



Kept in translation: *Adivasi* cultural tropes in the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha

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ABSTRACT

This article considers a little studied branch of Swaminarayan Hinduism, the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha, whose headquarters are located in Bakrol, Anand district, Gujarat. It is specifically concerned with the results of the activities of this branch among *adivasi* (tribal) people in the Chhotaudepur district in eastern central Gujarat, results that are of the sort that were once frequently referred to as ‘Sanskritization’, but that I prefer to call, with a nod to local terminology, ‘bhagatization’. The article first situates the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha within the broader family of Swaminarayan communities, contrasting it with another, much better known community, the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, with whom it shares an early lineage. Then it identifies ways in which participation in the Sanstha has led *adivasi* people to replace some of their traditions with practices drawn from the outside. Although it is common in the area to view people who participate in a community such as the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha as abandoning *adivasi* traditions altogether, this article suggests that such a view is misleading. Drawing inspiration from James Clifford’s work with cultural translation and Greg Urban’s work with cultural transformation, it suggests that the Sanstha exemplifies one way in which elements of *adivasi* culture persist when *adivasis* translate their traditions into settings marked by increasing contact with globalizing modernities.

KEYWORDS

bhagat movements; Bakrol; Bhadaran; Chhotaudepur; Dahyabhai Maharaj; Narayan Muni Maharaj; Ramanavami; Purushottam Maharaj; Rathvas; Swaminarayan Hinduism

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It is hardly unprecedented for members of a group somehow perceived as subordinate or inferior to reject their own religious or cultural traditions and adopt those of a group that is somehow perceived as dominant or superior. A prominent case in point is the widespread adoption of Christianity by many colonized peoples during the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — or earlier in the case of Christianity in Europe. This sort of Christianization is not, of course, unknown among India's so-called tribal peoples, especially in the Northeast, but another movement can also be found among them that derives from processes of cultural imitation operating within circumstances of social and economic inequality and, indeed, perceived inferiority. It has gone by various names, but the most familiar, at least in earlier decades, was probably Sanskritization. This term, however, is both vague and misleading, and it is laden with connotations that are not always appropriate, starting with the implication that the process has something to do with the adoption of elements of a Sanskrit-based culture and an attempt to become 'brahminized' (Carroll, 1977; Ikegame, 2013: 124; for critique of the term in south Gujarat, see esp. Hardiman, 1987; Skaria, 1999).

In this paper I am particularly interested in a case that exemplifies such acculturation among *adivasis*¹ who live in the easternmost *talukas* (political subunits) of Chhotaudepur district, Gujarat. We might call the general process of which it is an instance 'bhagatization', after the word *bhagat*, the local name for people who make this change. The most conspicuous — and locally contentious — markers of this change are dietary and ritual: unlike traditional *adivasis*, who drink alcohol and eat meat and use both in their rituals, *bhagats* are vegetarian teetotalers who refrain in their ritual practices from offering alcohol and meat to the *devs* and *devis*. Some adopt these lifestyle changes independently, while others join Hindu organizations, such as the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha.² In any

¹ The term *adivasi*, coming from Hindi ('the original inhabitants'), refers to a heterogeneous set of ethnic and tribal groups that some consider the aboriginal population of the Indian subcontinent. They are also commonly called 'tribals' and, in legal parlance, Scheduled Tribes or ST's.

² This essay should be seen as a preliminary report on work in progress. I first visited the Chhotaudepur area as a day trip in July 1998. I have made repeated visits between 2005 and 2013, the longest being in 2009, I remain in weekly and sometimes daily contact with people in the area via social media, and I have plans to return imminently. So far as I remember, I first encountered the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha in 2009, when I met Kanubhai Rathva in Chhotaudepur and, several months later, visited the temples in Rangpur and Padharvant, but it took some time, many conversations, both in India and the United States, and some reading before I realized the place of this movement within the broader Swaminarayan community. I must thank especially Kanubhai Rathva (Chhotaudepur), Govindbhai Rathva (Padharvant), Dashrath Rathva (Kocvad, Kavant *taluka*), and Desing Rathva (Rangpur) for information about the community and assistance during visits, Mahedrabhai V. Patel for engaging in stimulating conversation at, quite literally, a moment's notice, *adivasi* members of the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha, especially in the village of Simalfaliya, for their hospitality and openness, the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, Vadodara, the Adivasi Academy, Tejgad, and Subhash Ishai, S.N. College, Chhotaudepur, for

case, when people become *bhagats*, they think of themselves as improving and becoming more civilized. Bhagatization may be seen, then, as reflecting in the mirror of religion aspirations to social and economic development.

For at least two centuries bhagatization movements have taken place repeatedly among *adivasis* in Gujarat. The best known account of such a movement is probably David Hardiman's *The coming of the Devi* (Hardiman, 1987), about events in south Gujarat in the 1920s — although the case Hardiman documents differs from the one to be considered here in being an itinerant, temporary cult that moved from village to village (for a similar movement from 1992, cf. Baviskar, 2004: 97–103). Because *adivasis* live mostly on the periphery of Gujarat state, bhagatization is similar to a general tendency identified by Harald Tambs-Lyche: the tendency of the Vaishnavism favoured by Brahmins and *baniyas* from central Gujarat to replace the religious practices previously favoured by Rajputs in peripheral areas: Shaktism, with its sacrifices of animals to the mother goddesses of Rajput lineages (Tambs-Lyche, 2010: 107). There is, however, a crucial difference — aside from the geographical difference that Tambs-Lyche has worked in another part of Gujarat, namely, Saurashtra. Inasmuch as Rajputs, as a class, were rulers and relatively rich, while *adivasis* were ruled and relatively poor, it is probably best to consider bhagatization not as an instance of the same process but as a parallel current within a much larger stream.³ Indeed, some traditions that are Rajput practices devoted to the mother farther west are, in the area that interests me, actually *bhagat* traditions. Meladi Ma and Khodiyar Ma come immediately to mind.

