Negotiating Adivasi Agency: The Sarna Dharam Code in Jharkhand, India

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Introduction

Adivasis' relationship with the Indian state has always been an ambiguous one. To this day, Adivasis remain one of the most vulnerable people in Indian society. On the one hand, Adivasis are often subjected to land grab and have limited access to basic infrastructure (water, food, healthcare, education), on the other hand, indigenous activists have continuously stressed the acute dangers of Adivasis being deprived of their cultures, languages and knowledge-systems. The history of Jharkhand in particular is evidence of a century-old Adivasi struggle against this oppression, with numerous anti-colonial uprisings throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the ongoing call for recognition in independent India. The term Adivasi itself is closely linked to the political demands for recognition and the formation of a "tribal state" of Jharkhand.

While the Subaltern Studies and their approach to studying South Asian "history from below" has contributed largely to raising awareness for such struggles and modes of resistance, their approaches have sometimes been criticised for treating class as a defining feature of these communities, while Adivasi religious agency has not received much attention in academia.[1] Of course, however, certain religious identities are easily associated with primitivist or dangerous traits and as such Adivasis are often 'viewed as primitives trapped in modern state imaginaries, […] typically treated by scholars, activists, and policymakers alike as victims in need of protection or as savages to be civilized

through commercial and educational initiatives' (Chandra 2013a, 53). As such, when debating Adivasi religion and activism, neoliberalist and neo-colonialist assumptions must be challenged.

On 11 November 2020, the legislative assembly of the Jharkhand state passed a resolution on implementing a separate religious category for Adivasis in the 2021 All India Census, called Sarna Adivasi Dharma Code Bill, Sarna Code for short. Sarna is the name of an Adivasi religious community in Jharkhand and some of its neighbouring states which is mostly attributed to Santhal, Munda, Oraon, and sometimes Ho Adivasi communities. Prior to the Sarna Code resolution in November 2020, there had been several state-wide, and national protests by Adivasi groups demanding the official recognition of their religion. While the state of Jharkhand has made a first and important step in the direction of Adivasi religions' equal treatment, the Union government has yet to confirm and implement the code. This Sarna Code refers to a separate "box to tick" for Adivasis when asked about their religion in the 2021 Census.

The 2021 census however has been postponed by the Indian government—at first under the excuse of the COVID-19 pandemic. The prolonged delay has been criticised as an attempt by the Hindu nationalist BJP government to escape 'inconvenient truths' like the actual number of 'other backward classes' or that the numbers might not 'confirm the hysteria about growth rates of certain religious groups' (Rajalakshmi 2023) which gives an idea of the relevance of the Census for identity-politics in India. Sarna has received neither as a religious nor as a political movement much attention in (English-publishing) scholarship. However, considering the impact of an intensifying Hindu nationalist stage on Adivasi lives, Sarna might offer important and new insights. I argue that recent developments in the state of Jharkhand have demonstrated the need to consider religion and spirituality as important aspects of Adivasi identity assertion.

Sarna as agency

Through the lens of agency, the different identities and realities negotiated through Sarna become visible. While the concept of agency has been criticised for implying a 'universal notion of freedom' (Desai 2010), and 'call[ing] to mind the autonomous, individualistic, Western actor'

(Ortner 2006, 152), a nuanced understanding of subversive and relational agency helps to strengthen non-static, non-hegemonic conceptions of power. Identities are plural and simultaneous and religious, political, and emotional claims tightly entangled which is why when we look at the Sarna movement, we ought to focus on the processes of negotiation (Chandra 2013a) and communal and cultural aspiration (Appadurai 2004). My usage of agency has been influenced by the writings of Sherry Ortner and Uday Chandra and other post-colonial scholars who have challenged Western hegemonic and neoliberal ideas of freedom and development. Agency in my text stands for the "intentional"—while not per se conscious, much less coherent—process of negotiating one's action—and putative nonaction—taking place at an individual as well as a community level. Rather than being focused on the outcome of certain actions or "distributions of power" in a hierarchical structure, my idea of agency promotes (temporally) fluid, transformative aspects of cultural and religious practices that push the inquiry beyond dichotomies of empowered vs. disempowered, "progressive/future-oriented" vs. "traditional", and essentialising or victimising discourses regarding Adivasis. Hence, "who is speaking" in the Sarna debate has been of particular interest to my inquiry around agential intentionality and relationalities.

Locating religion in a secular state: Colonial pasts and the "tribal other"

The Census

To analyse the Sarna Dharam Code from an agentive perspective, I shall briefly contextualise the historical structures within which this claim is located: The Jharkhandi claim of introducing a separate religious category for the Adivasi communities criticises an important colonial, century-old foundation of Indian identity politics that systematically excludes or marginalizes religious, ethnic, or linguistic minorities (Appadurai 1993). As Dasgupta (2019) and Bhagat (2013) have shown, today's Census is a continuation of colonial epistemologies and racisms, claiming to collect and objectively portray the 'various statistical information on various characteristics of the people of India' (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner 2021b) and hence offer an authoritative foundation for studying Indian society and culture. But the knowledge generated by the responsible Census Division, collecting information on every person's and household's age, sex, marital status, religion, schedule, caste, mother tongue, education, migration background, fertility and economic status (Office of the Registrar General &

Census Commissioner 2021a) can be traced back to British chief ethnographer H.H. Risley's and other's racial classifications and social ranking of caste hierarchies. This suggests that 'the census is not only a passive exercise of counting people but is actively engaged in capturing reality through categories of their definitions' (Bhagat 2013, 435).

The Census can be seen as one of the first and most influential documents naming and defining the "Aboriginal Tribes" and "Semi-Hinduised Aboriginals" (Dasgupta 2019), and an inscription of their traits. What is more, the religious categories provided in the Census today are Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. While the collective label "Animism/Aboriginal Faith" used to be a separate religious category it has been replaced with an "Other's" category shortly after Indian independence in 1947 (Bhagat 2013, 436; Alam 2020). The authority granted to the Census data is a huge factor in rendering invisible all the social or religious identities that are not enumerated separately. As is the problem with most statistical data, it oversimplifies, hence leaves out important nuances. However, the Census provides some of the most important data for political decision-making in India.

In the 2011 Census, most people identifying as followers of "other religions and persuasions" have specified their religion as Sarna. 0,7 per cent of the total Indian population have referred to their belief as "other", two-thirds of these 0,7 per cent have identified as Sarna (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, n. d., Appendix C-01), which is a considerable amount, given the many different Adivasi belief systems in the country:[2] 'In the 2011 Census, about 50 lakh [5 million] tribals living in 21 States of the country mentioned Sarna as their religion in other columns of the census form' (*ETV Bharat* 2020b). In Jharkhand alone, 4.2 million people have stated that they follow other religions, which is 12,8 per cent of the total population, and of these, almost 98 per cent had stated their religious belief to be Sarna.[3] Meanwhile, the 2021 Census has been postponed until further notice due to the Covid-19 developments. Also, the Jharkhand government's resolution on Sarna has yet to be approved by the BJP-led Central Government.

As scholars like Hansen (1999) and Dirks (2001) have shown, the growing religious discourse in Indian politics since the 1980s cannot be severed from India's colonial pasts. In fact, it has been argued that colonialism has in many ways enabled the making of a strong "unified" Brahminic Hinduism and communal segregation. Although India has never been secular in a "textbook kind of way" the principles of secularism are held high by most political actors today, including the Hindu Right who have been known to consolidate their political influence

through the "social work" of organisations like the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), but also the Vishna Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) (Hansen 1999, 11). Hindus constitute the dominant confessional group in India (according to the 2011 Census they make up almost 80 per cent of the total Indian population), hence 'Hinduism in India has a strong tendency to become closely identified with national culture' (Jacobsen 2015, 69). This Hindu dominance has also assumed Adivasis to be "backward" Hindus, who have—due to their historical social and geographical isolation been cut off from "real" Hinduism, defending assimilation and Sanskritisation practices with civilisational arguments (Hansen 1999, 121).

Sarna

Adivasi religion has been marginalised or even negated in the above-mentioned ways. My study on Sarna suggests that the topic is still mostly missing in academia as well. However, broadly it has been argued that tribal and Hindu belief systems have a long history of shaping and influencing one another. While in the past, Adivasi religious reform movements have been studied in the context of Hindu proselytising movements and aspirations to assimilate religious practices into Hinduism (Sheid 2015; Hardiman 1984), many indigenous forms of knowledge and ritual worship are likely to have preceded and influenced Hinduism (Carrin 2012, 590). Adivasis often primarily identify with their local village/community rituals and culture—which might be confined to language or religious practices as well (ibid., 587).

