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Validating Aryan invasion or statement of rights? Rahul remark reignites 'Adivasi' vs 'Vanvasi' debate

RSS & affiliates reject term 'Adivasi', saying it goes against idea of united India, and prefer 'Vanvasi'. But others oppose latter term, saying it implies tribals are 'uncivilised'.

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File photo of tribal women an event to mark International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples in Ranchi | ANI

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New Delhi: During his visit to his constituency, Wayanad, earlier this month, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said there was a “perverted logic” in describing tribal people as ‘Vanvasi’. The word, according to him, restricts the tribal people to forests.

“The idea behind ‘Vanvasi’ is that you belong to the jungle and you should never leave the jungle,” he said in his rally on 14 August, addressing tribal people in Wayanad. “This is not acceptable to us and we don’t accept this word. This is a distortion of your history and your tradition. It is an attack on your relationship with this country.”

Gandhi’s words were aimed at the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), both of which frequently use the term ‘Vanvasi’. But it also rekindles an age-old debate: Which term, ‘Adivasi’ or ‘Vanvasi’, best describes India’s tribal people?

‘Adivasi’, translated literally, means ‘original inhabitant’. The term comes from the Sanskrit words ‘adi’, which means of the earliest times or from the beginning, and ‘vasi’, meaning inhabitant or resident.

But the RSS and its offshoots, such as the [Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram](#) (VKA) reject the terms ‘Adivasi’ and ‘tribals’. The VKA is an RSS-backed tribal welfare organisation

established in 1952 by RSS swayamsevak Ramakant Keshav. According to Mahesh Kale, the VKA's all-India publicity head, the term 'Adivasi' is divisive.

The VKA, like its parent body, the RSS, views 'tribals' as a colonial construct and 'Adivasi' as a concept that goes against its idea of a united India.

“Using the word 'Adivasi' is divisive because it indicates that those who are not the 'Adivasi', that is the other population barring 12 crore tribals, have come from outside,” Kale told ThePrint. “This gives validation to the Aryan Invasion Theory”.

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Aryan Invasion Theory and use of word 'Adivasi'

The Aryan Invasion Theory, which originated in the 19th century, postulates that 3,000-4,000 years ago, Indo-European speakers who called themselves Aryans swept into the subcontinent in waves and spread across it, displacing indigenous people.

While most mainstream scholars today don't deny that some Indo-European speakers moved into the subcontinent and brought Sanskrit, or its ancestor, with them, they characterise it as more of a 'migration' of disparate tribes than an organised 'invasion', and reject the racial dimensions the theory acquired in 19th-century pseudoscience, where it was used to justify colonialism.

However, the RSS, which believes in the principle of 'Akhand Bharat' — the cultural concept of a unified, or undivided, India — rejects the theory altogether as a colonial construct aimed primarily at "dividing India". In his book *Bunch of Thoughts*, the RSS's second sarsangchalak (chief) M.S. Golwalkar writes: "The origin of our people, the date from which we have been living here as a civilised entity, is unknown to the scholars of history. In a way, we are 'anadi', without a beginning".

The Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram uses this theory to advocate against the usage of the term 'Adivasi' or even indigenous people. India's original inhabitants, according to them, are all people who can trace their roots to India.

"It's simple. Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram believes that whoever lives in India is an original inhabitant or 'Adivasi' of the land and has not come from elsewhere," VKA's publicity head Kale told ThePrint. "The UN celebrates the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples but

it's basically for people who were colonised by the outsiders, like it happened in Africa and other places.”

This, he claimed, didn't happen in India, adding that misconceptions have been created about the word 'Vanvasi'.

“India's culture flourished in the forests — the Vedas, Upanishads, the Puranas, etc. were all written in the forests. There is no different meaning of the word 'Vanvasi' and it simply means those who live in the forest. It's been made complicated for the sake of politics”, Kale said,

RSS joint general secretary Krishan Gopal has gone on record to say that European colonisers proposed the Aryan Invasion “hypothesis” because they “couldn't accept” that the people they had colonised could be Aryans. He was speaking to fellow RSS joint general secretary Manmohan Vaidya as part of the *RSS Knowledge Series*.

“Europeans went to lands of Australia and Canada, and killed the indigenous people and established themselves there,” he's heard as saying in one video. “On the same principle, they proposed this hypothesis that Aryans invaded these lands, driving the 'Dravidas' towards the south. The Aryan race is the best, but they couldn't accept

that of the people of a colonised country. So they proposed this theory.”

Prakash Uiekey, a former district judge from Damoh in Madhya Pradesh who’s also a member of the VKA, defended the term ‘Vanvasi’, saying Rahul Gandhi had “no understanding on these matters”.

“In our Indian tradition, three systems are in place to identify people — Nagarvasi (those who reside in cities), Gramvasi (those who reside in villages) and Vanvasi (those who reside in forests). Even those who are not from Scheduled Tribes reside in forests,” said Uiekey.