The case that is the focus of my attention here is a *bhagat* movement quite popular in the area within ten to twenty kilometres of Chhotaudepur town, the centre of a former princely state with the same name and now the administrative seat of the district of Chhotaudepur in eastern central Gujarat. (Chhotaudepur district was split off from Vadodara [Baroda] district in 2013). Chhotaudepur is an *adivasi* majority district, Rathvas being the predominant

repeated hospitality, the family of Dr. Natvarlal Rajpara (Westminster, Maryland, USA) for graciously and unexpectedly providing transportation to Bakrol and Vadtal, Prof. Raymond B. Williams for encouragement, and, less directly connected to this project, Sadhu Mangalnidhidas of the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha for his time, patience, and information about Swaminarayan Hinduism. Earlier versions of this essay were presented under various titles at the 11th International Congress of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF), 2 July 2013 in Tartu, Estonia, the annual meeting of the European Association for the Study of Religion, 5 September 2013, in Liverpool, England, and the 21st Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, 25 August 2015 in Erfurt, Germany. Fieldwork in India has been generously supported by the U.S. Fulbright Program (2009) and the Faculty Development Committee of McDaniel College, Westminster, MD.

³ Writing about the Dangs, however, Ajay Skaria (Skaria, 1999: 152) notes that the line separating Rajputs and Bhils was relatively thin, although in the Dangs Bhils were *rajas*, unlike in Chhotaudepur, where the *rajas* were Chauhan Rajputs.

adivasi group.⁴ The *bhagat* movement that I will discuss is referred to in official contexts by several different designations. The longest and most official one that I know of is Aksharatit Sri Pragat Purushottam (Swaminarayan Sampradaya) Bhadaran, Bakrol Sanstha. I will refer to it more simply as the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha, or simply as ‘the Sanstha’, a word that means an ‘institution’ or ‘establishment’. Very little — perhaps nothing — has been written about this Sanstha in the academic literature. For example, there is no mention of it in Raymond Williams’ magisterial *Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* (Williams, 2001). Although the Sanstha diverges significantly from *adivasi* traditions in matters of teaching and practice, I will present it not as an instance of loss and the abandonment of tradition or of surrender to superior social or cultural forces but as one of ‘translation’ — to use James Clifford’s term — a translation in which some *adivasis* are engaged for what they perceive as their own benefit (Clifford, 2013). I want to tell this story for a couple of reasons. First, unlike other traditions of Swaminarayan Hinduism, the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha, and especially the *adivasis* who participate in it, are very little known outside the immediate area. Second, and just as important, the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha represents one particular way in which, in the process of translation, *adivasi* cultural tropes persist.⁵ To tell the story effectively, I need to start with some basics about the Sanstha and its place within the extended family of Swaminarayan Hinduism.

THE PRAGAT PURUSHOTTAM SANSTHA

The various Swaminarayan communities derive cladistically — that is, by a process of generational inheritance and splitting — from a saint known as Sahajanand Swami (1781–1830), born Ghanshyam Pande in Chapaiyya near Ayodhya, now in Uttar Pradesh.⁶ Orphaned at the age of eleven, Ghanshyam left home, adopted the life of a wandering celibate, and took the name Nilkanth Varni. Eventually he arrived in Gujarat, where he settled down and became a disciple of Ramanand Swami (1738–1801), receiving the name Sa-

⁴ Basic literature on traditional Rathva culture and religion includes: Haekel & Tripathi, 1966; Shah, 1980; Jain, 1984; Pandya, 2004; Ratnagar, 2010; Tilche, 2011; Tilche, 2015; Ishai, 2015. I have previously discussed Rathva culture and religion in: Alles, 2012; Alles, 2013; Alles, 2015.

⁵ In much of what follows, I use the term *adivasi* to refer to traditional *adivasi* cultural practices. I do so only for convenience, and I do not mean to imply that *adivasis* who no longer engage in these practices are somehow any less authentically *adivasi*.

⁶ Although the material that follows is available in many places, I have drawn it mostly from various books written as preparation for the various BAPS Satsang examinations, especially K.M. Dave, 2008; K.M. Dave, 2009; R.M. Dave, 2007; R.M. Dave, 2009; R.M. Dave, 2010; Ishwarcharandas, 2007; Ishwarcharandas, 2009. On the BAPS, see below.

hajanand Swami. Ramanand Swami was Vaishnava in religious practice, looked back to Ramanuja and his Visistadvaita for philosophical guidance, and predicted the coming of a manifestation of the supreme God on earth. Eventually, the community came to see Sahajanand Swami, also called Sriji Maharaj and Swaminarayan, as that manifestation, the supreme manifestation of God, beyond even such well-known *avatars* as Rama and Krishna.

Sriji Maharaj was, then, the kind of religious figure that Max Weber called charismatic, and when he died — or in the eyes of the community, returned to Akshardham — his community faced the typical Weberian problem of routinization: how to organize itself after the founder was no longer physically present. Sriji Maharaj himself divided the community into two provinces, each administered from a separate *gadi* — ‘seat’ or ‘throne’ — one located in Ahmedabad, the other in Vadtal. To administer the community he chose as *acharyas* the sons of his brothers. The son of his older brother became the *acharya* of Ahmedabad, while the son of the younger brother became the *acharya* of Vadtal. The *gadis* became hereditary (Williams, 2001: 34–36).