Adivasi religion has also been known to include a practice of human, and later animal sacrifice, the worship of ancestral spirits, as well as the consumption of alcohol, but Adivasi religion has been perceived as more egalitarian and holistic than Hindu belief systems. Another central aspect that has been stressed is the role of shamans, possession cults, and witchcraft (Sinha 2006; Desai 2010; Borde 2019). Although scholars have argued that 'belief in witchcraft is a new phenomenon in Adivasi societies and that it is derived from Hinduised ideas of female spiritual power, overlaid with a fear of this very same power' (Borde 2019, 4) it is perceived as a tribal religious trait. This "fear" of witchcraft can be observed on the political level: the "Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act, 2013" 'explicitly bans what are called superstitious practices' (Desai 2010, 318) and has added to the discrimination of Adivasi traditional beliefs and stigmatisation of Adivasis in the public eye.

Recently, and particularly in the context of the Sarna Code demand,

Adivasi religiosity has been stressed as a "pure" form of worshipping nature. Sarna is the Hindi term for sacred grove, denoting a forest adjacent to the community's village in which religious ceremonies are held. It has become conceptualised as the ancient or Adivasi traditional faith in the Chotanagpur region, namely of the Santhal, Munda, Oraon, and Ho Adivasis of Jharkhand and neighbouring states.

> The soil and the forest are symbolically represented in narratives and religious practices, in which, typically, the notion of the sacred grove (Sarna) sheltering indigenous deities or ancestors is paramount among the Mundari-speaking tribes (Carrin 2012, 591).

According to Radhika Borde's (2019) study of the Sarna movement, a sacred grove usually contains at least one Sal tree, the general name auspicious *shorea robusta.* Worshippers circumambulate the Sal tree in a ceremony which often includes the possession by a deity, called "sarna mata", chanting and dancing as well as rituals worshipping the earth, the forest, and the ancestral spirits. Sarna mostly appears as the name for the sacred groves which are 'an area of conservation as well as a spiritual retreat […] probably represent[ing] the single most important ecological heritage of the ancient culture of India' (Krishna 2020, 9). Sacred groves, however, are a phenomenon in Hindu culture as well and can be found across India under different names, with different local plants as centres of worship (ibid., 13-14, 17).[4]

Another aspect often closely associated with Sarna is the Jharkhandi regional activism, which is closely linked to the formation of an Adivasi political identity:[5] The term Adivasi has only been coined in 1938 when the Adivasi Mahasabha, the first anti-colonial movement in India claimed tribal political autonomy in the Jharkhand region—and lay the foundation for the "tribal state" of Jharkhand (Dasgupta & Rycroft 2011). Shah and Bates (2017) have shown how the isolationist and at times repressive policies of the colonial administration in the "tribal areas" have set the ground for the historical conflicts over forest and land rights, which still dominate Adivasi politics today. Tribal special or protective legislation inscribed in the Indian Constitution like the 1907 CNT and the 1949 SPT Act, both permitting the transfer of land to non-tribals have been responses to Adivasi uprisings against expropriation of (communal) land and nature. Viewed from a Sarna perspective the historical struggle of Adivasis in Jharkhand takes on a religious component, as well.

The complex entangled and fluid identities of the post-independence struggles of Jharkhandi Adivasis for a separate state are presented by Alpa Shah (2011) and Sujit Kumar (2018). While the foundation for an epistemic space of Jharkhand as an Adivasi state lay in the assumption of a majority tribal population, this numerical majority was not reflected

in the Census data. Therefore, a Jharkhandi identity 'was refurbished several times in the backdrop of changing political situation' (Kumar 2018, 106). Narratives supporting the struggle for an independent Adivasi Jharkhand, relied on blaming the predominantly Bihari "diku"-oppressor or argued with a 'rhetoric of internal colonialism against the State of Bihar' (Shah 2011, 217), blaming the state of Bihar for the "poor development" in the region and the exploitation of the Jharkhandi people.

Curiously, even though it had been the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), a regional party succeeding the Jharkhand Party of Jaipal Singh Munda, leading the fight for Jharkhandi independence, it was the Hindu right-wing BJP that took the quest for an independent Jharkhand a decisive step forward in 1989 and finally put into practice the long-standing demand for an autonomous region in Jharkhand. The state was incepted in late 2000. Despite the BJP's perceived role as an outsider, and its conceptualisation of Jharkhand as *vanachal* and Adivasis as *van-avasis*, meaning "forest dwellers" which is a demeaning term connected to the idea of Adivasis as "uncivilised Hindus" from the margins, the party succeeded in promoting the political agenda of autonomy for the region (Prakash 2011). The BJP had, in the eyes of Jharkhandi activists, managed to "hijack" the struggle for an Adivasi Jharkhand, assimilating it into its agenda of (economic) development. Jharkhand with its Chhota Nagpur plateau is one of the most resource- and mineral-rich areas in India that remains the most valuable source of industrial resources, like manganese, iron, chromite, copper, coal, mica, kyanite, bauxite, and limestone (Dutt 2019; Encyclopedia Britannica 2014).

The Sarna Code: Agents in the debate

Methodological remarks

As briefly noted above, few publications can be found on the Sarna religion and the Sarna movement in the English language. However, the demand for a separate Adivasi religion in the 2021 Census has partly been addressed in English publishing media. This research was carried out from late 2021 until March 2022, so only articles published before March 1 were included in the analysis. Selecting the articles, it was made sure to a) include publications of larger newspapers and agencies like The Times of India or Hindustan Times, and b) to include as many different sources as possible. In total, 28 articles from 16 different platforms have been included in the analysis. Articles that were too similar in content and style, or were not concerned with the Census code demand, I dismissed. Sarna as a topic was particularly prominent in

media reports in 2017, the *Sarna Code* demand is written of particularly in 2019 to 2021.

The table below categorises the data relevant to the inquiry. This table summarises the stakeholders in the Sarna debate. Information was gathered from newspapers, news portals, and websites, including national newspapers like The Times of India, The Indian Express, and Hindustan Times, and articles posted on national news portals/TV channels like The Wire, News18 and ETV Bharat, national weekly/ monthly magazines like The Caravan, Down to Earth but also clearly right-leaning news-portals like OpIndia and smaller blogs and websites. The first step in structuring this work has been to group all sources that focus on Adivasi/Activist perspectives. Many of these were longer feature articles (1000+ words) including statements by Adivasi individuals or groups or reporting on demonstrations. This group I have named "Activist Voices" for future reference. Next, mainly brief news articles (around 500 words) that capture more general facts on the Sarna Code demand and/or "Politicians' Voices" were grouped.

Other articles have a more Hindu nationalist bias: Sources like OpIndia or Hindu Post are known for their right-leaning orientation (Ananth 2019) and claim to 'provide [...] the correct perspective on issues concerning Hindu society' (*Hindu Post* n. d.). Other articles are grouped under this third section named "Hindutva Voices" are authored by Hindu nationalist figures. "Academic Voices" hardly include information on the Census demand. However, academic articles have provided general insights into the (re-) enforcement of a Sarna identity, serving as a tool to contextualise claims found in other media articles.

I was curious to find out not merely "what" but "who" is putting forward claims concerning an Adivasi religious code to be able to question intentions behind rather than effects of a Sarna Code, but biographical information about authors, publishers and audience was hard to access. What can be stated is that all authors seem to belong to an Indian diaspora, two authors identify as Adivasi (from the Gond community of Chattisgarh): Aakash Poyam and Santoshi Markam, and only three authors are female. Because the articles are published in English and often require certain background information, it can be assumed that the prime readership of nearly all articles would belong to the members of an educated, urban upper-middle-class, or include an international audience. For these reasons, the validity of the arguments included here, relate to parts of the public discourse on Adivasi, and how Adivasis are represented often by and to an external audience.

	Politicians' Voices (Frontline Stories)	Activist Voices (Feature Articles)	Hindutva Voices	Academic Voices
Authors	Indian diaspora male journalists/reporters	Indian diaspora mostly male journalists, as well as female and Adivasi activist authors	Indian diaspora journalists and public figures from Hindu nationalist organisations	Indian diaspora social science researchers working in university context and outside of India and who have conducted extensive field studies on Jharkhand's Adivasi
Stakeholders concerning Sarna (examples)	Political parties: (mostly state level) JMM, BJP Politicians: CM Hemant Soren (JMM) CM Raghubar Das (BJP) Bandhan Tigga "Sarna Dharamguru"	Adivasi protestors and activists, Sarna and non-Sarna Adivasis, National Adivasi-Indigenous Religion Coordination Committee (chairperson: Arvind Oreaon), Adivasi Intellectuals Tribal leaders of other Indian states RSS and RSS-affiliate organisations	"Break India Forces", e.g., "modern-day missionaries"/the church BJP politicians (state level) "Tribal" Christian converts "Corrupt tribal leaders" Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram	Christian-educated Adivasi activists, RSS-affiliate organizations e.g., Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram Environmental and Indigenous movements, often Urban-educated upper-middle-class activists Santhal, Oraon, Munda, Ho Adivasi women worshippers
Content: Focus/ Style of reporting	brief outlines (250-700 words per article) frontline-style news reports mostly focusing on recent political events, with little investigative character, "objective" in style	more extensive accounts (1000+/1500+words per article), mostly feature stories with investigative character, oftentimes including direct quotes from Adivasi (eco-/eco-religious/ regional) activists, historians, sociologists, opinion articles	including opinion pieces/commentaries e.g., by BJP/RSS personalities in larger national media outlets, pieces in smaller Hindu Right news websites, varying length, often cynical tone and/or biased	Do not focus on, or do not mention Sarna Dharam Code, but elaborate on Sarna more as an indigenous ethnopolitical/religious /eco-religious movement
Kind of Sources	mostly well-established national news agencies/newspapers	national as well as international online publications, blogs, magazines, media outlets, two more extenseive articles by Adivasi authors	Smaller, reportedly right-leaning online media outlets, Hindu Right-leaning commentaries in more well-known newspapers/-portals	Peer-reviewed academic journals (South Asia, Religion, Sociology, Anthropology focus), Edited Volumes
Sources (examples)	The Indian Express The Times of India ETV Bharat News 18	The Caravan Down to Earth The Wire Religion Unplugged	Hindu Post OpIndia Hindustan Times	Economic and Political Weekly Religion History Compass
Number included in analysis	8	11	9	no

