

# Sacred Spaces, Legitimacy, and Connections

## Socio-Political Mobilisation in Princely States of Southern Rajputana

### Introduction

India's polity till the eighteenth century was typified by numerous monarchical states that ruled over the expanse of the subcontinent. The rulers of Rajputana states in north-western India, mostly Rajputs, also exercised monarchical powers. From the seventh century onwards, the process of state formation in the region, notably in southern Rajputana, was inextricably linked to the role of sacred spaces, origin myths and symbolism in establishing legitimacy and facilitating expansion (Kapur 2002). In their transition from feudatories to sovereign rulers, the numerous Rajputs clans sought to cement their legitimacy by associating themselves with sacred spaces and symbolism.<sup>1</sup> One of the ways of seeking divinity was through tracing their lineages from Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, two prominent deities of the Hindu pantheon. The major clans, such as Mewar, Jaipur, Bikaner, and Marwar traced their lineage from Rāma called Sūryavaṃśīs (descendants of the Sun), while the ruling clans of states such as Jaisalmer traced their descent from the lunar line of Kṛṣṇa and hence were known as Candravaṃśīs (Jain and

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- 1 To illustrate, the Ranas of Mewar sought legitimacy and distinction not merely by seeking descent from the God Rāma but they even bestowed divinity and divine grace on their kingdom by regarding it as the dominion of Lord Śiva. The Ranas sought to promote and popularise religious symbolism in their official correspondence. Furthermore, when they visited the shrine of Ekaliṅgajī (Śiva is revered in Mewar in this form), they assumed the role of the priests and performed the ceremonies themselves. The rulers considered it highly honourable to donate to the shrine of Ekaliṅgajī and confer and distribute holy emblems and insignia of religious authority upon the priests of Ekaliṅgajī. It has been a ritual with the Maharanas to seek the Ekaliṅgajī's permission before leaving the city's confines. The present scion of the Sisodiyas adheres to this tradition. Due to their status as divine representatives, the words the Maharana uttered were taken to have descended from Śrīmukha, the pious mouth, and their persons were honoured as Śrījī, a great being (Jain and Sharma 2004: 46–47).

Sharma 2004: 46–47). The preoccupation of Rajput political elite with sacred and divine kingship reveals that personal/clan honour and status in political domain were a major concern even in the preliminary stages of these polities. Such an association between the political legitimacy and the religious connect has been predominantly observed in the region. In this context, the socio-political mobilisation in the region during the colonial period was perceived to be closely associated with the sacred sites and symbolism that were integral to the region's cultural identity.

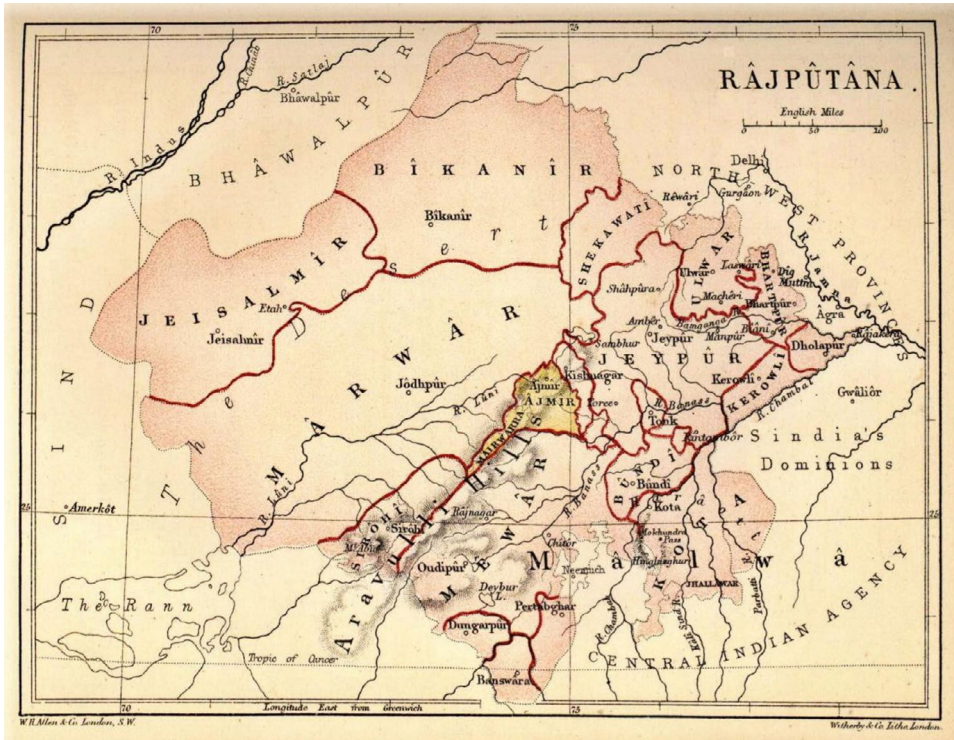
The advent of British colonial rule in India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries transformed the political landscape of the country. The Indian subcontinent, hitherto, had two simultaneous and distinct administrative and political systems. While some states, nomenclatured as 'British Provinces', were conquered and directly ruled by the British administrators, colonial power chose to leave many monarchical polities, henceforth called 'Princely states,' under the native rulers. Princely states were characterised by limited autonomy in the internal administration but were under the overall control of the British Paramount power. These princely domains continued the socio-political environment of the earlier centuries, with discernible feudal vestiges, intermingled with plodding imperial interference (Bhagavan 2003). Particularly after 1909, the princes were given considerable leeway to rule according to their own objectives and their inherited notions of South Asian tradition, which represented legitimate royal behaviour (Copland 2004: 807). This scenario created a distinctive space, in which British provincial laws were never enforceable. The entire Rajputana continued as princely states till India gained independence in 1947.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter concerns the princely states of Rajputana located in the north-western corner of the Indian subcontinent. These Rajput polities share cultural characteristics while maintaining individual specificities. They were deeply entrenched in traditional feudal structures, in contrast to the British-ruled provinces that were gradually evolving democratic institutions and practices. The focus of this study is on the southern states of Rajputana, which primarily consist of the former states of Mewar, Dungarpur, Banswara, and the neighbouring regions located at the southern end of the Aravalli range. This region has a considerable population of indigenous communities such as the Bhils.

The Bhils are an indigenous community that resides predominantly in today's Udaipur, Dungarpur, Banswara and Sirohi in southern region of Rajasthan, and in the neighbouring states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra, forming the largest indigenous community in western India. From the seventh century onwards, the regional state formation in southern Rajputana states was

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2 The sole exception was the British province of Ajmer-Merwara, which constituted an enclave situated within the Rajputana states.



Map 1 Rajputana States (Pope 1880: 28).

characterised by the ascendance of Rajput clans in the region, which resulted in the incorporation of the Bhil dominions under their rule. The history of the Bhils' participation in the state formation in southern Rajputana states included protracted negotiations, involving both resistance to and collaboration with the ruling clans, culminating in the marginalisation and peasantisation of these indigenous communities (Kapur 2008). Prior to the Rajput conquest, the Bhils held a significant portion of the southern half of the Rajputana.

The annals of Mewar mention the assistance provided by the Bhils to the early Guhila rulers.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the towns of Dungarpur, Banswara, and Deolia, the

3 The Guhilas were a prominent ruling clan in Rajasthan, with a notable presence since the early seventh century CE. They subsequently became a dominant power in the region during the course of following centuries. The Guhilas of Mewar were a Rajput dynasty that ruled the Kingdom of Mewar (Medapata, modern Mewar) region in the present-day Rajasthan state of India. The Guhila kings initially ruled as Gurjara-Pratihara (dynasty ruling northern India between the eighth and the eleventh centuries CE feudatories between the end of the eighth and ninth centuries, subsequently becoming independent in the early tenth century. In the mid-twelfth century, the dynasty underwent

old capital of Partabgarh, are all named after Bhil chieftains who formerly held sway there. Finally, it is widely known that in the three states, Udaipur, Banswara, and Dungarpur, it was customary to mark the brow of a new chief with blood taken from the thumb or toe of a Bhil from a specific family. The Rajputs believed that the blood mark signified the Bhil's loyalty, but it appears to have been more of a remnant of the Bhil's authority (Erksine 1908: 228). In the nineteenth century, the region witnessed British intervention with the treaties of 1818.<sup>4</sup> Over time, a series of socio-political decisions by the authorities resulted in mounting discontent among the tribal population in the area, leading to a rise in revolts by the Bhils in the southern Rajputana states (Doshi 1974; Mathur 2000, 2004; Doodwal 2021). Recent scholarship has debated and challenged the categorisation of princely states as homogenised entities. It has been highlighted that these arenas of native rule presented different courses of political and ideological responses to the conditions of imperial rule (Copland 1997, Ramusack 2003). In consequence, the manifestation of socio-political activism in these domains was perceived to diverge from the British provinces (Meena 2022), exhibiting notable contrasts in the administrative apparatus and socio-political milieu, especially in the context of pervasive religious and regional symbolism.

