

# Messianic Movements in Primitive India

By  
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Scholars interested in Comparative History of Religion have in the past been of the opinion that belief in a Saviour or Messiah is a late phenomenon in the history of religious development. But recent studies of this complex problem have convincingly proved that the belief in a saviour is not at all restricted to religions of highly civilized peoples, it can also be found in primitive religions. In some tribes such belief seems to be very ancient and to form an integral part of their religion, while in others such "saviours" rise up even in our times and their whole life-story unwraps itself before our eyes.

The origin of present-day messianic movements is often conditioned by peculiar economic and social situations which are causing severe mental tension and material distress. Such situations are mainly the result of exposure to strong influence and overpowering interference by alien civilizations. Primitive peoples, in close and long contact with such high civilizations, while unable to withstand their influence and interference, are on the other hand often averse to assimilation or to the active adoption of the new ways of thinking and living forced upon them. The consequence is extreme mental disturbance which is the more severe if it is coupled—as it usually is—with economic exploitation and social and political oppression. Unable to continue their life in these distressing circumstances, but equally unable to escape their present predicament, they find ultimately, often after repeated failures of flight or rebellion, their last hope in a charismatic leader or saviour who is to lead them out of their unbearable situation and to an earthly paradise or heaven

by more or less supernatural and miraculous means.

The original and traditional belief in and yearning for, a Messiah and Saviour, are no doubt often intensified and greatly strengthened by Christian teaching. The Christian Missions have in present times reached the last boundaries of the world and there is hardly any people and tribe left who did not yet hear of Jesus, the long expected Saviour and Messiah of the whole world. It is also due to these Christian messianic ideas preached by all Christian Missions that messianic movements arise among primitive peoples exposed to economic exploitation, social oppression and cultural interference. Thus we find messianic movements mainly among primitive groups that for some time have been exposed to Christian missionary influence. This is true also in India, though also Hinduism has its traditions of Messianism—the so-called *avatars* (incarnations) and the divine figures of the various Bhakti cults. Some messianic movements among Indian primitives may owe their origin to Christian influence, but others found their inspiration in Hindu messianism.

The messianic movements all over the world possess a number of characteristic common features which, though often strikingly similar up to small details, nevertheless cannot be explained in terms of diffusion or cultural borrowing. These similarities must be attributed rather to similar social and economic situations to which the human mind reacts all over the world in a similar manner. In fact, mutual influence of such movements can in many cases positively be ruled out.

Such messianic movements have been reported from Oceania, America and especially from Africa. It is only since a few decades that the attention of the anthropologists and students of Comparative Religion has been focussed on them. But now an extensive bibliography of such studies could be compiled; the best studies are by G. Hoeltker, M. Leenhardt, E. Andersson, B. Sundkler, K. Schlosser, G. Balandier, G. S. Slotkin, H. Deschamps, J. Eberhardt, K. Burridge, W. Wallis and P. Worsley. However, these authors described particular movements, confined to certain areas or peoples. The first general study of all these movements was published as late as 1959 by G. Guariglia in his book "Prophetismus und Heilserwartungsbewegungen als völkerkundliches und religionsgeschichtliches Problem"<sup>1</sup> (Horn-

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1) "Prophetism and Movements in Expectation of Salvation as a Problem for Anthropology and Comparative History of Religion."

Wien). Lately W. E. Mühlmann has published another general study of the same problem entitled "Chiliasmus und Nativismus".<sup>2</sup>

In the study of the messianic movements India has so far received scarcely any consideration. Only one preliminary study has been published by the author of this paper<sup>3</sup>. The reason for the neglect of the Indian movements lies probably in the inavailability of the sources which are buried away in journals inaccessible to foreign students of this problem. The present paper attempts to fill this gap and to bring to light all the evidence on messianic movements among the Indian primitives.

The characteristic features which in lesser or greater prominence are found in almost all these movements are: 1) a society intensively dissatisfied with the social and economic conditions which this society is forced to accept; 2) the existence of emotional unrest in this society displaying certain hysterical symptoms; 3) the appearance of a charismatic leader; 4) this leader demanding implicit faith and obedience from his followers; 5) the test of this unquestioned faith and obedience consisting either in a radical change of life (cessation of cultivation of their land, change of employment, etc.), even destruction of their property (furniture, houses, livestock); 6) rejection of the established authority and call for rebellion against it; 7) threat of severe punishment for opponents and traitors of the movement; 8) "Revivalism", i.e., the attempt at reviving certain important elements of the ancient traditional culture which have disappeared under the influence of the alien civilization; 9) "Nativism", i.e., the attempt of a primitive people to restore its whole pristine culture and to reject all alien elements assimilated from foreign cultures; 10) "Vitalism", i.e., the desire of the members in the movement for alien goods, especially spiritual ones, from "heaven", through superhuman powers or through magic; 11) "Cargo Cult", i.e., the expectation of alien goods, especially material ones, by boat from distant countries, provided for and sent by the ancestors (cf. New Guinea!); 12) "Syncretism", i.e., the indiscriminate adoption of various cultural traits of modern civilization by a primitive people; 13) "Millenarism", i.e., the

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2) "Chiliasm and Nativism." *Studies to a Sociology of Revolutions.*

3) S. Fuchs: *Messianic and Chiliastic Movements among Indian Aborigines.* In: *Studia Missionalia.* Vol. XIII, Roma 1963, pp. 85-103.

hope and expectation of a paradise on earth; 14) "Eschatologism", i.e., the expectation of a world renewal and improvement through world-wide catastrophic revolutions and upheavals.

These fourteen traits are found more or less strongly represented in almost all messianic movements all over the world, and also in India. This paper will show that primitive India has had its messianic movements and that also in India they display more or less the same characteristic forms as in other continents. The vast sub-continent of India contains large pockets of primitive tribes. It is evident that these tribes must have come in contact with the highly civilized Hindu and Mohammedan population and that this must have produced plenty of difficulties for the primitives. If economic exploitation, social degradation, and cultural disturbance and interference create messianic movements all over the world, we should certainly expect to find them also in India. And this is in fact so.

The primitive tribes of India are found mainly in three areas: in South India, in the north-eastern parts of Central India, and in Assam (with West Bengal). Western and northern India also have their contingent of primitive groups, but they are scattered in small communities and are, with the exception perhaps of the Bhil, almost completely detribalised under the influence of superior Hindu and Mohammedan culture.

The most important and fairly compact group of primitive tribes of India is found in Central India. Indeed, in certain areas the primitives form the majority of the population. Here the tribes have preserved their tribal culture and traditions to a large extent. Numbering over 12 millions, they have so far resisted successfully any attempts at assimilation and detribalisation though they were since centuries subjected to the domination and arrogant interference by Hindu and Moslem overlords. Needless to say that most of the messianic movements found in India are reported from this Central Indian province.

The second largest group of primitives is found in Assam (with West Bengal) and the North-Eastern Frontier Agency. However, the primitives of this part of India have been least disturbed and have been able to retain their traditional manner of living. Only in the last decades have they come more seriously in contact with an interfering government; a number of the tribes are still fighting for complete independence or at least partial autonomy. Messianic movements are found only among a few small tribes, like the Lushei and Kacha Naga, tribes that

have for some considerable time been influenced by modern civilization or by overpowering neighbours.

The primitives in South India are also divided into numerically small tribal groups; they have been decimated and scattered and so completely subdued by the superior cultivating castes that no fighting spirit is left in them. They are everywhere on the retreat and their disappearance as tribal entities or their assimilation by the lowest strata of classless proletarian society is only a question of time. No messianic movements are reported from the South Indian primitives.

### I. Messianic Movements in the Central Indian Tribal Group

The Central Indian tribal group comprises some twelve million tribes-men; they reside mainly in the states of Bihar and Orissa, and the adjacent regions of Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. In their great majority the tribes are agrarian, though they supplement even today their livelihood with the collection of jungle produce. They have given up their traditional "shifting cultivation" only lately and are now plough cultivators.

Their still very primitive and ineffective methods of cultivation require extensive lands and yield poor harvests. In the past waste land was available in abundance; but with the increase of the Indian population land became scarce and large tracts of aboriginal land were acquired or usurped by Hindu and Mohammedan cultivators. The tribal people were gradually dispossessed of their land and reduced to the status of tenants, field servants, even serfs and slaves of their Hindu and Moslem masters.

Ruthless exploitation and administrative discrimination added to their further economic impoverishment and their social degradation. In their desperate straits the tribals began to listen eagerly to the promises of men claiming to possess superhuman powers and assuring them deliverance from slavery and a paradise on earth without labour, suffering and hunger.

#### 1. Messianic Movements among the Munda

The Munda are an important aboriginal race in Chotanagpur, in north-eastern Central India. They are primitive cultivators.

By tradition land was formerly owned by the village communities, the individual families having only the usufruct of the fields which they actually cultivated. In course of time some Munda headmen rose to prominence and became petty kings. Other Munda communities became subject to Hindu (Rajput) rulers. The Munda chiefs adopted Hinduism because they wanted to be on an equal footing with the other chiefs and nobles of Chotanagpur. After the example of the Hindu rulers, they also surrounded themselves with Hindu priests and officials. Through these men Hindu customs found entrance among the Munda.

Now it was the custom of Hindu rulers, adopted also by the Munda chiefs, to reward their Hindu priests and courtiers with grants of whole villages and large tracts of land. For to the Hindus the king is the ultimate owner of all the land. When such grants were made in the Munda tracts and all land distributed among the Hindu officials, the Munda cultivators at first scarcely noticed the change from free ownership to tenancy as land was in abundance and taxes low. But slowly the situation changed. More and more Hindus invaded the Munda territory, and the Hindu and Mohammedan landlords began gradually and systematically to tighten the control of their tenants and to reduce the independence of the Munda to practical serfdom. Tenancy rents were increased, forced labour and various other forms of economic exploitation were introduced. Many Munda were deprived of their ancestral lands since they had no title deeds and Hindu revenue officers did not understand the customary Munda land property rights. Money lenders began their nefarious trade among the carefree and improvident tribals, and more cultivators lost their land to foreign invaders. *Diku* (foreigner) became a hated by-word among the Munda.

When the British took over the administration of the regions inhabited by the Munda, they adopted the revenue customs of the Hindus and not those of the Munda of which they were completely ignorant. In order to increase the revenue and to tighten their administrative control, they even granted in 1806 police powers to the landlords so that the Munda tenants were now completely at the mercy of their Hindu and Moslem oppressors. These could now carry on their oppression and exploitation without any check. Gradually the injustice increased beyond endurance. The Munda, great lovers of independence but at the same time no fighters, would have retired to new

forests in quest of new fields and new homes, as they had done on former similar occasions. But now no virgin forests were any longer left into which they could have retreated.

This explains the serious agrarian troubles which from time to time broke out in the Munda country during the 19th century. The Munda had no other choice than to fight openly for their rights or to be reduced to complete slavery which their oppressors obviously aimed at. The Munda rebelled against their oppressors seven times between 1789 and 1832, chiefly in 1811, 1819-20, and again in 1832. But the British administration was completely on the side of the Hindu and Mohammedan landlords and enforced law and order, as the colonial power understood it, with the force of its superior arms. The British East India Company, then in power, felt in duty bound to preserve peace in the new province which it had annexed, though it was not yet able to administer it efficiently and humanely. Thus all uprisings brought the Munda no relief, on the contrary, they only aggravated their distressing situation. The pressure of the victorious landlords under the cover and protection of British administration became more and more stifling.

