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The Alienation of Adivasis From Our Identity, or How I Unlearned My Hinduisation



Under the pretext of education, many Adivasis are taught that their culture, customs, language and habits are 'inferior'.

New Delhi: Gondi, one of the most ancient languages of India, is on the verge of becoming extinct. This is despite the language being the mother tongue of millions of people inhabiting the Gondwana region in Central India that includes large areas in Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra,

Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha.

The use of Gondi has become restricted to remote villages in interior forest areas. Although there has been a steady struggle to preserve the tongue from dying out, its future still seems uncertain.

I was born in a Gond family in Bastar. Growing up, I witnessed the decay of Gondi language in my own household and village. Within my family, the usage of Gondi to converse is going to stop with my parents. None of my siblings, except me, know how to speak the language.

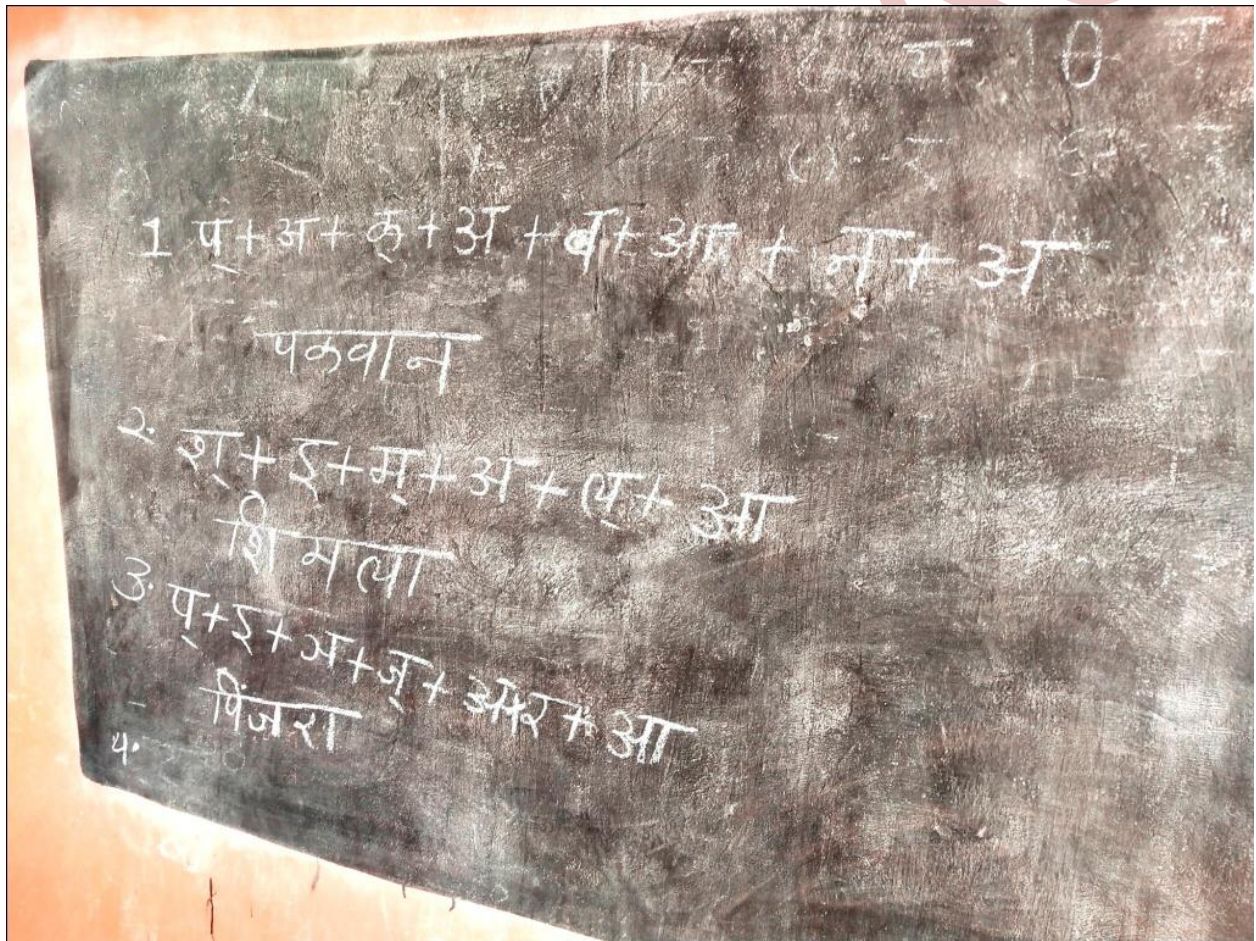
My parents knew Gondi because they did not attend school, where another language could be imposed on them.

In our childhood, my siblings and I would often converse in broken Gondi. But as we grew up and began going to schools, we became distant from our mother tongue. Now, none of us can speak it fluently.

My experience tells me that with the advent of modern education among Gondi families, our mother tongue started becoming obsolete. It is not the case with my family alone. In fact, a similar situation afflicts the entire region in which my native place is located.