This study concentrates on the role of sacred spaces in the socio-political mobilisation in the princely states of southern Rajputana during the colonial period. It is crucial to contextualise this socio-political mobilisation within the broader framework of activism in the region, which initially sought to address the socio-economic marginalisation of tribal communities through social reform. This activism subsequently gave way to the emergence of political reforms. Social upliftment was in most Rajputana states followed by political mobilisation, leading to Bhils' participation in struggles for their own rights as well as the larger struggles against the respective rulers, with a view to bringing about a responsible government. The socio-political movements, discussed in this paper, persuasively employed select sacred spaces for legitimising their cause and establishing themselves as potent voices within their respective domains. I explore this proposition by examining two sacred sites in this region, namely Bēṇēśvara Dhāma in

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a division into two branches. One branch continued to rule from Chitrakuta (modern Chittorgarh), while the other originated from the village of Sisoda with the title Rana and established the Sisodia Rajput dynasty, which ruled until independence (Hooja 2006: 152–56). Also, the ruling dynasties of Dungarpur and Banswara states had branched out from the Mewar dynasty.

- 4 The Rajputana states entered into individual treaties with the British East India Company and this marked British intervention in the region. By the end of 1818, almost all states of the present day Rajasthan were under the treaty obligation with the British. The guiding principle behind these treaties was the Subsidiary Alliance system promoted by Lord Wellesley, the Governor General of India (1798–1805).

Dungarpur and Mānagaṛha Dhāma in Banswara, and their relationship to the socio-political mobilisation that emanated as reformist campaigns and magnified into efficacious ferments that influenced the region's politics, as well as to cults that remain active to the present day.

## Sacred spots and socio-political mobilisation

The Rajputana states' political space was highly restrictive—due to its triple-layered subservience of the region—to the British, the Indian monarchs, and the local *jagirdars* or feudal lords (Hooja 2006: 987). Given these restrictions, sacred spaces and religious symbolism played a significant role in the socio-political mobilisation in these states in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. This was more pronounced among the indigenous and folk communities and in the pre-modern and pre-democratic societies during the colonial era.

Socio-political mobilisation can be explained as the motivating, persuading, and inspiring a group, community, or nation to take collective action for a cause that seeks to improve their lives, whether perceived or actual. T. K. Oommen explains mobilisation and collective actions through “the existence of certain uniformity among participants based on their interests rooted in socio-economic background and ideas emanating from their political orientations and ideological commitments” (Oommen 1977: 16). Mobilising any group or category of groups for a collective action is a challenging task for any leader, regardless of whether the group is urban or rural, tribal, or non-tribal, literate, or illiterate. In the absence of nationalist notions, ‘pre-political’ societies express their values primarily through religious vocabulary. Mobilisation efforts may be based on communal or primordial attachments (Oommen 1977: 16). Also, in the pre-democratic societies in question, when monarchical regimes were the norm, individuals rarely had access to communicative environments or civic spaces to express dissent and protest. In such polities, people had to contend with limited and constricted spaces. Mobilisers who wished to rally people needed therefore to reimagine and redefine the concept of public space to facilitate mobilisation. In many oppressive environments, the only secure locations for expressing alternative, opposing, or rebellious viewpoints were the sacred spaces where individuals could gather to worship.

The premise of the paper revolves broadly around two lines of thought. One is that the sacred or holy sites can lend the necessary credibility and legitimacy to a message, thereby making it more receptive and popular. Most cultures regard holy sites as representations of their beliefs, and the emotions evoked by these religious locations become shared and communal rather than merely private or

internal. Second, in the restrictive environment of non-democratic monarchical polities, there were limited spaces for socio-political mobilisation. In the princely states, in the face of the almost absent and restrictive public sphere, sacred spaces inevitably became an arena for people to address and challenge social and political issues. The interface of sacred spaces and socio-political mobilisation reveals that such engagements strengthen and reinforce each other.

This use of sacred places and religious symbolism as platforms for mobilisation has been observed in various historical contexts worldwide. In Brazil, churches facilitated trade union meetings during the dictatorship (1964–85), while in apartheid-era South Africa they became centres for anti-apartheid activism after the ANC's<sup>5</sup> ban. Similarly, churches in the United States played vital roles in the civil rights movement (Devine, Brown, and Deneulin 2015). In Iran, mosques played crucial role in the 1979 Islamic revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini used mosque networks to distribute his recorded lectures, which helped to galvanise support and ultimately overthrow the monarchy (Collins 2011: 42–44). Thus, sacred places and religious symbolism have been instrumental in fostering social change and political mobilisation, demonstrating their adaptability and resilience in challenging political climates.

In the South Asian context, Zohra Batul (2022) presents a pertinent analysis of contemporary times, examining sacred sites such as mosques and shrines in Kashmir's politics. Her study reconsiders the concept of the public sphere in non-western societies and its relation to political activism through collective action. She notably argues that the role of religion in political movements adds legitimacy to the struggle and encourages participation that is hard for believers to dismiss. She veritably stresses that particularly in the early twentieth century, the political leaders of the Kashmir Valley, representing a variety of political persuasions, have acquired legitimacy by associating their political activities with Islam and its symbols, including mosques and shrines. Since there is not much space available for protest in Kashmir, due to the ongoing strife, holy places have become the main hubs for political activism and thus help to facilitate construction of a counter-narrative to the official one.

Furthermore, religious institutions, due to their formal and informal structures, are well-positioned to mobilise social action. Community congregations have a significant impact on the growth of reform movements. The congregations associated with the sacred sites such as the fairs or *mēlā*, and festivals celebrated at the sites, facilitate continued participation through pre-existing networks and ties based on faiths. This creates a firm foundation and strengthens the movement

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5 African National Congress (ANC) is a political party in South Africa that was founded as an anti-apartheid liberation movement and has governed South Africa since Nelson Mandela was elected president in 1994.

(Hutchison 2012). Moreover, as Kama Maclean (2008) argues, pilgrimages serve as opportunities to unify the masses with the “common language of piety and ritual,” particularly in the less literate societies. Hence, religious fairs are potent resources in socio-political mobilisation.

The present study examines two sacred complexes, namely the Beneshwar Shrine (Bēṇēśvara Dhāma) and the Mangarh Shrine (Mānagaṛha Dhāma). The two sites are discussed in the following two sections, which highlight their association with the socio-political mobilisation during the colonial era in the southern Rajputana states. This analysis reveals a pronounced correlation between sacred sites and socio-political movements, particularly in relation to indigenous groups. This connection serves to reinforce the bond between these communities and the issues raised by the movements. Consequently, both sites, with their distinctive trajectory witnessing mobilisation of these communities, highlight this connection.

## Bēṇēśvara Dhāma/Beneshwar Shrine (Dungarpur) and Māvajī Movement

The sacred site of Beneshwar is located in Dungarpur, in the southern part of Rajasthan. It has been widely venerated as a holy abode, situated at the confluence of the river streams of Mahi and Soma.<sup>6</sup> The name ‘Bēṇēśvara’ is derived from the repute accorded to the Śiva-*liṅga* at the Bēṇēśvara Mahadeo temple, located in the river delta of Mahi and Soma.<sup>7</sup> The widespread reverence for the site is further derived from its supposed mention in the *Skandapurāṇa*.<sup>8</sup>

6 In popular perception, this place is also known as Triveni Sangam (Trivēṇī Saṅgama) and Vagad Prayag (Vāgaṛa Prayāga), as it is considered to be the confluence of three rivers: Mahi, Soma, and Jakhama. However, it should be noted that River Jakhama, the tributary of River Soma, joins the River Soma before the site itself. ‘Vagad’ or ‘Vāgaṛa’ is a region located in the south-eastern part of Rajasthan. Its boundaries are mainly defined by the borders of the districts of Dungarpur and Banswara.

