

Tribal Resistance in Western India: A Study of Bhilisthan Movement

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Abstract

This article examines the historicity and its contemporary resurgence of the demand for a separate Bhil state in Western India. Though the demand existed since the British era, there is a reasserted demand from the Bhils for a separate state in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Maharashtra. This article attempts to understand the political consciousness and the issues that led to this demand. When provincial elections were held in 1937, efforts by the nationalists to bring the Adivasis into their fold received an impulse. The Gujarat Kisan Sabha movement and the Tillers Day Act, 1956 changed the nature of politics and participation of the Bhils. Following the linguistic reorganisation of the states, Bhils were divided between Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. After the formation of new states, the Bhils again sought recourse to Bhilisthan with a different set of objectives. The article studies the issues that became the rallying point for the mobilization by the Bhartiya Tribal Party (BTP) and the Bhilisthan Vikas Morcha (BVM).

Keywords: Bhilisthan, Adivasi, Autonomy, State, Political party

Introduction

One must note that the demand for statehood and autonomy by the Adivasis¹ have been made before the modern Indian state came into existence. In the twentieth century, the nationalist movement, linguistic reorganization of states, and the Maha Gujarat movement in Western India led to its demise. This article seeks to reexamine the underlying factors for its decline and reemergence and the reasons behind this refusal to meet the demands of a separate tribal state. The demand though in existence among a small section of the Adivasis in the region did not take the shape of a movement like Jharkhand or Nagaland owing to the nationalist activity during the early years of the twentieth century.

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