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Adivasis Must Be Allowed to Register Their Religions in the Census



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A move to erase their identity will be considered an attempt to erase their histories by bringing them into the Hindu fold by force.



Representative image. Members of the Durua tribe, part of India's Indigenous Adivasis communities, perform traditional dances during the Chaitra Parab

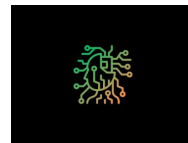
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Every time a census enumerator visits my home, I wait eagerly for them to ask me the question: “What is your religion?”. To my disappointment, they always record my religion as Hindu without even asking me. Almost every Adivasi or indigenous man in India meets this fate during a census enumeration.

The government of India has just announced its decision to conduct census enumeration in 2027 after a long mulling. What is new about this census is the decision to enumerate the caste of every individual citizen, a practice that was discontinued after the 1931 census.



Additionally, there is talk of a proposal to assimilate Adivasis into Hinduism by removing them from the ‘Other Religions and Persuasions’ category. Denying Adivasis the right to register their religion under this category would violate Article 25 of the Indian Constitution, which ensures freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion. Hundreds of diverse religious sects and communities take the help of this category to claim their religious identity in the census.

The Indian government’s move could be catastrophic to these communities, particularly to Adivasis, who have been increasingly asserting their separate religious identity in recent times. If the decision comes through, Adivasis would now be left with no option but to record themselves in one of the six institutionalised religions given as options by the Census Commission, namely Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Sikh and Jain. Adivasis are mostly enumerated as

Hindus unless they claim one from the remaining religious denominations.

The mishmash of the Adivasi religion can be mainly attributed to British colonial rule. The British initially treated all the Indian religious sects and practices as paganism, which means worshipping multiple gods, spirits, demons and idolatry. All these were crafted as Hinduism in the 19th century by socio-religious reformers and the colonial census.

The fact is that India has seen thousands of religious sects and traditions from the early historical period which are known by local names. However, the dominant pan-Indian traditions in ancient times were called Brahminic and Shamanic (Buddhist and Jaina). They were further divided into numerous sects, particularly Brahmanism, popularly known as Vaishnavism and Saivism from the early medieval period, which were developed appropriating non-Brahminic or non-Aryan religious traditions and practices. Saivism browned from non-Aryan ingredients.

In the 11th century, Al Beruni, a Muslim chronicler, is thought to have used the term 'Hindustan/Hindustani' for the first time, in a broader geographical and cultural sense encompassing the region east of the Indus river. Over a period, the term Hindustani gained popularity and was used to distinguish the Muslims from the native people or non-Muslims in North India. South India was called 'Deccan or Deccanis'. All medieval texts and documents use these terms to describe the religion, language, and culture of native Indians. However, the religious and cultural plurality of the country continued to flourish under the Sultanate and Mughal rulers.

Indian religious plurality came under threat with the advent of British rule in India, as it endeavoured to homogenise diverse religious sects and traditions such as Hinduism. However, the task was full of tension. There was intense debate among colonial administrators and Orientalist scholars about the nature of Hinduism, as it lacked the defining traits of an institutionalised religion, particularly those based on monotheistic philosophy. Raja Rammohan Roy's treatises on monotheism from the Upanishad texts in the early 19th century popularised Hinduism as a modern religion.

The making of modern Hinduism had a severe impact on the Adivasi religion and belief system. This is because there is no comparison between philosophy and practice in Hinduism. Although it talks of monotheism, in reality, it is polytheism, which was formed by appropriating many Adivasi gods and goddesses into the Hindu pantheon of gods. This created utter confusion when the religion of individuals was

enumerated in the census, as there was a thinner line between Hinduism and other native religious sects.

Nineteenth century socio-religious reformers had tried to separate Hinduism from native sects in order to prove and maintain its purity. Dayananda Saraswathi disowned pagan practices of Hinduism and advocated for pure Aryanism founded on Vedic philosophy. For him, only Aryans were the true Hindus. However, by the early 20th century, religion had taken a political turn, and religious supremacy had transformed into political power. In this game, every religion started increasing its numbers, as numerical strength became important to capture political power in India. In this context, V. D. Savarkar redefined Hinduism in 1923 in his famous writing *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* saying that those whose *pitribhumi* (fatherland) and *punya bhumi* (holy land) are in Bharath are Hindus. This gained popularity with widespread communal politics in colonial India. Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh supremo M.S. Golwalkar also declared Muslims, Christians and communists the enemies of Hinduism, furthering the communal line of thinking. Mahatma Gandhi **believed** that a true Hindu is one who respects all faiths.