Religious communities are notoriously fractious, and the Swaminarayan *sampradaya* has been no exception. Probably the most well-known Swaminarayan group outside of India is the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Pusushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, or BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha for short. In the early part of the twentieth century, a *sant* or celibate ascetic by the name of Yagnapurushdas (1865–1951) — today more commonly known as Shastriji Maharaj — broke with the Vadtal *gadi*. A variety of points were at issue. Some concerned laxity of practice. Another concerned claims about the position of a disciple of Sriji Maharaj named Gunatitanand Swami (1785–1861). Today members of the BAPS Swaminarayan community are taught that Sahajanand Swami is God, Purushottam, Paramatma, Parabrahman, and the Narayan of Swaminarayan, while Gunatitanand Swami is God’s ideal devotee, Akshar, that is, God’s divine abode, *atman*, *brahman*, and the Swami in Swaminarayan (K.M. Dave, 2008: 3–4). The result was a new community, centred in Bochasan (Anand district, Gujarat) and organized around a new line of succession. That line begins with Sriji Maharaj and continues through Gunatitanand Swami, Pragji Maharaj (1829–1897), Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj (1892–1971), and on to Pramukh Swami (b. 1921), who at the time of writing (fall 2015) is still alive in his nineties. The BAPS community is wealthy and internationally active, famous not only for its temple in Neasden in northwest London but also for its massive, high-tech Akshardhams in Gandhinagar, Delhi and, now (fall 2015) under construction, Robbinsville, New Jersey — to say nothing of its many temples on every continent but South America and Antarctica.⁷

⁷ On the Robbinsville Akshardham, see <http://www.baps.org/Global-Network/North-America/Robbinsville/Mandir-Info.aspx> (12.09.2015); s.v. ‘History’. For BAPS temples worldwide see <http://www.baps.org/Global-Network.aspx> (12.09.2015).

One member of this lineage is of particular interest here: Pragji Maharaj, born as Pragji Darji — Pragji the Tailor — and also known as Bhagatji Maharaj. As a tailor and a householder, Pragji had a checkered history within Swaminarayan Hinduism. Many of the *sants* refused to recognize him and his lineage. Like the BAPS community, however, the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha sees itself as standing in the lineage of Pragji Maharaj. From him, their lineage continues not through Shastriji Maharaj but through Purushottam Maharaj (1863–1940; revealed 1893), associated with the town of Bhadaran (Anand district, Gujarat), and then Purushottam Maharaj’s biological son, Narayan Muni Maharaj (1893–1958; revealed 1940). A month after Narayan Muni’s death, a particularly devout *bhagat* named Dahyabhai (1912–1968), originally from Bakrol (Anand district, Gujarat) but working in a mill in Ahmedabad, was recognized as the ultimate deity (Rathva, 2011–2012: 4). He quit his job and spent the rest of his life at Aksharbhuvan in Ahmedabad, giving *darshan* to devotees. Following Dahyabhai’s death on March 5, 1968 — his health was extremely poor — the manifestations of God on earth ceased. Leadership of the community passed to Dahyabhai’s wife, Lakshmisvarup Aksharmuktisri Maniba (b. 1914), who died on December 25, 1985, and then to his daughter, Aksharmuktisri Madhuben (b. 1939), who died on May 28, 2001.⁸ Previously these two women had given *darshan* together with Dahyabhai on especially important ritual occasions. The community is currently managed by Dahyabhai’s grandson, Mahendra V. Patel.

For those familiar with the BAPS community or with the Swaminarayan family of communities more generally, the Pragat Purushottam lineage, starting from Pragji Maharaj, begins to mark some striking contrasts. In Swaminarayan temples, men and women are generally segregated and Swaminarayan *sants*, especially in the BAPS community, are not only celibate but also strictly sequestered from women. By contrast, in the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha there is no *diksha*. Pragji Maharaj was a householder, and the householder is taken as the ideal.

The Pragat Purushottam Sanstha has its own theology. At the more arcane end is a fairly elaborate cosmology or metaphysics, focusing specifically upon what lies above the level of the 33 crore gods, 64 crore mothers, and all demons and mortal human beings. Immediately above these are two *saguna* triads — triads of beings with attributes. The lower triad comprises the familiar Puranic gods, Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva. The higher triad comprises Aniruddha, Pradhymna (*sic*), and Sankarshan — beings who are perhaps less familiar but are all associated with Krishna. Higher still are four *nirguna* forms — *murtis* without attributes — whose names again show marks of the Vaishnava heritage: Sri Vasudev Narayana, Sri Narnarayana, Sri Krishnanarayana

⁸ For more details on Dahyabhai’s and his brother’s families, see Sri Dahyabhai Maharaj Mandir Trust, 2012: 10.

(a.k.a. Pradhanapurusha, the ‘chief or principal Purusha’), and Sri Lakshminarayana (Prakrutipurusha, ‘Nature–Purusha’). Above them all is the solitary root *purusha* and root *prakruti* (Skt. *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*). Higher — or perhaps better, more encompassing — still is all of creation, the universe. Above that is the dependent *Aksharbrahma*, and finally, highest or most encompassing of all is the beginningless, complete Purushottam (Sri Pragat Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, 2003: 16).

This scheme soars fairly high, and I have yet to determine how widely it is known among *adivasi* bhagats, but another basic point is easier to grasp. It is that the lineage of gurus from Sahajanand Swami to Dahyabhai Maharaj comprises the six supreme manifestations of the beginningless, complete Purushottam on earth; all other manifestations of the divine are secondary and derive from them.

