the same.

It is found that the ABVKA establishes an *ashram* in tribal areas and operates all its activities from this *ashram*. This *ashram* works as the operating centre of the ABVKA for that area. In West Bengal, the ABVKA has more than 450 such *ashrams* (Field work, conducted on 10.02.2024). In every *ashram* premises, the ABVKA establishes a student hostel, where the tribal students from neighbouring villages stay and continue their education without paying any fees. The students get a variety of facilities from the ABVKA to continue their studies, i.e. they get their books, copies, dress, study coaching, computer training, sports training etc. totally without any cost. Apart from running hostels, the ABVKA runs different social service projects in the neighboring tribal villages, like,

- Schools for the infant children (4 to 6 years of age);
- Agricultural development centre to help the tribal farmers;
- Vocational training centre to empower the tribal youth;
- Self-help group for the empowerment of the tribal women;
- Medical centre for the tribal villagers;
- Sports centre for the tribal youth;
- Library for readings;
- Night schools;
- *Ekal Vidyalaya* (single teacher school);
- *Gram Vikas Kendra* (Centre for village development), etc. (Fieldwork, conducted on 12.02.2024).

The ABVKA and the Non-violence Way of Activity

The ABVKA always conducts its activities in accordance with the non-violence method in West Bengal; the ABVKA also follows the same non-violent approach in conducting various social reform activities for the tribal people. Among the activities that the ABVKA is conducting for the

tribals, restoring their land rights is one of them. In West Bengal, there is a long history of movements to restore land rights to the tribal and lower-class landless people. In 1967 an armed peasant revolt was started in the Naxalbari block of Siliguri sub-division in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, which is known as the 'Naxalbari movement'. The movement was led by the tribal and radical communist leaders of Bengal, and the main target of the movement was, seizing excess land from the landlords and distributing it among the landless people including the tribals (Mukherji, 1987: 1608). Within a very short time, the movement spread to different parts of West Bengal and took a violent turn. However, no such violent reflections can be observed in the activities of the ABVKA. The ABVKA always follows the Gandhian way of conducting its activity.

Hidden Agenda behind the Activities of the ABVKA

The ABVKA conducts all these above-mentioned activities for the socio-economic betterment of the tribals, but there is a hidden agenda behind this; the spreading of Hindutva ideology amongst the tribals of West Bengal. How the ABVKA is quietly accomplishing that task shall be discussed below.

Spreading Hindutva Ideology through Educational Projects

The ABVKA conducts two types of activities to promote education among the tribals,

- a. Running schools for 4 to 6 years old tribal children, and
- b. Building hostels (*chatrabas*) for the tribal students.

The aim of these educational projects is to promote education among the tribals, but apart from promoting education, the ABVKA is running these projects in such a way as to inculcate Hindutva sentiments among the tribal students. To explore the Hindutva agenda of the ABVKA now we will discuss the syllabus of the schools, and the daily routine of the hostel run by the ABVKA.

The school run by the ABVKA for children aged 4 to 6 years is known as *Sishu Siksha Kendra* (Centre for Child Education). The ABVKA use a different curriculum to educate the

children in these schools. There are many elements in that curriculum which are designed to spread Hindutva ideology among the students.

The curriculum begins with a *Barga Git* (class song); the teachers sing that song and the students follow him/her. The song starts with the line,

Chandan Hay Is Desh Ki Mati,

Tapobhumi Har Gram Hai.

Har Bala Devi Ki Pratima,

Bachcha Bachcha Ram Hai

(Syllabus of the Centre for Children Education)

Translation in English: The soil of this country has been described as having a fragrance of sandalwood and the villages of this country are referred to as *Tapabhumi*, (*Tapabhumi* means where saint and ascetic live). Every girl in the country is the embodiment of Goddess and the presence of Lord Rama is found in all the children.

Analysing the meaning of the above song, we can find that Indian villages are considered as *Tapobhumi*, which means where saints and ascetics lived. According to Harshav and Micheals, the concept of ‘saint’ and ‘ascetic’ is part of the Hindu religion (Harshav & Micheals, 2004: 52), not part of the tribal society. Through this concept, an attempt has been made to point to the Hindu phase of ancient Indian civilisation.