In their plight, the Munda turned, especially after the Great Mutiny (1857), in great numbers to the Evangelical Lutheran Mission which had recently started mission-work in Chotanagpur. The missionaries promised help. But the Munda, elated by the encouragement and sympathy of the missionaries, soon overstepped the limits of legal resistance and committed acts which were incompatible with law and order. The very existence of the Protestant Mission in Chotanagpur would have been endangered if the missionaries had not ultimately dissociated themselves from the lawless and violent behaviour of the Munda. These, on the other hand, felt themselves betrayed by the missionaries and apostatized in thousands.

The better educated among these apostates, often trained by the missionaries, now formed various groups and associations searching some ways for justice and redress. They presented a dangerous potential for rebellion. They only lacked a powerful leader who would unite them and lead them to concerted action.

In 1895, at last, such a man was found. He was Birsa, of the village Chalkad in Thama *thana* (police district). Between twenty and twenty-five years old, he possessed remarkably attractive features and was of more than average intelligence. He

had received some education, as he had attended for some time the Lutheran mission school at Chaibassa. Then he had for some time lived with a Hindu monk and later with a devotee of the Vaishnava sect. Though finally Birsa reverted to his old Munda faith, he had received much inspiration from his Christian and Hindu teachers.

Birsa began his mission by spreading the rumour that God had appointed him to save his people and to deliver it from the slavery of the *Diku* (foreigners). He claimed to have received his vocation when a flash of lightning struck him during a storm, but instead of killing him illumined and transfigured his face. He had a witness for this event who never tired of describing this miracle. Birsa found soon a large following and pilgrimages were started to the "Dharti Aba" (Father of the World), as he had himself called. He was credited with miraculous powers; he could multiply grain and cure diseases. Failures did not seem to weaken the confidence of his new disciples; they were attributed not to Birsa's lack of power, but to want of faith and to the disobedience of the patients. Later Birsa claimed to be God himself (Bhagwan) and threatened with death all those who did not believe in him.

His teachings were a strange mixture of religion and politics. He propagated the Hindu ideals of ritual purity and asceticism, while at the same time he encouraged his disciples to defy the Government and to disobey the officials. He forbade the worship of idols and spirits which play such a prominent role in Munda religion. He taught that there was only one God to whom alone worship was due. This doctrine appealed to the Munda also because they had grown tired of the heavy expenses for numerous sacrifices to the spirits, advocated in their distress by their own priests. They had proved to be of no use.

Birsa had no definite ritual of worship, but arranged prayer meetings after the fashion of the Lutherans. He had attended them often while at school at Chaibassa. Thursday, the week-day on which he was born, was set aside for the worship of God. Work was forbidden on that day. Birsa's followers had to wear the sacred thread of the high-caste Hindus. Birsa conceived a code of morals which followed the Ten Commandments. He preached that theft, deception, murder, drunkenness and polygamy were wrong, though he himself exempted himself from this last command, keeping two wives. He ordained that pigs and fowls of a white colour were unclean and should

be destroyed. This order was carried out promptly by all Munda in the districts affected by the movement.

Birsa prophesied that a deluge would flood the whole country leaving only one dry spot—on top of the hill where he resided with his lieutenants. Fire and brimstone would descend from heaven; those who stayed with him would be saved, the rest would all perish. This catastrophe would soon take place; it was wasted labour, therefore, to weed the crops; and, as the people would have no further use for ploughing, they should turn all cattle loose. Government money would turn into water and it was useless to keep it. They should spend all their money in buying new clothes, for when the great day of doom came the elect would have to be dressed in new garments. As a result of this teaching the Munda in many villages stopped all cultivation, thousands of cattle were turned loose into the jungle where they got lost or were stolen. All cloth in the local markets was bought up quickly so that prices rose sharply. A vast number of people assembled on the appointed day on Birsa's hill and waited for hours for the events to take place as foretold by the prophet. When nothing happened the crowds were disappointed. When Birsa explained to them that the catastrophe had been postponed for a time, they faced starvation; for they had abandoned their fields and turned loose their cattle. How were they now going to live?

In order to restore the somewhat shaken confidence of his followers Birsa's teaching now gradually took a more political turn and became incendiary. Its ever-repeated refrain was that the Munda should rise against their oppressors, drive out or slay all foreigners—Hindu as well as the British—and establish a Munda reign, with him as leader and ruler. Birsa announced that he would call fire from heaven to destroy the hated invaders of their country and that also all Munda who had failed to join him would perish. He promised that the bullets of the soldiers sent against his followers would turn into water and in the eventuality that he was taken captive he would render himself invisible and return to them. Only a lifeless log of wood would remain in jail, while his spirit would always be with them under some disguise and lead them to victory.

As a result of such teaching the gathering of armed Munda increased to about 6,000 around Birsa who in 1895 finally decided on open rebellion. The situation became very critical. The British authorities at last saw that Birsa's pretensions were go-

ing too far. Police were sent out to arrest him. His followers however protected him and resisted strongly. In revenge Birsa spoke of having all unbelievers massacred. Even the date was fixed for it. But on the eve of the rising a British police officer arrived at Chalkad with twenty constables, arrested Birsa at midnight when his followers were all asleep, took him on his own elephant and carried him off to jail.

With their leader thus removed, the Munda were unable for concerted action and the rising never took place. Birsa was tried by a British judge and condemned to 2½ years of jail, also some of his lieutenants received jail sentences. In 1897, however, Birsa was pardoned and released on occasion of a general amnesty. For some time he kept quiet, but then he began to plot another rising which was mainly directed against the Christian Munda and their missionaries. In preparation for the revolt his followers were liberally sprinkled by Birsa with Bir-da (hero water) and assured that no enemies could conquer them. The rising was planned for Christmas Eve of 1897. Many Christian Munda who had gathered at the mission stations and in their village chapels for the Christmas celebration were attacked and their houses burned. The Government had to send a military expedition against the rebels. In the encounter in which the rebel Munda fought with great bravery though with pitifully inadequate weapons 200 persons were said to have lost their lives. Fr. J. Hoffmann, however, estimated the number of persons killed as not more than twenty. Birsa was captured and thrown into jail at Ranchi. While awaiting trial he fell ill of cholera and died.

This was the last attempt of the Munda to recover their lost rights and land by force of arms. But many Munda still refuse to believe that Birsa is dead and they entertain the secret hope that one day he will return to lead them the way to final deliverance from all evils.

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## 2. Messianic Movements among the Oraon

Another important tribe in Chota Nagpur is that of the Oraon. Unlike the Munda, they are speaking a Dravidian language, the Kurukhi. Their social and economic situation has always been very similar to that of the Munda with whom the Oraon live in close geographical contact. No wonder that messianic movements occurred also among the Oraon, the more so as Christian missionaries were since early times very active among them and spread the message of a Messiah also among the Oraon. Many of the Oraon who refused to join the Christian Faith accepted the promise of a deliverer from all oppression and unhappiness.

In the years 1895 to 1900, and again at the beginning of the First World War, various prophets (*bhagats*) arose among the Oraon. It was the time when Birsa Bhagwan was active among the Munda. The Oraon originators and followers of the messianic movement called theirs the "Kurukh Dharam" or the real and original religion of the Kurukh or Oraon. What gave the new faith its initial impetus and appeal and helped at first so much to its phenomenal success, before long, however, proved also to be its weakness and caused its final failure. This unfortunate circumstance was the combination of a strong desire for deliverance from the bondage of capricious and blood-thirsty tribal spirits with perhaps a still stronger yearning for deliverance from the burden of an oppressive and unjust revenue system and the exploitation by landlords, moneylenders and various government officials. In fact, the great appeal of the new faith rested mainly on the promise held out by the propagators of the Kurukh Dharam that through devotion to Bhagwan, the one true God, they would be able to obtain relief from their long-standing agrarian grievances and the present wretchedness of their economic condition. Moreover, they would at the same time rise socially over their Christian tribal fellows and become equal with the Hindus who at present claimed to be superior to them and looked down on them with contempt and scorn.

Here too, consequently, the religious aspect of the movement was intimately connected with social and economic interests.

The leaders of the new movement were certainly indebted to ideas of the Hindu Bhakti cults and to Christianity when they preached that their followers must begin their new life by abandoning the worship of the spirits which so far had played a most important role in their religion. They declared that in their past—in the golden age—the Oraon had worshiped one God only and it was this that had made them so happy and free. It was due to the unfortunate influence of the Munda that they had slowly adopted the worship of the spirits. And they believed that those very spirits were responsible for their present adverse social and economic condition. These spirits must not only be abandoned but positively expelled from the Oraon country. The Bhagats invented a special ritual of exorcism for this purpose.

The individual who first expressed in words these ideas that had been long fermenting in the minds of the Oraon race was a young man, Jatra by name. He was about 25 years of age, a resident of the village Chepri Nawatoli near Gumla. In April 1914 he proclaimed to his fellow tribesmen that in a dream the Supreme God Dharmes had told him to give up exorcism and spirit worship, to abjure all animal sacrifice, animal food and liquor, and to give up ploughing their fields because it entailed cruelty to oxen and cows. Moreover, it failed to save the tribe from famine and poverty. The Oraon should revert to their ancient traditional form of cultivation, to "shifting cultivation". Nor should they further work as coolies and labourers for men of other castes and tribes. He further proclaimed that he had been ordered by Dharmes to gather together as many disciples as he could, teach them songs and incantations which came to him through divine inspiration and thereby to cure fever, sore eyes and other diseases. He soon collected a following of one to two thousand Oraon. Like Birsa Bhagwan among the Munda, he too proclaimed himself undisputed leader of all Oraon in matters temporal as well as spiritual, and warned those who did not join his movement that they would be stricken dumb.

The new faith soon began to spread like wild-fire. But on his refusal to allow his followers to take up work as coolies for the construction of a school in a village adjacent to his own, Jatra Bhagat was arrested by the police with seven of his followers. The Magistrate who tried them bound them down to

keep the peace and released them. Jatra Bhagat got frightened and abandoned his preaching. He disappeared from the scene. His further fate is unknown.

But the movement went on spreading, and other leaders appeared in different villages of the Oraon country. Thus an Oraon woman of the village Batkuri in Ranchi District one day went for her bath in a tank. When she did not return home her husband, after waiting anxious hours for her return, went to the tank and found her seated on the bank in a semi-conscious state of spiritual exaltation. She was repeatedly uttering the words "Bom-Bom-Bom"—the orthodox Hindu salutation for Mahadeo (Shiva of the Hindus). She was believed to have had a vision of the deity, and was reverently taken home. Soon afterwards she began to preach the new faith of *bhakti* (devotion) that had been revealed to her by Mahadeo (Shiva). Her doctrine was substantially the same as that taught by Jatra Bhagat. In her own and in some neighbouring villages this woman was accepted as a prophet.

Quite a number of such local prophets rose among the Oraon professing more or less the same current ideas. About the latter part of 1915 these local movements began to converge to one large and powerful messianic movement which went under the name 'Tana Bhagat Movement'. It spread practically over the whole of Chota Nagpur wherever Oraon villages could be found. Members of other tribes rarely joined this movement.