It is this last conviction that informs Pragat Purushottam practice. A dictum enjoins, *mahārāj sīvāya anya devī-devatāne namatā nabim* — in somewhat biblical language, ‘Thou shalt not worship any god or goddess except Maharaj’ — and although the Sanstha sees itself as part of the Swaminarayan *sampradaya*, pride of place as the object of worship generally falls to the last three persons in the lineage, Sri Purushottam Maharaj, Sri Narayan Muni Maharaj, and above all Sri Dahyabhai Maharaj. Thus, Purushottam Maharaj replaced the mantra, ‘Jay Swaminarayan’, with a different one, ‘Jay Sri Purushottam’ — in practice also ‘Jay Sri Pragat Purushottam’. This mantra is used not only in formal rituals but also in everyday life, for example, to say ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’. I have even seen it as an appliqué on a motorbike. It alone is said to lead to the highest state, *akshardham*:

This Purushottam *mahamantra* is the easy path from here to *akshardham* [the highest abode]. In between [*i.e.*, along the way from here to *akshardham*] there is no difficulty. If you recite ‘Ram, Ram’ you will go to Vaikuntha, if you recite ‘Krishna, Krishna’, you will go to Gauloka, and if you recite ‘Narayan, Narayan’, you will go to Badrikashram. But whoever recites ‘Purushottam, Purushottam’, only that person will be able to go to *akshardham* without difficulty (Sri Pragat Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, 2003: 13).

In addition, as his health was failing, Dahyabhai instructed his followers, after his death, to sing *bhajans* in the presence of his own photo. Thus, the community has eliminated most forms of ritual practice and replaced them with the singing of *bhajans*, religious songs. To quote from a commemorative volume dedicated to Dahyabhai:

Now it is no longer necessary to do the various vows and austerities mentioned above [including the *varnasrama dharma*, as well as recitations, austerities, visiting *tirthas*, making sacrifices, vows and fasts]. A person who has met God revealed only needs to sing *bhajans*

to him, recall him, keep him in mind, and be conscious of him. This, in fact, is the essence of all of the *sastras* (Sri Pragat Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, 2003: 13).

The texts of *bhajans* are available in various publications as well as on CDs,⁹ and throughout the year the Sanstha conducts a moving series of *satsangs* at which devotees gather for the purpose of singing praises together.¹⁰

The Pragat Purushottam Sanstha has its own distinctive ethic. Although it is a householder movement, it advocates an approach to life that is *nivrutti*, not *pravrutti*, one of retirement from the world rather than engagement within it. Devotees are encouraged to manifest this attitude of retirement in five distinct areas, the abandonment of desire, greed, taste, affection, and pride (*nishkam*, *nirlobh*, *nirsvad*, *nirsneh*, and *nirman*). According to a commonly used diagram, these virtues provide the context for study, reflection, meditation, and realization (see the Fig. 1).¹¹



Fig. 1

⁹ See, e.g., the volume available at <http://www.pragatpurushottam.org/uploads/sidebar/1539Aksharatit-Shri-Dahyabhai-Maharajnu-Pragtya-Bhajans.pdf> (03.11.2015).

¹⁰ The calendar for 2015 was made available on the PragatPurushottam Bakrol Facebook site at https://scontent-iad3-1.xx.fbcdn.net/hphotos-xta1/v/t1.0-9/10906224_312285955626818_5875746822502165841_n.jpg?oh=d146d33d3f9f1f07e672cc5b9af3f175&oe=56A375F7 (12.09.2015).

¹¹ A summary of the Sanstha's principles is found on its website (in Gujarati): <http://www.pragatpurushottam.org/philosophy> (12.09.2015).

Especially in comparison to the BAPS, the Pragat Purushottam community is relatively poor. It has nothing resembling the massive Akshardhams in Delhi or Gandhinagar or the large temples in Neasden and many other locations. Not only does it reject the practice of tithing, but it also has been primarily active not among wealthy upper caste devotees in central Gujarat and the international diaspora but in the tribal areas of eastern central Gujarat, where many people live below the poverty line. These emphases have had a somewhat predictable effect on the funds available to it. When Dahyabhai was alive, the community built a temple at Bhadaran, the home of Purushottam Maharaj and Narayan Muni (Sri Purushottam Narayan Mandir, dedicated January 1, 1961). After Dahyabhai's death, it built a temple at his hometown of Bakrol (Sri Pragat Purushottam Mandir, dedicated May 18, 1972) (Sri Pragat Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, 2003: 17). Other temples have been built in the tribal areas. I have personally visited those at Simalfaliya (Cacer; founded 1996), Padharvant (founded 2004), and Rangpur (founded 2007).¹² Compared with the massive temples being built by its cousin lineages, however, not just in London, Gandhinagar, Robbinsville, and Delhi but even in tribal areas, such as the BAPS temple in Bodeli, roughly 35 kms. west of Chhotaudepur and dedicated in 2011,¹³ the Pragat Purushottam temples are modest and plain.

IN THE TRIBAL AREA

To date, the centre of Pragat Purushottam activities in the tribal areas has been the administrative area known as Chhotaudepur *taluka*, the northeasternmost part of Chhotaudepur district, which borders upon Madhya Pradesh. Its population is 87% tribal, and literacy hovers around 36%.¹⁴ It remains unclear to me when the area was first visited by the Sanstha. Local memory — to the extent that I have tapped into it — still recalls visits by Dahyabhai Maharaj, which would have been before his death in 1968. Sanstha publications have a longer memory. Not only do they record how Dahyabhai regularly visited the area, starting in the summer of 1958, the first summer after his recognition as God. They also note that Dahyabhai first visited the area with Narayan Muni, and they record how devotees from various villages — places like Simalfaliya and Padharvant — became convinced that the highest Godhead, which had been

¹² These dates are taken from photos that I took of signs at the temples on 20 March 2009 (Rangpur), 15 March 2013 (Simalfaliya), and 19 March 2013 (Padharvant).

¹³ See <http://www.baps.org/Global-Network/India/Bodeli.aspx> (12.09.2015) and especially <http://www.baps.org/Photos/2011/Mandir-Moods-4372.aspx?mid=17561> (12.09.2015).

