

Emphasizing ‘Others’: the emergence of Hindu nationalism in a central Indian tribal community

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This article is an ethnographic account of the rise of Hindu nationalism in a central Indian ‘tribal’ (*adivasi*) community. It is a response to the lack of ethnographic attention within wider nationalist discourse to the kinds of social conditions and processes that have contributed to the manifestation of nationalism at the grass-roots level. It is argued that the successful spread of Hindu nationalism in specifically tribal areas is due to the instrumentalist involvement of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), a militant Hindu nationalist organization, in local affairs. The outcome of such involvement is the promotion of the threatening ‘Other’ and the attachment of ethnic group loyalties to a wider nationalist agenda.

During the course of fieldwork in a remote part of Chhattisgarh, central India, an incident took place that signified the moment when militant Hindu nationalism became a patently visible force in this mixed, Hindu/Christian *adivasi* (tribal) village.¹ It was early evening in September 1998, a time when most people had retired to their homes to prepare for the evening meal. The exception was a group of ten young men belonging to the local Hindu community. As on most evenings, they were engaging in ‘time-pass’, an activity that usually consisted of loitering about, ogling local girls, or playing cards. This particular evening, they had congregated along the forest road at the edge of the village to share a bottle of local liquor. As equal portions were being poured into makeshift leaf-cups, the sounds of a vehicle could be heard some distance away. This was unusual, for vehicular traffic was still rare in this part of Chhattisgarh due to impassable roads, and the young men began to speculate about who could be driving through the forest in the growing darkness. Soon, they recognized the jeep belonging to two Catholic fathers who were returning to the parish church in the neighbouring village.

As the vehicle drew nearer, the young men spread across the road, forcing the jeep to come to a halt. One of them, Kailash, ordered two others to ‘bring fire’ and instructed the rest to surround the vehicle so that they could burn it. Kailash then accused the Fathers of wanting to ‘turn all Hindus into Christians, like elsewhere in India’. Because ‘local Hindus do not want to become Christians’, Kailash argued, the Fathers had instead decided ‘to bring the Hindu community down by encouraging local Christians

to make and sell liquor to the Hindus'. These accusations were met with vocal agreement from the rest of the group and fierce denials from the Fathers, who insisted that they had no such conversion agenda. To the contrary, they claimed, they were counselling Christians to avoid liquor production and consumption. Throughout this heated exchange, the Fathers remained seated nervously in their jeep. The two young men who had gone to fetch fuel now stood on either side of the vehicle, wielding cans of kerosene and large pieces of burning wood, waiting for the order to torch the jeep. Nearly an hour later, the Fathers were allowed to proceed, but only after agreeing to employ more stringent tactics against those members of the local Catholic community who continued to produce and sell liquor.

This incident occurred during the period of anti-Christian violence that spread across India between 1997 and 2000. It was directly connected to the militant Hindu nationalist movement, which, since the late 1980s, has witnessed an unprecedented rise throughout India. The long-term ideological and political agenda of this movement is the spread of *Hindutva*, or 'Hindu-ness', and the transformation of Hindu culture into an undifferentiated, unified whole, for the purpose of achieving 'one nation, one people, one culture' (Khilnani 1997: 151). This kind of singular Hinduism assumes that India has always been 'fundamentally Hindu', a community united by geographical origin, racial connection, and religious belief (van der Veer 1994: 23). Indeed, the very concept of *Hindutva* itself equates religious and national identity, where an Indian is defined as a Hindu, and the Hindu faith in turn is defined as the core of Indian nationhood.²

Like other nationalist movements that revolve around the promotion of ethnic politics, Hindu nationalist objectives tend towards the instrumentalist kind, with its proponents using a strategy of ethno-religious mobilization to propel primordialist claims that an 'Indian nationhood' should attract everyone who is conceivably classified as a Hindu by blood or descent (see Jaffrelot 1993: 6). According to most analysts, the larger political strategy built around the Hindu nationalist quest for power can only succeed in a context where there exists a perceived threat – real or imagined – to the majority community of Hindus (see Hansen 1999: 208). Indeed, the perception of the 'threatening Other' – those whose origins and allegiances apparently lie outside of this community – has been called the 'cornerstone of the Hindu nationalist movement' (Jaffrelot 1993: 522). This strategy has contributed to the political success of the movement in recent years, most notably in 1997, when the Hindu supremacist political party, the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), first came to power as head of India's national coalition government.³

Within Hindu nationalist discourse, the 'threatening Other' has historically been the Muslim community. Protecting the 'Hindu nation' against conversion to Islam has, in turn, been of central concern to leading Hindu nationalist organizations like the RSS (*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, or 'Association of National Volunteers'), an 'educational' association that is the most visible face of *Hindutva* in Chhattisgarh.⁴ Along with other Hindu nationalist organizations such as the BJP and the 'cultural' wing, the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP), the RSS has been engaged in a systematic campaign involving the aggressive propagation of *Hindutva* sentiment. In 1992 the campaign against Muslims culminated on 2 December in the destruction of the Babri Masjid, an important mosque in Ayodhya, north India, an event that led to thousands of deaths across the country (see Nandy, Mayaram, Trivedy & Yagnik 1995).

Even as anti-Muslim sentiment continued to underpin Hindu nationalists' attempts to consolidate the Hindu nation, the attention of such organizations was directed towards Christians across India in the mid-1990s, with a particular focus on Christian *adivasi* communities. The reason for this shift revolved around the view that Christians, as 'foreigners and non-Hindus', pose a threat to the national Hindu majority because they are engaging in 'divisive and subversive' activities, particularly amongst 'backward' *adivasi* communities (see Hocking 1996).

It was partly in response to this threat that in the 1990s the Hindu nationalist agenda for *adivasi* communities came to revolve around a twofold strategy: to bring *adivasis* into the Hindu mainstream by revealing to them their 'true' identity as 'Hindus'; and to counteract minority Muslim and Christian cultures which have taken *adivasis* away from the Hindu fold (Almond, Sivan & Appleby 1995; Basu, Datta, Sarkar, Sarkar & Sen 1993: 67).⁵

As demonstrated by this short review, there is an extensive body of academic work within the social and political sciences devoted to the origins and contemporary manifestations of the Hindu nationalist movement (see also Dalmia & von Stietencron 1995; Gopal 1993; Vanaik 1997). Most of this literature situates the antecedents of Hindu nationalism within historical traditions such as late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German ideas of the nation and ethnic nationalism, nineteenth-century religious reform movements and Christian missionizing practices, and scouting and the British police (see Gold 1991; Thapar 1985; 1991). Contemporary manifestations of the Hindu nationalist movement, moreover, are framed against the backdrop of a post-colonial context that has been informed by the struggle between parties, personalities, and ideologies for the political reconstruction of India (see Chatterjee 1993). As Ludden (2005: 18-19) acknowledges, this struggle, which is underpinned by the gradual disintegration since the mid-1970s of the Congress party's hold over the Indian state, is principally concerned with the legitimacy of the state and the distribution of state resources and power. Since the early 1990s, this struggle has also been shaped by economic liberalization and an increase in urban, middle-class affluence and consumerism. It is in this context that the BJP and other proponents of the Hindu right have gradually enhanced their power and that, in the 1990s, *Hindutva* 'emerged as a solid competitor for popular loyalties' (Ludden 2005: 19).

