

The unseen faith: A call for distinct Adivasi religious identity in India

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HIGHLIGHTS

Today is World Indigenous Peoples' Day

For too long, the vibrant tapestry of Adivasi spiritual and cultural life in India has been obscured by a fundamental misclassification in the national census – their categorization as Hindus. This seemingly administrative detail carries profound and detrimental implications, leading to the erosion of a unique identity, the denial of fundamental rights, and the suppression of a rich heritage deeply intertwined with nature and ancestry.

On this World Indigenous Peoples' Day (August 9), it is imperative for the Government of India to acknowledge and respect the distinct cultural practices of Adivasi communities by granting

them a separate religion category in the ensuing census.

The historical record of census enumeration itself serves as a stark reminder of this disservice. From “Aborigines” in 1891 to “Animism” in 1901 and 1911, and later “tribal religion” (1921), “primitive tribes” (1931), and “tribes” (1941), colonial authorities, however imperfectly, recognised a distinct religious sphere for these communities. The post-colonial era saw a problematic and ultimately damaging shift. While the 1951 census initially recognized “Scheduled Tribes,” this category gradually morphed into “Hindu,” effectively subsuming Adivasi spiritual practices under a broader umbrella that demonstrably does not reflect their reality.

This misclassification is far from a benign oversight; it is a critical flaw rooted in inadequate representation during early census enumerations. Often, Hindu enumerators, unfamiliar with the intricate customs and deeply rooted traditions of Adivasi life, defaulted by categorizing them as Hindus. This unfortunate precedent has since perpetuated a historical inaccuracy, distorting the demographic and cultural landscape of the nation. The 2011 Census recorded the total Scheduled Tribe (ST) population in India at 10.43 crore (104.3 million), constituting 8.6 per cent of the nation’s total population. While the census did include an “Other Religions and Persuasions” (ORP) category for 7.9 million people – often encompassing various indigenous faiths – a significant portion of the Scheduled Tribe population was nonetheless recorded as Hindu.

For instance, data indicates over 63 per cent of the Santal population was categorised as Hindu in 2011, even as a substantial number also reported ‘Sarna’ (23 per cent) and ‘Sari Dharam’ (7.28 per cent). This highlights the incongruity and the urgent need for a more accurate reflection of their spiritual diversity. The consequences of this erasure are far-reaching, extending beyond a mere bureaucratic label. Adivasi identity faces a multi-pronged assault. The unbridled entry of non-tribal populations into Adivasi villages, coupled with the proselytizing efforts of Christian missionaries, further destabilizes traditional structures. Missionaries, often exploiting genuine health vulnerabilities, have converted Adivasis, leading to an insidious loss of traditional leadership, indigenous languages, and invaluable cultural practices.

For example, while Christianity accounts for a notable portion of the Adivasi population in certain northeastern states (90.08 per cent of the ST population in Mizoram was Christian in 2011), in Jharkhand, 15.48 per cent of the Scheduled Tribe population was Christian. Furthermore, the broader education system, by failing to adequately recognize or incorporate Adivasi culture, contributes to its marginalization, leaving younger generations disconnected from their ancestral roots.

At the heart of Adivasi identity lies an unbreakable bond with forests. These are not merely sources of livelihood; they are ancestral homes, sacred spaces, and the very wellspring of

spiritual sustenance.

The traditional Adivasi worldview sees humanity as an integral part of the natural world, not its master. The fact that over 90 per cent of the Adivasi population still resided in rural areas as per the 2011 census strongly implies their continued deep connection to land and forest resources for their livelihoods. However, this symbiotic relationship is under constant threat from external forces – rampant logging, destructive mining, and other forms of encroachment that not only dispossess Adivasi communities of their land but also dismantle the very fabric of their cultural heritage.

In the face of these formidable challenges, Adivasi communities are articulating a clear and urgent demand: recognition of their distinct identity and culture through a separate religion category. Whether it is the demand for “Sarna dharma” or “Koya Poonem” religion, the underlying sentiment is identical – a desperate plea for official acknowledgment of their unique spiritual path.

In Jharkhand, where the total Scheduled Tribe population was 8.65 million (86.5 lakh) in 2011 (26.2 per cent of the state’s population), the Santhal (over 27.5 lakh) and Munda (over 12.2 lakh) tribes are prominent. Crucially, the 2011 Census data from Jharkhand reveals that 45.23% (approximately 3.91 million) of the Scheduled Tribe population followed the Sarna religion, contrasting with 37.55 per cent (approximately 3.25 million) identifying as Hindus. Similarly, in undivided Andhra Pradesh (including present-day Telangana), with a total ST population of 5.92 million (59.2 lakh) in 2011, the Koya (over 5.9 lakh) and Gond (over 3 lakh) tribes are seeking recognition for Koya Poonem. These figures unequivocally highlight the significant numbers of Adivasis, who do not identify as Hindu and deserve accurate representation.

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Granting this recognition in the upcoming census would be more than a symbolic gesture; it would be a crucial forward step towards safeguarding their unique traditions, empowering their communities, and ensuring the rightful promotion and protection of their constitutional rights and benefits. This aligns perfectly with the spirit of India's constitutional provisions, which guarantee protection for distinct cultures and promote the welfare of Scheduled Tribes.

The time for historical misrepresentation is over. Preserving the cultural heritage of Adivasi communities is not just their concern; it is a profound responsibility that rests with the nation in its entirety.

On this World Indigenous Peoples' Day, it is time for the government to acknowledge and respect their distinct cultural practices, to finally see the unseen faith, and to allow Adivasi identity to flourish, unburdened by an inaccurate and detrimental classification.

(The writer is a research scholar in anthropology and a social worker)

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