¹⁴ According to the 2011 Census, 86900 persons in Chhotaudepur District were literate out of a total population of 241377; see http://censusindia.gov.in/pca/pcadata/DDW_PCA2419_2011_MDDS%20with%20UI.xlsx (03.11.2015).

manifest in Narayan Muni, was now manifest in Dahyabhai Maharaj (e.g., Sri Dahyabhai Maharaj Mandir Trust, 2012: 18–19). Even more remote, Dahyabhai's grandson, Mahendrabhai, has told me that both Purushottam Maharaj and his son, Narayan Muni Maharaj, had visited the area from the 1930s onward, but details of their activities remain sketchy.¹⁵

Popular memory recalls that the original beachhead of the movement was the village of Simalfaliya, a village of about 2000 people living in 366 households (2011 Census) south of the Orsang River, often referred to in the Sanstha as Cacer. Certainly, Simalfaliya has a special status among devotees in the area. Some local people have told me that all residents of Simalfaliya are *adivasis*,¹⁶ and all have converted to the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha, a process that occurred gradually in the aftermath of Dahyabhai Maharaj's visits. The Sanstha now regularly holds *satsang* in a large number of villages in the area on a rotating basis, according to a pocket calendar published each year (see footnote 6).

Many elements of Pragat Purushottam practice and teaching seem antithetical to *adivasi* traditions. In daily life the most obvious, shared with all *bhagat* movements, are the dietary restrictions. Devotees sometimes say that these restrictions are economically beneficial, because they no longer waste money on meat or alcohol. The benefits are not, however, without their disadvantages. Especially because the restrictions carry the force of religious morality, they are also socially divisive, separating those who have converted to the Sanstha (or another *bhagat* movement) from those who, for whatever reason, do not wish to do so. There are other losses as well. The traditional wooden house post, which often stands in the kitchen and before which people make offerings of alcohol and chicken, is replaced by a home shrine, often containing the photo of Dahyabhai Maharaj. The songs (*gayna*) that *badva* sing on special occasions and which contain the store of the community's traditional knowledge are replaced by *bhajans* sung together or playing as background music over sound systems. (I once asked where I could acquire a cassette of the songs and was informed that what I was hearing were MP3 files on a USB flash drive). Engagements and weddings are conducted not by the traditional *pujara* but by Brahmin priests. Tribal festivals organized by the local community are replaced by evening *bhajan* sessions, at least some of them scheduled from central offices in Bakrol. The village *devsthan* (literally, 'god-place'), with its stout *khunta* surrounded by smaller glazed and unglazed terracotta horses and *dhaba*,¹⁷ is replaced by the temple, and the presentation of offerings at the *devs-*

¹⁵ Conversation in Bakrol on March 22, 2013.

¹⁶ This is apparently not correct. The 2011 Census counted 117 persons belonging to Scheduled Castes.

¹⁷ *Khunta* are stout wooden posts, generally two and a half to three feet tall. *Dhaba* are terracotta structures which resemble a South Asian *stupa* in shape, but which have openings on their sides for *devs* and *devis* to enter.

than, including the sacrifice of chickens and goats, is abandoned for worship in the temple. The traditional greeting, ‘Ram Ram’, becomes ‘Jay Purushottam’. Finally, traditional ideas about *devs*, *matas*, and ancestors are abandoned in favour of teachings about the *atman* and *paramatman*, ourselves and God and the God within us.

A lack of continuity with *adivasi* traditions is seen elsewhere as well. To judge from the issues easily available on the Sanstha’s website,¹⁸ *adivasis* have made a substantial contribution to the Sanstha’s magazine, *Sri Purushottam Prakash*. In the first five numbers almost half of the articles attributed to named authors (42%) and more than half of the pages contained in those articles (60%) were written by Rathvas, the most prominent *adivasi* group in the area. These articles deal in some detail with basic teachings of the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha. For example, in the very first issue one finds an article by Ambubhai Kagubhai Rathva essentially on the teaching and life of Sri Purushottam Maharaj, an article by Pravinbhai Candubhai Rathva on key teachings of Swaminarayan scriptures, an article by Navinbhai Kanubhai Rathva on the way of life devotees should adopt, an article by Mohanbhai Chindabhai Rathva on the joys of being a devotee, and an article by Vajesinghbhai Phattubhai Rathva on the miracles of Pragat Purushottam Bhagvan. All of these authors except Mohanbhai Chindabhai were regular contributors to the magazine, at least in its early days. One searches their articles in vain for hints of *adivasi* traditions.

Photos of the seventh Satsang Shibir, held December 27–28, 2014, in Ganthiya village and posted on Facebook¹⁹ — to take just one example — leave a similar impression. In these photos one sees:

- a platform, highly decorated with garlands of flowers and outfitted with microphones and a sound system, with men and women seated on separate sides of the hall in front of it in precise rows, listening to speakers (some of them children) and observing felicitations, some by Mahendrabhai himself;
- a temple with a decorated image of Dahyabhai and men and women similarly seated;
- people reverencing a different photo of Dahyabhai;
- a Vedic-style altar;
- a book stall;
- and various parts of a common meal, including women washing dishes.

¹⁸ Four numbers of volume 1 and the first number of volume 2 are available at <http://www.pragatpurushottam.org/magazine> (13.09.2015).

¹⁹ https://www.facebook.com/pragatpurushottambakrol/media_set?set=a.311945515660862.1073741864.100005362479178&type=1&pnref=story. While this article was in print, a description of the Shibir, written in Gujarati, has become available. See Rathva, 2015, available at <http://www.pragatpurushottam.org/media/magazine/Year%202014–2015/2.pdf> and <http://www.pragatpurushottam.org/media/magazine/Year%202014–2015/3.pdf> (06.01.2016).

It all looks very formal, very literate — and to my mind very much like a school convocation. It also looks very non-*adivasi*. It has this character even though in the 2011 Census all but five persons in Ganthiya, a village of 1480 people, were recorded as *adivasis*, and even though Ganthiya was for decades the home of one of the most renowned traditional ritualists, Narsing *badvo* (d. 2010) (Shah, 1980; Jain, 1984), whose son Juvansing has taken over the business.