Especially in schools and, to some extent, in the 'outside' society, an environment has been created where speaking Gondi is considered a sign of 'backwardness'.

Gondi speakers are looked down upon as "uncultured" or "illiterate". Because of this, many speakers begin to distance themselves from the tongue. Not only this, they even try to hide their tribal or Gondi identity.



Gondi school in Chhattisgarh

How tribal children are alienated from their identity

My early education was from a branch of the Ramakrishna Mission Ashram. As soon as we stepped into the school, the process of our alienation from our mother tongue began.

Much later, I came to know that this was the case in other mission schools as well.

Recently, I came across a press release which claimed that Adivasis are being separated from their roots at the enormous Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS), a factory of a school for indigenous students.

The educational institute, located in Odisha's capital Bhubhaneshwar, is the largest residential school for indigenous children in the world. Nearly 30,000 tribal children from across the country are enrolled there.

The school teaches indigenous students to look down upon or disrespect their history and society. It antagonises them towards their culture, lifestyle and language, forcing them to consider it a sign of backwardness, the press release claimed.

The open letter, written by a few intellectuals to the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, stated that tribal children are deprived of even their native languages and are forced to speak and study in Odia and English.

The release also claimed that the children were not allowed to celebrate their indigenous festivals and are made to celebrate Hindu festivals and worship Hindu deities.

Reading the letter, I was not surprised at all. I witnessed this first-hand in my region, where the situation is no different.

At the Ramakrishna Mission Ashram where I had studied until the primary level, it was obligatory for us to converse in Hindi. It was an unannounced rule that no one could speak in our mother tongue, even privately.

Even though students enrolled in the school included native speakers of Gondi, Maria, Halbi and Chhattisgarhi, we were not allowed to use them. If students were found chatting with each other in their mother tongue, the teachers would stop us.

We were schooled not only about the various subjects but also about the principles of the Hindu religion. The first thing we did in the morning was to visit the temple and pray. Our day ended with another trip to the temple. We had to recite a prayer before eating. Thus, our day began and ended with *mantras*.

This was completely different from our own customs and practices. So, alongside modern education, the process of

our 'Hinduisation' was systematically overseen, though we were unaware of it at the time.

I realised this years later, when I developed political consciousness.

Replacing indigenous customs

In Adivasi culture, we do not follow the practice of touching a person's feet.

Juhar was our traditional greeting for another person. We would shake hands if the other person was of the same age or touch their cheek if they were younger. But our school taught us to touch the feet of elders.

Whenever the Mission's *swami* or *maharaj* visited the school, we were made to kneel or prostrate before them. Such customs or practices were imposed upon us.

We did not think of it as 'imposition' then, because we had already been brainwashed into believing those customs were 'superior' or 'high-class'. We began internalising that the culture, customs, practices and the language we had inherited from our families were 'backward' or 'poor'.

The Ramakrishna Mission Ashram provides free education and accommodation to tribal children in the Narayanpur district of Bastar until Class XII. Especially in the Abujhmad area inhabited by the Maria tribe, their schools are the only option for locals.

In 1989, the undivided Madhya Pradesh government banned the entry of outsiders in the area after listing Maria as an endangered tribe. But after the formation of Chhattisgarh, the ban was lifted in 2009.

Maria children are taught from Class I to XII in the ashram. In those twelve years, they are cut off not only from their culture and society but their families as well. They are either not allowed to visit their villages, even during summer vacations or other festivals, or allowed only for a short duration. Under the pretext of coaching, sports and tours, they are kept engaged during the holidays as well.

By the time they graduate from school, there is very little 'tribal' left in them. Their ways change so much that they begin to detest their native villages. Indigenous food habits seem strange or unknown to them. They develop a disdain towards their own culture. They do not find any aspect of their identity - language, customs, dress or food habits - worthy of pride.

This is a direct result of the twelve years of brainwashing they are put through.

This was my personal experience too. While studying, when I visited my home during holidays, the traditions looked 'bad'. However, as I grew up and became politically aware of my identity, I was able to analyse what 'education' had transformed me into.

It would be interesting to analyse what careers Adivasi children are opting after spending 10-12 years in such schools. While most of them are employed in low-level jobs as peons, nurses or teachers, only a handful manage to become lecturers, professors or engineers.

Despite the efforts to bring mainstream education to indigenous communities in the past 30-35 years, few students have conducted research on the culture of their own community or tried to raise awareness about their identity.

Attack on cultural heritage

We keep hearing about the attack on Indian culture after the British annexed India, but the attack on the tribal culture in the name of education – which started at that time – still continues.

While there is an argument to be had about the importance of mainstream education to tribal communities, the damage done to their culture through the education being imparted to them – by the government or religious institutions – is irreparable.

With enrollment in schools, the ‘Hinduisation’ of tribal children begins by changing their names. The names given by the parents under tribal traditions are recorded in the register by affixing ‘Ram’ to them or changing them altogether.