Political and religious stakeholders

Nearly all articles have presented Adivasi communities of Jharkhand and India as proponents of the Sarna Code. Most prominently, the Adivasi-associated party presented as the main political voice behind the Sarna is the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM)[6], the governing party in Jharkhand

since the 2019 elections. Chief Minister (CM) Hemant Soren is a Santhal Adivasi himself and the son of the party's long-term leader and former Chief Minister Sibhu Soren. On 11 November 2020, the Jharkhand assembly had unanimously passed a resolution to propose to the Central government the provision of a separate Sarna code for the Adivasis of the state. Chief Minister Hemant Soren is prominently defending the Sarna Code implementation, representing it as guardian of "the Adivasis'" claims on religious and cultural autonomy. Arguments concerning the autonomy of Adivasi culture are then often connected to the critique of Hindu nationalist assertions that Adivasis are Hindus.

The second largest party in the state is the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It had been leading the government of Jharkhand from 2014-2019 with Raghubar Das (BJP) as Chief Minister. He had been promoting the implementation of a Sarna Code, mostly with the goal of 'developing' the 'rebel-prone areas' which were 'under the menace of the left-wing extremists' (Gupta & Mukesh 2019). By this, Das is referring to Naxalite/Maoist groups that allegedly recruit members in the Adivasi regions. The BJP went into political opposition after the 2019 elections and had since then been challenging Sarna, criticising it on grounds of 'technical issues' (Ranjan 2020). Such technical debates take up a lot of space in the debate in the articles which prominently feature (BJP) Politicians' Voices and Hindutva Voices.

This is done by problematising nomenclature, stating that Sarna does not apply to all Adivasi religious belief systems and that 'equating the idea of a naturalistic religion with only the Schedule Tribe population is problematic [as] [i]t should be open to all' (Alam 2020). While this view is shared by scholars and "experts" cited in Activist Voices articles, it has also been voiced by BJP politicians and affiliates opposing the Code. Hindutva and Politicians' Voices articles argue how 'Break-India Forces' (*Hindu Post* 2021)—mostly referring to Christian missionaries and the Church—pose a threat to the Sarna community. The political legitimacy and effect of the Sarna claim are called into question. Mostly in articles featuring mainly Activist Voices, perspectives on the nationwide support for the movement are engaged: The claim that Adivasis in different states stand unitedly behind the Sarna Dharam proposal is mostly voiced through the National Adivasi-Indigenous Religion Coordination Committee, and its chief convener Arving Oraon. This committee seems to be the central organisation behind the Sarna protests.

Figure 1, Sarna Protestors in Khunti district. The sign reads: "Massive Mega Rally to demand the Sarna Code from the Government of India" (translation: Nishant Gokhale). The protestors are carrying red-and-white striped flags, the colors and symbol of the Sarna movement. The women wear red-and-white Saris. Source: Sarna Dharam Soto: Samiti / सरना धर्म सोतोः समिति, Facebook, posted: 8 Februar 2021, https://www.facebook.com/sarnadharam14/photos/pcb.2859558240934773/2859557994268131/.

But RSS-affiliate organisations like the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), too, are also mentioned as national organisations: According to OpIndia (2021) 'Sarna re-conversion ceremonies' have been taking place in Adivasi villages in Jharkhand, in which close to 200 Christian tribals 'return' to their ancestral faith as an act of emancipating from 'the menace of rampant Christian proselytization.' However, this re-conversion is described by quintessentially Sanskritization terminology like *ghar wapsi* (homecoming). The same platform, paradoxically, describes Sarna as an evil anti-Hindu "trick" by the church (*OpIndia* 2020). Activist Voice-articles on the other hand mention RSS-operated Hinduisation activities in Adivasi Villages 'under the banners of Vanvasi Kalyan Kendra and Vanbandhu Parishad' (Kumar 2020). Such articles also stress the role of Hindu nationalist stakeholders in the debate for they are endangering Adivasi communities, provoking the Sarna-identity claim, through their assimilating/Hinduizing politics—a reproach which the Hindu Right sources reserve for the Christian communities or "the church".

Identity politics: Discourses on religious freedom, democracy, and Adivasi "entitlements"

Sarna as political tool: tempering with "the right count"?

Political parties dominate much of the discourse around Sarna, but in what way are we able to perceive Sarna as an aspect of Adivasi agency, rather than a mere tool of identity politics? Sarna had prominently been part of the BJP's political agenda. How then does Sarna still represent an "Adivasi" movement? The political context in which the demand for a Sarna Code has developed is a good place to start questioning Sarna's agentive potential. The constitutional principles discussed in relation to Sarna reveal how the demand relates to a critique of development schemes, the claims over land rights, and the modes of Adivasi citizenship.

Debates over "tribal" and identity politics have resurfaced under the BJP-led state government (2014-2019). Particularly before the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP had promoted Sarna in their election campaign: Its promise to 'make necessary arrangements to *protect* Jaherthan (Sarna followers' place of worship)' (*The Times of India* 2016), and 'work […] hard to develop all the Sarna sthal (religious places) of tribal people across the state' (*The Times of India* 2017), was an important aspect of their developmental agenda. Sarna resurfaced in the public discourse but was closely linked to the idea of economic development. In the neoliberal agenda of the BJP, Sarna hence had a very different implication to one of communal land rights in activist demands: "Developing the Sarna sthal" meant profitable extraction of resources e.g., by contracting with big mining companies (Kumar 2018, 109).

After all, around forty per cent of India's mineral wealth is located in Jharkhand. The "protective" narrative regarding the Sarna sthal also implies Adivasi dependency on a government, that finally 'provid[es] education and development [to] tribal people' (*The Times of India* 2017). The BJP's program for the protection and development of the "tribal areas" according to former Chief Minister Das (BJP) ensures "all" people's welfare—as opposed to the politics of the regional parties: The JMM is accused of elitist politics, promoting state benefits/provisions for Adivasi only and opposing transferability of Adivasi land and forests, only to serve their own power-interests. As forests and cultivatable land are mostly in the hands of tribal elites, policies of state provisions and non-transferability of land are merely beneficial for "tribal leaders" and regional parties' leaders, who are allegedly doing nothing against poverty and criminality.

Criminality is an important part of conservative, right-wing discourse and connects to developments in the state of 2016, that were concerned with the transferability of land and anti-displacement as well. In 2016, the BJP had attempted to amend the CNT and SPT acts which resulted in year-long, and state-wide anti-government protests. The CNT and SPT laws are the oldest and most important regulations securing Adivasi rights to land and forests and the only official statutes preventing land alienation, but the amendment would have effectively suspended the main purposes of the century-old laws by making it possible to easily transfer Adivasi land for industrial and "developmental" purposes (*Down to Earth* 2016). The Pathalgadi movement, a grassroots-level protest movement, was a prominent phenomenon in these anti-amendment demonstrations. The Pathalgadi erected traditional stone slabs by the *gram sabha* (village council) that had the Indian constitution's 5th Schedule inscribed on them. Back then, many reports of the Pathalgadi's violent activities went public, their anti-national, anti-democratic form of "tribal" assertion, reports on people taken hostage or being killed by members of the movement soon overshadowed the cause (Singh 2019; Angad 2020b). Hence, arguments linking land struggles to a criminal agenda should very much be viewed behind this backdrop.