From such evidence one may gain the impression that movements like the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha are systematically destroying *adivasi* traditions, which are now in danger of disappearing. Indeed, that is one common local opinion, whether people judge such destruction to be socially bad or good. But such an impression is a little one-sided. As Karl Marx pointed out, although people make history, they do not make it exactly as they would choose. Circumstances intervene. Perhaps more to the point, Pragat Purushottam teachings and practices have not simply been imposed upon *adivasis* from the outside. *Adivasis* have been active in joining and shaping the Sanstha. As a result, not everything from the past has been lost as Swaminarayan Hinduism has been translated to the *adivasi* regions around Chhotaudepur. The question I want to turn to now is this: What has been kept in translation?

KEPT IN TRANSLATION

What has been kept in translation are not traditional stories, such as those about Dhartimadi, Meghraj, Doodho Raval, Indraj, Kali Koyal, and Pithoro, nor traditional rituals like Pangu and Gamshahi (Shah, 1980; Jain, 1984; Pandya, 2004; Tilche, 2015; Ishai, 2015; Alles, 2015). The Pragat Purushottam Sanstha replaces traditional knowledge, thoughts, and ideas with knowledge, thoughts, and ideas of its own, and it does the same with traditional observances and values. Nevertheless, something more intangible has persisted — or rather, perhaps something more tangible, more sensual: the movement and adornment of the body, the articulation of the voice and of physical objects not in words but in sounds, and the use of material objects. These are all, at times, recognizably *adivasi*, using the adjective not to denote people but traditional cultural practices. They are perhaps best communicated not by descriptive words but by photographs and videos; nevertheless, I shall try to illustrate what I mean by describing a particularly pertinent example.

Consider for a moment the celebration of Ramanavami in Simalfaliya/Cacer on April 12, 2011. Aspects of this celebration were documented nicely for me by a younger friend whose wife's family has deep roots in both the village and the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha. A major element in the celebration was the procession that escorted the current head of the Sanstha, Mahendrabhai Patel, as

he rode through the streets on horseback, carrying a photo of his grandfather, Dahyabhai Maharaj. Many features of the procession would be immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with traditional Rathva observances. For example, as festive processions in the area are, the procession was led by young men playing large drums known as *dbol*, as well as smaller drums and reed instruments known as *sbarnai*. Following them was a young man dressed in distinctive — and unusual — clothing that was clearly meant to evoke a tribal identity. He wore black pants and a sleeveless black shirt and had dried gourds suspended from his waist. On his head was a cap fitted with horns, and in his hands were a bow and arrow. With a large smile, he brandished the bow and arrow above his head, arrow pointed sky-ward, as he danced up and down in the procession. Following him were tribal dancers in costume, keeping time, as dancers in the area traditionally do, with hand-held cymbals. At various points along the route they stopped to perform traditional dance routines. Another group in the procession was reminiscent of traditional Rathva culture, too. It consisted of girls carrying bamboo baskets on their heads. The baskets were filled with dirt in which sprouts were growing, and these girls were followed by girls carrying terracotta pots on their heads. The mouths of their pots had been covered with large leaves, and on the leaves sat coconuts. The pots with coconuts are common in traditional *adivasi* observances in the area, but the baskets of sprouts are particularly striking. They are associated with the worship of Indraj, the Rathva *dev* of agriculture and the forests. In a ritual performed nine days before the celebration for Indraj known as *Ind puja*, the baskets are filled with dirt, planted with seeds, submerged in water to moisten the seeds, and then set aside to grow (Haekel, 1972).²⁰ During the celebration of *Ind puja*, people bring the baskets to the ritual site, carrying them atop their heads; then they are placed in a row before a line of branches set up for the celebration of *puja*.²¹

Other *adivasi* cultural tropes were present at the Ramanavami celebration as well. For example, groups of young men eventually joined the procession. They danced in unison down the street ahead of the drummers and instrumentalists, holding one or both arms vertically above their heads. Their dancing was effortlessly synchronized, everyone in the group taking four steps to the left, then four to the right, four to the left, and so on. As they did so, they bent their knees and dipped their hips on the first and third steps of each set of four. I first remember seeing such dancing in a procession down the street at a traditional Rathva wedding held in the village of Kanalva (Kavant *taluka*) in April 2009, but this dance is also commonly performed in circles at all sorts of

²⁰ My comments are based on the ritual of planting the baskets that I observed in the village of Gabadiya on 10 January 2006.

²¹ The baskets of sprouts are just barely visible in the background of Figure 1 in Alles, 2015, which shows the branches and offerings from the *Ind puja* celebrated in the village of Manka in January 2009.

traditional Rathva rituals. As often happens in traditional dancing, Rathvas at the Ramnavami celebration, too, mostly men, let forth enthusiastic ululations and whistles as they danced. The sound of the entire experience is distinctive, enthusiastic, and infectious.

To be sure, not every element of the Ramnavami procession invoked traditional *adivasi* cultural tropes. For example, after some time the boy and girl dancers who preceded Mahendrabhai on horseback started doing a Gujarati *dandiya raas* dance. Furthermore, it is hard to know what to make of the massive sound systems, with amplified harmonium music. Nowadays they form an inevitable part of many traditional *adivasi* celebrations such as weddings; they are, however, also in some sense clearly imported.