In the next line, it is mentioned that every girl in this country is the likeness of Goddess and Lord Rama is residing inside every child. Through this line, an attempt is being made to emphasise the presence of Lord Rama in Indian civilisation. V. D. Savarkar argued that, after the coming of the *Aryans* to India, new identities and attachments emerged, and this resulted in older cultural memories to be forgotten. With the forging of this new identity, India came to be known as *Bharatbarsha*, and the inhabitants of this land is known as ‘Hindu’ and the land itself as Hindustan (Sharma, 2015: 187). Savarkar further argued that “this nation (Hindustan) was founded

by Lord Rama the heroic prince of Ayodhya, when he made a victorious entry in Ceylon and incorporated this vast land from the Himalayas to the Seas into one empire and established the Hindu Nation” (Sharma, 2015: 187). In the educational syllabus, an attempt has been made to reveal the concept of the ‘Hindu Nation’ by finding the presence of Lord Rama in every child of India.

According to the curriculum of these schools, reciting the *Gayatri Mantra* is a regular task for the students. The *Gayatri Mantra* is a hymn of the Hindu Scripture Rig Veda, and it is cited in several other Hindu scriptures and texts like: The Bhagwat Gita, The Manusmriti etc. (Radhakrishnan, 1994: 56). ‘Om’ is the word by which the *Gayatri Mantra* is started, *Om* is a sacred sound of Hindu religion, and actually *Om* is the prime symbol of Hinduism (Beck, 2012: 202). So, it is clear how the ABVKA is trying to inculcate Hindu religious practices in the tribal students through this curriculum.

Now we will discuss how the ABVKA is trying to inculcate Hindu religious practices among the tribal students who are residing in the ABVKA-runs hostels (*chatrabas*). In every ABVKA *ashram* premises, there is a hostel (*chatrabas*), where the tribal students from neighbouring villages reside and continue their studies. It is found that the students enrolled in nearby primary or high schools and continue their studies from this hostel. The hostel authority provides all the facilities to the students without any kind of fees.

Every student in the hostel must follow a daily routine. Everything a student must do from the moment he/she wakes up in the morning till he/she goes to sleep at night has to be done according to this daily routine. Just like the curriculum of the schools (discussed earlier) here the ABVKA tries to inculcate Hindutva ideology among the tribal students through this daily routine. The matter will become clearer to us when we try to analyse the subject of the daily routine.

According to the routine, the students must recite Sanskrit hymns throughout the day, such as: *Ekattota Strotam* (Sanskrit hymn), *Ekattota Mantra* (Sanskrit hymn), *Bhojan Kale Uchcharaniya Mantra* (hymn to recite before starting feeding), *Sayaner Purve Uchcharaniya Mantra* (hymn to recite before sleep) etc. Here, a question arises: does the Sanskrit language

belong to the tribals? There are several tribal communities like Bedia, Lohra, and Kharwar that come under the Indo-Aryan language group, but Sanskrit is not a language of any tribal community. The language of the Indian tribes can be classified as a 'folk' language. There are many Hindu Scriptures like The Veda, The Manusmriti, The Bhagwat Gita, The Ramayana, The Mahabharata all written in Sanskrit, so it is very easy to say that Sanskrit is a language of the Hindu religion. Also, all the above-mentioned Sanskrit hymns are taken from the Veda, so the intention of the ABVKA is clear, that is engage the tribal students with the different Hindu scripture so the Hindu religious belief can be born in them.

Regular physical exercise in the morning is an important task for the students, in this regular exercise, the student must recite *Surya Pranama Mantra* (sun salutation hymn) and do *Yoga*. Both *Yoga* and the sun salutation hymn which starts with the word 'Om', are part of Hindu religion (Carmody & Carmody, 1996: 68). So again, traces of Hindu religious activities are available here.