In the case of the Sarna Code demand, the BJP and the JMM are accusing each other of their divisive, destructive, and unconstitutional politics (Dhritiman 2021), that make Adivasi a pawn of their respective agenda. The BJP states how the JMM is pursuing a "divide-and-rule politics" by pushing Sarna, accusing them of neo-colonial forms of exercising power. Many right-wing arguments relate to this politics-focused discussion. Oftentimes, the democratic and secular character of the Sarna Code is called into question. The 'Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh has reiterated that all tribals are Hindu’s and that the demand for a separate religious code is against the spirit of the constitution' (*The Times of India* 2015). This allegedly unconstitutional character, for the Hindu Right, seems grounded in the fact that constitutional minority benefits are fundamentally illegitimate:

> [Sarna Adivasis] probably believe that they are losing out on the minority-related benefits which their converted brethren [Christian Adivasis] can avail of. Thus, being classified as a different religion would entitle these not converted Sarna tribals to avail of the minority benefits. The question to be asked is, will the new code entitle them to avail of both ST and minority benefits? Availing of ST/SC benefits along with minority benefits is definitely unconstitutional. […] The very fact that many "secular" entities are pushing for a new Sarna code in the census makes it suspicious. (*Hindu Post* 2021)

"Double benefits" which are discussed even by less polemical voices draw on the danger of Christian Adivasis misusing their status as minority communities through availing ST benefits and Christian minority status and hence are "exploiting" the democratic system. That same threat is now feared if Sarna Adivasis would be eligible for minority reservations as a religious minority and Scheduled Tribes. One author goes so far as to claim that the Constitution should be changed, to "achieve justice":

> Constitution Order (Scheduled Caste) 1950 clearly states that only a Hindu can be member of SC community thus reserving the benefits for the real underprivileged sections of the Hindu society. But Constitution Order (Scheduled Tribe) 1950 doesn't say so. Due to this even after converting to Christianity, converts from ST communities availing reservations and other benefits. It's high time the central government changes this order. (*OpIndia* 2020)

The JMM and Hemant Soren on the other hand argue that through the Sarna Code Adivasis will be protected from the demographic misrepresentation their (seasonal) migration causes, as they are in danger of being counted as ST in one state but not so in another (Angad 2020a; Angad 2021). Such views are also presented in the Politicians' Voices articles. They assume that if Adivasis are (more easily) able to identify as Sarna, the number of ST recognised in the country will rise and avail of the benefits, to which they are entitled by the constitution. The environmental magazine *Down to Earth*, in a feature story capturing scholars' and activists' opinions on the effect of the Sarna Code, cites one JMM politician who thinks that the Census should be understood for what it is—a basis for policymaking. If the Census data or the way it is interpreted by the officials suggests that there are no Adivasis left in an area (for example because they became identified as Hindu) the constitutional safeguards would lose their grip or be paid less and less attention (Kukreti 2020a). Opposing this view of Christian Adivasis exploiting their minority status, it is argued by Religion Unplugged that:

> In India, religious identity is required for all kinds of legal paperwork, from home leases to bank loans to marriages, and religion can affect what laws apply to you. Tribals can benefit from various government programs if they identify as Hindu or Other, but those benefits are removed if they convert to Christianity or Islam. (Niazi 2020)

The author is pointing out the discrimination against non-Hindu, and "foreign" religious communities that some (more right-leaning) state governments in India exercise, and how for Adivasi being labelled as Hindu could be beneficial, in which ways specifically, the author does not

state. While right-wing authors criticise regional parties and activists for interfering with 'religious' issues even though they are 'secular entities' (*Hindu Post* 2021), the "unsecular" character of the Census is pointed out by liberal authors for it is effectively refusing Adivasis to exercise their constitutional right to religious freedom (Kumar 2021). This religious freedom is ambivalent and used by both sides of the discussion alike as the BJP's Religious Freedom Act 2017 demonstrates. The act was conceived to "safeguard" Adivasi culture and religion against forced conversion in Jharkhand. However, it has been criticised by scholars and activists for limiting and even brutally punishing religious self-determination of religious minorities and taking Hindu proselytization out of the equation.

By the more liberal and pro-Adivasi, pro-Sarna Code sources, it is often argued that Adivasis are practically forced to put down their religion as Hindu by the census officials and other authorities (Markam 2019). Activist Voices render it undemocratic to refuse a community so large in number to identify with their faith (Niazi 2020); Adivasi as a community make up more than 26 per cent of Jharkhand's population, Sarna Adivasis according to the 2011 census, make up 13 per cent (Census 2011 n. d.). While theorising the structuring elements of political action, the constitution is setting the frame for social welfare in the nation-state, it is inevitable to talk about power relations: While, of course, the law frames the way Adivasis are treated, enacting the intent of the constitutional assembly in providing safeguards to the weaker and historically depressed sections of society, on the other hand, how the law is put into action and whether or to what extend laws are enacted or amended, such as the Census Act, 1848, does rely more on the political will and respectively of political majorities.

This being said, the article by Adivasi author Santoshi Markam and other feature articles mention how the "others"-option was removed from the Census questionnaire in 2011, just like after Indian independence the "tribal religion" category had suddenly vanished which means that it was much harder for people to have their religion put down by name or as "other".[7] The census staff, too, can exercise a considerable amount of power in that regard. Responsible for taking down the answers of people—especially in areas and communities in which literacy is very low—they might only read out the available categories (Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Jain, Buddhist, Sikh) for people to choose from. Another argument relating to the way Adivasi are "silenced" through the working principles of the Census exercise is that, as CM Soren explains, 'the tribals would not be added to the census during surveys as they

would migrate to other states for non-agricultural employment in February, when the surveys would be carried out' (Kukreti 2020b).

This "tempering" with population numbers directly influences how many provisions are granted. While it cannot be the aim of this article, to offer an evaluation of the potential effects of the Sarna Code on ST minority provisions, it becomes apparent that such arguments make an important part of the discourse. That is why it makes sense to question the actual effect of state provisions and interventions on Adivasi welfare: As scholars like Stuart Corbridge (2000) and Nicholas Jaoul (2016) have pointed out, the state's affirmative measures are questionable when it comes to benefiting the marginalised. They have in fact mostly intensified pre-existing social inequality among Adivasi communities. The result has been that the state reservations and government schemes have mostly benefited the local elites. Put simply, those Adivasi elites were able to make use of these schemes much better due to their connections and knowledge of the programs.

Anthropologist Alpa Shah (2011) has added to this argument, that on a local level the tenant descendants, were rather eager to "keep the state away" and not engage with any *sarkar* (state, authority) related institutions. Shah states that while there was no clear sense among the common people of the villages about what sarkar referred to specifically or who were the people in power, most of the villagers were certain of the exploitation exercised by the state. The knowledge of the workings of the state and the management of funds within the community is often available only to village elites who owe their education to a better standing in society, inherited land, or public office. Hence, arguments over the constitutional character of the code based on its supposed influence on minority provisions are only so conclusive. However, the symbolic impact of these smaller administrative changes is undeniable.

Secularism and religious freedom

Another question regarding the constitutionality of the Sarna Code connects to issues around secularism and "religious freedom". The topic gained popularity in Jharkhand in 2017, when the implementation of the Freedom of Religion Law, also popularly known as "anti-conversion law" had added to the conflicts between Sarna and Christian Adivasis (Xaxa 2017). This BJP law suggests that Christians are posing a great threat to Sarna (and Hindu) Adivasi communities. Hence, to some Sarna has been presented as a mere strategy of buffering Christian aggression and oppression.

Looking more closely at accounts capturing Hindutva Voices, the questionable intentions behind Sarna have mostly been attributed to non-Adivasis and non-Sarna groups, infiltrating the easy-to-manipulate Adivasi communities. "Christian forces" are represented as the main agents acting behind the scenes, "invading" Hindu society (which Adivasi are allegedly part of). A common argument from the Hindutva perspective is that the church is exercising power over the 'poor' (*Hindustan Times* 2019) and defenceless "tribals" aiming at division to increase their own influence. The RSS and other right-wing forces voice 'concern over the unnatural growth of Christian population in many districts of the nation' (*The Times of India* 2015) because 'the demand [of the Sarna Code] has been pushed by the Church and Christian missionaries silently from behind' (*OpIndia* 2020).

According to OpIndia, Christian tribals are the main force opposing "tribal" development as well as propagating anti-Hindu sentiments, aiming at harming the nation. The (Christian) intentions behind "imposing" its divisive ideology on tribes and "misleading" them into demanding a separate religion from Hinduism, when in fact Hindutva applies to tribals means 'breaking India' (Vaidya 2021). The church is depicted as so influential that, according to BJP author Tuhin Sinha, Hemant Soren 'acted at the behest of the conversion bogey' by passing the Sarna Code resolution (Sinha 2021). By depicting Adivasis and the state government, as blindly acting under the influence of the Christians, Adivasis turn into merely a tool, unconscious or unknowing, passive actors. At best, they might be perceived as opportunistic, by blindly accepting the Christian way for their own good. This perception of Adivasis is achieved mostly through a language of fear ("concerned", "unnatural growth", "impose" etc.).