Alongside this research is a great deal of comparative literature that views Hindu nationalism, together with other 'nationalisms', as a product of modernizing and globalizing forces unfolding throughout much of the contemporary world.⁶ This scholarship, finally, belongs to a more general discourse on nationalism that has been produced over the past two decades, largely in response to the growing prominence of nationalist movements across the globe.⁷ While a detailed review of this literature would unnecessarily duplicate by now familiar arguments that have sought to explain how and why nationalist movements arise, it is important to note that these accounts together point to the role of several key phenomena: rapid industrialization and the uneven development of capitalism; modernity and (post)colonialism; the mobilization and communalization of communities in response to the impact of interstate warfare; and the politics of ethnic and other group entitlement claims in plural societies (see Smith 2003: 4; Tambiah 1996: 27).

The purpose of drawing attention to this extensive discourse is to highlight what has generally been ignored: namely, the grass-roots processes that explain precisely how nationalism is manifested and spread at the local level, particularly in rural settings,

and how ordinary persons' engagement in nationalist projects evolves.⁸ It is true that, with specific respect to India, there is a great deal of attention on the spread of Hindu nationalist sentiment and violence in urban settings. Available accounts include a focus on urban centres as the site of conflict (see Breman 1999; Fuller 2001; Hansen 1996), on the introduction of new rituals or 'invented traditions' created for political purposes in urban areas (see Anandhi 1995: 36-43; Fuller 2004), and on personal accounts of the victims of (largely urban) communal violence (Kakar 1996). While a small number of works cursorily mention the 'social upliftment' strategies being employed by Hindu nationalist organizations in rural areas (see Hansen 1999: 103-6; van der Veer 1994: 135-6), detailed ethnography is sparse, and there is no work to date that documents and analyses the precise manner by which Hindu nationalism is being introduced amongst rural *adivasi* communities.⁹

There is perhaps reason for the lack of attention to rural, *adivasi* communities, foremost being the fact that Hindu nationalism has its origins and is still concentrated 'in the heart of India's middle classes' (Hansen 1999: 7). However, the anti-Christian violence of the sort described at the beginning of this article is representative of the fact that this movement has successfully spread from its urban centres into more 'backward', rural regions, seeking popular and electoral support from India's dispersed *adivasi* communities.

This article is an attempt to understand some of the ways in which this is happening and to provide an explicitly ethnographic element that has been widely neglected within this literature. Specific aims are twofold: to identify the social conditions at the local level that have contributed to the emergence of Hindu nationalism in one particular rural, *adivasi* village, and to explore the process by which nationalist ideology is represented and transmitted to this community.

Following previous analyses (e.g. Jaffrelot 1993), I argue that the successful spread of Hindu nationalism to specifically *adivasi* areas is dependent on the 'instrumentalist' involvement of self-interested, powerful outsiders, such as proponents of the RSS, who use their positions to communalize social identities and relations by actively promoting the idea of the 'threatening Christian Other'. Here, I find Paul Brass's (1974: 37-45; 1979) analysis of ethnic group politics to be constructive, particularly with respect to the importance he gives to the involvement of political organizations in the promotion of ethnic group loyalties to a nationalist agenda.

My point in highlighting the issue of instrumentalism is to emphasize the directed and strategic way in which *Hindutva* ideology is made relevant to local contexts. And while it would be an over-simplification to argue that the events described in this article were generated solely on the basis of elite self-interest or the involvement of an outside political organization, it will become clear that the successful spread of Hindu nationalism in this area, whilst informed by local economic and political tensions and relations, is due principally to the RSS supporters' active involvement and exploitation of these tensions for nationalist ends.

Before I proceed, it is important to note that since the period between 1997 and 1999, when research for this article took place, the BJP has witnessed a significant change in its fortunes: it achieved power at the national level in 1998 only to suffer a defeat to a Congress-led coalition government in the 2004 national elections. However, the events described in this article continue to have contemporary significance and thus merit further analysis for the following reasons: first, while the BJP was defeated nationally, the party is still in power in various state governments, particularly

those with sizeable *adivasi* populations (including Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Gujarat). In such states, aggressive targeting of Christian communities, schools, and churches continues to be a regular practice amongst RSS and BJP activists. Secondly, in Chhattisgarh itself, the BJP defeated the Congress party by a massive landslide, giving renewed legitimacy and licence to the *Hindutva* ideology and campaigns, and raising fears amongst the more moderate Hindu and minority Christian communities about the potential for increased communalization. The BJP's recent electoral setback at the national level, in other words, by no means diminishes the analytical significance of these issues in the present-day situation. On the contrary, an analysis of these issues remains critical not only to our wider understanding of the manner by which nationalist groups like the RSS continue to gain an organizational base on the ground, but also to our understanding of the complex link between the growth of Hindu nationalism (and other 'nationalisms') at the grass-roots level, and larger discourses on (Hindu) nationalism.

Social setting and local conditions

This article is based on research that was carried out in a village that I will call 'Mohanpur', located in a densely forested region of Chhattisgarh, central India. At the time of my fieldwork, Chhattisgarh made up the southeastern region of Madhya Pradesh. It became a state in 2000, and currently boasts a population of nearly 21 million, 5 million of whom are *adivasi* people (Chaudhuri 2001: 86).¹⁰

Like many *adivasi* communities in this part of India, the village is geographically cut off from the urban mainstream due to thick jungle and inaccessible roads. Most villagers, who earn their livelihoods through a combination of rice-cultivation and the collection and sale of non-timber forest products, have never made the five-hour journey into the city 40 kilometres away. Owing to the lack of electricity, there is little access to 'popular' Indian or Hindu culture via television and other media. This relative geographical and cultural distance from the Hindu and Indian 'mainstream' contributes to the general 'backwardness' of the village and surrounding area.¹¹

Mohanpur, with a population of 893 spread across 165 households, is 93 per cent *adivasi*, 75 per cent Hindu, and 25 per cent Christian. The politically and socially dominant Hindus are divided into three *adivasi* groups (the Ratiya Kanwars, the Majhuars, and the Dudh Kanwars) and four non-*adivasi* groups (the Yadav, Panika, Chohan, and Chowk/Lohar). The Catholic Christians, all Oraon *adivasis*, are the lowest caste in the local hierarchy, which follows the order listed above. This hierarchy does not follow mainstream caste hierarchies found in other parts of India, which invariably place caste Hindus above those groups categorized as *adivasi* (see Singh 1993). Instead, it is defined by local rules of untouchability and most visibly expressed in terms of food consumption and commensality. No Hindu castes, for example, will take food from the Oraons, although such rules are quietly broken amongst individuals.

The high-caste Ratiya Kanwars, an *adivasi* group that has resided in this area 'for nine or ten generations', comprise nearly half the village population. Their local dominance is due to a combination of high-caste rank, 'first settler' status, and landownership, and is manifested in terms of economic wealth and ritual and political status. Following patterns in the surrounding area, the village headman, along with members of the village council (*panchayat*), traditionally and currently come from this caste. The rest of the Hindu groups migrated to the area between two and four generations ago, 'in search of land and work'. All Hindus live in caste-clusters in what is

considered to be the '*basti*', or main locality, which is built around the village shrine that houses local deities.