Singing the '*Vande Mataram*' song of Bankimchandra Chatterjee is also included in the morning physical exercise. Novelist Bankimchandra wrote the song in 1882 in his novel '*Ananda Math*', by this novel, Bankimchandra was concretizing the idea of Indian nationalism. Historian R.C. Majumdar argued that the nationalist idea that emerged through '*Ananda Math*' as Hindu Nationalism, in his words: "the aspect of the novel *Ananda Math* and the idea of Goddess Kali gives the impression that considered Bankim's nationalism as 'Hindu' nationalism rather than Indian nationalism" (Noorani, 1999: 45).

Practice of worship of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses is a regular part of the Hostel. In the evening the students must worship Lord Rama, Laxmana, Sita, Hanuman, Kali, Saraswati and so many other Gods and Goddesses. Every year on the day of *Vasant Panchami*, *Saraswati Puja* is organised in every hostel, a *Brahmin* priest conducts this *Puja*, and all the tribal children participate in the wreath.

Reading the Bhagwat Gita in the hostel is another mandatory activity for the tribal students. According to the daily routine, every student of the hostel must read and memorise two verses of

the Bhagwat Gita in every month. From all these above-mentioned points it is clear how the ABVKA authority is engaging the tribal students with the Hindu religious discourse system.

ABVKA's Hindutva Activities in Tribal Villages

Spreading Hindutva ideology in the neighbouring tribal villages of the ABVKA *ashram* is another important aspect of ABVKA's activity, therefore the ABVKA continue some Hindutva agenda in tribal villages throughout the year, celebrating Ram Navami, Hanuman Jayanti and Maha Sivaratri in tribal villages is important among them. It is found that the tribal youths conduct bike rallies during the Ram Navami and shout *Jai Shree Ram*⁹ together. The presence of the Hanuman Temple can be noticed in all the surrounding tribal villages where the ABVKA *ashram* is located. Tribal villagers perform *puja* at this Hanuman temple regularly, and the *Hanuman Chalisa*¹⁰ is also recited here in every week.

In some tribal villages, *Satsang* (religious gathering) is organised by the ABVKA. In these *Satsang* (religious gatherings), the representative of the ABVKA mainly talks about the ancient glory of Hinduism and tries to connect the tribals with it. In every ABVKA *ashram* a photograph of Lord Rama embracing Hanuman can be found, with this image in front, the ABVKA authority tries to convince the tribals that in fact the main Hindu society wants to connect the tribals in the same way Lord Rama embraced Hanuman.

Changes in Tribal Life and Culture

As a result of the different activities of the ABVKA toward the tribal people, there are some changes taking place in the life of the tribals of West Bengal. It is observed that influenced by the ABVKA's religious activities, the tribals are following the Hindu customs and rituals. In the hostels run by the ABVKA, tribal students worship Hindu Gods and Goddesses like Lord Rama, Laxman, Hanuman, Shiva, Saraswati etc. They are also reciting *the Gayatri Mantra*, which is a part of the Hindu religion.

⁹ Collective sounds proving the superiority of Lord Rama.

¹⁰ The Hanuman Chalisa is a Hindu devotional hymn in praise of Hanuman.

Here a question arises: do the tribals come under the fold of Hinduism? The answer is quite complicated. Virginius Xaxa made the argument that there are both similarities and dissimilarities between Hindus and Tribals, in terms of religious worshipping both the religion are natural religions, but Hindu society is a caste-based society and the tribals do not fit in this caste system (Xaxa, 1999: 1523). G.S. Ghurey argued that tribals and Hindus are the same because he found similarities in the religious activities of the lower caste Hindus and tribals; he called the tribals as 'Backward Hindus' (Ghurey, 1980: 135). So, the question of whether the tribals are Hindus or non-Hindus is a doubtful one. But it is true that the Hindu society is divided by a caste system, and the tribal are not part of that caste system. There are some similarities also found regarding religious activities, but there are some basic differences between Hindus and tribals. The religion of the tribals is known as '*Sarana Dharma*' which is totally different from the mainstream Hindu religion. At present, because of the influence of the ABVKA, tribals of West Bengal are following the religious customs and practices of the mainstream Hindu society, worshipping Lord Rama, Lord Siva, Hanuman, Saraswati, and Kali by forgetting their own religious ethos. In this way, the tribals are assimilating into Mainstream Hindu society.