Some Politicians' Voices articles in ETV Bharat and News18 have stressed instead how the Adivasi demand for a Sarna Code is an act of resistance against the churches' missionary activities. Adivasis, through demanding their own religious category, are therefore resisting, and opposing Christian dominance, using their democratic right as citizens to protest and assert their religious freedom. While reportedly, 'Christian dominance is so widespread that the Jharkhand state has the highest seat of Church and nearly 4 per cent population comprising mostly tribal communities are Christians […]' (Mishra 2020), Sarna is presented as the central tool to stop the 'mass conversion' (*Op India* 2020; *ETV Bharat* 2020a).

Here, what might seem like an account of agentive action against Christian oppression, is then somewhat discarded through the concluding remark that 'the Sarna Dharma Code is being demanded only to

trick the tribals' (*ETV Bharat* 2020a). This statement implies that Adivasi, do not possess the cognitive, emotional, or social capacities to choose for themselves their spiritual or religious confession, so they might easily be "tricked" into following either religion. With Sarna being expressed in the Politicians' Voices and Hindutva Voices articles alike as a mere reaction to or outcome of the danger that "Christian forces" pose to Adivasis, the argument follows that they need some sort of protection. This protection somewhat is disguised in the Sarna demand or rather is mediated by other, more potent agents who know what is "good" for these communities.

Such narratives on protective measures remind one of policies like the Religious Freedom Act of 2017. BJP speaker Tuhin Sinha for instance stated that 'once Sarna becomes a separate religious code, for the followers of the Sarna faith who believe in praying to nature, Christian missionaries will escape Hindu scrutiny in poaching this population […]' (Sinha 2021). It appears the BJP government had also planned to 'end reservation for converted tribals' to support 'the traditional nature-worshipping Sarna tribals' who are being 'attacked' by Christians (*Hindustan Times* 2019). One incident prominently referred to in the media, stressing Christian attacks on Adivasis, is a conflict which arose in 2013, when 'a dark-complexioned Mother Mary carrying infant Jesus Christ in a sling, just as tribal women do in a white Sari with a red border, on which the followers of Sarna (animist) Dharm have a reservation' (Kumar 2014) was put up in a village near Ranchi, provoking protest movements by Sarna Adivasis (Srivastava 2013).

In the same way, it is difficult how the terms "Christian tribals" and "missionaries" are often used synonymously by the Hindutva- and Politicians' Voices-articles, it is striking how there is little differentiation in the way Adivasi agents and groups are addressed. One exception is the Sarna "tribal religious leader", also called Dharamguru, Bandhan Tigga. Tigga agrees with the view that Christians are pursuing a specific conversion strategy and that a Mary statue in a white and red sari is proving it (Kumar 2014). Tigga concludes in an ETV Bharat interview that Sarna will 'definitely stop' the conversion problem (*ETV Bharat* 2020a). This representation due to 'mass conversions' (*OpIndia* 2020), migration, or 'mental immaturity' (Ranjan 2020)[8] suggests a rather inevitable marginalisation and voicelessness of the Adivasi population.

One article by the right-leaning news website OpIndia mentioned earlier contrasts this view by suggesting that many Christian Adivasis in the villages were engaging in a process of "reconverting" to the "traditional" Sarna religion. It confuses "tribal activists" with the VKA (an RSS-affiliate social organisation). Those ceremonies are said to involve the

washing of the converts' feet and the application of *sindoor* (vermillion cosmetic powder) to the Adivasi women who were reconverting. While this offers the illusion of an act of Adivasi religious agency, the article makes Sarna a Hindu phenomenon. The ghar wapsi ceremonies, sometimes also called *shuddhi* or "purification ceremonies" (van der Veer 1994, 210), have historically been performed by the Arya Samaj[9] and recently by Hindu Right movements like the RSS (Sabhlok 2020) to '"reclaim the souls" of Christian *Adivasis* who, through conversion, had "strayed" from the Hindu fold' (Froerer 2018, 8). Even in other states, like Madhya Pradesh (MP), the Sarna Code demand has provoked the idea of providing education on "tribal" culture. The MP Ministry for Culture and Tourism financed a large campaign for performing Ram Leelas[10] in Adivasi areas 'to inform them about the "influence" of Lord Ram in their lives' and how 'Shabri, a tribal sadhvi, and Kevat, a tribal who helped Lord Ram to cross river Ganga' so as to prove an Adivasi-Hindu unity, or the 'tribal's Hindu past' (Tomar 2021). Today, in reverse, Hindus are seen to help the tribals.

As far as RSS joint general secretary Manmohan Vaidya is concerned, some tribes are conscious of their cultural heritage in a good way because '[they] have understood that this barter with the Christian missionaries may […] lead to a complete disappearance and annihilation of the rich, faith-based realisations of their ancestors' (Vaidya 2021) and that Hinduism will be the ultimate solution to this existential threat. While Vaidya does not specify who these "enlightened" Adivasis are, it becomes clear that a language of fear is used as an emotive discursive strategy. Sarna is not merely a threat to the "tribal people" and their traditions but to *Bharat* (India) and Hindu society. This threat has been termed "Break-India Forces" (or Breaking India Forces)[11] by right-wing thinkers.

The above arguments debating issues around secularism and religious freedom, mostly seem to represent the political agendas of different parties and rarely portray the idea of individual choice. The example of Madhya Pradesh shows the two-faced ideal of secularism: The BJP-led ministry spends seven million Indian rupees on the "research" of an Adivasi history of lord Ram and popularising this narrative, but also stresses how Adivasi culture needs "protection" from conversion. While some Activist voices mourn the unfreedom of being forced to choose either Christian or Hindu as the official religious label, the JMM's efforts to secure representational rights and state benefits through the Sarna Code, might be seen as an inadequate response to the religious and identity political implications. Hindutva and political debates are very prominently debating the secular and democratic character of Sarna but,

by doing so, are reducing Adivasi intentionality to a strategy for securing "double benefits". While some level of agentive behaviour might be conceived in the way "tribals" are 'realis[ing] that their conversion [to Christianity] was a mistake' (*OpIndia* 2021) and "reconverting" to Sarnaism, such accounts of Sarna Shuddhi, as I have shown, only demonstrate Hindu proselytising practices. According to important scholars in the field of Adivasi politics, Virginius Xaxa and Jagannath Ambagudia (2021), religion and ethnicity/kinship are the number one factors influencing the voting behaviour of the people, not so much, as one may believe, anti-dispossession movements.

It has been argued that the BJP profits from communal polarisation between the Sarna and Christian Adivasi which might be concluded from the fact that the party has a larger voter base among Sarna Adivasis living in areas where a stronger communal polarisation between Sarna and Christian Adivasis has been documented (ibid.). Even less politically biased sources have stressed the political effect of the Sarna Code and the danger of proselytization that Adivasi communities face. While it might be the nature of news-selling, to serve stereotypes by drawing a picture of the villain and the victim, also making it "easier" to sympathise with the Adivasi under "attack", this hardly leaves room for a perception of Adivasis as individualistic and conscious decision-makers or proactive agents. Especially the spiritual aspect of Sarna is underrepresented by constantly linking Sarna identity to the effects it has on Adivasi political representation.

Sarna as anti-Hinduisation movement

It has become apparent in these numerous examples how Adivasi intentionality is often linked to the politics of the Hindu Right. BJP and RSS thus become major stakeholders even in articles focusing on Activist Voices, as will be shown in the following. That is because many activists stress the meaning of Sarna as a defence against Hinduisation politics.

However, one article suggests that Sarna might be regarded as an "RSS-sponsored" movement, taking a dig at Bandhan Tigga, the Sarna Dharamguru, or tribal/ religious leader of the "Sarna tribe". In the GLN article, it is stated that Tigga, the founder of the movement, is an affiliate of the RSS. He problematises the name Sarna for it is not actually in the vocabulary of any of the 32 Adivasi languages in Jharkhand. Instead, it is a Hindi term. The movement for the author is aimed towards 'creat[ing] confusion amongst the tribals about their religion, so that they are not able to unite under one platform' (Kumar 2020). The RSS is represented as infiltrating even activist movements such as

the demand for a "united tribal religion code", to keep the numbers of people associating with minority religions low. The argument of Hindutva as the driving force behind the Sarna Code negates Adivasi agency in important aspects.