The Oraons arrived in the area from a neighbouring district in the early 1970s and are presently the second largest caste in the village. They, like their predecessors, came in search of land, and were given permission by the Ratiya Kanwar headman (uncle of the current headman) to settle in the area. Owing to their untouchable status, the Oraons were ordered to live in the '*uppar para*', the upper neighbourhood, located a half-kilometre beyond the main *basti*, where they reside today. In spite of their low-caste status, the majority of the Oraons continue to feel indebted to the headman's family for allowing them to immigrate to the village a generation ago.

While there is a great deal of ritual and economic interdependence within the Hindu community, there is a relative absence of this kind of interdependence between the Hindus and the low-caste Oraons. The latter as a whole serve no specific ritual or economic role for the former, with the important exception of those members of the Oraon community who sell alcohol and act as moneylenders to the Hindus. Equally, there is strikingly little informal interaction between individual members of the Oraon and Hindu communities. Individuals *within* each community interact on a daily basis, assisting each other with work in the fields, or visiting each other at home to share advice or gossip. Apart from chance meetings at the village shop, it is very unusual for this kind of interaction to occur between Hindu and Oraon individuals. Members of one community occasionally participate in communal labour activities sponsored by members of the other, however, and representatives from all castes attend each other's traditional festivals.

In the discussion that follows, I use the categories 'Oraon' and 'Hindu' when referring to members of the Oraon Christian community and to members of the Hindu community, respectively. Usage of these terms reflects both the dominant local categories of identity and the broader relationship that existed between these two communities at the time of the arrival of the RSS in 1997.¹²

***Hindutva* and the RSS in local context**

In the same year that the Oraons arrived in Mohanpur, a Catholic mission was established in Madanpur, a village 6 kilometres away, to serve the growing Oraon Catholic population that lives within a 20-kilometre range. Through measures like setting up a medical clinic and a boarding school, the Church demonstrated its commitment to 'service' to the poor and, more broadly, to turning 'backward' *adivasi* Oraons into 'proper Christians'.¹³ While this is not the subject of the present study, elsewhere I have discussed how the Church's presence and activities have served to reinforce the boundaries around the Oraons' 'Christian-ness' and amplify the cultural distance between the Oraons and the Hindus, a process that has contributed to the increased attention by the RSS in the area and the creation of the Christian 'Other' (see Froerer 2002).

That attention by the RSS is in part a reaction to the presence and activities of the Church is not surprising, for the RSS is renowned for the manner by which its strategies, particularly with respect to health and education, are modelled after the historical success of Christianity amongst tribal communities (see Thapar 1985: 18). In addition to mimicking the activities of the Church, Hindu nationalist proponents' recent attention to *adivasi* people has contributed to the RSS's own agenda of mitigating the 'backwardness' of local *adivasis* and spreading the *Hindutva* message. The sort of 'backwardness' with which the RSS is concerned in this area refers largely to

the practices that underpin traditional *adivasi* cosmology and worship, such as the propitiation of village and forest deities with alcohol and blood offerings. Such customs, described by locals as *dehati* (rural) Hinduism, are contrasted to the forms of worship found within mainstream, *sahari* (city) Hinduism, where the 'big gods' – Ram, Shiva – are worshipped with offerings of incense and flowers.

To advance their aims of reforming these 'backward' practices, since 1996 local RSS activists have mounted a number of educational and cultural campaigns throughout the area. These include the introduction of mainstream Hindu holidays and the instruction of local *adivasis* in the 'proper' way of Hindu worship; the setting up of nursery schools with the aim of communicating a relevant 'cultural ethos' to young village children; and the organization of village 'training meetings' for the purpose of spreading *Hindutva* ideology to Hindu youths.¹⁴

Amongst the RSS activists who participated in these schemes is a young man in his late twenties named Raj who hails from the village itself. A member of one of the more prominent Ratiya Kanwar families, Raj left home after finishing Class Twelve (18-19 years old) some twelve years earlier in search of a better life in the city. Having no possessions or money at the time, he frequented an RSS-sponsored ashram in the nearby city, from where he received meals in exchange for the odd bit of work. He began devoting his full attention to this ashram, which also doubled as a boarding school for young tribal boys, and formally joined the RSS in the mid-1990s. Raj's familiarity with the villages and surrounding jungle made him a valuable member of the organization, and he quickly became the primary liaison between the local branch of the RSS and the area's *adivasi* people.

In Mohanpur, Raj is something of an icon. His high level of education, which contrasts with the local norm of Class Five (11-12 years old), is the result of relative family wealth and birth order: as the third of five brothers, Raj's father could afford to spare him from participation in agricultural labour and allow him to attend to his studies. Raj's access to the outside world has conferred upon him a type of social status which, when combined with his position as a member of the most dominant tribal group, makes him very respected amongst younger members of the Hindu community. His influence extends strongly over the group of twelve young Hindu men, including Kailash and the others mentioned at the beginning of this article, who initially attended the 'training meetings' conducted by visiting RSS cadres. Most of these young men, who are both married and unmarried and hail from all local Hindu caste groups, are educated to Class Five and range in age from the late teens to the thirties.¹⁵ Some of them are taken to spend time in the RSS ashram in the city, and all have been issued with khaki shorts and white shirts, the standard uniform worn by the young RSS propagandists across India.

These young men have proved to be useful to Raj and the other RSS proponents who regularly accompany him to promote various 'cultural' campaigns in the village. Such campaigns are directed towards the village as a whole and, as mentioned above, typically revolve around the 'correct' celebration of mainstream Hindu holidays and the discouragement of the sort of 'backward' *adivasi* practices that set local customs apart from the city variety. These young men are frequently summoned to assist Raj and the other proponents by fetching the appropriate materials needed to perform a ritual or assembling other members of the community to observe a particular ceremony. In this way they are also learning about the 'proper' ways of Hindu worship. Most often, however, they are summoned by Raj to participate in an evening 'training

meeting' to learn more about *Hindutva* ideology. The personal agendas and internal motivation of these young men vary and undoubtedly include the individual pursuit of political advantage or profit. However, it is not the objective of this article to attend to this level of analysis, apart from making the observation that most of these young men did, in the early days of the training meetings, express the hope that affiliation with Raj and his powerful organization might offer them some useful returns in the future.

In spite of Raj and the other proponents' efforts, and notwithstanding the participation of these young men in RSS-related activities, neither these meetings nor the other campaigns mentioned above have been especially successful in propagating the message of *Hindutva*. The nursery school that was set up in early 1996, for example, was closed down in 1997 due to lack of local support. Likewise, the introduction of two mainstream Hindu holidays during the period when my fieldwork took place has held little long-term interest for the majority of local Hindus, who remain more concerned with their 'traditional' *adivasi* practices than with mainstream Hindu forms of worship. And nearly two years into the 'training meetings', few of the young men seem well versed or terribly interested in the *Hindutva*-based subject matter. The group, moreover, had reduced from its original number of twelve when it began in 1997 to around four semi-regular participants when I completed my fieldwork in 1999. In short, while the strategies mentioned above have, as a whole, been marginally effective in bringing awareness of the Hindu nationalist agenda to certain members of the local community, none has been particularly successful in transmitting the kind of long-term communal sentiment that is required for the broader expansion of the movement.