7 In the Vagadi language, ‘Vēna’ signifies delta. Consequently, the term Vēṇēśvara, also called Bēṇēśvara, refers to Śiva (Mahadeo), the ‘Lord (Īśvara) of Vēna (delta)’ (Sehgal 1974: 363–64).

8 The *Skandapurāṇa* mentions the sacredness of River Mahi and the greatness of the *tīrthas* (pilgrimage sites) associated with its banks. Bēṇēśvara, situated on the banks of Mahi, is considered to be an auspicious *tīrtha*. Chapter 3 of Section II *Kaumārikākhaṇḍa* in Book 1 titled *Maheśvarakhaṇḍa* of the *Skandapurāṇa*, describes ‘The Greatness of the Tīrtha at the Confluence of Mahi and Sea.’ The text states that, “The great river named Mahi has been (in its earlier stages) full of all the Tīrthas. What (doubt) then about (the sanctity of) its meeting place with the Lord of Rivers!” (Shastri 1950: 105).





Map 2 Bēṇēśvara Dhāma (Dungarpur). Source: Google Maps

The site houses a Mahadeo (Śiva) temple, of which the present structure was built by Maharawal Askaran, the ruler of Dungarpur in the fifteenth century, although repairs were made to the sanctum in the eighteenth century. The Mahadeo temple was a revered spot among the local inhabitants, as Mahadeo was a venerated deity among the Bhils (Kapur 2008: 33–54). A fair (*mēlā*) at the site in honour of Bēṇēśvara Mahadeo was held continuously for no less than three centuries after the temple of Mahadeo was built.

In the early decades of the eighteenth century, a Brahmin reformer called Māvājī made Beneshwar the centre of his new sect. According to tradition, he was profoundly influenced by Mīrā and the *bhakti* cult.<sup>9</sup> It is believed that on the *mārgaśīrṣa śukla ekādaśī* (1785 V.S.)<sup>10</sup> he received heavenly revelation to preach the

9 Mīrā was perceived to be popular among the so-called depressed and weaker sections of society. In fact, she incurred the wrath of her family, who resented her association with the low-caste people. It has been argued by some scholars that Mīrā owes her popularity and survival in public memory to her following among the depressed and the downtrodden sections of peasants and artisans who, by singing Mīrā's *bhajans*, symbolically seek to defy the authority of the Rajput ruling family of Mēvāṛa/Mewar (Jain and Sharma 2018).

10 *mārgaśīrṣa śukla ekādaśī* falls on the eleventh day of the bright fortnight (*śukla pakṣa*) of the Mārgaśīrṣa month in the Hindu calendar. This day holds significance in Hinduism, particularly for Viṣṇu devotees who observe fasting and perform rituals dedicated





Fig. 1 and 2 The Śiva-līṅga at the Mahadeo temple (Bēṇēśvara). It is called a self-created Śiva-līṅga or *svayambhū* and is split into five parts. Photo by Jigyasa Meena.



message of the Vaishnava *bhakti* to the masses. He proclaimed himself as Kalki, the incarnation of Viṣṇu, and established the Niṣkalaṅka Sampradāya, with Beneshwar as its seat. According to popular lore, his earliest followers were Audichya Brahmins.<sup>11</sup> However, he earned formidable repute in the area due to his appeal to the marginalised caste groups and tribes (Interview with Keshav Kallal, the fifth-generation associate of Bēṇēśvara Dhām *pīṭhādhiśvara/pīṭhādhiśa*,<sup>12</sup> January 2, 2024). He initiated social reforms among the Bhils and other marginalised communities and castes like Kalalls, Bunkars, etc. within the Hindu fold (Kallal 2024, Mathur 2000: 5).

Māvaji's social reform initiatives were significantly shaped by the *bhakti* movement, with the objective of promoting social and religious equality. He instructed his followers to engage in *kīrtans* (devotional singing) and to attend discourses on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, thereby promoting spiritual growth and community cohesion. He placed great emphasis on abstinence from alcohol consumption, as part of his broader vision of moral and ethical living. Māvaji's approach was inclusive, as evidenced by his practice of admitting followers into his sect without discrimination, thereby breaking down the barriers of caste and social status. By advocating both social and religious equality, Māvaji's reforms sought to uplift marginalised communities, integrating them into a more cohesive and egalitarian society. His efforts not only promoted spiritual devotion but aimed at creating a socially just environment that would be aligned with the core values of the *bhakti* movement (Mathur 2000: 5–7, Sharma 1968: 238). Legend has it that Māvaji's virtues and his life of dedication won him the respect of everyone in the region of Dungarpur, Banswara, and the surrounding areas. His sect placed a lot of emphasis on the regular singing of devotional songs (*bhajan*). He is said to have had extraordinary spiritual abilities and to have penned many works on various religious topics, making forecasts about the future of the country (Census 1966: 26). Between 1728 and 1732 CE, he wrote, with the help of his follower Jeewandas, five illustrated treatises known as *Chopras*; they were in the Vagadi language. In these treatises

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to Viṣṇu. V. S. stands for Vikram Samvat, a calendar that is 57 years ahead of the Gregorian calendar—i.e., 1728–29 CE.

11 Audichya Brahmins are a sub-caste of Hindu Brahmins, mainly from the Indian state of Gujarat. They are the largest Brahmin community in Gujarat, with a minority residing in the Indian state of Rajasthan. The Audichya Brahmins have a wide distribution, with their main concentration being in Ahmedabad, Mehsana, Kheda, Bharuch, Surendranagar, Sabarkantha, and Panchemahal districts. According to historical records, the Audichya Brahmins descend from over a thousand North Indian Brahmin families who were invited by the Solanki kings in the tenth century to Gujarat to serve as priests. The term *audīcya* means pertaining to north in Sanskrit, *udīcī* means north, so the Brahmins invited by Mulraj from Northern India came to be known as 'Audichya Brahmins' (Lal 2002: 82).

12 Pīṭhādhiśvara/Pīṭhādhiśa is the head of the *pīṭha*/sacred seat.

he predicted the nation's destiny, described various facets of the Vaishnavism, and included several images representing different incidents from the life of Kṛṣṇa and the *rāsālīlā* (Vashishtha 1995: 25). His adoration for Kṛṣṇa was visible in his dressing up like Kṛṣṇa and his performance of the *rāsālīlā*.<sup>13</sup>

With time, Māvājī's following evolved into a sect, and his disciples came to be known as 'Bēṇēśvara Dhāma Panthī' or '*māvabhaktas*', a title which required strict adherence to the ethical code preached by Māvājī (Mathur 2000: 17). Bēṇēśvara Dhāma became popular, and his devotees thronged to show their reverence.

Māvājī advanced his Nīṣkalaṅka Sampradāya<sup>14</sup> among his followers and he called it the Bēṇēśvara Dhāma Panth. Spreading the message of the Vaishnavism, he preached non-violence, temperance, and vegetarianism to the illiterate Bhil *ādivāsī* (tribe) and to other castes without discrimination (Vashishtha 1995: 27–28). Hence, his followers are spread over several communities and groups such as Bhil, Chamar, and Sadh, as well as a small number of upper-caste Hindus such as Brahmins and Rajputs.

The sect came to be known as the "Mavaji guru-na-bhagat movement," or the "Beneshwar-na-bhagat movement." According to Stephen Fuchs, the movement emphasised the importance of 'social prestige' among the indigenous communities, who were willing to make significant sacrifices to climb the social ladder (Fuchs 1965: 54–61). Social prestige, in addition to economic factors, Fuchs argues, can be a powerful incentive for abandoning well-established and time-tested traditions in favour of new and unfamiliar ones. Māvājī's social reforms, manifested in his indiscriminating teachings, gave rise to the sect's initial popularity among the lower and middle classes.

Māvājī chose a sacred and venerated shrine to spread his message of social reform, largely driven by the objective of Sanskritisation<sup>15</sup> of the tribals and the so-called low caste groups. By promoting adherence to specific dietary norms (such as vegetarianism and total abstinence from alcohol), participation in distinctive

13 *Rāsālīlā* or *rāsa* dance is a dance drama from northern India that is based on scenes from the life of Kṛṣṇa.