The message of this Tana Bhagat Movement—called *tano* or *tana* (to pull, or pulling) from the frequent use of this word in their hymns—was that God (whom they called Dharmes, the "Just", or Bhagwan, the "Bountiful") would send a most powerful and beneficent delegate down to earth to redeem the Oraon from their misery. Sometimes this Messiah was identified with Birsa, the Munda revolutionary of 1895, or with the German Kaiser Wilhelm II, or with other celebrities. This messenger of God would teach them all that was necessary for them to know. Without any troublesome instruction in school the Oraon would learn in one day so much that they could pass their high school examinations with flying colours. This delegate sent by God would lead them to victory, would expel all foreign settlers from their land and restore all their property to them. He would do this during a darkness lasting seven days and seven nights.

After the darkness a bright day would follow lasting equal-

ly long—seven days and seven nights. In this time the millennial era of the Oraon rule (*raj*) would be inaugurated. The divine messenger would preside over the new kingdom and bring heaven down to earth. A few grains of rice would suffice to prepare a sumptuous meal, and rich crops would grow in the fields without the necessity of tilling the soil and exerting themselves with sowing and weeding. Others preached that in place of a mere messenger God Himself would come and dwell in the humble huts of the Oraon.

In order to prepare unhindered access to their houses for the "Spirit from Above", many Oraon removed several rows of tiles from the roofs of their huts. Bhagwan was expected to descend from his heavenly abode to preside over their nightly meetings, and for the sake of writing down his sermons the Bhagats bought many hundreds of slates in the shops and took them to their fields at night where they held their meetings.

The Bhagats one day conceived the idea of regarding their usual cooking pots as unclean. They threw them all out of their houses, earthen pots, pans and wooden spoons. Brass vessels they buried under the hearth; they were to be brought into the open only after the arrival of God or of his messenger, who would then purify them. In some villages all dogs were killed, because it was feared that the dogs might annoy God with their barking and prevent him from visiting their villages. Bullocks and cows were let loose, since ploughing and milking were henceforth unnecessary.

In order to speed the arrival of the great deliverer the Oraon had thus, according to the instruction of the Bhagats, to fulfil certain conditions which radically changed their old habits of living. But above all they were requested to have a firm and blind faith in God and in his messenger. As the Bhagats were obviously under the influence of Hindu reformers, they demanded from their Oraon disciples abstinence from meat and liquor. In addition, objects of red colour were taboo to them; consequently, the Oraon were forbidden to eat their very popular red pepper, as well as tomatoes, and reddish rice. Moreover, all pigs and chickens had to be killed, since from now on the Oraon were denied their beloved pork and fowl's meat. The most difficult and unpopular taboo, however, was that the Oraon had to give up dancing. This was their greatest sacrifice, for the Oraon were always passionately fond of singing and dancing.

Instead of their old gay and frivolous songs and dances at

night, the Oraon were in the evenings convoked by the Bhagats for prayer and hymn singing. Often they prayed and sang throughout the night in order to exorcise the evil spirits and to expel them from man, beast and home. It was a weird sight to watch them singing vociferously, waving their long shawls in the air and swinging their spears, and stamping them on the ground in order to drive out the evil spirits. Frequently they worked themselves into such a frenzy that their bodies began to shake in contortions; they shrieked and behaved like hysterics and madmen.

When after several such meetings they were worked up properly, they frequently reverted to their old practice of witch-hunting. It then appeared to them that all their praying and singing were of no avail unless they drove out the last evil spirit from the community. In this frame of mind it frequently happened that in a meeting a man or woman became hysterical, behaved oddly and believed himself (or herself) to be possessed. The only way the Oraon knew of driving the evil spirit out was to beat it out, and this was each time literally resorted to. The poor man or woman who became the object of their wrath was beaten with sticks and sometimes so severely that death or at least serious injury resulted from the exorcism. Also other acts of violence and occasional fits of madness were the consequences of these hysterical protracted meetings.

No wonder that gradually this new cult assumed perverse and dangerous forms and finally threatened to break out into open revolt against outsiders and even against members of their own community who refused to join them. The brunt of hatred had to bear the Christians. Through the tactics of the Bhagats the members of the new sect gained great self-confidence and in their desire for deliverance from economic exploitation and want—so justified in their difficult situation—this resulted in serious threats against their landlords and employers, against moneylenders and traders, and finally even against police and revenue officers who so far had encountered only passive acquiescence to their merciless exploitation. Even many Christian converts were affected by the movement and several thousands of them apostatized and joined the Tano Bhagat Movement.

Soon the Oraon began to sharpen their old battle axes and spears and to prepare for an armed revolt and the forceful expulsion of their hated oppressors. The leaders of the movement

convinced their gullible Oraon followers that their magic blessings would make them invulnerable and turn the bullets of the police into water.

The rumours about an impending rising of the Oraon caused great panic among the local landlords and government officials who neither understood the incessant nightly songs and incantations nor indeed were permitted to approach and witness the proceedings. When a number of 'Tanas' also stopped payment of rents to their landlords and gave up ploughing their fields the Government decided that the time had come to step in and to stop the whole agitation.

No doubt, not all alarmist reports were true which the police officers received from panic-stricken landlords and usurious moneylenders who had a bad conscience and rightly feared the revenge of the long-suffering Oraon. Especially dismayed were the liquor sellers whose business suffered much due to the vow of total abstinence from drinking by the Bhagats. But it could indeed be proved that some Bhagats had added the name of German Baba (Kaiser Wilhelm II) to their prayers and incantations. As it was wartime and the British were very touchy in those days of early German victories, these prayers sounded seditious and disloyal in the extreme. The authorities accordingly prohibited the nightly gatherings and several batches of Bhagats who disobeyed the new regulations were prosecuted and thrown into prison.

Thus by keeping the population under strict surveillance a general rising of the Oraon was successfully prevented. When the messenger of God failed to arrive and the exaggerated promises of the prophets proved to be illusory, a large number of followers began to vacillate and finally to break away from the movement. The Oraon reverted to their old religion and old ways of life. Finally the whole movement broke down and the hope for a deliverer and redeemer gave room to deep disappointment and passive resignation.

But similar messianic movements are again rising in present times; they too are partly inspired by political aspirations—the agitation for Jharkhand, a province of their own, ruled and inhabited by tribals only!

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### 3. Messianic Movements among the Santal

Similar messianic movements can be reported from the Santal, a Mundari-speaking aboriginal tribe whose territory is contiguous to the northern boundaries of the Munda area. The tribe is very large; in 1941 it numbered over 2,7 millions. The social and economic conditions of the Santal were at the time of the rise of messianic movements among them practically the same as those of the Munda and Oraon.

Several times already the Santal had in the 19th century abandoned their former habitats to the rapacious Hindu and Moslem farmers and traders. Finally no further retreat was possible. The moneylenders and landlords not only exploited them mercilessly, but also accused them falsely before the British courts. The Santal, knowing only their own language, could not make themselves heard and were consequently often unjustly condemned. Oppression was fiercest in Damin-i-koh where the Santal had settled only a few decades earlier.

Gradually tensions heightened and many disturbing rumours were spread through the Santal country. One was that mythical snakes of a voracious nature were moving around and swallowing men. Various precautions had to be adopted to protect the Santal from the snakes. To carry out the rites of placation many men were kept away from their homes and from work. Their wives, in their absence, had to stay all the while in bed. Seized with fear, they were not allowed to put their feet down on the ground.

Another rumour said that a mysterious buffalo cow was wandering through the country. Where it stopped to graze all the people died. To protect themselves from this cow the Santal dug up all the grass around their houses and villages.

Then still another rumour announced that people were coming to kill all foreign settlers among the Santal. Bullock skins and flutes should be hung up at the end of the villages to indicate that Santal lived in them, or they too would be killed.

Women who had an equal number of children were encouraged by anonymous orders to become friends and to ex-

change presents. They visited each other, exchanged clothes and ate a joint meal. This custom was probably introduced to cultivate a strong feeling of solidarity between the Santal individually and between the various village communities as a group. When the rebellion was due they would then present a common front.

The Santal became deeply disturbed by all these anonymous rumours and orders. But gradually two men became known as the outstanding and undisputed leaders of all Santal. They were the two brothers Sido and Kanhu, who were later joined by their younger brothers Chandu and Bhairal. They claimed that the Supreme God had appeared to them in various disguises, as a white man, as a bright flame, as a red-hot knife, as a pierced slab of Sal wood (*Boswellia serrata*), and had given them a sacred book in which all his precepts were noted down. But the book had fallen in pieces from heaven into several Santal villages. This, they proclaimed, was a sure sign that they should soon begin their rising. The two leaders appointed themselves Subah (leaders) of the Santal and installed their closest followers as lieutenants whom the Santal should obey promptly and blindly.

However, before the decision for an armed revolt was to be taken, all other possibilities for a peaceful solution of their problems were to be tried out. So the leaders proclaimed. But their applications were summarily rejected by unsympathetic British officials whose minds had been poisoned by false and malicious reports of lawyers and landlords. As the last peaceful step the Santal leaders decided on a march to Calcutta, the capital. First they sent cups filled with oil and vermilion around through the villages to placate the spirits and to call the Santal together for this march. About 30,000 Santal, together with their wives and children, obeyed the summons and assembled at the home village of the two leaders to march in a body to Calcutta and to place a petition of their grievances before the Governor General himself.

But when on the long way towards Calcutta their provisions gave out they were forced to plunder some markets. This of course provoked police action. Near Bhagnadi, an over-eager and ambitious Indian police officer rashly decided to arrest the Santal leaders and to stop the march. But he only provoked violence. The angry crowd hacked his eight police constables to death after he had been felled by Sido whom he had wanted

to arrest. Thus on July 7, 1855, the rebellion precipitatedly and against the initial intention of the Santal leaders broke loose. Other Santal chiefs and headmen joined the rebel group, sent the Sal branch, their traditional sign for war, through their villages, raised their own private armies, killed a number of their worst oppressors and looted the markets. But British troupes, with their superior arms and strategy, were sent against them to put down the rebellion. The Santal were killed in great numbers as they fought with reckless courage and suicidal obstinacy. Many Santal villages were burned down in punitive expeditions. Finally, the rebels fled into the jungles where many more perished from hunger and exposure. Sido died in battle; his three brothers and many other leaders of the rebellion were captured, summarily tried and hanged.

Though the rising opened the eyes of the British officials finally to the extent of oppression which the Santal had suffered, little was done at first to protect them against further exploitation. Therefore soon another type of messianic movement began to grow. It was called the Kherwar Movement, since *kherwar* (villager) was the original name of the Santal. Its aim was the return of the Santal to their original culture and religion. It was announced that their present oppression was a divine punishment for abandoning the worship of God and for venerating the spirits. Deliverance could come only through a radical change of heart. It would bring back that golden age when the Santal had been the undisputed masters of their land. Then they had worshiped God alone and no evil spirits.

This was in essence the teaching of Bhagrit, a Santal who in 1871 set himself up as a religious teacher. He exhorted his fellow tribesmen to abstain from eating pork and fowl's meat and from drinking liquor. The Santal should also cease to worship Marang Buru (their chief spirit) and venerate only the one true God.

