

Muzzling Artistic Liberty and Protesting Anti-conversion Bill in Jharkhand

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Adivasi culture is fluid in nature, with the scope for imitation of other cultures and a significant inclination towards its own socio-religious practices. The common tropes of this culture and identity are more of a political construct and are used as a potent tool to unite against external forces. These constructs are analysed in light of the response by civil society, the government, and Adivasi communities to the book *The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories* by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar.

Jharkhand was in the limelight a little over a year ago for two reasons: first, the protest against and ban on Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's book *The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories*, and, second, the anti-conversion law which penalises attempts at conversion with imprisonment. The state government had passed orders to confiscate copies of the book as well as banned its sale. Civil society activists attacked Shekhar for allegedly portraying Adivasis in poor light and for writing porn in the name of representing their society. The same civil society organisations have also protested vehemently against the anti-conversion bill. Leaving aside the government's actions, one can say that the incidents evoked responses from the Adivasi society that could be regarded as reactionary in the first case as it curtails the individual liberty of artistic expression, and liberal in the latter case as the individual right to freedom of religion is invoked. The two reactions were rather incompatible and need to be understood from a perspective fit enough to explore Adivasi culture as it exists in multiple modalities. The fact that Adivasis in Jharkhand have lived side by side with caste societies for a substantial number of years makes it necessary to understand their culture as a dynamic, rather than a stagnant entity. While it is easier to capture the exchange of tangible behaviour, the amorphous nature of cultural cross-pollination is difficult to be easily interpreted. The common tropes of Adivasi culture and identity are more of a political construct and are used as a potent tool to unite against external forces in order to protect their resources. The pertinent questions that arise are: Why was it felt necessary by a certain section of the Adivasi society to protest against Shekhar's work in the name of culture? Which notion of culture

are the protestors subscribing to? Does the Adivasi society need to make sense of liberal values not only in matters of faith, but also in matters of an individual's liberty of expression? I look at the Adivasi sociopolitical discourse by taking up the issue of anti-conversion protest first and then try to link it with the Adivasi politics of cultural imagery. This article attempts to understand the reactions of the three identified parties, that is, the government, civil society, and the individual.

Ulterior Motives

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led state government has passed the anti-conversion law, the Religious Freedom Bill, 2017 in the assembly, and the state's governor gave her assent in September 2017. It outlines provisions of imprisonment ranging between three and four years and/or a fine between ₹50,000 and ₹1,00,000 in cases of forced or coerced conversion. Any lawful conversion has to be conducted with the prior approval of the district collector who shall be intimated regarding the person's willingness to convert and with details like the time, place and the person who administers the conversion. The opposition parties have protested against the bill highlighting its futility as, they argue, there already exist anti-conversion provisions within the Indian Penal Code (IPC) like Section 295(A) which deals with "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings," making it a punishable offence. However, Christian organisations like the Rashtriya Isai Mahasangh (RIM) are at the forefront of social protest against the anti-conversion law.

Adivasi society is believed to be outside the caste system and, hence, endowed with a unique agency in a country where caste has arguably pervaded every religion apart from Hinduism. If one looks at the religious census, we find that hardly one-third of the Adivasis still submit themselves as Sarna followers, while around 40% and 15% present themselves as Hindus and Christians, respectively. Despite this, the religious rites and festivals of the Adivasis are celebrated by every Adivasi irrespective of their religious persuasion. What we need to understand is that religious conversions have hardly

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depleted their cultural practices. But, in this process of reproduction of culture, one can notice that Adivasi culture has not remained a watertight category and has undergone changes which gives it a more syncretic form.

Despite endorsing one or the other religion, Adivasis still remain at the fringes of their adopted religion. Despite being taunted by the mainstream religionists as backward, pagan, or primeval, why do the Adivasis convert? Why do they observe their own cultural practices despite converting to other religions? The answers to these questions are not straightforward and need to be understood in the context of backwardness of the community as well as the neo-liberal onslaught on their resources.