14 The Nīṣkalaṅka Sampradāya is a religious sect founded by Sant Māvājī; it has a significant following. Followers of this tradition believe in Sant Māvājī as an enlightened figure and consider him to be the manifestation of Lord Viṣṇu's tenth *avatāra*, Kalki. The tradition emphasises devotion to Viṣṇu and follows the teachings of Sant Māvājī, focusing on spiritual purity and liberation.

15 In this context, the process of Sanskritisation should be understood as developed and popularised by the Indian sociologist M. N. Srinivas (1956). It broadly refers to the process of social or upward mobility of castes and communities situated at the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy through the adoption of rituals, customs, ways of living (such as vegetarianism, teetotalism) of the higher castes, and also exposure to ideas and values mentioned in Sanskrit texts, both sacred and secular, such as *karman*, *mokṣa* etc. (Srinivas 1956: 485).



Fig. 3 The Brahmā temple (Bṛhṇeśvara Dhāma) constructed by the Śrīgauṛa Brahmins. Photo by Jigyasa Meena.

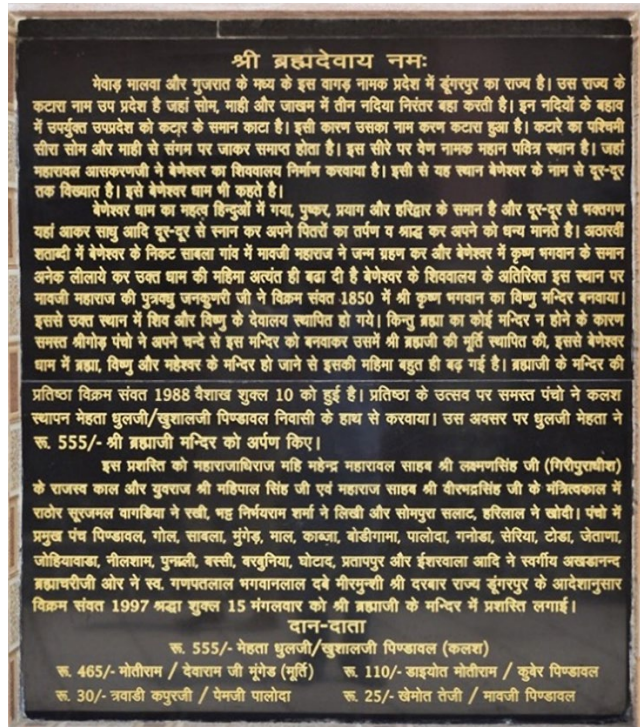
forms of worship, and the adoption of dress codes that were consistent with those observed by the higher-caste Hindus, Māvajī sought to facilitate their upward social mobility.

By establishing his connection with Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa as also through legends that underscored his own magical and divine powers, his personality imparted a divine aura. Māvajī chose a site that was already marked as sacred amongst the local populace. Such environs must have enhanced the popularity and acceptance of his social message. In consequence, as the subsequent narrative establishes, Māvajī's social and religious activities in the region further served to reinforce and augment the sacrality of the site. Not surprisingly, this site and particularly the fair associated with it became an interaction point for intermingling of the indigenous population with the non-tribal Hindus, which in turn has facilitated the process of Sanskritisation among these inhabitants residing in the remote hilly terrain (Vashishtha 1995: 32).



Later, in the last decade of the eighteenth century, Māvājī's daughter-in-law, Janakumvarī, built a temple of Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa, next to the Mahadeo Temple, to commemorate Māvājī, who passed away in the mid eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup> The Government Census publication accounts that this temple, presently called Hari Mandir, holds great significance, as a large number of people come to pay homage there. The fair in its present form started only after this temple's construction. At first, two fairs were held concurrently, one to pay tribute to Bēṇeśvara Mahadeo, and the other to celebrate the completion of the Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa temple's construction. As Viṣṇu's fair gained prominence with time, a sizeable crowd could be seen honouring him. While the followers of these two deities come to honour their respective deities, they also honour other deities (Census 1966: 26).<sup>17</sup>

Fig. 4 The stone slab outside the Brahmā temple displays information about the site as it is popularly perceived. It mentions the 'Hari mandir' as the 'Viṣṇu temple of Lord Kṛṣṇa' constructed by Janakumvarī, daughter-in-law of Saint Māvājī. This shows the interchangeable use of nomenclature for the temple as 'Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa/Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa/Hari Temple'. Photo by Jigyasa Meena.



- 16 According to the Government Gazetteer, in Samvat 1850 (1793 CE), Janakumvarī, who was Māvājī's daughter-in-law, constructed the Viṣṇu Temple at Bēṇeśvara (Sehgal 1974: 364). It is worth noting that the temple has been referred to interchangeably as the Viṣṇu temple, Śrī Kṛṣṇa temple, Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa temple, and currently, as the Hari temple (see Fig. no. 4 & 5).
- 17 The fair is held between *māgha śukla ekādaśī* and *māgha śukla pūrṇimā*. In addition to the temples of Bēṇeśvara, Mahadeo, and Hari Mandir, there is a temple dedicated to Brahmā, the three Hindu gods forming the trinity (Brahmā the creator, Viṣṇu the



Fig. 5 The Hari Temple, also known as the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa Temple (Bēṇēśvara Dhāma), has recently undergone a complete renovation. The exterior structure is entirely new, while the idols inside the temple remain unchanged. Photo by Jigyasa Meena.



Fig. 6 The images inside the Hari Temple are considered to be the family of Saint Māvaji, and he is venerated as Kṛṣṇa. Photo by Jigyasa Meena.

In the present format of the Beneshwar fair, the *mahanta* (chief priest)/*pīṭhādhiśvara* of the Bēṇēśvara Dhāma, who is a descendent of Māvajī, hoists a seven-coloured flag on top of the Hari temple to mark the commencement of the ten-day fair (Sharma 2023). This highlights the importance of the Māvajī cult. On the first day of the fair, *māgha śukla ekādaśī*, the *pīṭhādhiśvara* (chief) arrives in a procession from the town of Sabla, along with a silver idol of Māvajī mounted on a horse. The Bhils in this region have been scattering the ashes of their deceased relatives in Ābudarrā Ghāṭa on *māgha śukla dvādaśī* (twelfth day). This ritual is performed in the morning, after the *pīṭhādhiśvara* has bathed there, as it is believed to enhance the water's sanctity. At the Hari temple, an *āratī* of the *pīṭhādhiśvara* is performed and the *rāsaliḷā* is staged at night.

The fair resulted in the spread of Māvajī's teachings and following, and it gained the stature as the “*kumbha* of the *ādivāsī*” in the present times.<sup>18</sup> The fair created a religious and economic network that leveraged this sacred site. In addition to becoming a great religious congregation/pilgrimage site (*tīrtha*) for the tribals, it also opened space for developing wider interactions and networks that augmented the cult which developed around the site and enhanced the social base



Fig. 7 Ābudarrā Ghāṭa (Bēṇēśvara Dhāma). Photo by Jigyasa Meena.

preserver and Śiva the destroyer). The temple was constructed in 1931 by Śrīgaṛa Brahmins (sub caste of Brahmin community) from Dungarpur, Banswara, and Udaipur. The premises also house a Gāyatrī temple and a few Dharmaśālās (shelter or rest house, especially for spiritual pilgrims), which were later additions to the place.