Bhagrit's teaching, however, had also a political slant. He proclaimed that the land belonged by right to the Santal and that no Government could demand taxes from them. In his meetings he used to pass a bowl of rice around asking: "Who has created this grain?" His followers answered: "God has created it." And Bhagrit put his second question: "And who has ploughed the ground and sown the seed?" "We did the ploughing and sowing," replied the angry Santal. Bhagrit then summed up: "If we did the ploughing and sowing, and God

let the crops grow, why should we pay taxes to the Government?"

Bhagrit's followers were known as Kherwar or Safahor (pure men). They finally decided to revolt at a given signal and to drive out of the country all non-Kherwar. After this, Bhagrit would rule over them.

But before Bhagrit could give the signal for the revolt, he was arrested and thrown into jail. Deprived of their leader and head, the rebels did not dare to strike. Gradually the excitement subsided, and with it died the hope of the Santal for independence and a paradise on earth of which they had dreamed so fondly.

However, this hope did not die completely. Every now and then, especially in the years when the crops fail and famine threatens, new prophets (*babjis*) arise who claim to possess miraculous powers, such as the power to cure disease, to procure offspring and prosperity, etc. There are still many Safahor (ritually pure men) who abstain from eating pork and fowl's meat, who abhor liquor. They worship Mahadeo (Shiva of the Hindus) and kill animals only when they perform a sacrifice. In this and other respects they display a decided partiality for Hindu traditions and customs. But they have also adopted Christian beliefs and practices, though they sometimes have changed and perverted them to serve their own particular purposes.

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#### 4. Messianic Movements among the Gond

South of Chota Nagpur, in eastern Madhya Pradesh, and spread over a vast area, live over three millions of Gond, another Dravida-speaking primitive tribe. The Gond too are adversely affected by their clash with a superior Hindu population encroaching slowly but irresistibly on their land. No wonder, that

tensions arose which led to movements of a messianic nature. However, the pressure from superior cultures made itself felt adversely much later than in Chota Nagpur; Hindu and Moslem invaders began much later to occupy the jungles of Gondvana. Nor have the Gond movements ever become so revolutionary and violent as those in Chota Nagpur.

Only in 1929 a certain Bhausingh Rajnegi of Balaghat District began to reform his caste fellows, the Gond, and to convert them to Hinduism. He claimed that Bara Deo, the supreme God of the Gond, was identical with God Shiva of the Hindus. The Gond had really in the past been Kshatriyas by birth, and great warriors. This was proved by the fact that in the 16th century one of their kings, Dalpat Shah, had married a Rajput princess, Devi Durgavati, who later became famous in her brave fight against the Moghuls. Gondvana was the home of the Gond where they had been kings for many centuries. Their former power can be gauged from the mighty ruins of the ancient forts. But later, the Gond had become depraved as they had adopted degrading customs. This was the real cause of their economic, social and political downfall. They could regain their pristine greatness only by a radical reform of their present ways of life. Bhausingh preached accordingly the orthodox Hindu rules of a ritually pure life: He tabooed the eating of beef, the sacrifice of pigs and fowls, the drinking of liquor. No Gond should eat, drink or smoke with members of any other caste, widows should not remarry, and girls should be married off before reaching maturity.

At the end of 1936 another Raj Gond (Hinduised Gond) reformer propagated much the same points of reform. In his zeal he visited even the wild tracts of Mandla District. He was always accompanied by a retinue of disciples and servants to prove his importance. He also carried some large books with him in which the sacred precepts of Hinduism were recorded. Though it was obvious that he himself did not understand a word of Sanskrit the books gave weight to his words. He visited all the Gond villages and held meetings in which he encouraged the Gond to reform their ways and to adopt Hinduism. He gave out that the Government supported his orders and that all those who disobeyed his instructions would be punished by the law.

He promulgated a new Gond religion. He claimed that the Gond were despised and exploited by their Hindu neighbours

because their manner of living was immoral and despicable, and that they should conform to the superior standard of the Hindus. All fraternizing with members of low castes and other tribes must stop immediately; children must be married young; widows should not remarry; women must be kept in seclusion. They must give up their gaudy and cheap ornaments for the more refined jewellery of the non-tribal women. They must dress in the Hindu fashion and wear a bodice. Dancing of men and women together must cease, especially the Karma dance was objectionable. The singing of the immoral Dadaria songs was forbidden. Pork and fowl's meat should not be eaten anymore, and in order to remove all temptation pigs and chickens should be destroyed. Cows must not be yoked to the plough as they were sacred. Drinking liquor was a sin. All Gond should undergo the Hindu purification ceremony and wear the sacred threerad like the high-caste Hindus they really were. In support of these instructions a rumour was started that the Government recently fined a Gond Rs.50 for shooting a crow. How much more they would be fined if they killed a chicken!

The movement spread quickly through the whole Mandla District; many Gond paid their fee and had themselves admitted into the Raj Gond caste, accepting the sacred thread with all the restrictions which orthodox Hinduism imposes on its followers.

At first these new laws were rigorously enforced. But soon the Gond found that the Hindu way of life was not for them; particularly their women objected to seclusion and to a restriction of their freedom. Moreover, the Gond could not afford to keep the women at home and idle. The Gond themselves lusted irresistibly for pork and fowl's meat and a glass of liquor. And they could not live without singing and dancing. Moreover, it was obvious that the observance of all these irksome taboos did not improve their social status; the Rajputs did not regard them as equals and intermarry with them.

First in one, then in the other Gond village the old songs were started and men and women assembled in the evenings for the dance. And of course, no dance without liquor! However, there was now a bitter taste in these enjoyments—the Gond felt guilty and ashamed for having failed in their highest aspirations.

Similar reform movements were started in other areas of the Gond territory. They all resulted in similar destructive

consequences on the tribal life and culture of the Gond, while at the same time they failed in getting the Gond fully admitted into the Hindu caste system.

One such movement was started about fifteen years back in the village Rattanpur in Bilaspur District under rather strange circumstances. The story goes that in summer 1945 or 1946 a cow gave birth to a calf. The owner tied the cow to a Mahua tree (*Bassia latifolia*). While the cow rested in the shade of the tree a woman came and wanted also to rest under the tree. She beat the cow to make her move out of the shade. But the cow exhausted after giving birth to the calf did not budge an inch from the spot. The woman who was really a witch and possessed magic powers got angry and cursed the cow which died on the spot killed by the force of the witch's incantations. After some time, it happened that a Hindu holy man (*sadhu*) passed that way and saw the cow lying dead under the tree with its calf lowing pitifully at its side. He proclaimed that he was going to call the cow back to life through the propitiation of his gods. The villagers came running from their huts and when they heard what the holy man proposed to do they built him a small hut near the Mahua tree. The *sadhu* began his ritual while the people looked on in awe and reverence. After the worship was completed the cow indeed revived. This created a big sensation. Since that day the Gond began to worship Mahua Deo—the god in the Mahua tree, under which the revival of the cow had taken place. In honour of Mahua Deo the Gond also took the vow not to drink anymore Mahua liquor (*daru*) though they are passionately fond of it. But the Gond are not quite sure whether the deity in the tree is male or female, in some villages the deity is a goddess and addressed by the name of Mahua Devi<sup>4</sup>.

But this was not the end of it. The Hindu *sadhu* inaugurated a whole new cult which soon assumed the dimensions of a veritable revival movement. It spread mainly in Chhattisgarh and in the adjacent districts which before Independence were feudatory states and which are mainly populated by Gond and similar aboriginal tribes.

The members of this movement celebrate their worship in a very elaborate manner. A certain village is selected and the

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4) Cf. R. N. Nagu (1962): p. 29.

worship of Mahua Deo (or Devi) arranged for as many days as the villagers can afford. For they must bear the expenses incurred during the feast. Usually it lasts nine days. At a suitable spot a hut is erected and a large circle is drawn around the hut. The area within the demarcation line is called "Deo Ghera" (divine precincts). On various spots within the circle a number of bamboo poles are stuck into the ground. About thirty such poles are erected. Each bamboo pole represent a certain god or goddess; each one has his (or her) distinctive place, a flag and the traditional emblem by which the deity can be recognised. The gods are the usual village gods of the Gond, like Mahadeo (Shiva), Suriya Deo (Sun-god), Nag Deo (Snake-god), etc., but also some modern deities appear on the scene, like Bari Bharat Mata ("Great Mother India"), Chhoti Bharat Mata ("Little Mother India"), Daruga Deo (God Police Inspector—a powerful god!), Sipahi Deo (God Police Constable), (God Jailor Munshi), and a Nadi Deo who is represented in a streamlet, an artificial ditch through which water is made to flow.

The cult is aimed mainly at the exorcism of all evil spirits believed to haunt the whole country and also to possess human beings. It is these evil spirits who cause all evils in the world, disease, hunger, misfortune, accidents, mental distress and sin, and finally death. Therefore these evil spirits must be exorcised before any improvement of the whole situation can be hoped for.

As it is commonly believed that the spirits prefer to possess women the exorcism is usually directed against them. The procedure of exorcism is as follows: The married women of the village—all of whom are suspect—are made to sit down in a row facing one of the gods within the sacred area. The women are told to remove their bangles. This is done in order to deprive them of their magic powers which are supposed to rest in their bangles. Now five young unmarried girls who, because they are virgins, cannot be touched by the evil spirits, holding twigs of the Mahua tree in their hands, walk around the women and call on the god to visit them.<sup>5</sup>

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5) "The association of virgins with the ritual is interesting and their association with the subsequent proceedings is obviously a borrowing from Tantrism" (Shakti cult), says R. N. Nagu. Cf. R. N. Nagu (1962): p. 31.

If any woman of those sitting in the row believes herself possessed by an evil spirit she begins then to tremble and to moan. This is generally accepted as proof that the woman is a witch. At once the door of the hut in the centre of the sacred area is closed so that no evil power may enter it and mingle with the holy force dwelling in it. The women of course get very excited when one of them has thus been exposed as a witch. All are eager to drive the spirit from the woman.

When the excitement has somewhat subsided, the exorcism is started. First the woman is made to step over the Nadi Deo, that is the streamlet which has been artificially made by pouring water into a ditch. A piece of wood is thrown into the running water. The woman is asked what object is floating on the water. If she answers in a cryptic manner, for instance, that a snake is floating in the ocean, the people take this as a sign that the woman is indeed possessed and that the spirit speaks through her.

The woman is then led before the various gods whose emblems are hung up on the bamboo poles. Each time the woman is asked in front of a god to reveal the name of the spirit dwelling in her. Any answer the woman gives is faithfully noted down by a man accompanying the procession. Then the evil spirit supposedly dwelling in her is requested to leave her. If he refuses, one god after the other is invoked to threaten the spirit with his traditional weapon. Often it happens that the spirit gets frightened and the woman is released of his presence then and there. But if the spirit is obstinate the woman is taken before Daroga Deo, the powerful God Police Inspector! She is tied with a strong rope which is gradually tightened until the pain increases to such intensity that the spirit in the woman feels obliged to disclose his identity. He must take an oath on Ganges water and the sacred *tulsi* (basil) plant that he speaks the truth.

The possessed woman must now tie her hair in a knot. The spirit is supposed to reside now in this knot which with an iron knife or sickle is suddenly cut off. For this rite the assistance of Kumbhi Deo is invoked. The woman thus delivered from the evil spirit is then taken the round to all the gods in the bamboo poles. Finally she is generously sprinkled with water and vigorously shaken till she comes to her senses again. Usually she is quite unaware of all that has taken place.