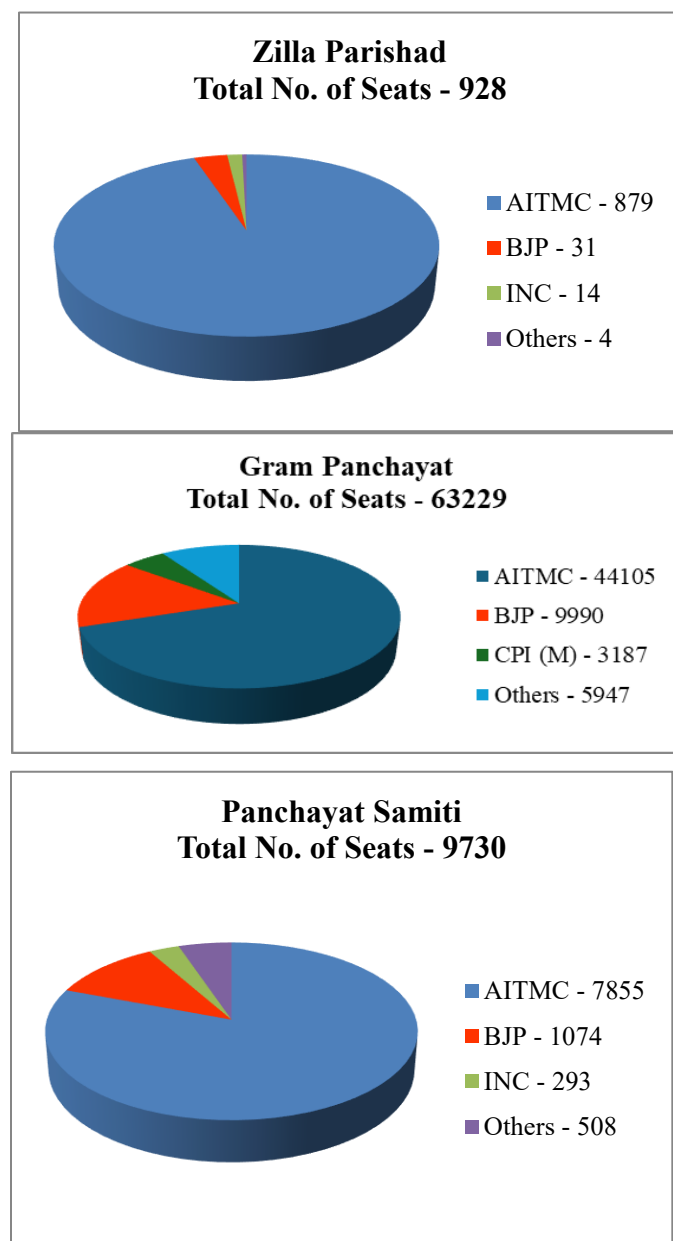
Religious transformation leads to several social transformations among the tribals of West Bengal. Because of the influence of the Hindu society, the tribals are forgetting their own social identities and adopting new ones. Traditional dance with colourful dresses and playing folk musical instruments like *tumba* and *tamak*¹¹ is an important part of any tribal society, but nowadays it is found that the tribal people are using loudspeakers and other modern instruments to celebrate their festivals. Indigenous liquor has a close relation with tribal society; in every social programme including marriage the tribal people consume Indigenous liquor, but recently with the influence of the ABVKA the new tribal generation trying to prohibit alcohol consumption. In medicinal practices, there is a change can be observed. It is generally found that every tribal society has a person specialised in herbal treatment, who is known as *Ojha* (Fieldwork, conducted on 10.03.2024), if the people get sick, they get the herbal treatment from this person, but presently because of the medical projects of the ABVKA the tribal people are getting treatment of allopath

¹¹ Two sorts of drums.

or homeopathy. As a result of the modern medical system, the traditional treatment practices are completely disappearing from the tribal societies.