- 18 *Kumbha* is a major sacred pilgrimage of the Hindus. So, the Bēṇēśvara fair is considered as the most sacred pilgrimage site by the *ādivāsīs* or tribals of the area.



of the devotees, as large numbers of devoted followers from the nearby states used to visit the fair (Report 1926: 1). An excerpt of a folk song widely sung by the tribals in the region exhibits the appeal and social diversity of the Bēṇēśvara fair among the Bhils and the tribals who visit the fair:

*The Vagad Bhils and Dhebar Bhils have come to the fair. O, my friend!*  
*The Mangalia Bhils of Gujarat have come to the fair. O, my friend!*  
*The Bhils of Paniyar have come to the fair. O, my friend!*  
*The bald Bhils of Bhana Seeman have come to the fair. O, my friend!*  
*The Bhils of Vadgaon, resembling long-legged grasshoppers, have come to the fair. O, my friend!*  
*The Bhils of Baudi, like the tiny hola bird, have come to the fair. O, my friend!*  
*The wasp-waisted Bhils of Palna have come to the fair. O, my friend!*  
*The dandy Bhils of Khedapani have come to the fair. O, my friend!*  
*The langot-wearing<sup>19</sup> Bhils of Santrampur have come to the fair. O, my friend!*  
*The well-groomed Bhils of Chatrina, Sanjali and Baria Paraganas have come to the fair. O, my friend!*  
*The Bhils of Chorasias Parganas, Dohad and Jhalod, carrying canes, have come to the fair. O, my friend!<sup>20</sup>*

This gathering turned the space into a trading hub for the neighbouring areas and attracted traders alongside the pilgrims. The fair is predominantly attended by tribal people, with over half of the attendees being Bhils. Bēṇēśvara Mahādēva

19 A bottom wear cloth worn by men in the Indian subcontinent.

20 The folk song mentions places including neighbouring areas such as Vāgaṛa (Banswara and Dungarpur) and Salumber (Dhebar Lake, Udaipur), Gujarat, Paniyar (a village near Mahi River), Bhana Seeman (in Santrampur), Vadgaon, Baudi (Dungarpur), Palna (Banswara), Khedapani, Sanjali and Baria Paraganas, Chorasias Parganas, Dohad and Jhalod (Gujarat). The excerpt of this folk song in the local dialect, translated by the author of the article into English, is as follows:

‘Baneśvara nā meḷā nuṇ gīta’ (“The song of Beneshwar Fair”)

*Vāgaḍajyāṃ dhebarajyāṃ meḷe āiyāṃ helī re*  
*Gujarātanāṃ bhāgaḷajyāṃ meḷe āiyāṃ helī re*  
*Pāṇṇiyārānāṃ kāṇṇiyāṃ meḷe āiyāṃ helī re*  
*Bhāṇṇā hebaḷanā sāmḍarā meḷe āiyāṃ helī re*  
*Vaḍagāmīāṃ ṭiṭudiyāṃ meḷe āiyāṃ helī re*  
*Bāvaḍināṃ olāṃ te meḷe āiyōṃ helī re*  
*Pālāṇṇā pāṭaḷajyāṃ meḷa āiyōṃ helī re*  
*Kheḍā pāṇṇā śelī meḷe āiyāṃ helī re*  
*Hutiyārṇṇā laṃgoṭiyā meḷe āiyōṃ helī re*  
*Satarināṃ suṃgāḷajyāṃ meḷe āiyōṃ helī re*  
*Sohā sorāhajyāṃ ḍemgāḷajyāṃ meḷa āiyōṃ helī re*  
(Pathak 1915: 58–59)

and Māvaji are both revered at the fair. The latter is mostly worshipped by the so-called low castes among the Hindus, who also assemble there in large numbers. Although members of other Hindu castes also attend, their numbers are relatively small. Non-Hindu visitors are mostly traders or tourists.

The fair was originally organised under the patronage of the erstwhile princely state of Dungarpur. It brought religious fame to the place and provided income from the trade and from taxes and customs duties,<sup>21</sup> garnering good revenue for the state and showing a notable increase over the years.<sup>22</sup> In addition to its religious and commercial aspects, the fair also developed as a site for entertainment and leisure. Attendees could enjoy songs, folk dances, magic shows, animal shows, acrobatic feats, merry-go-rounds, and swings. After independence, the Panchayat Samiti<sup>23</sup> has been arranging exhibitions, showcasing improved agricultural techniques and instruments, instructions on sanitation and hygiene awareness as well as family planning (Census 1966: 29). Government administration has used the platform to communicate and provide relevant information to locals and tribals. Various government departments and organisations would set up stalls and exhibitions at the fair, including those related to government initiatives and schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)<sup>24</sup> to educate and reach out to the public.<sup>25</sup> The fair thus serves

21 According to official records, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, there were around 250–550 shops at the fair, with a considerable volume of trade in cloth and cotton goods, mostly from places such as Bombay and Guzerat (Gujarat), and Pertabguruh (Pratapgarh), also along the Dungarpur. A wide variety of goods was sold at the fair. The value of goods such as ‘drugs, copper and brass utensils etc. was higher than the other goods such as paper, perfumes, glass and crystal ware, silk, etc’ [Report 1874: 86, Report (1876–77) 1877: 60–61, Report (1875–76) 1877: 62–63, Report 1884: 96]. Later, after the independence, the fair gradually expanded the range of items for sale. The Panchayat Samiti collected taxes from the shopkeepers, the amount varying according to the item being sold.

22 The fair was reported as ‘a great success’ because ‘the value of goods sold considerably’ increased and it showed that ‘the sales were extraordinary’ (Report 1886: 116, Report 1888: 98).

23 Panchayat Samiti is a rural local government (Panchayat) body in India.

24 The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is a social welfare measure of the Indian government. It guarantees the “right to work” and aims to enhance livelihood security in rural areas. The program provides at least 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to at least one member of every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. The MGNREGA guarantees women one-third of the available jobs and aims to create durable assets, such as roads and wells.

25 “Vāgaṛa prayāga bēṇēśvara dhāma para dasa divasiya mēlā śurū: saptaraṅgi dhvajā laharāi, santa māvaji ki mahimā batāi,” *Rajasthan Patrika*, 21 February 2024. <https://epaper.patrika.com/Dungarpur?eid=8&edate=21/02/2024&pgid=1504833&device=desktop&view=3>



Fig. 8 Exhibition Stall of the Rural Development and Panchayati Raj Department, Rajasthan, showcasing various government schemes and initiatives at the Beneshwar Fair 2024. Source: Panchayat Samiti, Sabla, Dungarpur.

as a vital platform for social mobilisation at the present time, the way it did also earlier, before the independence. It provides an opportunity to engage with the public, educate them about available resources and programmes, and foster community participation and awareness. This enhances the efficacy of public welfare schemes and promotes inclusive development. The convergence of religious and social activities at the pilgrimage site thus constitutes a significant factor in the process of social change and empowerment.

In the popular perception, this sacred location is considered by the *ādivāsīs* today to be a bigger and more important pilgrimage site or *tīrtha* than Pushkar, Prayag, and Kashi. The highest numbers of visitors are usually seen during *māgha pūrṇimā* when hundreds of thousands of tribal devotees from Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh gather there for a holy dip. The location where the three rivers meet is called Triveni Sangam. Each tribal group that arrives there brings its drums, which livens up the atmosphere. The tribal people, particularly the Garasias and the Bhils, attend the fair wearing their traditional attire and ornate jewellery, creating a vibrant display of colours.<sup>26</sup> The fair has hundreds of food

26 They are particularly noticeable in their colourful clothing wearing elaborate blue, green, and red ghagras (long pleated skirts traditionally worn by women in Rajasthan),



Fig. 9 People visiting government stalls at the Beneshwar Fair 2024. Source: Panchayat Samiti, Sabla, Dungarpur.



Fig. 10 Interior Wall of the Exhibition Stall of the Rural Development and Panchayati Raj Department, Rajasthan, showcasing various government schemes and initiatives at the Beneshwar Fair 2024. Source: Panchayat Samiti, Sabla, Dungarpur.





Fig. 11 Exhibition Stall of the Agriculture Department, Rajasthan, and local artists performing and giving social messages at the Beneshwar Fair 2024. Source: Panchayat Samiti, Sabla, Dungarpur.

and drink stalls, along with fun activities such as giant wheels or merry-go-rounds (Pillai 2016). Also, many colourful cultural programs are organised by the district administration and tourism department. Various sports and other competitions are organised by the Tribal Area Department. Thus, melas may be viewed as the social media of the earlier times and apart from recreational and informative facets, they also have immense potential to mobilise in today's time.

Sacred sites, hence, serve non-sacral purposes such as socio-political mobilisation. The Beneshwar Fair was particularly famous and witnessed major gatherings of tribals from the region and the nearby areas. Like other fairs and festivals, it served as a sacred space for mobilisation and provided a platform for the local populace, activists, and social workers from the neighbouring regions to interact. In the pre-independence era, political leaders extensively used the holy spot of Bēṇēśvara for their meetings. Despite its location in the tribal belt and lack of regular means of transport and communication, a large number of people used to flock to the fair, so regional leaders were also drawn to the event. In 1938, for example, Gauri Shanker Upadhyaya of Dungarpur and Haridev Joshi of Banswara, both of them Gandhian activists, attended the fair to interact with and mobilise the tribals, so that they may rise up for the socio-political reforms (Vyas 1986: 159–61).