Sometimes such an exorcism is dangerous and may even

lead to the death of the victim. In 1957, for instance, such an exorcism took place in the village Silhari near Shapura in Madhya Pradesh. Some days previously the goddess Mahua Devi had been installed in the village and the villagers had been offering water to her for propitiation. Thereafter, the women offered water for three days according to the ritual. Then the magicians (*panda*) started their witch hunt. They began it by playing their flutes, beating drums and dancing before the Devi. Then five virgin girls were called. They joined in the dance but in a separate group, and fell into trance. As soon as they did so they were placed between the planted bamboo poles. There was a rush of blood to their heads. In this hysterical state they threw a coconut before two women and declared them to be witches. The two old women were made to sit near the sacred fire (Havan Kund). The magicians—priests of the Devi—continued their dance, occasionally tapping the women with iron tongs and requesting them to confess their guilt.

In the evening the two unfortunate women were allowed to go home. But the dance and the ceremonies were continued on the following day. A small girl fell in trance and declared a third woman as a witch who had performed black magic on her. That woman too was called from the crowd and ordered to sit near the altar beside the two old women who had been declared witches on the previous day. She was questioned but vehemently protested her innocence.

The drum beating and flute playing continued. The magicians heated iron rods to red heat in the fire of the Havan Kund and after applying a little clarified butter on their palms handled the hot irons without burning their hands. This was a proof of the magic powers of Mahua Devi, they declared.

The three women were tied to the post of Kalimai (Goddess Kali) and kept there the whole day. At sunset the villagers were asked to go home. But the magicians remained guarding the three women. They were denied food and water, and kept tied in such a position that they could neither sit nor stand erect.

At night the relatives of the third woman decided to rescue her early next morning. When the usual ritual started on the next day, three young men armed with sticks rushed at the spot and rescued the woman though the magicians resisted strongly. But no one raised a hand for the first two women who were widows without children and destitutes.

The two old women were kept tied to their posts till afternoon when they confessed their guilt in sheer despair and agreed to show the article which contained their magic powers. This was supposed to be the heart of one of the boys alleged to have been killed by their black magic. They were released and taken near the river where they pretended to search for the article. As they could not find it they were brought back and again tied to their posts. By sunset one of the two women died of exposure. The other one was released, but she also collapsed and died soon afterwards.

The magicians wanted to cremate the bodies to obliterate all traces of their guilt. But a report was made to the police and the whole procedure with its fatal result revealed.

Though normally the practices of the exorcists are less dangerous, the incident just described shows that such revival movements may lead to very unhappy results.

This ritual of exorcism and worship of Mahua Deo and the other thirty gods is continued usually for nine days in one village. On the last day a ceremonial dinner is prepared with the first fruits of the new harvest. A part of the rice and of the coconuts offered in worship is taken home by all who attended the meal and mixed into the grain in the bins and into other foodstuff which is thereby blessed.

When the feast is completed in one village it may start all over again in another. Thus all villages of the district are in turn sanctified and cleared of the evil spirits believed to be residing in the area.

But the organisers of the Mahua Deo cult are not content with the one aim of driving out evil spirits. They aim also at the ritual purification of the Gond. Therefore they demand from all persons attending the celebration that during these nine days they abstain from meat and liquor. During that time they must daily bathe, keep their houses clean and must fast, taking only one meal a day. Some of the followers of this Bhagti Movement—as the cult is also called—have made the vow to observe these severe rules every day throughout their life. The worship of the cow is also an important part of this cult. Beef-eating is naturally looked upon as a major crime.

The propagators of the Mahua Deo cult have organised themselves into a legal association: they now have a president, a secretary and an executive committee. Their aim is to purge Gond society systematically and ritually from various evil

practices. Their way of doing this is certainly much influenced by Hindu ideas of ritual purity and moral outlook.

Another Gond movement more in the north of the Gond area, in Surguja district, took a different course and displays again other features. In the year 1951 Surguja District suffered a severe famine. Because of a failure of the monsoon many people and cattle died. The tribal religious leaders—village priests, magicians and witch-doctors—performed many sacrifices and killed many animals and poured away much liquor to appease the angry gods. But nothing helped to bring rain. In consequence the people lost faith in their ancient religion and were on the look-out for new and more powerful gods and a more effective ritual of worship.

This new religion was inaugurated by a humble illiterate Gond woman. Her name was Raj Mohini, and she was of the village Govindpur. Originally she came from Grogori, about 30 miles from Govindpur, but after her marriage she began to live at Govindpur, in the house of her husband's sister. Until 1951 she was little known to the people outside of Govindpur. At the time of the famine she was a woman of about 35 years of age, unassuming and quiet. She was illiterate and learned to read and to write a little much later.

Raj Mohini suffered like the rest of the villagers severely in the famine. She scarcely managed with her family to survive by collecting tubers and roots in the jungle. But to her the famine proved a blessing in disguise. It made her the leader of an important religious movement.

The story of her conversion is not told by all in the same way. One version relates that Raj Mohini went one day into the jungle to collect fruits and tubers to still her hunger. When she failed to find anything edible she felt very miserable and started weeping. She was resting on a rock when suddenly she had a vision. She saw a "Mahatma" (saint) who consoled her and promised her that all her troubles would vanish if she started to lead a pious life.

According to another story, narrated in the official Constitution of "Bapu Dharma Adivasi Seva Mandal" under which name the movement is now propagated, Raj Mohini went on July the 10th 1951 to the jungle in search of edible fruits and roots. Not finding anything she lay down on a rock weeping bitterly. Then and there she received enlightenment about the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi! This consoled her greatly.

After her enlightenment Raj Mohini sat down on the rock—today her ashram stands on the rock—and refused to go home. She started preaching and advised the people to give up liquor, meat and to stop telling lies. They should follow the path of truth. In short, she asked them to follow the Hindu religion which she declared was the supreme way of life.

Her husband tried to take her home and to stop her preaching. But she refused to obey him. In fact, she broke all ties with her family. For a number of days nobody really bothered about her and listened to her preaching. Raj Mohini then returned to the village and announced a fast for 21 days to call down rain from heaven.

When her fast was completed, the rain came and brought with it peace and prosperity. Raj Mohini however became a prophetess in the eyes of the grateful people. Gradually the number of her followers increased. Last of all were the village priests, magicians and witch-doctors to accept her prophecies, but finally they too were won over.

After Govindpur had been converted, Raj Mohini extended her influence. She began to tour the neighbouring areas and on her preaching tours she went as far as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Wherever she went she was received with great enthusiasm and reverence. People were well informed in advance of her arrival and elaborate preparations were made to receive her officially. The village streets and lanes were cleaned. Provisions were collected to feast her and to feed her large retinue.

After her arrival prayer meetings were held in which Raj Mohini sang Hindu religious songs. After that she preached. The people who gathered for these meetings in large numbers and listened to her sermons offered her plenty of rice and coconuts as if she were a goddess. Every command of hers was promptly obeyed. At her bidding the Gond gave up drinking liquor and eating meat. The faith of her followers in her was boundless. She was believed to possess miraculous powers. It was claimed that the grain which she distributed in handfuls after service (*prasad*) if mixed with the grain in the bins would keep the granary always filled.

At one time the people of Govindpur suffered from water scarcity because there was no tank in the village. Raj Mohini gave the order to her followers to dig a tank. A large crowd of people gathered to dig and by evening Govindpur had its tank.

Unfortunately, the diggers struck rock and no spring was found to fill the tank.

At the peak of her movement this simple Gond woman had about 80,000 followers. They called themselves Bhagats and had taken the vow to live a pure life, that is, to abstain from liquor and meat, and from telling lies. They were supposed to bathe daily and to wear clean clothes. The house of a Bhagat was known by a white flag flying on its roof.

However, this large number of followers could not be maintained. In fact, the Raj Mohini movement declined considerably for various reasons.

One was that the exaggerated claims in her miraculous powers soon disappointed many followers. They regarded her as a goddess who could perform miracles. In all their needs and difficulties they approached her for help. When their prayers were not fulfilled they lost faith and deserted her.

Another reason for the decline of her movement was the dishonesty of some of her intimate helpers. Raj Mohini was a simple and trusting woman and therefore easily deceived. One of her closest disciples, for instance, misappropriated the large amount of money that was collected for a temple, a tank and an ashram at Govindpur. The money had been entrusted to his keep. He had to be dismissed in 1957. Also other followers deceived her and filled their own pockets with the gifts offered to her. Thus the rice and the coconuts which were offered in large quantities to Raj Mohini by her devotees were sold by her lieutenants and the money went largely into their pockets. When they were dismissed by her for theft and dishonesty they took revenge by accusing Raj Mohini of immorality.

Much opposition to the movement also came from the non-tribal landlords and moneylenders, who opposed the movement because Raj Mohini preached against free labour and the high rate of interest demanded by them. Due to the movement also the liquor dealers of Surguja suffered a heavy loss. The aboriginals abstained from liquor and the liquor dealers lost their business. These people were very influential and could exert much pressure on the timid tribals. They frightened them into deserting the Raj Mohini movement.

Another reason why Raj Mohini found much opposition was that her agitation caused a serious split in the Gond community. The Bhagats, her followers, supposed to lead a different and ritually pure life, tended to keep aloof from their unreformed

tribal fellows. They not only refused to marry into their families, but ceased to eat and to associate with them. This became so serious that even families were torn asunder, one member of the family being a Bhagat refusing to have any dealing with the other members of the family who refused to join the Bhagat Movement. This split among close relatives caused great scandal and seriously impaired the further extension of Raj Mohini's influence.

Perhaps the way of living, propagated by the prophetess, was also too difficult for the Gond. Thus many of her followers deserted her and reverted to their ancient customs. Even some of her intimate disciples left her and some of those who apparently had remained faithful to her had to be dismissed because they proved corrupt and deceiving scoundrels. Ultimately Raj Mohini found herself moneyless and almost destitute. In 1958 there was no one to assist her at Govindpur ashram. But then a tribal student joined her; he is at present her secretary.

However, this simple but sincere woman did not lose courage and give up her mission. She dismissed all corrupt and insincere followers and formed an association, legally registered as the "Bapu Dharma Sabha Adivasi Mandal" (Association of Ab-origines following Gandhi's way of life). The aims and objectives of this society are: 1) to create the feeling of universal brotherhood; 2) to preach the principles of Mahatma Gandhi and to perform all kinds of national service; 3) to wean the tribals from eating meat and drinking liquor; to spread the idea of cleanliness; to raise their economic standard; and to lay emphasis on leading a simple and truthful life; 4) to propagate the Hindu religion, to sing Hindu hymns (Havans and Kirtans); 5) to eradicate all social and communal evils.

Raj Mohini has at present 21 members in the managing committee of whom five are from Mirzapur District in Uttar Pradesh; the rest are Gond from Surguja. These members are managing ashrams at various places in Surguja, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Still, the number of her followers is at present low and seems to be further decreasing. But those who have remained with Raj Mohini are her staunch devotees; they often come to Govindpur and offer rice and coconuts to the Devi (goddess) as they call her; occasionally they contribute money or free work for her social activities. Thus they constructed an ashram (retreat centre) for her at Govindpur.

The main activities at the ashram are to recite prayers in

the morning and evening; on Thursdays and Tuesdays a prayer meeting is also held at noon. After prayers, the prophetess gives a short exhortation. The members of the ashram also organise fairs (*melas*) on feast days like Dasserah, Magh Pur-nima and Chhait Dasserah. On such days all her followers gather around her.