One should not draw too many conclusions from the celebration of Ramnavami in Cacer in 2011. It is just a single incident,²² and I offer it only as food for thought. In analyzing cultural transformation, the linguistic anthropologist, Greg Urban, borrows vocabulary from physics — inertia, acceleration, and deceleration — to talk about persistence and change during processes of cultural transmission (Urban, 2001). Among other things, he reminds us of one difficulty that adults learning a language have: they pronounce the new language using the phonological apparatus they learned as young children, and so they speak with an accent. He refers to this as habitual inertia, as distinct from what he calls existential inertia — the persistence required by the learning of language in infancy. There are, in fact, neurophysiological reasons for this difference: languages learned as an adult are generally processed differently by the brain than languages learned as a child (Abutalebi, 2008).²³

I want to take some inspiration from Urban's account to talk about the kind of 'inertia' represented by *adivasi* participation in the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha, that is, the kind of inertia represented by what is kept in translation. For the sake of the metaphor, I will distinguish rather schematically between two dimensions of language: on the one hand, the semantic code, and on the other, the phonological repertoire. The Pragat Purushottam Sanstha teaches *adivasis* to speak a different religious language, that is, to use a different religious code. They speak it, however, with a distinctly *adivasi* accent. In other words, when *adivasis* in the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha observe the new rituals, they do so by employing, in part, traditional patterns of how to engage in ritual action. In the example that I have discussed, these patterns include the way to lead a procession, the way to dance in a procession, what to carry in a procession, and in one case, how to dress in an unusual, festive manner that signals one's particular identity as *adivasi*.

²² It is not, however, an entirely isolated incident. Other examples could be offered, such as the festivities at the centenary celebration of Dahyabhai's birth 2–4 March 2012, which included *adivasis* in tribal dress. I reserve discussion of further examples for future publications.

²³ I am indebted to Dr. Stefan Volk, University of Sydney, for this reference.

This is not the only way in which *adivasis* in the Chhotaudepur area have kept traditional elements while translating their cultures and traditions into circumstances created by their encounters with globalizing modernities, often in the form of missionizing Hinduisms. (Jainism and Catholic Christianity have had much more limited success in attracting adherents in the area.) Some *badva* — traditional healers — illustrate another path. They have retained their traditional healing practices but have become *bhagat*. In practice this means most pointedly that they have given up eating meat and drinking alcohol — or sometimes just one of the two. They may also incorporate elements of other traditions into their healing practice. For example, two *bhagat badva* in the village of Ode have established shrines that contain a motley collection of statues and posters of Hindu deities, among them Durga, Bathiji Maharaj, Hanuman, and Sai Baba. In the neighbouring village of Jaloda one *badva* has gone in a rather different direction: he has constructed in his house a replica of the grave of a Muslim *pir* in the vicinity of Devgadhi Baria, some 40 kilometres to the north. In the presence of this replica he carries on his healing practices.²⁴ Such *badva* and the changes that they have made to traditional practices merit much more attention than they have received to date, but we might suggest that in these cases, rather than practicing Hinduism with an *adivasi* accent, as members of the Pragat Purushottam do, these *badva* retain the old religious code, deleting certain terms and adding loanwords to it — something like Gujarati or Rathvi (the language of the Rathvas) peppered with a bit of English. That is, they continue to perform their healing practices, but they introduce new elements into them. In at least two of the cases mentioned the healing practices have been carried over from a time when the *badva* were in fact *jagats*, that is, traditionalists rather than *bhagats*.

I would hesitate to refer to either of these processes, either the one that results in Pragat Purushottam *adivasis* or the one that results in *bhagat badva*, as Sanskritization, because I do not think that they represent any particular aspiration to appropriate the Sanskritic tradition. Certainly the *badvo* who heals next to a replica of a *pir's* grave does not. As Lucy Carroll once asked, is Sanskritization:

really anything other than that phenomenon common to all societies where to a greater or lesser degree the plebeians follow the social and cultural lead of the elite, emulating the latter to the extent that their own financial resources and the presence or absence of social sanctions supporting elitist prerogatives permit? (Carroll, 1977: 359, quoted in: Ikegame, 2013: 125).

Carroll's view would seem to contain a good deal of common sense, but it would also seem to leave many issues in need clarification. In an extremely

²⁴ I am indebted to Subhash Ishai, S.N. College, Chhotaudepur, for photographs and communications about these three *badva* (October 18 and 21, 2015).

careful study, the Norwegian scholar Håkan Rydving has addressed some of these issues, but in a very different context.²⁵

Rydving's topic is the Christianization of the Lule Saami in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In discussing this process, he has developed a rather precise framework for understanding religious change — in his words, 'elements of a theory of religious change' (Rydving, 1995: 165). Taking a cue from the distinction in German between *Wandel* and *Wechsel*, he begins by distinguishing two kinds of religious change: the change that routinely occurs within religious communities over time (*Religionswandel*, religious change₁), and a change of religious adherence or identity (*Religionswechsel*, religious change₂) (Rydving, 1995: 9–10). Rydving's concern is with the latter. In it, he sees the operation of two complementary processes, 'deculturation', which he defines as 'the process by which the indigenous religion is weakened', and 'enculturation', 'the process by which the foreign religion is strengthened' (Rydving, 1995: 11–12). His specific interest is in deculturation, a process that he characterizes in terms of six 'dichotomies': past vs. present, group vs. individual, continual vs. alternating, external vs. internal, enforced vs. spontaneous, and positive/enriching vs. negative/destructive (Rydving, 1995: 13). His model culminates with twelve possible causes for 'religious change₂' (Rydving, 1995: 15–17).

Rydving's framework can help us to situate the turn of *adivasis* in eastern Chhotaudepur district to the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha a little more precisely. That turn also requires, however, some modifications to the model.

There are some similarities between bhagatization in eastern Chhotaudepur district and the Christianization of the Lule Saami. For example, like the indigenous Lule Saami religion, *adivasi* traditions in this part of India have 'no common leadership, no common structure of authority and no missionaries to advance [their] cause' (Rydving, 1995: 163). This apparently makes them susceptible to religious change, presumably because it points to a source of organized resistance — or inertia — that is absent. What I find more striking than such similarities, however, are the differences.