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along with chunky earrings, attractive necklaces, and tinkling anklets, which attract tourists. The men of this tribe wear coloured shirts, a dhoti, and a red or saffron *pheṃṭā* or turban.

The annual fairs at Bēṇēśvara and other similar locations used to provide a platform for institutions such as the Sēvā Saṅgha in Dungarpur and the Harijan Sēvā Samiti in Partapur (Banswara), both of which worked for the propagation of Gandhian constructive programmes among the Bhils through speeches, songs, and exhibitions (Vashishtha 2014: 103–4, 199).<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Manikyalal Verma, a key leader of the Prajā Maṇḍala Movement (a popular movement for responsible government in princely states during the 1930s and 1940s), effectively utilised this platform to educate and rally the tribals for socio-political reforms through Gandhian means. Verma used to organise an exhibition using tent camps throughout the week of the fair, with a view of teaching weaving and spinning. In the exhibition display, he used to include the program of singing, with a bhajan troupe regularly in attendance, to draw the tribals to the exhibition. Verma would give speeches, which were illustrated through pictures, to promote Gandhian messages advocating spinning and weaving, and giving up foreign goods. He preached against certain social customs, such as *mṛtyu bhōja* (death feast), child marriage, use of inappropriate and abusive songs on the occasion of wedding ceremonies. To make the content more communicable, Verma and his team used to make various charts elucidating such policies and display them at the exhibition. At the same time, all the organisational heads, teachers, and social workers also gathered from the surrounding villages, to argue against the practice of *purdah*, prohibition of child marriage, abusive songs, and death feasts, and for a healthy and hygienic way of life (Parmar 1992: 216–17). These initiatives raised the socio-political consciousness of the tribal people in the remote regions and ultimately connected them and their regions to the larger struggles such as the Prajā Maṇḍala movement<sup>28</sup> and the national freedom struggle, thereby making them a part of the wider political dissent and civil disobedience against the colonial rule.<sup>29</sup>

27 Sēvā Saṅgha was founded by a Gandhian, Bhogilal Pandaya, in 1938, as an institution for implementing Gandhian constructive programs among the Bhils in Dungarpur. Harijan Sēvā Samiti in Partapur (Banswara) was a branch of the Harijan Sēvā Samiti, an organization dedicated to the upliftment of *harijans*. The term *harijan* which means ‘children of God’, was popularised by Mahatma Gandhi, and refers to the members of the outcaste groups in India, previously known as the untouchables and referred to now as Dalits.

28 Prajā Maṇḍala movements were a wave of political campaigns that originated in the princely states under the British rule in the 1920s. People residing in the princely kingdoms, ruled by the local monarchs instead of the colonial rulers, led campaigns for political reforms including civil liberties, against their feudatory rulers and, on occasion, the British government.

29 The Dūṅgarapura Rājya Prajā Maṇḍala and Bāmsavāṛā Rājya Prajā Maṇḍala were formed in the 1930s and 1940s in the princely states of Dūṅgarapura/Dungarpur and Bāmsavāṛā/Banswara as part of the Prajā Maṇḍala Movement initiated across the princely states in colonial India. The Praja Mandals or Lok Parishads were political

## Mangarh/Mānagaṛha Hills (Banswara) and the Bhagat Movement

Mānagaṛha is an iconic site, with multiple meanings and rich symbolism deeply entrenched in the public memory of the people of Rajasthan. The association of the site with both religious and political activism, especially of the marginalised and the oppressed, has endowed it with a wide currency in the politics of the present times, too.<sup>30</sup> Mānagaṛha is a small hillock situated at the southern end of the Aravalli mountains in the present Rajasthan, bordering the village of Ānandapurī (formerly known as Bhukiyā) in Banswara district in Rajasthan and Sunth (erstwhile Sant Rampur state) in Gujarat.

The site is more popularly known today for the Mānagaṛha Massacre Memorial, commemorating the massacre that took place on 17 November 1913 in Banswara district of Rajasthan. Mānagaṛha was highly venerated by the Bhils and was part of the earlier Bhil kingdom.<sup>31</sup> It is the place where Govindgiri, of the Govalia Banjara community (semi-nomadic goods carriers), launched a moral and social reform movement among the Bhils, popularly known as the ‘Bhagat Movement’ (already mentioned earlier), which later transformed into a political movement aimed at forming Bhil Raj (Bhil Kingdom).

Govindgiri was born in 1863 in Bersa, a village in the former princely state of Dungarpur (Vashishtha 1997: 20). His father was a skilled trader who utilised the community barter system to trade goods extensively across Gujarat, Vagad, and Malwa regions. This allowed him to witness first-hand the struggles and hardships faced by the *ādivāsī* communities (Sonker 2022: 408). During the major famine of 1899–1900, the Bhils, who were the most marginalised group in the region, were devastated. Govindgiri, too, lost his family and home in the famine, and around 1909 he decided to start a cult to “reform the degenerated Bhil” (Fuchs 1965: 51). He organised a feast for the Bhil inhabitants, lit a *dhūnī*, (“sacred fire”), declared

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movements that advocated responsible government for the subjects of the princely states against the rulers as well as the British Paramountcy, as the freedom movement led by the Indian National Congress (INC) consciously distanced itself from political agitation in the princely states until the late 1930s. Eventually, these movements merged with the national freedom movement after a change in the INC’s stance to support them.

30 The recent large gathering of tribals at Mānagaṛha with the demand for ‘Bhil Pradesh’ traced back to the historical roots of the site (“Tribals from 3 states”, 2024).

31 As previously mentioned, Banswara was ruled by the Bhil chieftains before the Rajput clans took over the region. In 1530, Jagmal, son of the Sisodia Rajput ruler of Dungarpur, displaced and defeated the local Bhil chieftain Vasna and became the ruler of Banswara. The successors of Jagmal continued to rule the princely state of Banswara until its integration into the state of Rajasthan in 1948 (Kapur 2008, Vashishtha 2014).





Map 3 Mangarh/Mānagaṛha Hills (Banswara). Source: Google Maps.



Fig. 12 The Mānagaṛha Massacre Memorial (Banswara, Rajasthan), Source: *Wikimedia Commons*.

himself to be the incarnation of God, and began his campaign. Gradually, the Bhils started believing him and, as a result, his reputation among them grew. He then travelled extensively in the Bhil-inhabited areas, including the surrounding regions of Dungarpur, Banswara, Sant-Rampur, Idar, and Panch Mahals, which significantly increased his appeal among the Bhils, who eagerly flocked to join his cult (Fuchs 1965: 51–52).

Govindgiri presented a strict ethical code that one must accept to participate in the new faith. His teachings emphasised prohibition on inter-dining with the outsiders, even Brahmins, and encouragement of virtuous living and association with good people. The followers were instructed to always speak truthfully, refrain from lying, stealing, or coveting others' spouses; avoid meat and wine; and maintain cleanliness by bathing daily and wearing clean clothes (Fuchs 1965: 52).

To spread his message and influence to other regions, Govindgiri used a religious token, sending his disciples to neighbouring villages to light the *dhūnī* in new centres, and from there to spread his sect throughout the area. In a few years, large sections of the Bhil in the districts around Dungarpur became ardent followers of Govindgiri. *Dhūnī* and *nīsāna* (sacred flags) were employed to mark their domain; they held religious fairs (mela) on auspicious days to pay respect to these symbols. One auspicious *dhūnī* was lit at Mānagaṛha, which, as mentioned above, was an ancient sacred spot. Thus, Govindgiri used prevalent sacred spots to popularise his message, while, at the same time, creating new *dhūnīs* that became new spots endowed with sacral and divine power. The wide diffusion and impact of his message were in direct relation to his efforts to create and replicate spots marked by religious and sacral meaning.

Govindgiri later became known among the Bhils as 'Govind Bhagat' due to his powerful preaching. After the formation of his Sampa Sabhā<sup>32</sup> and establishing *dhūnī*,<sup>33</sup> his preaching evolved into a transformative movement, earning him the title of 'Govind Guru'. Initially, the British and the Dungarpur ruler himself were highly appreciative of Govindgiri's moral and social transformative initiatives. The Dungarpur ruler himself welcomed Govindgiri to his palace and courteously listened to his devotional songs (*bhajan*) (Fuchs 1965: 52). Also, the correspondence

32 Sampa Sabhā was an association formed by Govindgiri in 1883 for socio-political reform among the Bhils. Its main stated objectives were abstinence from alcohol, stealing, robbery; opening schools in villages; personal cleanliness; worshipping god; amelioration of the economic condition of the downtrodden (Sharma 1991: 213).