It is widely believed that the Christian missionary activities have alleviated the position of many Adivasis who find better representation in state jobs. The concerted attack by the Hindu right-wing forces on the converted Christian Adivasis gives further credence to the notion that the latter have also played an active role in protests against Adivasi land acquisition. The Religious Freedom Bill, 2017 needs to be understood against this backdrop. It can be said that the apprehension of the Christian Adivasi section that the new law is a Hindu neo-liberal ploy to divide the Adivasi community is not entirely unfounded. It has been already observed that the BJP receives a good amount of support from the Hinduised Adivasis (Kumar 2015). Having failed to further consolidate its position among the non-Hindu Adivasis, the best available option left to the BJP is to further divide the community and galvanise the support of the Sarna Adivasis by projecting their Christian counterparts as the real threat to the Sarna religion. How much success will this experiment yield to the Hindu right-wing party is yet to be verified but it has certainly created some rift at the local level as the main office bearers of Sarna Dharam have, in the recent past, objected to appropriation of adivasi cultural symbols by the Missionaries (Yadav 2013). In a mineral-rich state this political experiment, if it fructifies, will certainly provide impetus to the aggressive neo-liberal agenda of the BJP

as it will weaken civil society reactions against attempts to acquire land. The amendments to protective legislations like the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (CNTA), 1908 and Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act (SPTA), 1949 are also in the same mould.

It is in this context that the educated Adivasi Christians are viewed as the real impediment to the march of neo-liberal “reforms.” Whatever the inner politics, the community has been able to generate protracted resistance against the state’s attempts to disenfranchise them. The political component has the capacity to act as a transcending force in creating “Adivasiness” amidst the more localised imagery pertaining to the different cultures of the Santhals, Mundas, Oraons, Hos among others. However, the reaction against Shekhar’s stories on Adivasis has similarities and differences in the approach of the government and the “civil society.”

Cultural Imagery

Shekhar hails from Pakur district of Jharkhand and works as a doctor in the district government hospital. After the controversy around his book was raked up by social activists, the BJP-led state government did not waste much time in criticising and banning the book. The author was also served a show-cause notice as to why action should not be taken against him for writing controversial literature while in government service and was also simultaneously suspended from duty. However, he was acquitted of the charge. Tabish Khair (2017) had strongly criticised the government’s objection to the literary work by a government employee and asked,

Does any employer, governmental or corporate, own the employee, body and soul, as if he was a slave, to the extent that the employee has to seek permission to indulge even in acts of creative and personal expression?

In fact, the government’s action was primarily aimed at assuring the Adivasi community that it is sensitive to the latter’s culture and society, and consolidating the BJP’s position among them.

Another dimension to this issue was the protest by a certain section of the civil society against Shekhar for writing porn in the name of Adivasi culture. As is well known by now, most such protests do not

engage with the content and ideas in the literature. Even the well-meant “liberal” attack is based on the notion that the author has portrayed Adivasi culture, particularly women, in the “wrong” way.

The construct of “Adivasi” itself does not infer a cultural homogeneity of a particular group of people. It is rather a political construct in which cultural notions play an important role to consolidate particular groups of people against others, including the state.

Every member of the Adivasi community does not carry the same historical imagination and engage with similar cultural practices. For instance, the history of the Ho Adivasis in Jharkhand is different from the histories of Mundas or Oraons. While Adivasi icons, like Birsa Munda, Sidhu and Kanhu, and others who fought against the exploitation of Adivasis by outsiders, are equally owned by every Adivasi, one cannot say the same about a Ho Adivasi and Tana Bhagat, who is believed to have started a millenarian movement among the Oraons. Some Adivasi symbols can easily transcend the intra-community barriers whereas others cannot. Subsequently, one notion of the Adivasi as propagated by certain section of civil society should not curtail the autonomous space of another individual to make sense of their culture. This is the space the civil society actors should respect—or violate at their own peril—the individual’s liberty to own and express their opinion. It is for this reason that the Adivasi society should defend the rights of Shekhar for its own sake.

Thinking the Adivasi Way

Adivasis in India have experienced different degrees of interaction with various societies and religions. Influences from caste and religion have actually developed some puritanical values among certain groups of Adivasis, particularly those who have adopted one or the other religion,

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