Bhagatization in eastern Chhotaudepur district, including the turn to the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha, would seem to be considerably more voluntary than the conversion of the Lule Saami to Christianity was. According to Rydving, Lule Saami who maintained their traditions were fined, flogged, and in some cases sentenced to death (Rydving, 1995: 54–68). *Adivasis* do not experience any such coercion to 'bhagatize' from the state. It is true that alcohol use, while widespread, is illegal in Gujarat. Nevertheless, like the pressure against

²⁵ Studies of both conversion and syncretism are legion. I choose to discuss Rydving's both because of its theoretical precision and because of my involvement in a comparative project on indigenous religions underway at the University of Tromsø, Norway, to which Rydving's work is directly relevant.

meat-eating, pressure against alcohol use has mostly been social, not legal. Specific persons or families may also experience more focused pressures to join the Sanstha, such as pressures from friends and neighbors, work associates (to the extent that they have such associates), and extended or even immediate family.

Furthermore, the bhagatization of *adivasis* in eastern Chhotaudepur district occurs in a significantly different context than the conversion of the Lule Saami did. Unlike the Lule Saami in the late 1600s and early 1700s, *adivasis* in eastern Chhotaudepur district today are experiencing significant and wide-ranging changes in social and economic structures and processes (Rydving, 1995: 15, 164). These changes include an increase in formal education and literacy, increased exposure to regional, national, and international media of communication, growing prevalence of motorized transportation, a more self-conscious participation in regional and national politics, the increased importance of a money-based economy, greater access to scientific medicine (healing has been a major function of traditional religious leaders), the introduction of mechanized farming practices (occurring rapidly within the last five years), electrification, a shift from *kaccha* (wattle and daub) to *pakka* (plastered brick) houses, and a shift from extended-family to nuclear-family dwelling units (Alles, 2012; Alles, 2015). Determining the extent to which any of these factors are causes rather than correlates of a turn to the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha would require a significant amount of work, but one can at least note that in the minds of many *adivasis* the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha, like other *bhagat* movements, is closely associated with these newly emerging structures and processes.

The above features fit comfortably within Rydving's model of religious change, but a third difference does not. It concerns the manner in which religious change is conceived.

Rydving makes a strong case, based on the possession of two different personal names, Christian and Saami, and two different naming rituals, the Christian ritual of baptism, which provided a Christian name, and a Saami naming ritual, which took the Christian name away, for the existence among the Lule Saami of two distinct religious identities, Saami and Christian, and thus for a clear distinction between two sorts of religious change (Rydving, 1995: 115–127, 160). Presumably these two identities framed the question of what traditional practices Lule Saami would be permitted to keep. The situation of *adivasis* in eastern Chhotaudepur district is quite different. In their case the existence of two distinct religious identities, and so of two different kinds of religious change, is not so clear-cut. It is not just that scholars have differed on how to categorize *adivasi* traditions, the classic stand-off being that between Verrier Elwin (Elwin, 2009), for whom *adivasis* had their own distinct cultures, and G.S. Ghurye (Ghurye, 1980), for whom they were Hindus, albeit

degenerate ones. What is more to the point is that *adivasis* in eastern Chhotaudepur district themselves differ on whether their traditions are Hindu or not (Alles, 2013). From one *adivasi* perspective, *adivasis* who join the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha are abandoning their traditions for something foreign; from another, they are reforming their own traditions.

Identifying the *adivasi* turn to the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha as either *Religionswandel* or *Religionswechsel* — religious change₁ or religious change₂ — presents, then, a theoretical conundrum. It would force us to declare one *adivasi* perspective correct and the other wrong, without any good grounds for doing so. I think it is more useful analytically to develop instead vocabularies and strategies for discussing these changes that take attributions of identity into account but that do not require us to endorse one *adivasi* perspective or the other. With that in mind, let us return briefly to the analogy of language.

I have suggested that we might think of *adivasis* in the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha as speaking the Sanstha's sort of Hinduism with an *adivasi* accent. Other forms of bhagatization seem to operate more on the level of the semantic code: *badva* who become *bhagats* adopt what might be seen as analogous to loan-words into their practices. Rydving uses a similar lexicographical analogy: certain religious elements, he notes, are like loan-words, some of which may be integrated into a language, while others continue to be recognized as foreign (Rydving, 1995: 160). Other linguistic analogies may be helpful in understanding these processes as well. For example, one might suggest that in some cases *adivasis* have preserved traditional phonology and semantics but have adopted a new set of grammatical rules for using them: Donyipolo and Rangfraism in Northeast India seem to express *adivasi* religious content by using what we might call the grammar of Christianity (Scheid, 2015; Barkataki-Ruscheweyh, 2015).

At the end of the day, however, such linguistic analogies are not particularly precise. Several issues require more careful formulation. Among them I would include the following. First, what would constitute a more adequate, more literal account of the various elements that change? An answer requires, of course, a model of cultural structures and processes that is adequate at least to local circumstances. Second, what factors are responsible for different communities translating and adapting traditions in different ways? Clearly, the mechanism cannot be the different way in which the brain processes languages learned as children and adults. Third, what persists, what does not, and why? Even on the metaphorical level, it seems clear that in the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha not every element of the *adivasi* 'phonological' ritual apparatus is kept in translation. What accounts for the variation? Finally, inertia is not stasis. How long will the elements that are kept in translation by *adivasi* members of the Pragat Purushottam Sanstha remain? Will they have an impact on the broader practices of the Sanstha, or will they, like the native language of immigrants, be slowly replaced as future generations learn — or choose — to speak the Pragat Purushottam

form of Swaminarayan Hinduism without an accent? Why? These are all questions for which I do not at the moment have good answers, but they strike me as questions that certainly deserve further investigation.

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