

it. If we glorify woman as a symbol of sacred motherhood, we would like to molest her.”¹

To be sure, proponents of a Hindu Rashtra have refrained from calling for the liquidation or annihilation of Muslims; the sheer number of Muslims makes this impractical.² Rather, Hindutva

diverse, and distinct cultural and religious identity, which historically has been safeguarded by the Indian constitution. “By obliquely indicating that Hindus are the preferred community, the state is forcing Adivasis to switch sides to enjoy aids and benefits,” explained Neetisha Xalxo (personal communication

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NOTES

1. See M. S. Gowalkar, 2019, “The RSS Chief Who Remains Guruji to Some, a Bigot to Others.” www.theprint.in (accessed May 31, 2021).
2. For an incisive analysis on the challenges that Indian Muslims confront under the BJP rule, see Mujibur Rehman (2021 forthcoming), *Shikwa-e-Hind: Political Future of Indian Muslims*. New Delhi: Simon & Schuster.

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ACCEPTABLE CITIZENSHIP: INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AND INDIA’S NEW CITIZENSHIP LAWS

KumKum Dasgupta, *Hindustan Times*

DOI:10.1017/S1049096521000731

On March 4, 2020, members of India’s indigenous communities, known as Adivasis (i.e., original inhabitants), gathered at Jantar Mantar—an iconic protest site in New Delhi—to register their objections against the Citizenship Amendment Act–National Register of Citizens–National Population Register (CAA–NRC–NPR). The protesters, who came from different parts of India, opposed them mainly on three grounds.

First, they were concerned that a large segment of Adivasis may not be able to prove their citizenship due to the lack of identification documents and, therefore, could lose their citizenship.

Second, the protesters believed that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its affiliates are using the CAA–NRC–NPR to send a message that Adivasis should come within the Hindu fold, either by choosing Hinduism as their religion in government documents (including the upcoming 2021 Census) or by converting from their current faith. This “forced mainstreaming,” many Adivasis believe, may lead to the loss of their centuries-old, rich, vibrant,

with author), a Delhi University professor and an Adivasi from the eastern state of Jharkhand. “Many Adivasis are willing to convert for material gains and also to avoid trouble with the state. But they must realize they will be second-class citizens in the Hindu fold.”

Third, the protesters feared that Hindu refugees who come to India, using the CAA route, could usurp control of their natural resources—the Adivasis source of food and livelihood—with the help of an accepting government.

These anxieties are not unfounded for India’s 700-plus Adivasi communities,¹ whose members are scattered across India, concentrated in the central and northeastern parts of the country (Yengde 2020). This article discusses the Adivasis engagement with the CAA, focusing on indigenous communities in central and eastern India, where many of India’s Adivasis are concentrated. A significant number of Adivasis live in India’s northeastern states; however, recognizing their specific politics, this discussion is limited to indigenous communities in central and eastern India.

Resource Crunch

The fear of losing control over natural resources is not baseless. Although they have state-granted legal protection, successive government programs have forced generations of Adivasis to vacate their land and forests for development projects, mining, and implementation of forest and wildlife conservation laws. For a long time, the different regimes viewed the Adivasis as detrimental to forests and animals, as well as the cause of natural disasters, political violence (i.e., Maoism), and economic migration (Nilsen 2019; Shah et al. 2018).

The dire socioeconomic status of the Adivasis is evident in the data. The 2011 Census counted 104 million Adivasis, comprising 8.6% of the population. However, 51% of Adivasis live below the poverty line, compared to the 40.2% national average, and 65% are landless.² In 2006, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act accepted this fact and recognized the customary rights of forest dwellers, including their right over commons areas and their right to manage and sell forest produce (Chemmencheri 2015). “However, its implementation has been unsuccessful, thanks to inadequate community awareness, conflicting laws, lack of dedicated structural implementation, administrative roadblocks and government deficit,” according to Debyeet Sarangi, who was involved with the Kondh community in Odisha (*India Development Review*, <https://idronline.org/how-development-excludes-ativasi-peoples>).