Nonetheless, the GLN-author Vishad Kumar refers to the Sarna movement in a way that recognises its history, an important way of representing the regional and national relevance of the movement and the Adivasis claims. The national demand for Adi-Dharma, popular in the 1980s, laid the foundation for Sarna but was ignored by the Central Government up until the Dharamguru Bandhan Tigga allegedly claimed the movement for himself and coined the "No Sarna, No Census"-slogan. The demand was proceeded by many others. This suggests the urgency in the demand on a national level, which Adivasi activist and writer Aakash Poyam confirms as well (Poyam 2020). When the demand for a separate religion was finally taken more seriously by the Hindu nationalists, Sarna became adopted as a political aim by the BJP as the party had realised its potential for their political agenda. The insinuation of Sarna being part of a Hindu nationalist conspiracy is not explicitly taken forward, however, it is implied by these accounts that Sarna is taken advantage of by Hindutva forces which are trying to Hinduise or "misguide" the Sarna Adivasis:

> Meanwhile, Seva Bharati, an RSS-affiliated organization, has been trying to establish Hindu rites and rituals in tribal-dominated areas under the banners of Vanvasi Kalyan Kendra [VKK] and Vanbandhu Parishad. (Kumar 2020)

Adivasi are "fooled" by Hindu nationalists working under the cloak of charity, welfare, and non-profit organisations, and whose ideas have even found their way into the inner circles of Adivasi-activist movements. Right-wing cultural organisations like the above-mentioned VKA according to political scholar Sujit Kumar are the major foundation of these schemes and help the BJP gain close knowledge of their Adivasi voters' topics (Kumar 2018). Hindu Adivasi voters benefit most from the right-wing organisations' strategies which help the RSS gain influence and as early as the 1990s and early 2000s, the RSS had used this influence to stir up an existing local conflict between Christian and non-Christian Adivasis. Put this way, the strengthening of the Sarna movement can be interpreted as a product or effect of Hindu Right strategies and their divisional politics, increasing the incitement against Christians and Muslims, hence "winning over" Adivasis.

A different theory is put forward by Gond Adivasi activist Aakash Poyam. According to him, the Sarna movement had been initiated in the 1970s by Santhal leader Besnao Murmu, as an anti-Hindu movement in

Jharkhand but it was not the first movement to realize that 'how being classed as "Hindu" in the census posed a threat to their culture and identity […]' (Poyam 2020). The claim for religious autonomy Poyam traces back to a Koitur religious reform movement in the 1930s that built strong religious links to the Koya Punem religion. Later, in the early 2000s, an Adivasi intellectual named Ramdayal Munda proposed a pan-Adivasi religious asserting their indigenous status, which was to be called Adi-Dharam and replace the "others"-category in the Census, returning to the claim of a common root in the beliefs of the indigenous people of India. Only after Adi-Dharam failed, did the Sarna Code-demand move from being a regional claim to mobilizing Adivasis nationally.

More commonly referred to by the Activist Voices articles is the "traditional right" of Adivasi culture and religion. Some accounts introduce Sarna as an "ancient" religion or traditional faith of Adivasis, in a way that stresses their pre-Aryan identity, and relies on the claim that Adivasis are an ethnic group distinct from Hindus as a way of legitimising Adivasi claims for political autonomy. Sarna conceptualised as a pre-Hindu religion seems to be one of the most important arguments in defending Adivasi culture as unique and distinct from Hinduism in many ways:

> The scholar Samar Bosu Mullick writes, "Adi-dharam, the original belief system, as we know it today may not be the earliest but certainly one of the oldest systems of belief still in practice in its various forms and different levels of continuity and transformation." Subsuming Adivasi belief in the "other" category erodes their distinct identity. (Tank 2021)

On the one hand, the aspect of worshipping nature, the river, the forests, and the trees is described as essential to Adivasi culture, representing Adivasi intentionality as grounded in re-establishing a pure way of practising their culture. On the other hand, this same narrative has been utilised by Hindu nationalists, asking 'Does Hinduism not worship nature?' (Sinha 2021), once again calling into question the intention behind Sarna. For instance, through remarking on the Sun god Surya Dev, the holy river Ganges, several festivals celebrating the earth and the water, plants like peepal and tulsi, BJP-author Tuhin Sinha tries to prove the "Hindu essence" in all Adivasi culture. Drawing on his own experience, the author states that he has witnessed 'Adivasi devotion for Lord Shiva [and] […] the same devotion in Adivasis for Deori Mata, (a form of Maa Durga) whose temple on the Jamshedpur-Ranchi highway became world famous after Indian cricketer M.S. Dhoni's visits.' (ibid.)

The difference between Sarnaism and Hinduism then is pointed out by some Activist Voices articles, stating that for Sarna Adivasis the meaning of the forest, certain plants, and deities is different and, also, that '[a]ccording to the tribal ethos, community is part of an ecosystem and not the master of it. The tribal religion is different from Hinduism as it does not have a figure of god' (Kukreti 2020a). Experts on Adivasi issues (mostly cited in Activist Voices articles) also state that Sarnaism, as opposed to Hinduism, does not worship idols, or that 'most of the rituals are performed by women only.' Also 'tribals offer non-vegetarian food and liquor to god and goddess, but in the Sanatan Dharm, non-vegetarian food and liquor are consumed by demons only' (Tomar 2021).

The Adivasi activists Poyam and Santoshi Markam on the other hand, focus more on the way that a Hinduization threat is really about the power exercised through enumerating or labelling Adivasi as Hindus. Markam's article (2019) shows how Adivasis are forced to opt for other religions and captures activists' voices arguing that 'the removal of the "Aboriginal" option is an attempt by the government to make them [Adivasis] "religious slaves"' (Markam 2019). Calling back to mind the post-colonialist critique of the census as a colonial tool, this is exactly the danger of the enumeration of identities—that they might be used for political purposes but contradict lived experiences and realities. The political scholar Sujit Kumar points out how Sarna becomes ever more important due to Hindutva politics which 'has provoked the ancient Adivasi religion Sarna to enter into conflict with the adivasis converted to Christianity and revive itself against "proselytizing" Christian organisations' (Kumar 2018, 111). According to Kumar, Sarna assertion became important at a point where Hindu nationalists turned to a "new agenda" regarding Adivasi and instead of referring to Adivasis' "backward Hindu" identity tended to stress the differences between Christians and Sarnas. Kumar also believes that '[a]midst this conflict, the Hindu organisations are gaining sympathy from the Sarna Dharamgurus for the support provided to the latter by the former' which, reportedly has resulted in a 'positive approach of the Raghubar Das government [2014-19] towards the proposal to make Sarna as the only admissible religion for Adivasis to avail reservation benefits in state jobs' (Kumar 2018, 111).

Again, Sarna serves as a tool for "winning over" tribal voters, adding to a view that negates Adivasis' position as political or cultural agents. However, political alignment does not account for a religious sense of belonging or beliefs—even though the point is often made that a certain cultural assimilation can be assumed. Such assimilation to a more Hindu

cultural/political sphere is often perceived as "derogatory" when Adivasi align with the BJP. While it is true that some Adivasis vote for the BJP or follow certain Hindu practices, this, as Kumar states, is mainly right for an Adivasi middle class which, due to their "close proximity" in everyday interaction with Hindus has started to incorporate some Hindu rituals into their own culture—without necessarily attributing the same religious meaning to it. Aspects of such Hinduisation in daily practice are not an account of missing Adivasi intentionality or consciousness regarding culture, beliefs, or moral convictions.

It is more about the meaning and aspirations attributed to a certain action, or the conscious reflection of certain doing that will determine agentive character. It would be wrong to equate a political alignment with spiritual convictions and the other way around. But this is of course catered by a political discourse that is shaped mainly by identity politics and the prevailing Hindu nationalist politics. If we accept Sarna as both, a religious and a political space where Adivasi identity is negotiated, we can move away from a representation of Adivasis as the oppressed. Constantly stressing the danger of their being "taken over" by another religious group assumes their unconsciousness and missing agentive capacities. Hence the call for "preserving" Adivasi culture carries the danger of undermining Adivasi cultural 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2004).

Sarna as aspirational practice

Sarna and eco-nationalism

After having discussed how Sarna has gained importance as a political or ideological tool and predominantly so by non-Adivasi protagonists, in this final section, I seek to portray in more detail Activists' and academia's arguments regarding Sarna. Surely, Sarna as a religious and political movement exists beyond the dichotomy of resistance to or assimilation by an "outside" danger.

> The ongoing demand is yet another act of resistance in the tribal history of Jharkhand, which is full of stories of rebellion. We have been worshipping nature before the ideology of religion existed […] This is the time we come forward and ask for our rights and recognition before our history and culture becomes extinct. (Tank 2021)

Sarna resonates with the idea of Jharkhand as a "tribal state". Religious environmentalism as a form of tribal activism in Jharkhand therefore might be understood as a new parameter for reclaiming a Jharkhandi tribal identity. Sarna has been defined by activists, not only

as an ancient but spiritual connection to nature. It seems that this claim has expanded, or rather specified nature as the concrete physical space of the sacred groves in Chhota Nagpur. Activists', politicians', and scholars' voices stress Sarna as an ancient tradition of nature worship that connects to the history of the Jharkhand state and Adivasi identity. C. M. Soren states that 'the rationale behind the Sarna Code resolution is to fulfil the purpose for which Jharkhand was created in 2000' (Mishra 2020). Sarna Code does not only protect tribal rights but the tribal state of Jharkhand, a space in which Adivasis live protected and as equal communities. This is manifested in the state's slogan "*Jal-Jungle-Jameen*" ("Water, Forest, Land").