In addition to interpreting the lives and culture of the tribals, the ABVKA influences these people politically also. Because of the ABVKA and RSS' activities, political importance of the BJP is increasing in West Bengal in recent time. In 2011 the All India Trinamool Congress (AITMC) came to power, before that, the leftists were in power for more than three decades. The BJP did not have much influence in the political arena of West Bengal, but at present it is found that the BJP is exerting its influence in several parts of the state. The RSS-ABVKA duo plays a vital role in the arrival of the BJP in the political context of West Bengal. It is seen that the political influence of the BJP is gradually being established in the tribal areas inhabited by the ABVKA. The matter will become clearer to us if we analyse the result of the Panchayat General Election of 2023,

Seat Won by the BJP at the Panchayat General Election of 2023



(Data collected from the official website of the West Bengal State Election Commission: <https://portal.wbsec.org/>)

The BJP won the total of 31 seats among 928 seats in the Zilla Parishad, 1074 seats among 9730 seats in the Panchayat Samiti and 9990 seats among 63229 seats in the Gram Panchayat at the last Panchayat General Election of West Bengal conducted in 2023 and in all three-tier, the BJP came next to the ruling party AITMC. The BJP also won 77 seats among 292 seats in the last

Legislative Assembly Election of West Bengal conducted in 2021, here again, the BJP won the second highest number of seats after the ruling party AITMC. At the last General Election of India conducted in 2024, the BJP won 12 seats in West Bengal among 42 seats and got the second position next to the ruling party AITMC (Data collected from the official website of Election Commission of India: <https://www.eci.gov.in/>). So, at present, the BJP is occupying an important position in the current politics of West Bengal. There was a time when the BJP had no such traces in the Politics of West Bengal, but now it is seen that the BJP has gained the status of an opposition party in the context of West Bengal.

The Hindutva activities of the ABVKA and the RSS have been a significant factor behind the BJP's rise to power in recent times. However, it would not be correct to say here that the Hindutva activity of the ABVKA-RSS duo is the only reason behind the rise of the BJP in West Bengal. There are many reasons behind the increase in the BJP's vote bank; like the BJP's organisational activities in West Bengal have increased significantly or the allegations of various corruptions of the current ruling party inspired the people to vote for the BJP, but it is true that despite all other reasons behind the rise of the BJP in West Bengal today; one important reason is 'Hindutva activity' and the 'cultural transformation' of the ABVKA.

Conclusion

The objective of our research was to find out the changes and new identities that have emerged in the life of tribals of West Bengal in recent times. During this research, we found that several changes had taken place in the religious and social life of the tribals. We observed from our field research that, recently, the tribals of West Bengal socially and religiously adopted the customs and rituals of mainstream Hindu religion. The children recite the *Gayatri Mantra* in their schools; students worship Hindu Gods and Goddesses and read the Bhagwat Gita regularly in their hostel; tribal youths participate in the festivals of Ram Navami; Hindu festivals like Hanuman Jayanti, Ram Navami are celebrated in tribal villages; tribal people are participating in *Satsang* (religious

gathering) where discussion continues about the Hinduism. A touch of Hindu religious practices is also seen in the various social festivals of the tribals. That is, it is true that in the contemporary context, a change is coming in the tribal society of West Bengal which has impel them to follow the customs and rituals of the Hindu religion by forgetting their own. The role of the ABVKA is very important behind these changes of the tribals; we noticed that the ABVKA conducts several welfare activities in the tribal society for their socio-economic development. While carrying out these welfare projects, the ABVKA is gradually inculcating Hindu religious practices and customs among these tribal people. As a result, the tribals are ignoring their own religious and social customs and adopting Hindu social and religious practices. Perhaps this cultural change is helping to increase the BJP's vote bank, and the BJP is emerging as an important political party in West Bengal.

These recent changes in tribal lives can be explained by the theory of Nirbakisation, here we can find that the tribal culture and identities are gradually disappearing from West Bengal because of the cultural domination of the Hinduist organisation the ABVKA. Here another aspect is also visible, that is, the tribals of West Bengal are adopting the social and religious customs according to Hinduism, which can be explained through the theory of Sanskritisation; the tribals of West Bengal are recently trying to adopt the various social and religious practices of the Hindu religion.

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