The new reforms advocated by Raj Mohini are made use of by social workers of the district. They also plan to co-operate in a new scheme of the prophetess which she calls 'Ansh Dan'. It means that each follower of hers has to contribute a certain percentage of his harvest to a collection which then is loaned to the poor on a small interest. Thus the Bhagats are discouraged from taking loans from the moneylenders; they should help each other. Raj Mohini plans also a bank for the provision of good seeds and of other implements for better cultivation. Thus her movement—once a messianic movement—is gradually turning into a tame welfare association.

Further down to the south of the Gond territory, in Bastar and Jaypore districts—formerly princely states—a similar movement began in 1932. It started with the rumour that a god had descended on one of the mountains of the Eastern Ghats and commanded all men to avoid things of black colour. Black goats and pigs, fowls of the same colour should not be kept or slaughtered, clothes, blankets and all umbrellas with any black in them had to be discarded, as also the use of beads or articles made of aluminium alloy had to be given up.

The Maria Gond believed this story, and the news spread through the hills with incredible speed. Everywhere black goats and fowls, blankets, clothes and umbrellas, aluminium ornaments and utensils were carried from the houses and placed on a heap at the village boundaries. Then purification ceremonies were performed to ward off any threatening disease resulting from the possession of such forbidden objects. Mohammedans ever on the lookout for quick profits made much money from the goats abandoned by the Maria Gond because they were black. The goats were slaughtered and exported.

But the Government stepped in, and its effective propaganda soon stopped the movement. Some of the Maria were even able to recover from the police the articles which they had cast off. For the police had been ordered to collect them and to return them to their owners.

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## II. Messianic Movements in Assam

Various tribes in Assam and in the adjacent North Eastern Frontier Agency came around the middle of the 19th century under the influence of British administration. Soon afterwards, Welsh Presbyterians and English Baptists established missions in these areas, especially among the Lushei, and converted many of them. Since that time the life of the tribes has changed considerably. Head-hunting has been stopped, slaves have been freed, and the hillmen have learned to obey a higher authority than their chiefs and village councils. The tribes have adapted themselves to order and discipline, but no doubt, by gaining order and security, they have lost much of their former *joie de vivre*. For not only such customs as warfare, head-hunting, slave-raiding, etc., have been stamped out, also other more harmless activities of the tribals have been forbidden, partly through a shortsighted and puritanical mission policy. Thus alcohol has been completely banned among the Christians, dancing has been discouraged, the youth-dormitories have been closed down, the beautiful dress of the aborigines has been exchanged for drab western fashions, and missionaries even insisted on cutting off the long hair of the boys for hygienic reasons.

### 1. Messianic Movements among the Lushei

No wonder that revival movements with hysterical symptoms made their appearance among the converted Lushei. They assumed dangerous dimensions in the last decades of the 19th century.

The Lushei have certain mental qualities which make them accessible to revivalism. They are emotional, have an inferiority complex and are in a degree exhibitionists. Moreover, revivalism is a somewhat prominent feature in Welsh Presbyterian circles. Certain members of the congregation who easily fall into ecstasy are believed to be visited by the Holy Ghost and their utterings are received as prophecies.

This tradition of the Welsh Presbyterian Church received a characteristic Lushei hue in certain "Houses of the Lord", as the churches of the Lushei are called. After long and tiring prayers and songs a member of the congregation feels that the Holy Ghost is going to visit him (or her). Often it is a woman or girl who is thus privileged. She stands up in the congregation, while the others make room for her and intensify their prayers and singing. The performer commences moving her feet and perhaps uttering incoherent words. The tempo of the dance increases while some man begins to beat a rhythm on a drum. "The dancer, perhaps a woman or young girl, ever more energetic in her movements, stomach wobbling, breasts swollen in ecstasy," eyes dilated, gradually moves towards the final paroxysm of surrender, into a hysterical swoon. It is reported that in some cases of these excessive emotional outbursts sexual liberties were taken and some of the sufferers were disgraced. The mission authorities no doubt censured such behaviour severely, but they could not control it in the outlying districts which could be visited only on rare occasions.

The revival movement in the village Kelkang became a rather notorious incident in the general revival atmosphere. The movement was inaugurated by three Lushei elders who obviously had plotted the whole affair beforehand in order to make capital out of these revival tendencies in the Welsh Church of Lushei. They began to "speak in tongues" according to the Bible, full "of the Holy Ghost", and pretended to make known the Will of God through their unintelligible mutterings.

They soon secured a large following and gained an ever increasing power over their fellow villagers. At last they conceived the idea of finding the Will of God through opening the Bible at random and seeking their daily guidance by reading the text on the open page. If the passage referred to sacrifices, they would demand that the faithful surrender their livestock to them. Did the passage refer to the raining of Manna from the skies, they advised the people to cease cultivation as God

would soon rain rice down from heaven. They also predicted that the end of the world was near. The children were the first to take them serious and to play truant instead of going to school, since it was clearly useless to learn when the whole world was going to end so soon.

The local mission teacher as well as the headman of the village were unable to bring the community to its senses and summoned the pastor. However, this worthy man was driven from the pulpit when he started to preach and expelled from the church. He went, but did not find the matter important enough to report it to his superiors.

The madness began to spread to other villages and to assume dangerous dimensions. The village headman, though confined to his house by the revivalists, managed somehow to send a messenger to the Superintendent of the district. This official thought the situation serious enough for his personal attendance. He took however the precaution of taking an escort of Gurkha riflemen with him. The party proceeded to a camp within eleven miles of Kelkang and there the Superintendent stopped for a while to consider what action he should take.

When the leaders of the revival movement in Kelkang heard of the Superintendent's imminent arrival they plotted against his life. They decided to rush him in a crowd and to trample him to death so that no single person could be charged for having killed him. However, the plot miscarried, for the Superintendent arrived at Kelkang on a Sunday morning before the congregation had assembled and the service begun. All houses were searched at once, the guns of the villagers confiscated. The houses of the leaders were surrounded and two sepoys placed on duty outside the chapel. Nobody had the courage to oppose the police.

The main leader of the movement had absented himself from the village when he heard of the arrival of the police. It was said that he had gone into the jungle to pray alone. He was found at some distance from the village and was arrested without offering any resistance. On the way back to the village he pretended to be mad, jumping about clutching all the while the Bible, and mumbling incoherent words. But when the Superintendent told him that he would get no food if he continued to behave in this strange manner, he calmed down. His family was allowed to visit him and to send him food.

Then the Superintendent started to question the villagers.

It was obvious that they had severely suffered due to this madness; some had neglected their fields and had been starving for weeks. Their bodies showed all the signs of starvation and nervous overstrain. It took the Superintendent ten days to restore sense and order in the village. This he achieved by a clever stratagem. He played on the fear of the main leader and told him that he would receive a long prison sentence unless he turned approver. He promised him leniency if he admitted that he had committed a fraud and that it was not the Holy Ghost who had spoken out the elders. The man confessed finally in public and the village gradually returned to normalcy. The Superintendent persuaded the Governor of Assam to exercise clemency for the culprits. Since no one was punished the movement ceased without leaving any scar on the mind of the people.

The mission authorities took vigilant care that such incidents did not happen again in other places. Thus the revival movement among the Lushei died down without further incidents.

## 2. Messianic Movements among the Kacha Naga

Of a somewhat different nature was the messianic movement reported of the Kacha Naga who reside north of the Lushei tribes. The Kacha Naga had for some time been severely oppressed by the Kuki and they also resented the administration imposed on them by the British. Thus they also were prepared for messianic movements.

For several generations already a prophecy had been going the round among the Kacha Naga that a Naga king would one day arise, drive out the Kuki and the British and rule over "all who eat from a wooden platter", that is, over all Naga tribes. It was in 1929 that a man arose who claimed to be the promised Messiah. He was a seer, Jadonang by name, of the village Kambiron. He founded a new religion which consisted basically of Naga animism, but was embellished and enriched by Hindu and Christian ideas. Since apparently Jadonang did at first not break any law, the authorities did not interfere with his preaching.

Early in his new career, Jadonang associated himself with a young girl who became his devoted disciple and priestess.

Later Jadonang succeeded in having himself and the girl whose name was Gaidiliu proclaimed and worshiped as gods. Temples were erected in their honour and a sacred python was installed at their residence in the village Kambiron. By preaching that the Naga kingdom was soon to be established they secured a large following. The program outlined by Jadonang was in short that all the Kuki, their arch-enemies, would be massacred and that all their own possessions should be spent in one stupendous feast of merit. Then the millenium would begin: the Naga would henceforth live on their new gods' miraculous bounty, wanting nothing and with no further necessity for manual work. Meanwhile the worthy pair collected a large amount of tribute from their followers, threatening all who refused to pay and to follow their orders with exile and a worse fate in the near future. They exacted their tribute with the help of agents, mostly ruffians who were known as the most disreputable members of the three tribes affected by the new movement.

However, Jadonang did not stop at extortion. One day four Manipur traders were kidnapped by his followers and apparently sacrificed to the new gods. The police was informed and soon found sufficient evidence of Jadonang's guilt. After a fair trial he was hanged; his followers involved in the murder received long jail sentences. But the Government made the fatal mistake of releasing Gaidiliu; she appeared too young for any responsibility in the crime. As soon as she was set free, her agents took her to the north, and a few days later the whole Kacha Naga country rose in revolt.

The British government had to send troupes to all three districts in which Kacha Naga had settled, to Manipur, Naga Hills and North Cachar. A number of outposts were set up from which search parties went out to catch the rebels and to keep the districts in check. The country could be controlled, but Gaidiliu could not be apprehended. Masang of Kepelo, her North Cachar agent, was a very wily man. He hid her cleverly and found ever new ways of escape when she was in a tight corner. Once she was concealed for three months in close vicinity to the military outpost at Hangrum. But no one betrayed her. She proved a very elusive prey, protected by the sympathy of the people and by the fear of retaliation had anyone revealed her whereabouts. The pursuers were often deceived by the fact that Gaidiliu could be worshiped also in spirit, without her physical presence. Often the sepoy arrived at a place of

worship hoping to surprise her at last, the Naga still dancing around her throne—but it was empty. She had not been there at all, and they had been worshipping her spirit.

When Gaidiliu left Hangrum to hide in some other refuge she left the order to the villagers to attack the outpost. She assured them that she had bewitched the rifles of the sepoy; the bullets would turn into water and nobody would get killed. The people of Hangrum believed her and one day they started the attack on the outpost in bright day-light and from a side which gave them no cover whatsoever. When the sepoy fired their first volley over the heads of the attackers in warning, they believed that the bullets had in truth turned into water and could not hurt them. They rushed on and were received by the second volley from a range of thirty yards. It was a miracle that not all were killed. But even so every family of the village mourned a dead. In addition to this the Government inflicted heavy punishment on the surviving villagers and burned down the whole village.

Still, Gaidiliu remained at large. The movement went on. Her agents were busy collecting large funds for the "goddess". They sold "Gaidiliu water" at ten rupees a bottle as a sure preventive against any illness, though the water had been drawn out of the village pond; they performed magic ceremonies for those who were ill and took large fees for them; they collected tribute from all and did not forget to put a large part aside as their own commission; but they also protected Gaidiliu well so that she could never be apprehended. She was obviously too valuable as a source of income for them that they could afford to lose her.