33 The concept of *dhūnī* or sacred fire has been in use in many religious orders since earlier times. Also, it was considered an Ārya Samāj influence, as Dayanand Saraswati visited Mewar during this period. It is noteworthy with regard to Govindgiri's movement, as he made it a symbolically integral part of his cult. In the popular perception, the *dhūnī* in Mānagaṛha has been considered as present in some form also in the past, making the site holy for local inhabitants (Vashishtha 1997, Mathur 2000).

of the British officials described Govindgiri as a “genuine ascetic” and appreciated his teachings, which aimed at the “moral and social improvement of the Bhils” and led to the “spread of education and civilising influences.”<sup>34</sup> However, with time, the rulers began to disapprove of his activities, perceiving them to be a reforming spree. This change in attitude was primarily due to the revenue losses incurred by the authorities because of his teachings against liquor consumption (Vashishtha 1997: 28–31). Additionally, the authorities were fearful of his activities at Mānagaṛha. This was particularly evident in 1912 and early 1913, when Maharawal, the ruler of Banswara state, imprisoned him. However, he was released in April 1913, due to the fear of commotion among the Bhils.

In October 1913, Govindgiri and his followers sought refuge on Mangarh Hill, in response to mounting tensions with the authorities. This gathering was more reminiscent of a traditional tribal protest than a conventional act of resistance. Its purpose was to attract the attention of the state authorities to the grievances of the local population. The site was transformed into a focal point for Govindgiri’s activities and served as a platform for disseminating the message and gathering the Bhils. The message was disseminated that on the occasion of the fair on 13 November (1913), the congregation would initiate the establishment of Bhil Raj.

Mānagaṛha was chosen as the location for the Bhils’ congregation since there was a *dhūnī* of the Bhils at Mānagaṛha in ancient times, and because it was one of the prominent centres of the Bhil kingdom. As a result, Govindgiri could attract a large gathering of his disciples to attend a fair there. In addition, he chose it as a place for residence, worship, and accommodating a fair, because of its beautiful garden-like qualities and the convenient availability of water and firewood. Further, it was strategically placed on the border of the Banswara and Sunth states, which made it accessible to the Bhils of the neighbouring areas to congregate easily (Vashishtha 1997: 87, Mathur 2000: 25). An excerpt from a folk song, widely popular among the Bhil tribals today, underlines the antiquity of Mānagaṛha and its *dhūnī* for the Bhils:<sup>35</sup>

34 Letter from Government of Bombay, No.1647, Dated the 17th (Received 19th) March 1914—Proceedings, August 1914, Internal-A, Foreign & Political Department, National Archives of India.

35 Translation of the song in English is by the author of this paper. Original text after Sharma (1956:103):

*Gīt govinda gurū ro* (“Song for Govind Guru!”)  
*Raī ne kevāan bole re, mānagaṛha mâte dhūmāl kare*  
*Hāansu mānagaṛha vāje re*  
*Hāansu ek garū be selā*  
*Hāansu jūnī dhūnī jūnī*  
*Hāansu dhūñiye pūjā karo*  
*Hāansu danakāan jātarī āve*

*Everyone together says—There is a fight over Mānagaṛha,  
Mānagaṛha is famous, there is a Guru and two disciples,  
There is a very ancient dhūnī, worship this dhūnī,  
Every day travellers come, many travellers come,  
There is a fair of people, a huge fair, people gather here.*

On November 13th, 1913, a large number of Bhils gathered on the Mānagaṛha hill, to take part in the annual fair on the full moon of the month of Kārtika. The religious force of the *dhūnī* and the historicity of the site had a strong attraction for the Bhils. This huge assemblage was disapproved by the state authorities.

In the eyes of the authorities, the Bhil gatherings at Mānagaṛha and the massive influence of Govindgiri among them “portended a Bhil rebellion against the Rajput rule”.<sup>36</sup> The rulers have been, perhaps, apprehensive of the potential power of mobilisation inherent in a historic holy land and the “former stronghold of Bhil dominion” as a symbol of ancient glory that could remind the Bhils of their earlier kingdom (Vashishtha 1997: 38).

For this reason, the Govindgiri-influenced Bhil assemblage at the Mānagaṛha hills on the Sunth-Banswara border, which was disapproved by the colonial authorities and the Dungarpur Durbar (royal court) and found formidable enough to deploy the Mewar Bhil Corps,<sup>37</sup> was eventually attacked to arrest the movement (Report 1913–1914: 4). The Mewar Bhil Corps, along with the troops of the Rajput rulers, attacked the Bhils gathered at Mānagaṛha. This led to the fateful massacre of Mānagaṛha on November 17th, 1913.

Following the suppression of the Bhagat movement activities in Mānagaṛha in 1913, the authorities restricted access to the site for the Bhils. Furthermore, the site became a disputed territory between the princely states of Banswara and Sunth. After India’s independence in 1947, it became a part of the state of Rajasthan, and was recognised as a sacred site of the ‘Bhagat Bhils’ and a historical site, popularly known as Rajasthan’s Jallianwala Bagh.<sup>38</sup> In honour of Govindgiri

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*Hāansu gaṇāan jātārī āve  
Hāansu mānaviyāan no melo  
Hāansu bharī melo bhārī.*

36 Letter from Government of Bombay, No. 1647, Dated the 17th (Received 19th) March 1914, Progs, Aug 1916, Internal-A, Foreign & Political Department, National Archives of India.

37 The Mewar Bhil Corps, established in 1841 by the British Indian government, was a military unit formed with its headquarters in Kherwara. This corps was specifically created to employ the Bhil tribe, while also serving to police and maintain order in the challenging and rugged hill terrain of the Mewar region.

38 The Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, Punjab, British India, is a historic site where a massacre occurred on 13 April 1919. On the annual Baishakhi (harvest festival) fair,

and his Bhagat movement, the village of Bhukhiā (meaning “hunger”), situated within the precincts of Mānagaṛha Dhāma, was renamed Ānandapurī (meaning “city of bliss”) in 1959, with the objective of fostering environment of peace and tranquillity (Vashishtha 1997: 87–88, Tribhuvan 2022).

Following its dispersal in 1913, the fair at Mānagaṛha was revived only in 1952. Although the Bhils were scattered and suppressed, this incident further reinforced the memory of the sacred site of Mānagaṛha among the Bhils. The 1952 Mānagaṛha Fair, celebrated as a religious activity of the Bhagat Bhils, was marked by the purification of the bloody hill of Mānagaṛha through a *yajña* (ritual performed in front of a sacred fire) performance and a night-long singing of devotional songs. At the beginning, only a small group of Bhagat Bhils participated in the fair. Since 1975, however, the fair has grown considerably, due to the construction of a temple, known as Mānagaṛha Pañcadhāmā, which contains five shrines, dedicated to Govindgiri, Hanumān, Vālmiki, Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa and Niṣkalaṅka. The temple has become a place of pilgrimage (*tīrtha*) for both Bhagat Bhils and non-Bhagat Bhils, evolving with time into a significant pilgrim site among the tribals of the region. Bhagat Bhils from the Māvajī and Surmaldass<sup>39</sup> sects attend the temple fair and are warmly received by the Bhils of the Govindgiri sect. As a result, even in contemporary political circles, Mānagaṛha has been chosen to be the object of adulation and celebration by various political groups in their bid to garner support from the tribals of the region and has been persuasively pitched to be the ‘national monument’ (Tabeenah 2022, PIB 2022).

This historical movement influenced several socio-political campaigns<sup>40</sup> in the later times and served as the inspiration for H. R. Meena’s historical novel, *When Arrows Were Heated Up* (2016), which presents the perspective of tribals, whose narrative appears to be buried under the official records. The novel presents the struggle of the *ādivāsī* under the leadership of Govind Guru both against the British and the rulers of princely states. In his analysis of the novel, S. K. Sonker

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a significant gathering of individuals had assembled with the intention of voicing their opposition to the Rowlatt Act and the detention of pro-independence activists. In response to the gathering, Brigadier General R. E. H. Dyer surrounded the assembled crowd with troops of the British Indian Army, blocking the exit and ordering fire. The troops continued to fire, even as the crowd attempted to flee, and did so until their ammunition was exhausted.