With the spread of intense communal politics, Adivasis came to occupy a religious no man's land where Christian missionaries and Hindutva forces competed to traverse through their areas and bring them into their religious fold. Christian missionaries were the first, but the Hindutva forces who followed them could assimilate them into Hinduism without much effort. This was done through propaganda campaigns and lobbying with colonial officials. Hindutva associations brought tremendous pressure on the Census Commission to enumerate Adivasis as Hindus irrespective of their claims. Although this was never officially declared, many Adivasis were enumerated as Hindus in the 1941 census. Ironically, Verrier Elwin, who was considered to be a champion of the Adivasi cause, was among those who believed that Adivasis other than those in Assam were Hindus.

Enumerating the Adivasi religion was a difficult task of the Census in India, which started in 1871-72. The main difficulty faced by the Census Commission was drawing a line between Hinduism and other native sects, as there was no strict definition of Hinduism in place. The term Hindustani was still used in terms of race, nationality, language, and culture. The debate on who Aryans and non-Aryans are also added to this chaos. Out of the chaos, the Census Commission classified Indians into five religious categories, namely Hindus, Muhammedans, Christians, Buddhists and Others. The Adivasis, along with the castes outside the Varna system, were included in the Other category. Adivasis were, however,

recorded with their community name as their religion – Gond, Munda, Banjara, etc.

The 1881 Census followed almost the same model. In this Census, 14 religious categories were recognised in Bengal. Santhals, Kols, Eastern Aboriginal and Western Aboriginal were recorded as separate religious categories, but in the total tabulation, they were shown as one Aboriginal religion, separating them from the All Other Religions category.

It is worth noting here that a new term called Animism was used to designate the Adivasi religion in the 1891 census. The Census Commissioner, J.A. Baines, defined Animism as the belief in the existence of souls or spirits that freely move through earth, air, man, and all other objects, which become divine and objects of worship. Those forest tribes who were not acknowledged as Hindu, Christian, Muslim and Buddhist were enumerated as Animists. Enumerators were instructed to enter the names of the forest communities in the prescribed column, and in the compilation, they were included in the Animism category. The Adivasis were enumerated under the same category in the 1901 and 1911 censuses. However, there was serious debate on the use of the term among ethnologists and administrators, as it was a derogatory term. Indeed such descriptions primitivised Adivasi religion and culture further.

The Census Commission replaced the term Animism with Tribal Religion from the 1921 census. Yet, enumerating Adivasi religion with their respective community name in the Census schedule continued. The same model was followed in the 1931 and 1941 Census. Although caste-wise Census was dropped after 1931, it did not affect the enumeration of Adivasis in a separate religion category. Indeed, there were widespread religious and cultural assertion movements (such as Tana Bhagat) by the Adivasi communities from the 1920s across India. However, the Hindu Mahasabha and Arya Samaj's campaign to merge Adivasis into Hinduism turned out to be successful. The Census Commission dropped the Tribal Religion category from the 1951 Census. However, the Adivasis took the help of the Other Religion category to reclaim their religion in the census.

The decision to assimilate Adivasis into Hinduism is a purely political move that aimed at suppressing the Adivasis' assertion of a distinct religious identity, **particularly the Sarna Dharam movement in central India**. Adivasis primarily constituted the majority under the Other Religions and Persuasions category. In 1951, 18.4 lakh individuals were recorded under Other Religions and Persuasions, which rose to 79.3 lakh by 2011. Specifically, those identifying as Sarna Dharam increased from 18 lakh in 1991 to 35 lakh in 2011.

Adivasis have historically been living outside the caste-village society, resorting to the forests and hills. Over time, they developed their own language, belief system and culture

in order to carve out their separate identity. Their history and identity are their weapon in negotiating with the imperial and modern states, and in keeping them at bay. A move to erase their identity will be considered an attempt to erase their histories by bringing them into the Hindu fold by force.

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