There is one strategy, however, that has had more than nominal impact, and this is the involvement of Raj and other RSS activists in disputes between the Oraons and the Hindus. Specifically, it is by appropriating and stripping local disputes from their social context and attaching them to wider Hindu nationalist concerns that the RSS has experienced its most substantial success. This strategy is strikingly parallel to the process described by Tambiah in his study of ethno-nationalist conflicts in South Asia, whereby local incidents are 'progressively denuded of their contextual particulars' and then 'distorted and aggregated into larger collective issues of national or ethnic interest' (1996: 81). Identifying them as 'focalization' and 'transvaluation', Tambiah demonstrates how these twin processes are compounded by the involvement of propagandists who appeal to more enduring (and therefore less context-bound) loyalties such as race, religion, and place of origin (1996: 192). It is through such a strategy that the RSS has also propagated one of the most critical ideologies that underpins the Hindu nationalist movement: the 'threatening Other'. This has, in turn, resulted in the spread of widespread communal distrust between local Hindus and Oraons, a phenomenon that is fundamental to the wider success of this movement.

Liquor, land, and local tensions

In order to understand how this has happened, it is necessary to examine the origins of the local disputes in which the RSS became involved. These revolve around the production, sale, and consumption of *arkhi*, the local liquor distilled from the flowers of the *mahua* tree (*Bassia latifolia*). An important ritual, medicinal, and social necessity, *arkhi* occupies a central position in the daily lives of local *adivasis*.¹⁶ Alongside its use as a ritual libation and cure, *arkhi* serves as an exchange item and figures prominently in the practices surrounding local communal labour. Perhaps most importantly, it is

a beverage consumed in the evening after a long day's labour by at least one member of most households in the village, on a daily or at least weekly basis.

People in this area have had the knowledge to make *arkhi* 'since the beginning', although the drink has been made by locals themselves only for the past twenty years. Prior to this, there was a government-controlled liquor store that served the consumption needs of local tribals. After these shops were closed down in the early 1980s, the bulk of the production and sales of *arkhi* has been left to the Oraons, who, it is said, brought with them 'the idea to make and sell liquor'. It is Oraon women who have the responsibility of making the drink, perhaps because the process of making *arkhi* revolves around what is considered to be 'women's labour': it is distilled within the domestic space, at the household hearth, using large amounts of water that must be carried from the village well. Today, most Oraons produce the liquor on an occasional basis, and nearly half of them sell and make a minor profit from these sales. In turn, the primary customers are Hindu *adivasis*, the majority of whom make at least occasional purchases from Oraons for both ritual and personal consumption. As we will see below, the relationship that underpins the exchange of liquor, with the low-caste Oraon acting as the primary vendor to the higher-caste Hindu customer, and the threat that such a relationship brings to traditional structures of power, is the basis for the grievances that would eventually arise and be appropriated by RSS activists.

There are two sorts of Hindu customers (both invariably male) who purchase liquor from Oraons. The first is the customer who visits the Oraon locality any time from morning to evening, in search of alcohol that is intended for a specific ritual offering – often related to illness – or for guests who have made a sudden appearance. This type of customer will be found walking swiftly, carrying a half-litre bottle in his hands, quite conspicuously and with nothing to hide, for he is on official, usually urgent, business, publicly sanctioned by the actuality of illness or visitors. After procuring the *arkhi*, he will carry the bottle in full public view and immediately return home. In a day, the Oraons will see at least three customers of this sort, although this will increase in times of widespread illness, or during the wedding season.

The more common sort of customer, and the type with whom this article is concerned, is the one who arrives around dusk. This is the time when, amidst the flurry of evening activity in the village, a man can slip out of his home, at most telling his wife that he is going 'visiting'. This is a seemingly innocuous activity that entails an hour or so of wandering around, calling on kin to talk about a worryingly dry spell of weather or the possibility of being forced to mortgage a portion of land to meet a sudden debt. In fact, his destination is invariably the Oraon locality to purchase and consume *arkhi*.

Unlike the daytime customer, who proceeds quickly and in fully sanctioned public view, this customer generally walks with a relaxed and casual gait through the shadows of the Hindu *basti* towards the Oraon locality: being undetected is important for evening customers, who do not want to appear to be too anxious about their intended goal. When the customer arrives at his destination, he shows the Oraon vendor the contents of the parcel he has brought to exchange for the *arkhi*: resources from the household coffers such as rice, lentils, or sometimes a portion of freshly killed forest meat.

In addition to the continuing availability of liquor, one reason for the regular visits by Hindu men to the Oraon locality is the relative privacy of both the locality itself, situated a half-kilometre from the Hindu *basti*, and the Oraon homes, which, unlike

the communal homes in which Hindus dwell, are all single-family dwellings. In the household of their hosts, the Hindu customer will be left alone if he wishes to sit quietly in the shadows, and his demands for a drink will be indulged without judgement. Consequently, he will often leave the Oraon locality and make his way home in a state of total drunkenness.

Arkhi, then, is at once socially prohibited and publicly sanctioned, depending on the context in which it is consumed. In the context of a wedding feast or a healing ritual – which fall within the socially sanctioned purchasing rights of the first type of customer – the consumption of liquor is acceptable. Drinking begins to be socially prohibited only when its consumption ostensibly makes a significant dent in the consumer's household resources or causes public disturbance in the form of drunken behaviour and violence.

Women are invariably on the receiving end of these incidents, either as victims of their husband's drink-induced violent behaviour, or as indirect victims of social ostracism meted out by the village headman against the drunken man's household. But the growing concerns of Hindu women (and later of the Hindu community) about drinking have less to do with the behaviour of the drunken customer, and more to do with what this behaviour signifies: that the Hindu customer has exchanged valuable household resources in return for alcohol. Because of their larger role and presence in the domestic space, women are more aware of the kind of resources (rice or lentils) that are spent by their husband's consumption habits. The Hindus' general concern with the dwindling resources in their own community is augmented by an even greater alarm at the perceived profits being generated by *arkhi* sales and the material status of the Oraons, whose household incomes are ostensibly benefiting, in a very visible fashion, from the drain on resources of Hindu households.

It is true that Oraons do appear to be a materially wealthier community. For example, most Oraon families own one (and sometimes two) of the most valuable local goods – a bicycle – in comparison with only about half of all Hindu families. Additionally, the first motorcycle in the village was purchased by an Oraon shopkeeper, as were the first two of three televisions that the village boasts.¹⁷ Finally, the first diesel-powered threshing machine, along with the only pesticide pumps available in the village, were owned by Oraons.