39 Surmaldass, a Bhil reformer, founded Surmal Panth in the 1870s. His followers spread to Gujarat, Mewar, Banswara, Dungarpur.

40 The socio-political awakening among the Bhils due to Govindgiri’s Bhagat movement inspired other Bhil revolts such as the Eki movement led by Motilal Tejawat in 1920s, and the Praja Mandala agitations in the region, which aimed at political reforms and became prominent after 1930s and 1940s, saw the participation of the tribal communities in these states.

stresses that Govindgiri knew that religious activities could influence people. Therefore, argues Sonker, he effectively incorporated religious elements into his social movement to fight against the oppressive system, using *dhūnī* and Sampa Sabhā (association for socio-political reform among the Bhils formed by Govindgiri in 1883), thus re-orienting the *ādivāsī* to stand with him (Sonker 2022: 420). The sacrality of this place advanced with the installation of sacred fire (*dhūnī*) and organisation of fair, and eventually developed as a *dhāmā* (sacred shrine and pilgrimage), with the massacre marking the valour of the Bhils. Govindgiri's movement had a permanent impact, evident from the annual fair that attracts ever-increasing visitors to the hillock of Mānagaṛha to pay homage to Guru Govindgiri and bring Banswara on the pilgrim and tourist map.

## Conclusion

Sacred spaces evolve within the wider socio-political milieu and not in isolation. Thus, religion and socio-political engagements are mutually reflective and reinforcing. The immense reverence for the venerated sites studied above facilitated the campaigns and mobilisation as well as socio-economic connections in the concerned region. This shows that non-religious motives and commitments can be gleaned through sacral might and mediums, such as ritual symbolism, holy oaths, and slogans. Sacred spaces have been effective mobilisation grounds that imparted legitimacy and protection to the discussed movements against the dominant power structures.

The religious and the sacred have had a powerful emotional appeal not only for the less-literate tribal communities, but have been a part of the mobilisation strategy of the urban and educated as well. The role and impact of religion in socio-political movements have remained undiminished in the Indian subcontinent. For instance, the political ideology of the extremist nationalist leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak<sup>41</sup> exhibited a religious and revivalist orientation, as evidenced by his use of imagery and symbolism, including references to the Gaṇeśa festival, to appeal to the sentiments of many Indians and facilitate solidarity in the national movement. Tilak transformed the quintessentially religious space of Gaṇeś Utsav in Maharashtra into a political space, when he saw the possibility of uniting the

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41 Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920) was a prominent nationalist leader who played pivotal role in the early stages of the Indian independence movement. He was actively engaged in the latter decades of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century and emerged as a notable figure during the extremist phase (1905–19) of the Indian nationalist movement, which advocated radical measures to achieve self-rule.

people against British oppression through this religious festival, which had been earlier a celebration on a much smaller scale (Gopinath 2019: 97–98). In a similar vein, Kama Maclean's research on the Kumbh Mela (2008) shows that both the nationalists and the British used extensively mela space for communication and information dissemination. The holy *saṅgama* (river confluence) at Allahabad, where the Kumbh Mela takes place, attracts pilgrims from all around the country, making it a potent space for the nationalists of all hues to utilise it to communicate with the masses. It is important to note, however, that the Gaṇeśa festival, popularised by Tilak, and the Kumbh Mela, were intended to appeal to a wide audience, and although exclusive in many ways, they became powerful spaces. The appeal of the sacred spaces under study in the current chapter was quite regional, intended for a given, specific locality. Being in a tribal-dominated region, both the shrines and the associated melas managed to attract largely marginal and tribal communities of the neighbouring areas.

Māvajī and Govindgiri, two charismatic and messianic leaders who led campaigns around these sacred shrines, emerge as ingenious individuals who, despite being non-tribals, were seeking to enter the minds and hearts of the populace, in which tribals formed the predominant group. It is difficult to ascertain their motives, yet how they negotiated space for themselves in the region is indeed incredible. Oommen, who explored the nature and significance of regional and local leadership in India, refers to these leaders as “local charismatics” who operate within a specific locality or culturally autonomous region. Oommen categorises such leaders into two distinct groups: those who are simply a replica or an edition of the national charismatics and who seek to style themselves after the pattern of behaviour of the national leader; and those who use their charisma without reference to the national leaders (Oommen 1972: 9–10). Reminiscent of the latter, the leadership of these two leaders, Māvajī and Govindgiri, has demonstrated profound regional ingenuity.

It is interesting to observe the increasing influence and subsequent popularity of the non-tribal leaders in the tribal belts. At the outset, despite the seminal contribution of the Bhils to the foundation, formation, and sustenance of the princely states of southern Rajputana, the image of the Bhils as a backward, semi-civilised isolated group of people persisted.<sup>42</sup> This demeaning and condescending projection of the tribals in colonial narratives and popular understanding prevented tribal leaders from earning legitimacy and respect among the non-tribals. Moreover, these groups remained resourceless in terms of material wealth, education, and clout. Hence, non-tribal leaders who could mobilise resources and

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42 Relevant discussion on the theme of participation of tribal communities in the state formation processes in the southern Rajputana states from the early medieval times to the colonial period has been well documented in N. S. Kapur (2008).



state support for the tribal populations through their charisma, mobilisation strategies, and networking skills became imperative for the Bhil populace of the region. In the advanced phase of the anti-colonial and pre-independence activism, too, non-tribal outsiders like Manikyalal Verma and Bhogilal Pandya devoted themselves to the cause of ameliorating the living conditions of tribal communities in southern Rajputana. Hence, the region hardly experienced the presence of popular and powerful tribal leaders. Even in modern times, tribal leaders are seldom able to successfully champion the causes and rights of the tribal population.<sup>43</sup>

The use of sacred sites was central to the social, religious, and political activism of Māvajī and Govindgiri. The attempt to gain access, influence, and legitimacy through the use of these sites speaks to their acumen as mobilisers. They acquired initial popularity using ancient sacral spots, and further embellished the sites by the addition of more shrines and a *dhūnī*, thus establishing their independent identity among the people. The fairs organised by them emerged as additional and popular spaces associated with people's religious beliefs and faith. Increasing the number and the territorial dispersion of sacred sites was the key to their formidable influence in the region.

Each sacred space attracts its visitors based on the ideologies, tendencies, and messages it espouses. The sacred sites of Bēṇēśvara and Mānagaṛha are situated in the predominantly tribal-populated states of Dungarpur and Banswara but have differing social bases. For example, although Beneshwar fair is revered as the '*maha kumbh*' of the tribals, it has a much wider social outreach among other communities, due to an effectual reform campaign by Māvajī who brought the *bhakti* and the Vashnavite influence in harmony with the existing Shaivite traditions. Mānagaṛha largely remained a tribal attraction as the shrine was primarily remembered as an ancient holy centre of the Bhils. Govindgiri advocated the worship of Mahadeo—he used to emphasise his devotion and wore *rudrākṣa*<sup>44</sup> (Mathur 2000: 22, Vashishtha 1997: 24). However, the Mānagaṛha shrine also houses other deities, which are revered with similar devotion. Mahadeo/Śiva has been revered by the indigenous, tribal, and local communities, as well as the royal houses and the non-tribal populace in these princely states.

The two sacred shrines in the focus of this study have historical and cultural significance that is evident also in present times. The temple complexes, the fairs (*melā*), religious congregations and gatherings around them exhibit the socio-economic and cultural bond that had nurtured activism in the region. The fairs at the shrines hold a massive significance, as they involve not just religious celebrations

43 <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/have-indias-tribal-leaders-failed-their-people-13197> (accessed August 25, 2024).

44 *Rudrākṣa* is a prayer bead associated with Śiva.

but commercial and recreational aspects. The socio-political campaigns around the two sites under study exhibited the substantial power of mobilisation of these religious fairs and, as Maclean points out with regard to the Kumbh Mela, “an unparalleled opportunity to influence the congregated masses” (Maclean 2008: 5). The development of these sites’ sacrality followed varied paths, but eventually they both provided space as well as motivation for the predominant tribal communities to unite for the sake of activism.

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