Identity Crisis

The fear of losing control over resources and being forced out of their land is the result of a genuine problem that many Adivasis

face: the lack of state-granted identification documents and land titles. “The constant movement of Adivasis, sometimes under extreme duress and without adequate time to take their belongings, means many misplace state-approved identity documents, or

and the reasons behind their reluctance to trust the Indian government. “Adivasis are nature worshippers; they have no idols or holy book or temple and believe that their ancestors are their guiding spirit...these are very different from what Hindus follow.”

[W]e must not ignore the implications of the CAA on the religious identities of several members of India’s disparate Adivasi communities, who fear that now more than ever they will be pigeonholed into one of the acceptable religions so as to be accepted as citizens.

many simply don’t have one,” explained Sreetama Gupta Bhaya of the non-profit Oxfam. “Many of these documents are also riddled with errors. Adivasis don’t even attempt to correct them because of a lack of education and an understanding that these need to be corrected; going to a government office means losing a day’s wage. Unhelpful and arrogant government officials who treat them as second-class citizens make them reluctant to visit government offices” (personal communication with author).

Even among the Adivasi community, the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups are in a worse predicament: they reside mostly in isolated and remote areas, with little education and awareness of the outside world.

Yamuna Murmu, a tribal rights activist in Bihar, cogently summarized the anti-CAA mood among the Adivasis: “Our ancestors—Tilka Majhi, Birsā Munda, Sidhu-Kanhu—fought vehemently against the British for our rights and independence but, sadly, today the government is seeking proof of relation and belongingness to our motherland,” he told *NewsClick*.³ “People protesting across the country are sloganeering ‘Hum Kaagaz Nahi Dikhayenge’ [We will not show documents], but it’s an undeniable truth for the tribal community because it has nothing to show.”

Back to the Fold

In recent years, the BJP and its affiliates have achieved some success in incorporating Adivasis into the Hindu fold. Its success can be measured by the electoral support that the BJP has had among Adivasi communities in recent elections (Jha 2017; Sitapati 2020; Thatchil 2014). Its success has been aided by the built-in discrimination in the government’s enumeration system. For example, the Census form has only six options under the religion column⁴: Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh. However, Adivasis across India often hold religious faiths and practice religious traditions anchored in animism and nature worship, which are quite distinct from the six listed religions.

“If we do not consider ourselves followers of any of these religions, which option should we choose? Before 2011, a seventh option, ‘Others,’ was provided, and most of us used to opt for it. But now, even that has been removed,” Mahendra Dhruva, a tribal activist from Bihar, told Santoshi Markam, a writer for *The Wire*.⁵ “We want a separate religious code option for all the tribals [Adivasis] of the country.” The Adivasis also perceive the demands of right-wing groups to ban beef, which is included in their dietary habits, as a part of the broader India-for-Hindus agenda.

“People fail to understand that the Adivasi religion is fundamentally different from Hinduism,” explained Xalxo (personal communication with author), who has taken to social media to make Indians aware of her community, their way of life and living,

Understandably, much has been written about the potentially adverse impact of the CAA on India’s Muslims. However, we must not ignore its implications on the religious identities of several members of India’s disparate Adivasi communities, who fear that now more than ever they will be pigeonholed into one of the acceptable religions so as to be accepted as citizens. ■

NOTES

1. Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2020, 38).
2. See www.cprindia.org/news/understanding-land-rights-tribal-populations-scheduled-areas.
3. See www.newsclick.in/Bihar-Tribals-Face-Disenfranchisement-Threat-Wake-CAA.
4. See https://censusindia.gov.in/Census_and_You/religion.aspx.
5. See <https://thewire.in/rights/advasi-religion-recognition-census>.

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PRECARIOUS CITIZENSHIP: INTERNAL MIGRANTS AND INDIA’S AMENDED CITIZENSHIP LAWS

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DOI:10.1017/S1049096521000718

In January 2020, residents of a slum in the suburbs of Bengaluru city (Karnataka State) found their homes razed to the ground by the city’s municipality. At the receiving end were internal labor migrants,¹ who routinely face such harassment in the cities to which they move for work. Although such evictions are a mainstay of contemporary urban life in India, this particular demolition caused an unusual stir because it reeked of the ominous politics of India’s new citizenship laws. The event was triggered by a viral video shared by a local resident that portrayed the slum as an