

Recognising Adivasi identity in the Census

The much-delayed gazette notification for the Census which is to be held in 2027, has been rightly criticised for a lack of clarity on the promised caste enumeration. But there is hardly any discussion on the long-standing demand of Adivasi/Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities that their distinct identities, including systems of faith, be recognised as part of the Census.

The Census includes the religious demography of India through the registration of a person's religious beliefs. The religions mentioned are Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism. For those with other beliefs, there is a general column titled 'Other Religious Persuasion' (ORP). There is no column for the beliefs of STs. This omission is unconstitutional on several counts.

An unconstitutional move

The Constitution has specific provisions for the protection of the beliefs, customs, and traditions of STs, such as those reflected in the Fifth and Sixth Schedules. In addition, Articles 371A and 371B have specific protections for customary laws and practices in Nagaland and Assam, respectively. Article 25 ensures the right to profess, practice, and propagate one's faith, and Article 26 guarantees the right to manage religious affairs. For STs, these rights must translate into recognition of distinct faith-based beliefs and practices centred on nature worship and ancestral traditions, in every general legal and policy framework, including the Census. The restriction in the Census to six religions or the ambiguous ORP category violates the spirit of Article 25 as it compels STs to misidentify with mainstream faiths or be relegated to a catch-all category, which is the ORP.

This misidentification is reflected in the 2011 Census data. The ST population was counted as 10.43 crore (8.6% of the then population of 120 crore). If we look at the ORP column in Table C-01 of the 2011 Census, only 0.66% of the population (or 79



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lakh people) registered themselves under ORP, which means that the large majority of ST communities could not register their religious or spiritual identity and had to misidentify with other religions. This is unfair and unjust.

The majority of Adivasis live in rural habitats and have little information about the meaning of the ORP choice. It is only where ST organisations have provided information regarding registration of specific faiths under ORP that the numbers of ORP go up. This is found in a breakdown of ORP provided in the appendix to the Census tables. In Jharkhand, where there have been Sarna-based mobilisations, the registration specifically in the name of Sarna under ORP was the highest of any State (49 lakh). In some parts of Madhya Pradesh where the mobilisation of the Gonds is significant, over 10 lakh individuals registered as Gond faith in the ORP column. In other words, where information breaks the obfuscation of the ORP column, ST communities prefer to register their own faiths.

The issue gains importance because of the reality of a changed political context affecting Adivasi rights. In the last few years, RSS-affiliated groups have targeted Christian missionaries and Christian converts among STs. Intensified attacks and ghar wapas events are well known. Under the Modi government, RSS groups have strengthened the narrative that the "vanvasis (forest dwellers)" are historically part of the Greater Hindu Family. These are new forms of Hinduisation of ST communities. The power of the state has been used to co-opt and coerce sections of traditional tribal chiefs. The strategy is to realign ST rituals with Hindu practices, introduce slogans celebrating Hindu gods among traditional chants, build Hindu temples in ST areas, take soil from sacred ST groves for the building of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, and so on. ST children studying in Eklavya Model Residential Schools are taught more about Hindu customs, hymns, and festivals than their own traditions. There is no dearth of funds for the

expansion of RSS-run schools in poor ST areas. Corporate Social Responsibility funds from well known corporates are easily available. This is a well thought out plan to build an overarching Hindutva identity among STs as part of the core agenda of the RSS.

This also reveals the utter hypocrisy of the RSS and its actual contempt for ST identity and culture. It demands that Adivasis who convert to Christianity should be stripped of their recognition as STs, as, according to them, only allegiance to Adivasi religion and beliefs should determine whether the individual is ST or not. Yet STs who practise Hindu rituals or identify themselves as Hindu are still eligible for recognition as STs. The constitutional and legal view is that recognition of a community as ST is linked to several other factors, not religious affiliation.

The entire centralisation and homogenisation of the 'one nation, one culture' project of the current regime negatively affects Adivasi communities. Among the 700 communities recognised as ST, there is both commonality and diversity. India's diversity is in fact well represented by ST groups who embody a rich mosaic of cultural, linguistic, and spiritual diversity. Adivasis have been pushing back against new forms and methods of assimilation. The demand for recognition of their faiths in the Census is one such form of resistance.

Need for a separate column

In November 2020, the Jharkhand government unanimously passed a resolution seeking the inclusion of Sarna as a separate religion in the 2021 Census. The BJP did not dare oppose this. It was sent to the Centre for approval and inclusion and did not get a response. The resolution is as relevant today. However, since the issue is not limited to only one State or to one Adivasi belief, a separate column in the Census should be added titled 'Adivasi/ST faiths'. ST faiths will then be at a par with the other six major religions. All political parties should put pressure on the government for such inclusion to strengthen democracy and the constitutional rights of Adivasis.