Reasons for the Oraons' more visible level of wealth are linked to the relationship that the two communities have to land, labour, and access to cash. Unlike Hindus, most Oraons do not own land, and are forced to engage in outside wage labour (*bhuti kam*) such as participating in public road works. In contrast, very few Hindu households engage in this sort of wage labour because most possess landholdings from which they yield sufficient agricultural or forest produce on which to live. Furthermore, and due partly to the influence of the Church, Oraon expenditures on social obligations that revolve around lifecycle rituals are significantly less than those of their Hindu counterparts. The tremendous expenditure required to maintain these obligations creates a strain on the average Hindu household's resources, and often they are forced to mortgage their land in order to meet the costs. In short, the Oraons' greater participation in wage labour means that they generally have greater access to cash. This not only allows them to purchase more non-essential goods, but places them in a position to act as moneylenders to local Hindus in need of urgent monetary loans. In exchange for the loan, the Oraon lender will take possession of a parcel of land belonging to the Hindu debtor until such time as the loan is repaid.

While proceeds from liquor sales do contribute to the overall wealth of the Oraon community, the total income earned from the production of *arkhi* is just a fraction of that earned from other wage-labour sources (see Froerer 2002). However, it is the Hindu community's perception of these profits that matters here, and the perception remains that not only is income from liquor sales making a substantial contribution to the Oraon's social and material status but, more significantly, it is enabling them to acquire possession (through mortgages) of Hindu-owned land. As I demonstrate below, it is this perception that has been appropriated, cultivated, and used by the RSS to encourage anti-Christian sentiment and promote the 'threatening Christian Other' as grounds for transforming ordinary drink disputes into wider *Hindutva* concerns.

Drink disputes and the construction of the 'Christian Other'

The source of these drink disputes originated in the context of weekly meetings held by the 'women's organization' (*mehila sangat*) that was established in the village in October 1997.¹⁸ The broad aims of this organization revolve around the empowerment of *adivasi* women in the form of teaching home-based business skills and initiating village-improvement projects. The meetings were locally organized and mediated by a man named Chamalsai and attended by approximately twenty-five Oraon and fifty Hindu women.

The first two meetings that I observed in early November 1997 were geared towards their original purpose: discussion of possible small-business projects in which small groups of women could get involved. After these, however, the organization's primary concerns, spearheaded by the numerically dominant Hindu women, came to revolve around the rate of (Oraon-produced) liquor consumption and expenditure by their husbands and sons. In response, the Oraon women complained that the focus on *arkhi* was interfering with the wider aims of the organization and that other, more important issues such as electricity and clean water were being ignored. Hindu women countered that the expenditure of household resources (namely rice) on alcohol was a major issue that affected many local households, and therefore did merit regular attention.

Tensions between these two groups of women escalated rapidly. By early December 1997, these meetings had evolved into an anti-drinking forum, and the main fissure over the issue – the Hindu consumer-as-victim, on one side, and Oraon as primary-accused, on the other – began to take shape. Most meetings followed a pattern that included much loud argument about the Oraons' alleged role in producing and selling large quantities of the drink to Hindu customers, who were using household supplies of rice to purchase the drink. The Hindu women's accusations were always met by Oraon women's denials. After such meetings, an immediate boycott from both sides would be called: Hindu men would stop going to the Oraon locality to buy liquor, and Oraons would curtail their sales to local Hindus. Within a week or so, another meeting would be called because, inevitably, another Hindu customer would be 'caught' drinking.

Interestingly, the manner of being 'caught drinking' or 'selling' was not in the actual act of drinking or selling, but in the visible and often public effects of the sales: the drunken behaviour, violence, or theft by the customer from his own household's supplies. During one of the meetings in December, for example, five Hindu women got up and related how they had 'caught' their husbands drinking by observing them taking rice from the home, only to return hours later, ostensibly from the Oraon locality, in an inebriated state.

While the Hindu women became increasingly angry at what they felt was the Oraons' blatant disregard for the problem of local drinking, the Oraon women became annoyed by what they construed to be a misallocation of blame. It was only they who were taken to task and held responsible for the behaviour of the Hindu consumers; the contribution of the Hindu consumers to the problem was entirely ignored.

The friction between the two groups came to a head at the end of December, when a meeting was called by Hindu women in order to discuss the amount of *arkhi* that had been consumed by their husbands and sons the previous Christmas week. The Oraon women admitted that they had been storing the drink for their own Christmas consumption, but denied selling to local Hindus. In response, one Hindu woman declared that her meagre harvest was already half depleted due to her husband's evening habit of visiting the Oraon locality. The Oraon women accused her of lying and walked out of the meeting, refusing to meet with Hindu women again and grumbling that it was not their responsibility that Hindu men could not control their drinking.

That the Oraon vendors have taken the brunt of the blame for the social and economic problems felt by the Hindu consumers is an important point. The attitude amongst Hindus was that consumption of liquor in itself is not bad; indeed, at least one member from nearly every local household consumes *arkhi* on certain ritual, social, or private occasions. Selling, however, is perceived as bad. It leads to domestic and social problems and, worse, diminishes the household supplies of the (Hindu) customer and generates a profit for the (Oraon) vendor. I shall return to this point later on.

By early February 1998, discussions about the control of *arkhi* consumption began to dominate the public, mostly male, forum of the village council (*panchayat*).¹⁹ The decisions taken in this context are regarded more seriously by all villagers because it is mediated by the village headman. It was also around this time that Raj and three other RSS proponents, who had been conducting 'training meetings' with young local men on an irregular basis, regularized their presence in the village with weekly meetings. Importantly, these meetings were often held on the same day as a scheduled village council meeting, which was usually attended by both the young men and the RSS proponents alike.

In the village council meetings, discussions once again revolved around calls for Oraons to control the sale of *arkhi* to Hindu consumers. As before, most of the blame for production and sales was placed with the primary vendors and profit-makers, the Oraons. An important difference here was that while the women were more concerned about household resources being squandered on the drink, the men were more concerned with the sort of material possessions that the Oraons were ostensibly able to accrue through *arkhi* profits. During one particular meeting in early March, discussion centred on the new television that the Oraon shopkeeper had recently acquired. The shopkeeper was accused by several Hindu men of purchasing the television – an expense that was entirely beyond the means of ordinary villagers' income – with money he made from *arkhi* sales. In response, the shopkeeper insisted that the purchase was made possible with the profits from his shop.

This was the first time that such a direct connection was made between material possessions and *arkhi* sales, and members of the Oraon community agreed that they should totally end all sales to local Hindus. By mid-March, however, regular sales and consumption had resumed, and the problem of consumption became a regular point

of discussion during subsequent village council meetings. A turning point came in the first week of May, when an urgent meeting was called by Hindu women, this time after the evening meal. Because of the unusual hour, the Oraon women, accompanied by a few curious Oraon men, agreed to attend. The subject was, as usual, *arkhi*, with Hindu women accusing Oraon women of excessive production and sales, and the meeting soon descended into a shouting match between the two groups.