We can see that through Sarna, the indigenous rights to land, forests, and natural resources are attributed to a spiritual but also special dimension. However, this mostly re-enforces older claims of the Jharkhand movement, of an Adivasi regional pride and indigenous belonging. Geographical belonging as enshrined in sacred groves is defended on spiritual grounds because it is argued that Sarna inhibits the ancestral spirits, which is why to exercise their faith Adivasis are tied to their ancestral forests. This view is not only oriented towards the past (ancestors) but creates a rather static view of these communities.

Some articles are mainly reporting on the protests in Delhi on 15 March 2021, organised by the above-mentioned National Adivasi Indigenous Coordination Committee. Here, different Adivasi opinions are voiced, pointing to various (activists') demands behind Sarna. While the voices of individual Adivasi and different groups are captured, their intentionality often is directed towards preserving "traditional identity" and "customs". Personal concerns of Adivasis regarding the consequences of the recognition of their religious identity are rarely included. These accounts tend to report on and stress the traditional rights of Adivasis, which goes hand in hand with problematising migration. This is a particularly popular argument voiced by JMM agents. The argument draws on an Adivasi-diku-dichotomy, also presenting the (seasonal) out-migration of Adivasi from Jharkhand as particularly dangerous (*ETV Bharat* 2020c).

Anthropologist Alpa Shah (2010, 134), however, remarks how this view also leads to moralising arguments around Adivasi cultural and spiritual identity because tends to negate their free choice to migrate. Local and regional politicians or activists profit from this narrative because their voters are predominantly Adivasi. They fear that if the proportion of Adivasis in the state becomes weaker they might lose electoral support (voters and funding).

Migration to other states in India threatens the image of the rich and glorious ecological tradition of Adivasi life as being rooted in the villages of Jharkhand and undermines the rationale of the new state. […] Jharkhand's Adivasis are therefore the subjects of policies and strategies aimed at keeping them incarcerated (ibid., 138).

The history of the Hos, Mundas, and Oraons of Jharkhand, like many other Adivasi communities in India, is often filled with pride for an identity as migrating societies. But as far as the politicians' or activists' narratives in the media are concerned, migration is the fate of the victims, Adivasis who are subjected to dispossession, oppression, poverty, and land alienation, rarely are (seasonal) migrants perceived popularly as choosing a lifestyle that entails migration. For example, as Shah has shown, some religious practices of ancestral worship involve migrational aspects, "moving" from forest to forest; Munda Adivasis, for instance, move their ancestors' spirits from one village's stone burial grounds to stones erected on their new land.

Nonetheless, the forced colonial migration cannot be excluded in this view. Shah stresses too the high extend of Adivasi out-migration from the Chotanagpur region during the colonial era amounting to one-third of area’s Adivasi population being displaced to work in tea plantations and railway and construction projects. And even today, it is mostly the rural Adivasi population who see themselves forced to migrate for labour, often seasonally. While arguably, migration is very problematic in the light of exploitation of labour in a system of capitalist production or Adivasi people having to flee from the effects of deforestation or drought, there are other reasons for Adivasis to migrate (ibid., 140). Family disputes, social pressure, individual and/or financial reasons, and language barriers, might all be reasons for Adivasis to migrate either seasonally or for longer periods to a different area, where they can also find work, but these individual motives are mostly ignored by the activists (ibid., 143).

This, of course, is not to undermine the fact that often Adivasi labourers, especially women, are exploited in the mines and kilns. But Shah makes a strong point from an agency perspective in remarking how individual stories "matter" in presenting their real "intentions" and aspirations, even though they might not easily serve a political narrative aiming to unite Adivasi voices and rights. Shah has criticised that the authenticity of indigenous movements is often achieved by "tying" Adivasis to their land, however, such localised spirituality or "eco-incarceration", as Shah calls it, is deeply unjust. Claims or views tying Adivasi identity to "their land" are inclined to prevent social change and keep in place local hierarchies, under which the most marginalised

continue to suffer the most. Also, the desire of Adivasi people to be attached to their land has become a moral and spiritual imperative, leading to the question of whether Adivasi would lose their "identity" in case they "chose" to move or to identify with another religion and still assert their Adivasi or indigenous identity.

Sarna therefore also carries the danger of perpetuating the idea of Adivasis as agriculturalists, rural, backward, peasant people. What Chandra (2013b) might call part of a 'primitivist ideology,' in which 'protection [does] not simply mean defending the economic rights […] but defending imagined aboriginal ways of life in a modern age' (139), Shah has called the danger of indigeneity, referring to a global or urbanist, middle-class imagery of Adivasi "embeddedness in the land". It is particularly evident in the (new) Jharkhand movement, with its claims on pre-Aryan cultural and spiritual rootedness in the land. This is also evident in the media discourse; how Sarna is part of a reimagined Jharkhand movement, entailing Adivasi spirituality as rooted in their "original land". Even though there are those activists who do not consider Sarna first as 'an assertion of an ecological identity [but as] an old demand to assert tribal identity. For a tribal population that continues to follow their own culture and religion […]' (Kukreti 2020a) the latter argument from an agency point of view might be criticized for it locates Adivasi intentionality in the past.

Even before the success of the Sarna Code debate in mainstream politics, scholars have taken Sarna as an example for criticising an activism that perpetuates inequalities among the Adivasi, mainly because a small, (Christian) urban-educated Adivasi elite[12] is leading the debate and speaking for the marginalised people. After Jharkhand's independence from Bihar, the Jharkhandi activists had mourned the fact that independence had been achieved through a diku government (the BJP) and by undermining the true purpose of the state. After all, an intensification of communal religious consciousness might benefit the opposite cause and instead, add to a rhetoric in which religious identity constitutes access to resources and rights. Relating to Shah's argument, if the meaning and purposes are inflicted on Adivasi and stand in their way to "choose freely" the purposes and meanings of their practices, their agency, especially their agency as individuals, is negated. Such has mostly been the case, even with arguments focusing on Activist Voices, because the aspirational character of Sarna, cannot be found in romanticised "tribal pasts".

Sarna may also be perceived as a subversive strategy for Adivasi communities to "cope" with the religious-nationalist discourse of the past twenty to thirty years (Shah 2007). But rather than simply

"adapting" to this Hindutva discourse, Adivasis have started negotiating and mediating the requirements posed by the political discourse. For example, they mediate how religious or "pure", "good citizens" or good members of a community while not getting evicted from their homes for purposes of development or how they will not be forced to send their kids to schools where they don't learn their ancestral languages, etc. This way, they are not simply resisting political power but aspiring cultural spaces as the following example shows.

Sarna as eco-feminism

Despite the large focus on essentialising arguments in identity political polemics, Sarna can also be found to add to decolonising discourses on Adivasi movements and agency. Statements by politicians like Hemant Soren have also stressed Adivasis' crucial role in protecting nature and the environment: 'the entire country was worried over rising pollution levels and in such a scenario the religion of the tribals aimed to protect the environment' (*ETV Bharat* 2020c). While of course, Sarna carries the danger of compromising diversity among the Adivasi communities, it also employs strategies of creating new and aspirational spaces by using the global (indigenous) environmentalist discourse that helps present Adivasis as a community of the future. A unified religious identity has therefore attributed the meaning of preventing climate change and working towards a more sustainable future, for India, and from a global perspective, too:

> Sarna Dharam can teach a lot to the world facing problems, such as pollution and environmental degradation, as it is all about worshipping nature, forests, and mountains. The resolution has resurrected the debate over whether tribal religion is a distinct ecological way of life or just a belief system. It is often argued that tribal religious belief is an ecological expression of their existence that maintains an intimate relationship with nature. (Kukreti 2020a)

It is important to point out just how the ambiguity surrounding the political, religious, and individual intentionality regarding Sarna shows a (proactive) negotiation is taking place. Not only do Adivasi negotiate their rights as citizens of India, and as a religious minority without calling into question the authority of the Indian constitution, but they are also negotiating traditional and new forms of their religion—as the anthropologist Radhika Borde (2019) tries to show in her writing of the Sarna movement as a feminist and eco-religious movement. While Sarna has been known for over thirty years and is mainly practised by Oraon and Munda Adivasis in Jharkhand, Borde shows how Sarna is reinvented by the women of the villages that used to practice the Sarna religion. Borde

acknowledges the implications of Sarna in the current mainstream political debates but shows how it might primarily be understood as a spiritual and emancipatory "movement" of women. Sarna empowers women to claim new roles, not only in the village community but even in the national sit-in protests in New Delhi which were held in demand of a Census Code for Adivasis.

