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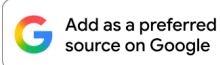
How Hindutva comes for Adivasis

Choubey's study reveals how the VKA uses service delivery to advance a larger agenda: dissolving tribal identity into undifferentiated Hindu majority.

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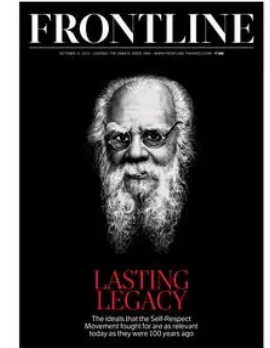
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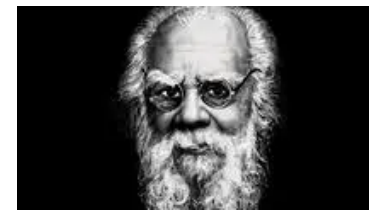
A patient being taken to a health camp run by the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, in Tripura in 1998. | Photo Credit: Ashibh K. Bhowmik

In his latest book, *Adivasi or Vanvasi: Tribal India & the Politics of Hindutva*, Kamal Nayan Choubey studies one of the relatively less documented organisations of the **Hindu Right**, the Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, or VKA for short. Noting the fact that the “[e]xisting literature on tribal issues and/or the RSS has not systematically focused on the politics of Hindutva in the tribal areas”, Choubey takes a deep dive into the literature

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and testimonies produced by the VKA to examine its contributions in the field of tribal rights. Choubey frames his enquiry within the “larger ideological and historical context of the RSS” as he points out that the VKA was formed fundamentally “to resist the influence of **Christian missionaries** in tribal areas and to spread Hindu values among tribals”.

Over six chapters, Choubey explores the VKA’s inherent duality and its emancipatory and ideological functions. Beginning with a historical account—the VKA’s nationalist origins and inception in 1952, its RSS-based organisational structure, and its proliferation via affiliated organisations in the post-Emergency period—the subsequent discussion illustrates the VKA’s ideological agenda manifested in its religious propagation and its appropriation of local tribal heroes and histories. Choubey unveils how the VKA’s homogenising slogan, “*Tu Mein Ek Rakt*” (You and I have the same blood), ideologically aided its adoption of the neutral descriptors “vanvasi” (forest-dweller) or “janjati” (tribal people) over the historical category “Adivasi”. Further, the deliberate debunking of “indigeneity” as a colonial construct has eased the VKA’s Hindutva dissemination of “Sanatan Dharma’ as an indigenous religion” among non-Christian and Muslim sects and tribes in north-east India.

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In the subsequent chapters, Choubey addresses the VKA’s constructive work, its success in running educational institutions, medical services, skill enhancement initiatives in rural and urban areas, and women’s empowerment programmes, all of which are tailored to suit the ideological agenda. The VKA’s engagement in forest rights issues, its demand for proper implementation of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, and the Forest Rights Act, 2006, assume importance as Choubey offers examples to demonstrate how, despite being a non-confrontationist



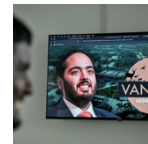
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organisation, the VKA has fearlessly criticised the government and the Supreme Court and succeeded in ensuring the withdrawal of unfavourable court orders and draft amendments.

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Adivasi or Vanvasi: Tribal India and the Politics of Hindutva

By Kamal Nayan Choubey

Vintage Books

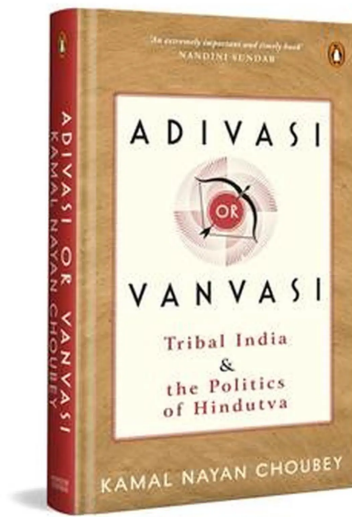
Pages: 272

Price: Rs.799

Foregrounding the VKA's 2015 "Vision Document", the discussion highlights the organisation's "quest for a more inclusive system for tribals", a quest that Choubey compares to that of the All India Union of Forest Working People, a left-oriented organisation that has dedicated itself to "fighting for the rights of adivasis and other forest dwelling communities over forest land and its resources". This brief comparison delineates the differences in strategies and goals between the VKA's ideologically driven vision of tribal rights with those of left-oriented and other grassroots tribal organisations.