However, in the end the people got tired of the unending demands for tribute for the "goddess". The harassment by government and police officers also increased steadily. The number of dissenters grew, and though a few informants to the police were punished by the rebels and some even murdered, it was only a question of time that Gaidiliu would be betrayed. It happened at Lakema. There the caretaker of the resthouse heard about her hiding place and informed the police. In order to deceive her spies a decoy raiding party was openly sent into the wrong direction, while the real search party started in the stealth of night towards Gaidiliu's real shelter. Her guardians had been celebrating the stupidity of the police and were lying drunk about the house when the police arrived, swarmed over

the palisade and forced open the door. While her bodyguard was too drunk to protect her, Gaidiliu fought like a wildcat and resisted fiercely. She bit one of her captors into his thumb, but finally she was overpowered and brought before the British officer in charge of the party.

After she had calmed down she complained to the officer that she had found little pleasure in being treated like a goddess. She never had any privacy, she said, and had not even had time to take a bath, the people wishing all the time to worship her and asking her for help. So she was allowed to have a bath at last—in the privacy of her prison. Later she was convicted of abetment of murder and condemned to 14 years' jail.

At the time of Gaidiliu's capture her agents had been able to escape. It proved a hard task to apprehend them. One of them collected a party and took cruel revenge on the caretaker of the resthouse at Lakema who had betrayed Gaidiliu to the police. As the caretaker himself was absent—he had gone to draw his pay—his wife and children were all strangled and his house burned. The leader of the party who killed the caretaker's family was himself shot when he resisted arrest some years later.

The revolt broke down after the arrest of Gaidiliu and her agents, and the movement stopped. But the hope for deliverance from foreign rule never died among the Kacha Naga. They still believe that one day Gaidiliu would return to them and lead them to freedom. Before she had been arrested she had told her followers that even if she were caught by the police her real and divine self could not be imprisoned, but would escape from the jail and leave only a dead log of wood back in the cell. Her spirit would return to her people in a disguise that her enemies would not recognise her. Only her true followers would know her and she would lead them to victory.

This belief revived shortly before the second World War when the Kacha Naga found her spirit incarnated in a young British girl doing research in the Naga country. Later, during the war, this British girl was able to organise a guerrilla defence party against the threatening invasion of the Japanese. She succeeded in her task largely due to this curious belief.

Parry: *The Lakhers*. London 1932. pp. 19-25.

### III. Messianic Movements in Western India

The aboriginal tribes of western India—Rajputana, western Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat—are settled in loose groups, much interspersed with Hindu and Mohammedan cultivators and artisans. Even the Bhil tribe, of great numerical strength (over two millions!), is broken up into a number of separate endogamous sub-sections which have little more in common but the name. Some sub-sections are much Hinduized, some less, the more Hinduized ones claiming higher social rank. The Bhil are known in the annals of Rajputana and western Madhya Pradesh as implacable enemies of the Rajputs who invaded their country and subdued them in continuous wars and skirmishes with ferocious severity. When the British arrived on the scene, the struggle was almost over though the Bhil still rose a few times against their hated oppressors. Their resistance was finally broken with the help of British arms and strategy.

#### 1. Messianic Movements among the Bhil

With the pacification of western India through the British the cultural and religious penetration of the aboriginal areas set in through Hindu landlords, traders and officials. Lately, this acculturation process is being intensified by semi-official and voluntary reformers and social workers. But the slow Hinduization of the Bhil has always been much assisted by certain individuals who through their personality and teaching were able to inspire movements which in some aspects at least resemble messianic agitations.

Thus in the last decades of the 19th century a reform movement was started by a certain Lasodia. This Lasodia, who lived nearly three quarters of a century ago in Mahikantha and Dungarpur and is said to have been a Bhil, must have been a remarkable man. He proclaimed that he possessed divine powers which he had acquired through a mystic communion with supernatural forces. He proved his superhuman status by eating broken glass and scrap iron.

The Bhil were astounded; they had never seen anything the like and were convinced of his divine nature. Lasodia's reputation spread rapidly over the whole country. The Bhil listened spellbound to his instructions. Lasodia preached devotion to the god Rama. He advised his followers to lead a righteous and virtuous life: deception, theft, adultery, rape, etc. should never even be mentioned among them, all traditional practices of witch-craft and magic should be abolished and god Rama alone be worshipped; all kinds of meat and alcoholic drink should be taboo. The positive commandments to be observed were the usual ones: the new converts were encouraged to bathe daily and to wash their clothes, to avoid associating with other castes, especially low ones. They should practise non-violence and periodically sing devotional songs in praise of Rama (*bhajan*).

Even after Lasodia's death his movement continued through his disciples. Many followers however seem to slacken in their zeal after a period of fervour. They may even revert to their old ways of life and again indulge in strong drinks and in eating meat.

Another reform movement was inaugurated by Govindgiri, or Govind Guru. His sect was subsequently also called Nathpanthi. It began during the severe famine which visited the Bhil country around 1900. The crops failed completely and men and cattle perished in great numbers. A Govalia Banjara—caste of semi-nomadic goods-carriers and in former times military camp followers—named Vinda, a resident of the village Vedsa in Dungarpur district (formerly a princely state), deserted his home after his wife, his children and all his cattle fell victim to the famine. He moved into the neighbouring State of Sunt-Rampur and Godra where he settled down in some unknown village. There he married the widow of his elder brother. Soon after his marriage he became the disciple of a Hindu monk (*gosain*) whose name was Rajgiri. Vinda changed his name into Govindgiri. Around 1909 he returned with his wife and children to his old village Vedsa.

Govindgiri decided at Vedsa on a religious career. First he arranged a big feast and lit a sacred fire (*dhuni*). He declared that he was an incarnation of God and that it was his mission to reform the degenerated Bhil. Somehow the Bhil believed him and his fame rose; it travelled wide and spread in the surrounding regions of Dungarpur, Banswara, Sunt-Rampur, Idar, Panch Mahals and further. All these regions are mainly

inhabited by Bhil groups. The Bhil soon began to flock to Govindgiri's residence and to ask for admission into his sect. The new religious leader initiated them all and instructed them in his new faith. He preached devotion to Rama; he forbade interdining with any outsiders, even with Brahmins; he encouraged pious and virtuous living and the company with good people; his followers should always speak the truth, and abandon all kinds of falsehood; they should not steal, nor lust after another man's wife; they should abstain from meat and wine; they should bathe daily and wear clean clothes.

The new faith succeeded in attracting large numbers of converts among the Bhil who hoped through it a rise in their social status. With the increase of the number of the movement's followers also Govindgiri's reputation grew. Gradually the Bhil really began to believe in his claim to be a divine incarnation and accorded him divine honours. Even the Ruler of Dungarpur invited him to his palace and listened graciously to his religious songs (*bhajan*). Govindgiri sent his disciples out into the neighbouring villages to light the sacred fire in new centres and to spread his sect from there over the whole land. In a few years large sections of the Bhil in the districts around Dungarpur became ardent followers of Govindgiri.

This rapid rise of his influence seems to have turned the head of Govindgiri. He thought of aspiring nothing less but a Bhil kingdom in which he would be the ruler. As the first step in the realization of his plan Govindgiri retreated with an armed batch of his Bhil followers to the Mangarh Hills on the border between Banswara and Sunt-Rampur. This happened in the year 1911 or early 1912. From this inaccessible stronghold he began to recruit a Bhil army and to terrorize the whole country. Finally the Raja of Sunt-Rampur sent his well-armed state troops, fortified by the Mewar Bhil Corp and British artillery, against the badly armed and poorly organised Bhil army of Govindgiri. The self-styled Bhil king attempted to avoid an open clash with the troops, but in November 1912 he was forced to accept battle and was completely defeated. The ill-disciplined Bhil fled when they saw their companions being killed or wounded. Govindgiri, along with his lieutenants, was captured, tried and sentenced to transportation for life. But after eight years he was pardoned and released. He was even allowed to return home. However, in jail he had become an addict of hemp smoking (*ganja*). He was a sick man and died a few years later.

Thus ended ingloriously the career of a man who had proclaimed himself an incarnation of God and who had aspired to the crown of a Bhil king.

In spite of the defeat and inglorious end of the inaugurator of the new faith, Govindgiri's movement did not die out completely. His chief disciples who survived him managed to keep the reform movement alive and to gain new adherents for the Nath-panthi. It is still an important religious sect among the Bhil of Dungarpur.

A similar, but less adventurous movement was started in West Kandesh by a Bhil named Gulia. He later earned the honorific title of *Maharaj* (religious teacher, lit., 'Great King'). Gulia likewise began a reform campaign of a more or less religious nature. He preached to the Bhil, gave them religious instruction and advised them to suppress all customs which proved offensive to the Hindus. He especially urged them to abandon drinking *toddy* (palm-wine) and Mahua liquor (*Bassia latifolia*) to which the Bhil were much addicted. The Bhil were overawed by a religious teacher whom even the Hindus respected though he was only a Bhil; therefore they flocked in large numbers to his residence to listen to his instructions. It is said that at times fifty to seventy thousand Bhil attended the gatherings which Gulia organised with the help of his disciples. In these mass meetings not only Rama was worshipped; also Gulia was praised in songs as the reformer of the Bhil. And indeed, influenced by Gulia's preaching, many Bhil abjured strong drinks and became strict teetotallers. This displeased the local liquor dealers greatly, for they lost much business on account of him. One day Gulia was found murdered in his room. It was rumoured that the liquor dealers had killed him. With his death the whole reform movement lost its leader and gradually collapsed.

Another similar movement was initiated by a Hindu monk, Visvanath Maharaj, among the Bhil of Rewakantha. It is claimed that he converted in his life about 75,000 Bhil to Hinduism. He persuaded them to worship the Hindu gods, wear the sacred thread of the twice-born and conform to orthodox Hindu customs and practices. The Bhagats, as his followers were called, had to take the vow at the time of their initiation not to drink Mahua liquor and toddy, to abstain from meat, and to observe strictly all the Hindu food taboos. A follower of Visvanath Maharaj was not even permitted to accept food from his own wife if she

did not join the movement. At Juna Rajpipla a Bhil Bhagat in fact prepared his own food in his house over a separate hearth because the other inmates refused to reform and to observe the strict rules of the Bhagats.

Over and above the observance of these new regulations Visvanath's devotees were obliged to pay an annual visit to their spiritual head and to pay him the respect due to a religious leader (*guru*). However, one day Visvanath Maharaj died, and with his death the whole movement broke down and most of his followers slid back into the more easy life of ancient Bhil tradition.

In the last decade an old reform movement has started to make converts among the Bhil. It is called the Mavajiguru-nabhagat movement, or the Beneshwar-na-bhagat movement. The founder of the sect is called Mavaji, while Beneshwar is the commonly known centre of the sect. But the actual centre of the movement is today Sabala, a village about four miles from Beneshwar in the district of Dungarpur. Mavaji lived, it is said, nearly three centuries ago. His origin is not clear. While some maintain that he was a Brahmin, others assert that he was a Bhil. But most probably he was a low-caste Hindu.