Academics divided

Academics appear divided on the subject. G.N. Devy, a tribal rights activist and the founder of Bhasha Research and Publication Centre (BRPC), Baroda, told ThePrint that the RSS’s usage of the word ‘Vanvasi’ belies its Sanskrit leanings. In 2010, Devy’s BRPC launched the People’s Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI), an exercise aimed at “documenting and preserving” the languages spoken in India today, *The Indian Express* quoted Devy as saying at the survey’s launch event on 13 August, 2017.

“The RSS’s language leans towards purism, incorporating more Sanskrit-based words,” Devy, a former professor of English at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda,

told ThePrint. “When the RSS began focusing on tribal welfare, they aimed to differentiate themselves from traditional tribal organisations. Hence the adoption of the term ‘Vanvasi’.”

When the RSS first began using the term, it wasn’t with “any specific intent” and was done “without any extensive consideration”, he said.

“Subsequently, it was imbued with the meaning they intended to convey”, he told ThePrint, adding that tribal people refer to themselves as ‘Adivasi’.

“From my perspective, it’s important to use the terminology preferred by the community itself in order to listen to and honour their voices,” he said.

Virginius Xaxa, a sociologist and visiting professor at Delhi’s Institute for Human Development (IHD), told ThePrint that the term ‘Adivasi’ began gaining currency only as late as the 1920s. He also agreed with the RSS’s interpretation that the term “tribal” was a colonial construct.

“The colonial state and the colonial administrators delineated certain segments of people as ‘tribes’ and differentiated them from the more advanced segments of the Indian population,” he said. “Colonialism has attached distinct meanings to the term tribe viz. savage or

uncivilised. Although such an image of tribal people in India preceded colonialism, the term or category emerged under colonialism.”

The word ‘Adivasi’, he said, began to be used around the 1920s, when “the nascent, tiny, and educated class” began to emerge among the indigenous peoples of present-day Jharkhand and its neighbouring areas. This group organised itself into an outfit called the Adivasi Mahasabha to demand a separate state of Jharkhand comprising the contiguous Adivasi tracts in Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha.

But he takes exception to using the term ‘Vanvasi’ — a word that, according to him, connotes “savage and uncivilised” people.

“It is not an empowering term, it merely refers to their being forest dwellers and hence all the attributes connected with it such as *junglee*, uncivilised, savage, etc,” he said.

It’s also devoid of the dimension of rights, he said. “In contrast, ‘Adivasi’ is a concept of social, cultural, and political statement for rights they had over land, territory, and forest. Different people with their distinct languages, and cultures have the rights to determine life within a given political system,” he said. “If such an assertion is

taken as divisive, then it basically means that one continues to deny them their due rights and entitlement.”

But anthropologist Geetika Ranjan believes the entire argument of ‘Vanvasi’ versus ‘Adivasi’ is specious. For her, it’s all semantics.

“From an anthropological standpoint, both are simply terms which indicate a specific group. Political connotations have been attached to them,” Ranjan, a professor at the North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong, told ThePrint.

When discussing tribes, groups are referred to based on their habitats and traditional ways of life, she said.

“‘Adivasi’ indicates old or original inhabitants of a place, those deeply connected to the land for generations. This term emerged from that concept,” she said. “These are neutral descriptions that simply identify these groups as they are. Whether we label them as ‘Vanvasi’, implying jungle-dwellers, or as ‘Adivasi’, depends on the intent of the speaker.”

Also Read: [*Not Germany, an Indian journalist explains how Aryans actually came from Russia*](#)

‘Prefer using Janjati’

But even as the debate rages on, the increasing criticism of the term ‘Vanvasi’ has seemingly made a section of the RSS and its offshoots avoid it altogether.

VKA publicity officer Kale, quoted earlier, admits that the organisation prefers to use the word ‘Janjati’ (loosely, tribals), although he denies there’s any deliberate thought behind this.

“It is true that there have been controversies over this word, and we are liberal in terms of using any words for the communities,” he said. “However, there is no strategy behind it (using Janjati). It’s just a short and convenient form that we use. There is no policy on which word has to be used or which hasn’t.”

He also said, despite his previous arguments against it, that there is nothing wrong with using the word ‘Adivasi’. However, he added, “we do believe there are different meanings to these words”.

The BJP’s ST Morcha chief and Rajya Sabha MP Samir Oraon agreed, saying that although ‘Adivasi’ is a newer term than ‘Vanvasi’, either could be used.

“It is the word tribal which has colonial connotations.” he said. “It defines the communities as ‘non-cultured’.

‘Vanvasi’ is simply a term that says ‘those who lived in forests’. How is this divisive? Rahul Gandhi has no understanding of the culture and tradition of our civilisation.”