

Should ST status remain after religious conversion? The Adivasi delisting debate raging in Jharkhand

A renewed row over 'delisting' has raised Constitutional questions around religion and affirmative action for Adivasis.

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Followers of the Sarna faith in Jharkhand. Wikimedia Commons

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When the population census process got underway in Jharkhand on May 16, an appeal began circulating among Adivasi communities: don't mention "Hindu" in the religion column; instead,

write “Sarna” — the traditional tribal faith — or “others”.

Around a week later, a large Sangh-affiliated Adivasi gathering in New [Delhi](#) demanded “delisting” from the Scheduled Tribes (ST) category for tribal people who convert to Christianity or Islam.

These two recent, interlinked developments have revived the long-running debate around religious identity among Adivasis, not only in Jharkhand but elsewhere too. Here’s a look at why religion and, in particular, “delisting”, are such divisive matters among the community.

First, what is delisting?

“Delisting” refers to the demand that tribal people converting to Christianity or Islam should not continue receiving benefits for STs. Among the major voices raising this demand are Adivasi Hindus.

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But another section of Adivasis, from the Sarna community (which does not identify as either Hindu or Christian), argues that if religion becomes the basis for removing tribal status, the same rule should apply to tribal people who have converted to Hinduism.

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This renewed debate around delisting has also raised Constitutional questions around religion and affirmative action.

This comes amid the recent Supreme Court observation reiterating that Dalits converting to Christianity or Islam cannot continue to claim Scheduled Caste status under Article 341. However, Article 342, which deals with STs, does not explicitly mention religion — a distinction now central to the debate around tribal identity and conversion.

The opposing sides of the delisting debate

The Janjati Suraksha Manch (JSM), affiliated with the Sangh's tribal outfit Akhil Bharatiya Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram, organised the New Delhi gathering on May 24. Attended by Union Home Minister Amit Shah, it saw several Adivasi groups, including some from parts of the Northeast, backing the delisting demand.

However, the Sarna community and the Christian Adivasi Mahasabha organised a similarly large counter-rally in Chhattisgarh's Jashpur district. Adivasi activists from Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, especially followers of the Sarna faith, also extended support to Christian Adivasis and distanced themselves from organisations seen as close to the RSS.

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The Delhi event, notably, triggered another controversy. Home Minister Shah used the word "vanvasi" while talking about delisting, leading to protests in Jharkhand. Protesters argued that the word, meaning "forest dweller", reduces tribal identity only to geography. "Adivasi", which means "original inhabitants", carries a political and historical identity linked to land and indigeneity.

The origins of the delisting demand

The roots of the delisting idea are often traced to Baba Kartik Oraon, a prominent Adivasi leader who later became a Union minister in Indira Gandhi's cabinet.

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Kartik Oraon lost his debut Lok Sabha election in 1962 from Lohardaga, an ST-reserved constituency. He argued before the Patna High Court that since his opponent had converted to Christianity, he no longer was a tribal from the Oraon community and should, therefore, be disqualified.

The Patna High Court, however, held that Oraon is "primarily a tribe and ethnic identity, not merely a religion". It observed that Christian Oraons retained their clan system, and continued to observe tribal customs and festivals. The judgment noted that they are "Oraons first and Christians next".

This High Court judgment is often cited by opponents of the delisting demand to argue that religion is immaterial in determining ST identity.

But this was not the end of the idea.

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In August 1967, when Kartik Oraon was a minister in Indira Gandhi's cabinet, the government introduced the 'Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Order Amendment Bill' in Lok Sabha to revise the inclusion and exclusion of castes and tribes across India. It was referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee the next year in March.

The committee, in its report on November 17, 1969, proposed amending the Bill to exclude Christian and Muslim tribal converts from the Scheduled Tribe category. The government, however, expressed reservations over the proposal. Parliament never adopted it.

Kartik Oraon's 'misunderstood' legacy

Tribal people and groups affiliated to the RSS and BJP have often invoked Kartik Oraon to claim that Adivasis are Hindus and cannot remain Christian while enjoying Constitutional protections for STs.

Kartik Oraon, however, himself had a sharply different view.

In his book, *Bees Varsh Ki Kaali Raat*, he defines Adivasi faith as "Adi Dharma", an indigenous religion that existed before Hinduism. While he does argue that converted Christians should not continue receiving ST benefits, he goes on to state that Adivasis are not Hindus, questioning under which *varna* (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra) they could be placed within the Hindu social order.

Kartik Oraon's Congress politician daughter, Geetashree Oraon, told *The Indian Express* that her father's writings and political legacy had repeatedly been "twisted" to "mislead" tribal communities.

"My father never hated the Christian community. He was a secular person. At that time, he believed there should be equal distribution of resources... While RSS groups do not object to tribals following Hindu practices, they object when tribal communities follow Christianity," said Geetashree Oraon, who is a former education minister of Jharkhand and national women's president of Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Vikas Parishad.

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