The tradition records that owing to his virtues and to his life of devotion to Rama Mavaji was highly respected by all people—even Brahmins—in the entire region of Dungarpur, Banswara and the adjoining areas. He is reputed of having possessed exceptional spiritual powers and to have written a sacred book on the history of the universe from its very creation. The book contains also the future fate of the world. It is handwritten. At present it is in the possession of the head of the sect. It is alleged to be written in an unknown script decipherable only to the succeeding heads of the sect who read out excerpts from it to the devotees once a year. The God of the sect is Kalki-avatar—the Tenth and still expected Incarnation of Vishnu. The present successors to the seat (*gaddi*) of Mavaji are Brahmins. It seems that they are holding this position since many generations.

Owing to the probably low origin of Mavaji, the sect gained initially a following more in the low and lower-middle sections of the Hindu population. But since about ten years the sect is making many conversions among the Bhil.

The tenets of the sect are much similar to that of the Lasodia movement. But here there is more emphasis on the periodical

singing of devotional songs (*bhajan*). It is also more insistent on the observance of abstinence from meat and alcohol. Commensality with members of other sects and castes is strictly forbidden; even Brahmins are not excepted from it. Unlike the Lasodia Bhagats who are obliged to put up white flags on their houses, the Mavaji Bhagats are forbidden to put them up.

Recently also other sects have started their propaganda among the Bhil, so for instance the Kabir-panthi and the Buniya Bhagat movement. But so far they did not have much success.

An aboriginal tribe of Mahikantha in Bombay State, the Grasia, is said to be akin to the Bhil and has split off from the large Bhil tribe many generations ago. In the 19th century already, Kheradi, a teacher of the tribe, attempted a reform of his caste fellows. He too propagated first of all the veneration of the god Rama. He also forbade his followers to kill animals, drink liquor and eat meat. He advised them to observe all the regulations of orthodox Hinduism. Like high-caste Hindus, his Bhagats too should take a bath before having their meals, put red marks on their foreheads and tie yellow strips of cloth round their turbans.

The Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency of 1880 relates that in 1871 this movement came to the attention of the Bombay Government because the followers of the Kheradi sect had been outcasted by the Grasia community. As this caused them great annoyance and serious harm, they reported their grievance to the Government who put a stop to it. At that time the number of Kheradi's followers was relatively small and scarcely more than 400.

Later two of the reformer's disciples settled in the Idar district (former state) and attracted new followers who almost doubled the number of the movement's members. These Bhagats are peaceful and god-fearing farmers. They are remarkable for the absence of crime among them. They are prosperous, as they are leading more the frugal life of their Hindu neighbours than the unsteady life of their emotionally unstable tribal fellows who occasionally give way to excesses and violence.

In the twenties of this century a Hindu of the merchant caste (Vaishya), Motilal Tejawant of Udaipur, felt moved by the ignorance, illiteracy and incontinence of the Grasia Bhil to work for their reform. He was particularly pained by the slaughter of many animals which the Grasia committed on their

festivals and at their sacrifices. He therefore visited their villages and exhorted the Grasia and also other Bhil to abandon their bad habits and to adopt the good and virtuous Hindu customs. Among other things, he insisted on their abstinence from liquor and tobacco and begged them to give up the slaughter of animals for sacrifice and food. His zealous and sincere campaign which he carried out for over thirty years made some impression on the Grasia, but after his death in 1956 also his movement came to naught and the reformed Grasia reverted to their old way of life.

In the opinion of T. B. Naik, who has done much research among the Bhil of northern Bombay State, the readiness of the Bhil to accept the preachings of these Hindu reformers is due to a feeling of sin or guilt. The Hindu reformers have succeeded in convincing the Bhil that their adverse economic and low social condition is the result of their "bad" and "immoral" habits. They can hope of improving their desperate situation only if they gain religious "merit" by turning away from their tribal way of life and by adopting the "virtuous" Hindu life.

T. B. Naik fears that the "reformed" Bhil will not be satisfied with a mere improvement of their economic and social standards, but that they—as the aboriginal tribes in East Pakistan, in Bihar and Orissa, in Mymensingh, and in the Thana District of Bombay State—will also turn against "the foreigners in their own land", demand their departure, and ask for at least a limited autonomy in their ancient homeland. It is obvious that these reform movements have such an appeal for the Bhil because at least subconsciously they hope that they will be able to recover through them that golden age of the past when they were free and happy, when no Rajputs, British and Indian Government officials, no Hindu and Mohammedan landlords, moneylenders and traders interfered with them and disturbed their traditional way of life.

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## 2. Messianic Movements among the Warli

In the south and south-east of the Bhil territory, in the

districts north of Bombay and in South Gujarat, an important tribal people—the Warli—are living amidst a Hindu population that has long since exploited them mercilessly. The social and economic conditions of the Warli are consequently very similar to those of the Bhil. They too are treated as backward and barbarian primitives, ignorant, helpless and therefore just fit to serve the superior Hindu castes into whose hands most of the Warli land is passing. Other landlords are Parsis (immigrants from Persia and followers of Zoroaster) and Moham-medans.

The deplorable social and economic conditions of the Warli had obviously prepared the ground for a messianic movement. But no leader rose up among the Warli; they were already too dispirited. But after the Second World War a very active Communist Maratha lady, Mrs. Godavaribai Purulekar, paid a visit to the Warli villages. What she observed on this first preliminary visit made her forever their devoted and indignant advocate. As a convinced Communist she not only believed and preached that the coming paradise on earth should also be made available to the Warli, she also took effective steps to hasten its arrival.

She began her reform work by giving the Warli expert legal advice and assistance in their struggle with the landlords. She tirelessly explained the law to them that no landlord could demand forced labour, and labour without pay. She prosecuted landlords who took advantage of the economic dependence of the Warli and kept Warli debtors in bondage as house and field slaves, and prostituted their women and girls. She won several court cases and forced the exploiters of the Warli to greater discretion.

After Mrs. Purulekar had thus gained the complete confidence of the Warli she organised unions and meetings among them. Already at the first meeting at Zari 5000 Warli followed her call. This unprecedented large gathering itself was to the oppressed and helpless Warli a great inspiration. They became aware of their strength and realised the necessity for keeping united.

Emboldened by the encouragement and assistance of the Communist lady leader and her very active staff, and by the success in the occasional skirmishes with certain landlords who tried to assert their old privileges of domination over their former serfs, the Warli formed a union with the aim to end all serf

tenure and forced labour. By a strike they forced their landlords to pay them just wages for farmwork at the beginning of the rainy season. Another strike was required before the landlords agreed to grant them a fixed price for grass cutting.

In 1946, at last, a mammoth meeting was held at Bombay which was attended by 90,000 Warli. Mrs. Purulekar became generally known as the "uncrowned queen" of the Warli; she became their prophetess whose lead they follow implicitly. Ever since, the Warli vote in large numbers for the Communist Party whenever an election takes place.

The meetings and processions which the Communists organise for the Warli to rouse their spirits in opposition against their exploiters are cleverly directed to produce a peculiar mental attitude. Long marches are arranged resulting in great fatigue. During the processions red flags are carried aloft and incessantly slogans are shouted with lifted fists. The never tiring leaders, placed strategically at certain intervals in the procession, shout short and catchy slogans repeating them a hundred times. The procession shouts itself hoarse repeating enthusiastically the same slogans lifting their fists. After a while the leaders change the slogan, but it expresses the same wishes of the Warli, only in other words.

The long marches, the incessantly repeated rhythmical shouting of slogans, the waving of red flags, the gathering of vast masses of people, moved by the same grievances and claims, the open defiance of their former masters and of Government and police authority, all these factors create an intoxicating and almost mystical feeling of solidarity. It predisposes all those taking part in the gatherings and processions for any deed of violence and self-immolation demanded by the undisputed leader, Mrs. Purulekar, and her faithful Communist helpers.

It has indeed frequently happened that members of the Warli tribe have resorted to violence when out to redress an injustice against a man of their tribe perpetrated by some landlord, government or police officer. However, so far the Warli have not yet asked for Warli autonomy in the districts where they form a majority nor have they demanded the expulsion of all alien settlers that have legally or illegally acquired their land and exploited them economically. But it is only a question of time, and surely the demand will be raised for a territory in which the Warli can live without the interference of the hated foreigners and according to their old and sacred traditions and

customs.

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### Conclusion

The examples which have been given in these pages of messianic movements among the primitive tribes of India show clearly that most of them follow the general pattern of the messianic movements as we find them in America, Africa, and, at least partly, in Oceania. We find tribes living in a state of emotional instability due to the generally unsatisfactory condition of their economic and social life, due also to the impossibility of continuing their old traditional way of living while they are not prepared mentally to accept the new principles and rules of life which a superior form of culture seems to force upon them. The advent of a charismatic leader, or of a person claiming to be such a leader, be he of the same tribe or an outsider, is generally accepted as the chance for liberation from the present desperate situation. It gives hope for either a return to the old traditional way of life or admission to a new form of life which enables them to hold their own against their oppressors.

While in most countries of the world it is Western civilization and Christian religion which are opposed by these movements, in India it is mainly Hinduism that is either rejected or secretly aspired at, while Western civilization and Christian religion affect them only indirectly and to a much lesser extent. However, this does not deny the possibility that the Christian teaching of a redeemer of the world from sin and oppression, and the Christian hope for Divine mercy and for heaven, have reached somehow many Indian primitives and may have inspired them to messianic movements. But no doubt, the Hindu Bhakti cults could also have provided inspiring ideas for such movements and it indeed seems that they have been responsible for the origin of some.

The methods which the originators of messianic movements have often employed to achieve either the restoration of their old independence or the acquisition of equality with the superior

cultures are often pitifully inadequate, based mainly on magic and charismatic means, and intended to provide quick and easy solutions of all their problems. When they fail to achieve their object, as they always do, the effect is complete demoralization and passive resignation.

The messianic movements among Indian primitives can also provide certain important conclusions about certain aspects of primitive society. They show, for instance, that even among backward tribes certain individuals are endowed with special outstanding mental and physical abilities which qualify them for leadership in their communities. Government reformers and social workers should take cognizance of this fact and deliberately and purposefully train likely individuals in a backward tribe as prospective leaders. They could prove to be most effective and valuable promoters of the reformatory aims of the Government because they are members of the community and not outsiders. Most of the social workers and reformers among the Indian primitives sent out by official and semi-official agencies have unfortunately been members of the communities which have created the problems for the backward tribes. No wonder that they have been received with great suspicion and that their instructions have not been accepted eagerly and obediently.

The Indian messianic movements also show clearly how much importance the primitives place on social prestige. They are prepared to bring great sacrifices for a rise in social status. The superior attitude affected by many reformers and social workers will only antagonise the primitives. Reform movements should not be based on, and motivated by, merely economic considerations. Social prestige is a more potent motive for the primitives to give up time-worn and beloved old customs and habits for new and unaccustomed ones may they ever be so useful.

The Indian messianic movements further prove that it is a psychological mistake to demand no return for material and spiritual goods offered to primitives. Free gifts demoralize them. They do not value any goods which do not cost a price. The leaders of messianic movements in India always demanded great and often heroic sacrifices from their followers not only for admission into their movements but also as a condition for staying on in them. And the aspirants and members of such movements always fulfilled these conditions cheerfully and proudly

provided the right type of leadership was there to inspire their imagination and to inflame their idealism. The deep psychological trends and the intensive emotions which in the past have been aroused by the messianic leaders, often for a disastrous revolt and final defeat, should and could again be roused and guided to a better world for the Indian primitives.