General pandemonium ensued until finally Raj, who happened to have conducted a training meeting earlier that day and had been observing the proceedings, got up and called for calm. As the crowd settled down, Raj publicly questioned the Oraon women as to why, when the Catholic Fathers visit the village in their jeep, they go directly to the Oraon locality. He did not wait for a response, but instead supplied the answer: 'because the Fathers were coming to encourage and advise the *isay log* (Christians) to make and sell *arkhi* to the Hindu community'. The Oraon women vehemently denied these allegations, and insisted that the Fathers only came to conduct the annual Catholic mass. Raj responded that the rest of the Hindu community believed otherwise: 'the Fathers had a secret plan, *like Christians all over India*, to bring the Hindu community down by encouraging Oraons to ply Hindus with liquor'. This suggestion was met with vocal agreement from the Hindu women and the crowd of Hindu men who had come to investigate what the shouting was about. As Raj sat down, a few of these men joined in with charges about the Christians' 'secret' agenda.

After Raj's accusation, Chamalsai, the nominal leader of the meeting, took control. Attempting to redirect the meeting towards local drinking concerns, he proposed a strict implementation of fines against all parties involved. Everyone present was asked to supply a signature or thumbprint to verify his or her acquiescence to the new rule.

The meeting appeared to be getting back to order when suddenly Kailash, one of the young Hindu men present, stood up and announced that if the '*Christian sellers*' didn't pay up immediately when fined, they (the Hindu landowners) would take their land back from those Christians to whom they had mortgaged it, without repaying the mortgage. An Oraon woman stood up and retorted that 'you people [Hindus] had better stay off our *gahana* land [land belonging to Hindus, mortgaged to Oraons]. We paid for it, which means it's ours until you return our money. And if you so much as come walking nearby, we'll beat you'.

With this, the crowd exploded. Some of the Hindu men rushed at and began beating the few Oraon men who happened to be present, while others surrounded the Oraon women. Accusations against the Christians' alleged agenda of acquiring all the Hindu land through *arkhi* sales could be heard above the din: 'you Christians are using *arkhi* money to buy our land'; 'you Christians should give us back our land and leave here'; 'you should go to live with the [Catholic] Fathers where you belong'; 'if you remain in Mohanpur, then you shouldn't sell *arkhi*'; 'if we see you buying anything else like a television with *arkhi* money, then we'll destroy it'; 'if you remain in Mohanpur, then you should stop going to *girja* (church) and start worshipping at the village shrine'. The Hindus also insisted that they retain a right to inspect their land, even if they had temporarily given it away in a mortgage transaction. The fighting went on for fifteen minutes, until the village headman was summoned to calm the crowd.

It is important to point out that this was the first time that local Hindus used the category 'Christian' in place of 'Oraon' as a term of identification in a public context. Prior to this, Hindus would refer to Christian Oraons as 'Oraon people' when otherwise discussing the community. More critically, it was the first time that local drink

disputes, and the local Christians' alleged agenda to 'bring the Hindus down', were linked to broader, nationalist aims.

After this incident, the Oraons declared a boycott on *arkhi* production, which lasted just two weeks, at which time there was a resumption of the drinking and selling of *arkhi*, along with regular meetings calling for its boycott to be resumed. The critical turning point came in June, when the village headman himself announced in a village council meeting that the Hindu community had deteriorated due to drinking; that this was largely due to the consumption of alcohol; and that 'Christians' must no longer sell to Hindus because, as is happening throughout the rest of India, the income that is being generated from these sales is 'bringing the Hindu community down'. This was a remarkable statement, for the headman had, until then, been a publicly neutral figure with respect to local drink tensions. As the descendant of the Ratiya Kanwar headman who had permitted the first Oraon settlers to remain in the village one generation ago, his neutrality had always been taken for granted by the Oraon community. The implications of the headman's acknowledgement of the connection between 'Christians' and drink tensions were very serious, and there was great discussion amongst Oraons about what could have brought about his changed position. It was finally agreed that his use of this communal category was employed for the purpose of catering to the growing sentiments of the Hindus, a majority of whom had begun to use the category '*Isay*' (Christian) in a public context.

There was relative calm in the village after the headman's pronouncement. But beneath this calm was an underlying disquiet amongst the Oraons, who had been deeply disturbed both by the charges levelled by Raj and by the apparent acquiescence of the village headman with these charges. Around this time, news of the growing anti-Christian violence across India, in which RSS and other militant Hindu nationalist groups had been implicated, began to filter into the village.²⁰ Oraons were concerned that, without the support of the headman, and in response to the growing influence of local RSS proponents and wider Hindu nationalist concerns, they might be forced to leave the village. These anxieties were compounded on days when Raj and other RSS proponents were spotted conducting a training meeting in the main *basti*.

The arrival of the monsoons in early July temporarily halted any further 'training meetings', as the forest road became impassable. Meetings resumed in September, when the incident with the jeep described at the beginning of this article took place. The main instigators of this incident included Kailash and the other young men who regularly attended the 'training meetings', one of which had taken place earlier in the day. In response to this incident, and to demonstrate co-operation with Hindus' concerns, the Fathers instituted their own system of fines against members of their parish who engaged in the production of *arkhi*.

The use of 'Christian' as an ethnic category also moved beyond the context of liquor disputes, a fact that underpins the degree to which local relations have become communalized. Two incidents will serve to illustrate. In March 1999, Hindu and Christian women from all the surrounding villages were invited by the Church for a meal and festivities to celebrate International Women's Day. When the meal (prepared by Hindus from a neighbouring village) of rice and lentils was served, a group of Hindu women from Mohanpur refused to eat, fearing that the food 'would turn us into Christians'.

A more serious incident occurred in April 1999. Beyond the village, at the top of a hill that is classified as 'forest land', rests the cross to which local Oraon Christians trek for the annual 'Way of the Cross' procession. A few days before Easter, during an RSS

'training meeting', Raj suggested to the group of attendees that they tear down the cross and construct a small Hindu shrine in its place. Local Oraons, along with the Fathers, got to know of these plans, which were reminiscent of the 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid, and there was talk of cancelling the procession. But nothing ultimately came of these threats, and the procession went ahead as usual. However, it was the potential of the conflict which, in view of the anti-Christian violence that had spread throughout other parts of India during the previous year, gave this incident heightened importance.

Hindu nationalism on the ground: analysis and conclusions

The events described above did not radically transform local drinking practices; nor did they result in any further violence of the kind outlined in this article, nor even in the unity of all local Hindus against all Oraon Christians. These events did, however, bring about the transformation of the Oraon community into the 'threatening Christian Other' against the majority Hindu community, one of the most critical, long-term aims of the Hindu nationalist movement (Jaffrelot 1993). This has given rise to the polarized communalization of social relations, with local *adivasis* increasingly viewing one another in terms of a more singular 'Hindu' or 'Christian' social or religious identity. These events have also had significant political impact, with the majority of votes in Mohanpur, traditionally a stronghold for the more moderate Congress party, returned for the first time in favour of the BJP candidate in the 1999 state assembly elections.

It is the emergence of these phenomena that this article has sought to understand. This article has also attempted to make a distinctly ethnographic contribution to the wider literature on nationalism in order to explore both the process by which nationalist ideology is transmitted in a rural context, and the specific role that political organizations like the RSS play in this process.