Women, according to Borde, claim their agency through religious practices which they are moulding themselves out of traditional forms of worship. They relive the old tradition of Sarna Prathana Sabhas, which involves a ceremony of worship which is held every Thursday. Prayers and hymns are chanted to Dharmesh (Oraon sky-god) and Sarna Mata, the sal tree is circumambulated by the worshippers, rice grains and incense are offered, women bring water and pour it on the tree, women also plant shorea robusta (sal) trees as they are considered auspicious plants. 'Spontaneous and often mass possession is commonly witnessed during the ceremonies' (ibid., 5) and mainly women are possessed by the goddess. Next to or because of this spiritual bond with the gods and nature, women build self-confidence, through a new sense of community among the women and girls they feel empowered to more actively engage in the social realm.

In village religious ceremonies known as Sarna Prathana Sabhas, to which women had before been prohibited due to the belief that they were capable of black magic (witchcraft), these women and girls were able to convince the community that their taking part was beneficial to society and instead a form of white magic. Additionally, women become more active in the village's political life and conducted welfare projects including agricultural development, cottage industry development, the installation of common stoves, and a successful mushroom cultivation program. Many of these welfare projects target women specifically, and indeed Adivasi women have added to their incomes by participating in these projects (ibid., 8).

Through the regular and active participation in Sarna rituals, a new social identity has been established among the women whom Borde has accompanied. They have started experiencing and creating a sense of community that goes so far as standing together against sexual offences by family members and the abusive consumption of alcohol. Borde (ibid.) also speaks of a 'new authority' that is 'conferred onto' them through the possession experience by the goddess Sarna Mata which results in their capacity to speak up in front of the village community, for instance. They receive a greater share of respect also due to their new spiritual role. On a local level, women's (individual) engagement in Sarna spiritual practice has allowed them to change the dynamics of domestic

relationships, and their role in the village community. Through indentifying with increasingly popular discursive ideals of environmental protection, the movement receives legitimisation and authority, especially on an international scale and therefore is connecting to a narrative of empowerment in indigeneity e.g., the conceptualisation of indigenous peoples as protectors of the earth.

This is an example of how Adivasi spiritual praxis is presented as aspirational. In associating with global activist themes, Adivasi culture is not simply tradition anymore but a way of imagining a more sustainable and environmentally friendly future. Still, intentions of agents on a smaller, even private scale, are recognised if we consider Borde's example because individual women feel empowered to speak up whether it be during a national protest or in their households.

In this recent example of the spiritual engagement of Adivasi women in Sarna, an analytic focus on the processivity and experience of religious and cultural expression is presented as an agentive strategy. The Adivasi "capacity to aspire" thus is not confined to the margins of some imagined past of their native land, customs, and religious praxis, but is instead ruled by a changing relationship of the self and the community and re-imagining the spaces that might be claimed through communal, cultural resources or the appropriation of certain narratives like that on indigeneity and women's rights. What is missing in Borde's like many other accounts, however, is the individual scale on which decisions are made and the multiplicity of intentionality influencing these local, regional, national, or trans-regional modes of assertion.

Concluding remarks: Decolonizing Adivasi religious agency

I have started by pointing out how colonial epistemic fault lines have continued to shape the relationship between Adivasis and the state and added to essentialising views on the primitive religious and cultural identity of Adivasi communities. The case of the Sarna Dharam Code shows how mostly non-Adivasi stakeholders are presented as agents in the debate—at least as far as English-speaking contributions are concerned. The Sarna Code is mostly described as a tool of identity politics and considering the Census as an important basis for policymaking in India, Sarna has been used as a marker of identity by various agents. I have shown that, in the medial debate, the usage of Sarna entails opposing ideas on Adivasi agency. By promoting *and* refuting Sarna Dharam, the BJP and Hindu Right claim to protect Adivasis from Christian proselytization or regional parties like the JMM. In turn, the JMM, Adivasi politicians and activists call for the implemen-

tation of the Sarna Code in order to protect Adivasis from Hindu paternalism. An Adivasi perspective is discouraged in both cases, through enforcing dichotomies and reducing the scope of Adivasi agency to their defence against or victimhood to dominant ideologies. Moreover, religious aspects are often closely entangled with debates around constitutionality and secularism, however, the communities' or individuals' diverse wants and needs are rarely the subject of the debate. It has been argued how some forms of indigenous activism can negate or compromise an Adivasi capacity to act as individual and future-directed agents because representations of their cultural identity tend to "incarcerate" Adivasis in supposed traditions, customary practices, and their "true" forest lands. However, there have been other attempts to portray the Sarna religion as agentive potential for indigenous or feminist environmentalism in an aspirational, rather than tradition-bound praxis. Such re-attribution and subversion of spiritual and ecological meaning or concepts of space can hence be understood as an agentive moment.

Endnotes

[1] Some exceptions include the Tanika Sarkar's analysis of the Jitu Santal's Movement in Malda (1929-1932) and David Hardiman's prominent work on the Devi Movement in South Gujarat (1922-1923). See, for instance Guha (1985).

[2] There many different names for Adivasi religions listed in the Census table such as Sari Dharam, Adi Dharam, Tribal, Addi Bassi, Santhal, Munda etc.

[3] However, there is no data on the specific number of how many Adivasis identify as Sarna, Christian or Hindu.

[4] Sarna is the name for sacred groves only in Bihar and Jharkhand. The deities believed to protect the forests differ as well as the trees traditionally worshipped as sacred. Whereas in Jharkhand the sal tree is auspicious to the communities, in Bihar also bamboo is held sacred, in West Bengal even further plants are worshipped in a sacred grove (Krishna 2020, 12-13).

[5] Adivasi identity for the Movement's leader Jaipal Singh Muda and other intellectuals of the 1930s and 40s presented Adivasis first and foremost as 'descendants of the non-Aryan autochthones' (Dasgupta 2019, 114), claiming Adivasi as an ethnic (and homogenous) group or identity which stresses first and foremost their distinctness from non-Aryan Indian oppressors (dikus). The term Adivasi has become generally accepted as a concept to challenge hegemonic assumptions which the term "tribe" still carries as it was essentially a European concept to denote the "backward" peoples of the forest and hill areas. Adivasi was an assertion against such primitivist ideology. Until this day, Scheduled Tribes are defined as communities that show 'indication of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness with the community at large, and backwardness' (Ministry of Tribal Affairs n. d., Annual Report 2020/21).

[6] Some examples for Adivasi activist organizations and individuals supporting the claim are: Jharkhand Disom Party (a BJP-ally), Adivasi Sengel Abhiyan, Akhil Bharatiya Sarna Dharam Mandwa, Akhil Bharatiya Majhi Pargana, Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Mahila Morca, Odisha Adibasi Kalyan Mahasabha, but most of these are mentioned only once and more as a side note which is why I have decided not to elaborate further into each of these organizations, especially as most of the information available online would have been in Hindi.

[7] Unfortunately, I have not been able to verify this argument, namely, that in the 2011 Census the "others" category had been removed from the Census questionnaire. I found this claim in a few pro-Adivasi articles, but was unable to find official information about it, e.g., it is not discernible when comparing the Census 2001 and the Census 2011 data (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India n.d., C-01 APPENDIX).

[8] The "migration problem" is raised by several other political agents. Most prominently, CM Hemant Soren is quoted that: 'The most prominent reason for the drop in the numbers of tribal population is their mental immaturity' (Ranjan 2020), a problematic statement that might be considered a paternalistic approach towards Adivasi rights. However, what should be noted is that in contrast to “Dharamguru” Tigga or BJP officials, Soren does not blame the Christians for the decline in Adivasi numbers, but rather "dikus' immigration", as well as the (seasonal) emigration of Adivasis for work and, lastly, the BJP's and outsiders' resource-grab. Generally, Soren accuses the BJP government for its anti-Adivasi politics (Angad 2021).

[9] The Arya Samaj (AS) is a Hindu reform movement, founded at the end of the 1870s, propagating the "Arian faith". It had been an important factor in the formation of civil rights and national independence movements in India, while promoting Brahman values and "evangelizing" the Hindu faith, they were known as a movement for their proselytizing approach, holding ceremonies in order to "re-convert" Christians and Muslims specifically, to "bring them back" from the foreign, misleading religious path to the pure Indian, Hindu fold. For more information see Fischer-Tiné (2013).

[10] Ram Leela or Ramlila is the name for a Hindu dramatic play/storytelling/dance event usually performed during the Dashahara/Navratri festival in which stories around the important Hindu god Ram are re-enacted (Indian Culture n.d.).

[11] A term which has become popular in Hindu nationalist circles after the release of the book *Breaking India: western Interventions in Dravidian and Dalit fault lines* in 2011, authored by public intellectual Rajiv Malhotra.

[12] Historically, these activists had been Christian converts or Adivasis who in the early 20th century had profited from missionary schooling. Christians had gained influence in the Chotanagpur region by functioning as mediators between the savage tribes and the colonial administration (see e.g., van Schendel 2011). In fact, they became the main advocates for adivasi rights and, in the end, the first and some of the most important advances for Adivasi autonomy had been the result of Christian educational initiatives.

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