In the penultimate chapter, Choubey assesses the VKA's Hindutva ideology and its ability to create "majoritarianism in tribal areas". He reviews the VKA's opposition to the Sarna Code (a historical code that

recognises the “separate religion of adivasis”), its campaign to delist tribal people who have converted to Christianity, its simultaneous propagation of ghar wapsi (reconversion), its rejection of Left organisations in the name of naxalism, and its positive impact on the electoral success of the BJP.



Had Choubey included an analysis of “moolvasi” (indigenous) organisations, the book’s debate over Adivasi or vanvasi would have been strengthened. | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

While summing up the overall arguments of the book, Choubey reiterates that the VKA’s advocacy for “majoritarianism and extreme nationalism” is at odds with its emancipatory role in articulating tribal rights. However, he holds out hope that instead of advancing its divisive ideology, the VKA will choose to ally with “those left-oriented, socialist or Gandhian organizations, which have been mobilizing tribal communities at the local level against displacement and forced ‘developmental’ projects”. He concludes by recommending the “rebirth” of the VKA as an “indomitable organization fighting for the protection of tribal interests”.

Arguably, an important academic book, *Adivasi or Vanvasi* proffers a detailed account of the VKA’s engagement with tribal rights within the context of Hindutva. Dense in matter and information, Choubey’s well-researched book will surely enable future studies in this area. However, as far as the central problematic is concerned, the book hesitates to draw inferences from the issues posed. For instance, Choubey observes how the VKA’s organisational links with the government have protected it from threats and challenges. Consequently, its role has rested on creating a “conducive environment

for the different policies of the Indian state”. Yet, at the same time, Choubey asserts that the VKA considers itself “autonomous from the Indian state or capitalist class and emphasizes its unique agenda”.

This clearly suggests a contradiction between reality and rhetoric, an aspect that should have been probed and critiqued. At the theoretical level, Choubey affirms his reliance on the Gramscian paradigm of the “traditional” intellectual while addressing the VKA’s organising capacities. But to fulfil this, a more rigorous exposition of the stratified nature of select tribal societies should have been presented as the Gramscian model presumes a material context, the struggle between classes, as the necessary base for evaluating the function of intellectuals in society. It would have been interesting if Choubey had presented a case study for unravelling the function of “traditional” VKA intellectuals in the light of the organisation’s proximity to the state apparatus.



Tribal people at a dining hall run by the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram in Jashpur Nagar, Chhattisgarh, on March 16, 2004. | Photo Credit: V. Sudershan

In a bid to bring out lesser-known facts about the VKA, the book overly emphasises the organisation’s constructive role and fails to scrutinise its collusive role in stoking communal violence. Possibly this loss in focus also occurs because Choubey treats the VKA as a singular and discrete organisation of the Sangh Parivar, one that does not engage in violent activities as affirmed by its

functionaries. However, the book's arguments could have highlighted the VKA's collaborative role as there is evidence to show that the 1998 anti-Christian attacks in Dang district, Gujarat, were spurred by the VKA and the head of its faith-awakening wing, the controversial monk Swami Aseemanand. Since Choubey refers to the Shabri Dham temple that Aseemanand started in the Dang area in the early 2000s, an enquiry into the processes by which the attacks unfolded would have prompted discussions on the violence implicit in the VKA's ideological campaigns.

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Equally, the study shows that to combat the influence of missionaries, the VKA endorses ghar wapsi campaigns, which adopt techniques that missionaries use. What are Choubey's thoughts on these? Besides acknowledging how these reconversion ceremonies enact a "public performance" and citing scholarship that asserts that such "returns" have not yielded significant social results, Choubey does not probe this contradiction, this opportunist mimesis, within the VKA's self-professed ideological campaign against missionaries.

Undoubtedly, the decision to omit/emphasise something is an authorial prerogative, but it cannot be denied that had Choubey included an analysis of "*moolvasi*" (indigenous) organisations, the book's debate over Adivasi or vanvasi would have been strengthened and its comparative focus aided. Perhaps, this could be the scope of Choubey's next work, which should assess the function of diverse activist-intellectuals who have and are ensuring positive changes in tribal welfare.

Sharmila Purkayastha is an independent researcher based in New Delhi.

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