It is interesting that the RSS activists chose drink tensions as the primary tool with which to demonize the 'threatening Other' and thereby communalize social relations and advance their *Hindutva* agenda. On the one hand, consumption of *arkhi* is an engrained *adivasi* practice in this part of Chhattisgarh. By choosing *arkhi*, RSS activists risked alienating the very community on whom their agenda is focused. Activists thus had to direct their attention towards what was a pre-existing local division: that between the customers (the Hindus) and the vendors (the Oraons). Such a choice also had a useful material basis manifested by the connection between expenditure on *arkhi* and the loss of land and livelihood.

The material basis that frames these grievances makes it possible to interpret the above events as an ordinary caste conflict, whereby certain members of the high-caste 'sons of the soil' (Weiner 1978) and other members of the Hindu community attempted to 'level' (Tambiah 1996) or diminish the margin of advantage enjoyed by the upwardly mobile, low-caste Oraon community. The central issue here is the way in which increasing tensions between the Hindus and Oraons have been framed by both the (re)allocation of scarce resources (land) traditionally belonging to and controlled by the higher-caste Hindus, and the increasing economic wealth, helped by liquor profits, of the low-caste Oraons (see Brass 1974: 34).

Growing Oraon wealth through liquor sales and other forms of wage labour does indeed serve to undermine traditional structures of domination by threatening the economic and political status of the more dominant Hindu community. In this context, evolving Hindu/Christian communal tensions could be viewed as an

amplification of pre-existing economic tensions mapped onto Hindu/Oraon caste relations. Moreover, local Hindus' enthusiastic response to the RSS's warning of Christian aims of acquiring Hindu land, as evinced by the former's immediate resort to the use of communal categories, could be construed as a predictable reaction of a threatened high caste to the increasing power of an aspiring low caste.

However, what could have been interpreted as the tensions distinctive of an ordinary caste conflict rapidly became communalized by the involvement of members of the RSS, who strategically shifted attention from the (Oraon) caste to the (Christian) religious community and encouraged the promotion of the 'threatening Other'. As Weiner (1978: 7) has pointed out, when competing groups belong to different ethnic or caste communities, and when the issue revolves around competition over or access to economic wealth, then pre-existing tensions can and do become exacerbated into larger ethno-nationalist issues – particularly if a group is organized (see Brass 1974: 45). In short, the pre-existing tensions provided the RSS with a convenient platform from which to extend strategically its ideological agenda.

Locally, the success of such a strategy can be attributed to the manner by which the RSS tailored its response to the social conditions that revolved around economic divisions and drink tensions (see Hocking 1996: 225-6). The fact that Mohanpur is located in the geographically remote area of rural Chhattisgarh where people have little access to the Hindu mainstream means that it is largely impossible to employ the methods by which Hindu nationalism is routinely spread in urban or less remote areas, which rely heavily on people's access to mass media and to popular forms of public participation (see Varadarajan 1999). The strategies of Hindu nationalist activists are thus dependent on other means of spreading *Hindutva*, such as the specific adaptation to local conditions and cleavages documented in this article.

Implicit in this analysis is the instrumental involvement of Raj and other RSS proponents, who have used their positions actively to promote the idea of the 'threatening Christian Other' and shape the forces through which Hindu nationalism has been delivered to the village. Indeed, Raj could be classified as what Brass calls a 'conversion specialist' (2003: 32-3), one whose pivotal role is to attach new meaning to local conditions or convert an ordinary incident into communal discourse, enabling its potential escalation into communal violence. While it has not been the objective of this article to examine Raj's individual agenda and justifications for participation in the incidents described above, it is important to note that his role, in tandem with the instrumentalist involvement of groups like the RSS and the way in which proponents of such groups bring their influence to bear on others' politics, is crucial for the successful production of communal sentiment in areas like the *adivasi* community where this research took place. It is, in short, through such involvement that the RSS gains influence in local affairs and initiates a transformation from the ground to national-level politics.

As discussed earlier in this article, these strategies are also parallel to what Tambiah (1996) calls 'focalization' and 'transvaluation'. In tandem with these processes, RSS propagandists stripped drink tensions of their local particulars and attached them to one of the most powerful manifestos of the Hindu nationalist movement: the 'threatening Other'. In this manner, the RSS not only generated anti-Christian sentiment but encouraged a cultural allegiance between local Hindu *adivasis* and Hindus elsewhere in India. Tambiah goes on to show how these processes are supported by the

involvement of proponents who draw on more enduring loyalties of race, language, religion, and place of origin (1996: 192). Locally, such involvement is also parallel to parts of Brass's (1974; 1979) analysis of ethnic group politics in South Asia, particularly the attention he gives to the role played by organizations like the RSS in influencing the course of local conflicts and attaching these to a nationalist agenda.

It is true that Brass has been criticized for over-emphasizing the impact of the political organizations headed by elites when he writes that 'they shape group consciousness by manipulating symbols of group identity to achieve power for their group' (1974: 45; see Jaffrelot 1993: 80; Robinson 1977). More recent writings have also expressed wider reservations with studies of nationalism that privilege instrumental processes over others (Varshney 2002). In an article on expressions of Palestinian nationalism, for example, Jean-Klein is highly critical of such analyses, in terms of how 'the masses have nationalism projected on to or prescribed for them by pervasive or persuasive (mis)representational actions of nationalist elites and leaders' (2001: 84). However, and as demonstrated by the ethnography above, the manifestly instrumentalist nature of RSS involvement in local affairs indicates that such analyses remain critical to an understanding of the specific way in which Hindu nationalism has been transmitted locally, and of how Hindu nationalist propagandists play an integral part in communalizing and therefore polarizing social relations.

It must also be said that while the successful spread of Hindu nationalism into this *adivasi* area is due principally to the strategic involvement of the RSS in local affairs, the latter is also a response to the presence of the Church. Although this has not been the focus of this article, the RSS and other Hindu nationalist organizations across India do see the Church as a threat to the wider *Hindutva* agenda, particularly in view of the historical reputation that the Church has for conversions amongst India's backward classes. Christianization continues to be a factor in communalization processes in more implicit ways, for it is principally through mimicking the kind of educational and medical initiatives long associated with Christian missionary activities that groups like the RSS and the VHP have seen their greatest success amongst India's more dispersed *adivasi* communities (see Thapar 1991). The very presence of Christians alongside Hindus, in other words, creates the possibility of entry into the village by the RSS. This translates, in turn, into the heightened possibility for ordinary disputes to evolve into more threatening, communal tensions.

However, the primary motivation behind the RSS's interest in *adivasi* communities is driven by the fact that the larger 'community' of tribal people has yet to be encompassed within the *Hindutva* fold. While the strategies mentioned in this article have recently contributed to the electoral success of the BJP, *adivasi* communities as a whole remain an important obstacle to the long-term political agenda and comprehensive success of the Hindu nationalist movement. Strategies that stress the 'Christian-ness' of the 'threatening Other' provide Hindu nationalist activists like the RSS with a local platform from which, through polarization and communalization of local identities, they can emphasize the 'Hindu-ness' of *adivasis*. This sort of emphasis on shared religious identities, in turn, underlines the 'common' origins and aspirations – and therefore allegiances – that *adivasi* Hindus ostensibly have with the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) of Hindus across India.

The growing emphasis of religious identities over other ethnic distinctions not only underpins the spread of Hindu nationalism by the RSS, but figures increasingly in the

propagation of other nationalisms and nationalist movements across the globe. I began this article by highlighting the fact that the grass-roots phenomena from which nationalist movements are constructed and around which they revolve have largely been ignored in favour of abstract historical or political analyses. It is only through detailed ethnographic analysis of everyday experiences and social conditions that we can begin to obtain a glimpse of the complex link between the growth and (re)production of Hindu nationalism (and other 'nationalisms') at the grass-roots level and larger discourses on (Hindu) nationalism.

NOTES

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¹ Although I prefer the term '*adivasi*' (original inhabitant), which is used by local people themselves, my alternating usage of this term with 'tribe' and 'caste' throughout this article reflects the impossibility of a clear distinction between these terms (see Bailey 1960; Dumont 1961; Sundar 1997: 156-90).

² Thapar (1991) and Hansen (1999) argue that the specific notions of Hinduism as a unified religion and 'Hindu' as a well-bounded cultural category are largely products of orientalist scholars, missionaries, and colonial administrations from the seventeenth century onwards.

³ The BJP's main political opponent at the national level is the more moderate Congress party, which had been the most dominant political party in India since Independence in 1947. The Congress party's rule at the national level went uninterrupted until 1977. It returned to power in 1980, reconfigured as the Congress (India) party. In spite of its decreasing influence in the 1990s, it remained a major force in Indian politics. In the 2004 national elections it defeated the BJP and became leader of India's coalition government.

⁴ Founded in 1925 as a 'national volunteer force', the original mission of the RSS was to unite and organize Hindus on nationalistic lines against colonial rule and against the proselytizing influence of Muslims and Christians.

⁵ RSS strategies to identify *adivasis* as 'true Hindus' and bring them into the Hindu mainstream can be compared to other movements that have revolved around questions of tribal identity or upliftment. While late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social movements were largely aimed at changing or 'improving' the established way of *adivasi* life by emulating the cultural practices of higher-caste Hindus (see Hardiman 1987; Sinha 1959), the objectives of more recent movements have revolved around the promotion of the political and economic rights of *adivasis*, often in reaction to powerful (usually Hindu) and sometimes exploitative outsiders (see Devalle 1992; Singh 2002).

⁶ See Kapferer (1988) and Marty and Appleby (1993; 1994; 1995). For comparison with ethnic-nationalist movements outside of the South Asia region, see Ben-Ami (1992), Glenny (1999) and Pratt (2003).

⁷ Seminal studies include Anderson (1983) and Gellner (1983), along with works by Smith (1971; 1992).

⁸ One recent exception outside of the literature on South Asia includes Jean-Klein (2001), whose ethnographic account of 'nationalist production in everyday life' in Palestine during the *intifada* offers a timely criticism to studies that ignore the process by which ordinary people engage in what she calls 'self-nationalisation' (2001: 84). Billig's (1995) more general work on 'banal nationalism' identifies everyday habits that contribute to the ideological reproduction of nations (and nationalism).

⁹ Kalra's (n.d.) study of the Banjara (an 'ex-criminal' tribe) in rural Rajasthan (western India) does mention how RSS activists have recently arrived in the area and have spent months endearing themselves to the local community (see Fuller 2004: 262-89); and Hocking (1996) tells us that *adivasi* Christians in the tribal-dominated Jharkhand area (now a state) are increasingly characterized as being outside the bounds of the Hindu nation. However, neither writer provides detailed analysis of the precise manner in which Hindu nationalism is introduced to and accepted by the local community.

¹⁰ Two other tribal-dominated regions, Jharkhand and Uttaranchal, were also granted statehood in 2000. The fact that this occurred during a BJP tenure has contributed to the latter taking credit for the formation of the three states.

¹¹ Popular stereotypes that contribute to this 'backward' label and persist within mainstream Indian society include living within forested environments, speaking a tribal dialect, holding animistic beliefs, hunting and gathering, and drinking and dancing (see Pathy, Paul, Bhaskar & Panda 1976).

¹² See Froerer (2002) for discussion on the complexities and transformation of local categories of identification.

¹³ Historically, such institutions have been an important vehicle by which Catholic missions across India have established their presence amongst *adivasis* (Forrester 1977; Sahay 1976).

¹⁴ The ideological message of these meetings is summed up as follows:

... Hindus alone constitute the Indian nation, since they are the original inhabitants and sole creators of its society ... Hinduism is uniquely tolerant, and hence superior to any other faith, but its tolerance has often been mistaken for weakness. The Hindu nation has been repeatedly conquered by aliens, particularly Muslims and the Christian British, and must acquire strength through RSS *sangathan* (organization) to counter all present and future threats (Basu, Datta, Sarkara, Sarkar & Sen 1993: 37).

¹⁵ It is this category of person that is the primary target of the RSS in terms of augmenting its support base (Basu, Datta, Sarkara, Sarkar & Sen 1993).

¹⁶ The customs of alcohol use amongst *adivasis* in India have been thoroughly examined elsewhere (see Hardiman 1985; Shukla 1978).

¹⁷ Practically speaking, these are relatively useless 'prestige goods' due to the fact that there was no regular electricity supply in the two years that I was in the village.

¹⁸ This organization is a local branch of a larger women's organization called the *Samaj Seva Sanstha* (Community Service Organization), a Catholic-run organization that is based in the neighbouring district of Raipur. It was set up in the early 1990s for the purpose of instituting social service and welfare projects. Although a few women are aware of the organization's Catholic connections, it is not perceived by local people to be Christian-based.

¹⁹ The *panchayat* is a traditional, village-level council where power is typically shared between a group of 'big men' who normally come from the dominant castes (see Srinivas 1969 [1955]). Village council meetings, which are dominated by Ratiya Kanwar elders, are called weekly or monthly to mediate disputes or address issues of local concern, such as permissible areas for cattle-grazing. In recent decades, the old village council was replaced with a state-administered system of self-government (the *gram sabha*), which locally comprises Mohanpur and two other villages. While the elected head of this body officially has greater power than individual village headmen, the power and standing of local *panchayats* remain intact.

²⁰ Violence included the burning and destruction of churches (throughout tribal districts of Gujarat, western India), the rape of nuns (in a tribal district of central Madhya Pradesh, central India), and, later, the murder of a foreign missionary and his two small sons (in a tribal district of neighbouring Orissa, eastern India).

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Résumé

Cet article est un compte-rendu ethnographique de l'essor du nationalisme hindou dans une communauté « tribale » (*adivasi*) du centre de l'Inde. Il se veut une réponse au manque d'attention ethnographique porté, dans le discours sur le nationalisme en général, aux types de conditions sociales et aux processus qui ont contribué à la manifestation du nationalisme au niveau local. L'auteur affirme que le succès du nationalisme hindou dans les régions tribales résulte de l'implication instrumentale dans les affaires locales du *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), une organisation nationaliste hindoue militante. Le résultat de cette implication est la mise en exergue d'un « Autre » menaçant et l'adhésion des groupes ethniques à une idéologie nationaliste plus vaste.

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