For example, the name Chamru is changed to Chandresh or Chanduram. Bhandu is changed to Bhavesh, and Kosa to Kanhaiya.

'Ram' is added as a suffix to every name, such as Manuram, Chanuram, Santuram. The impact is so deep-seated that many legally change their names later.

Even the names of villages, rivers and mountains have been changed in the government's documents. For instance, the indigenous name of Narayanpur was Nagur. The local people still call it by that name.

Similarly, the name of Kukur river which flows through Narayanpur is *Neybered*. According to native people, the name of this river has been derived from '*nayum*' which means snake and '*bered*' for river, but '*Neyu*' also means dog in Gondi. However, the river is now called Kukur, just like Kodanar was changed to Kondagaon (*Koda* means horse).

In schools, we were also taught that the culture of our tribal society is a '*rakshas*' or demonic culture. We were taught that belief in Hindu deities is superior to our tribal, natural beliefs. They reasoned that tribals are carnivores and eating meat is a demonic practice. We were taught that since the deities of tribals needed sacrifices of animals like chickens, goats, pigs, and buffaloes, they were not gods but demons.

During my school years, it was ingrained in my mind that our culture must be very lowly. I would argue with our parents to try and convince them that the customs we follow were evil.



Followers of Sarnaism worshipping their deities. Many Gonds follow Sarnaism

The impact of this brainwashing in schools was so great that both my brothers and I had given up eating meat. Believing the Hindu deities to be superior, we started

worshipping them and hanging their images on the walls of our home.

I have changed with time, but my brothers have not. They never found an opportunity or atmosphere that allowed them to be disillusioned about the years of brainwashing.

The diversity of our country is glorified in schools, but they fail to teach respect for all cultures or how to treat everyone as equal. Even today, we are reminded at every step, even if obliquely, that Hindu customs and practices are superior and a mark of culture, while all others are inferior.

I am referring to Hindu customs because it is the prevalent culture in our vicinity. However, in other parts of the country, like Jharkhand or the Northeast, the order of Christianisation must almost be similar.

Celebration of Hindu religions

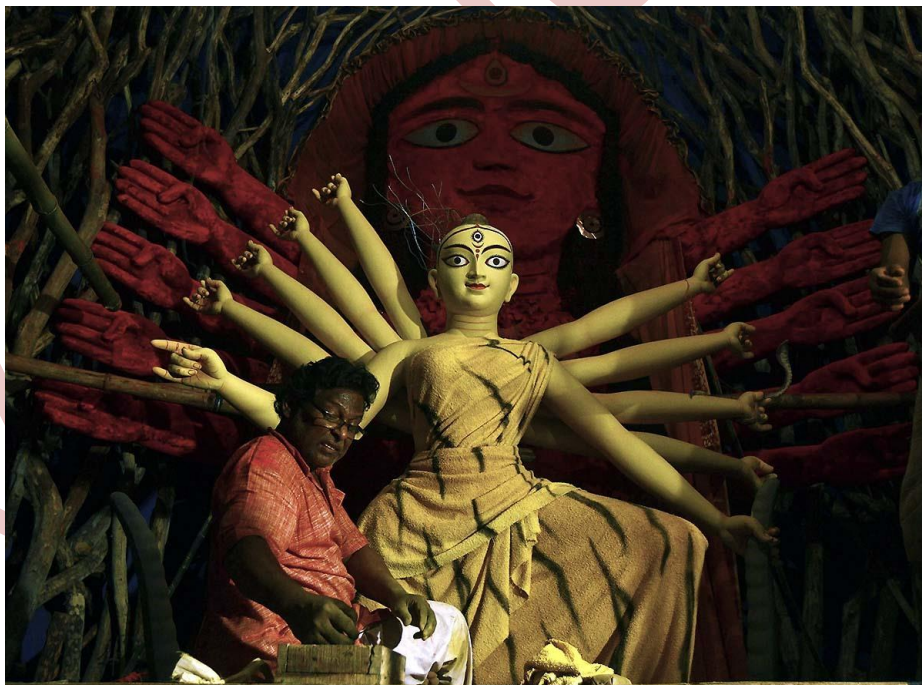
In addition to schools being the vehicles of Hinduisation, the Gayatri *math* was also celebrated in our village in my childhood. I don't remember when or how the math and its people entered our village or our region.

There used to be a community hall in our village which was earlier called Ghotul. Once a week, the Ramayana was recited there and mythological tales were narrated. My grandmother would take us there.

Later, Ganesh Chaturthi began to be celebrated with much pomp and show. Festivities were also organised for a nine-day period during the Durga Puja.

Before the Durga Puja festival came into vogue, a festival called Jagar was celebrated in our village. As part of this festival, some paddy plants were brought to the Ghotul from the field amid fanfare. For nine days, women, young people, and children of the village would gather there each day to sing, dance, play games and narrate stories. On the ninth day, the plants were poured into a pond.

With the installation of a Durga idol, the festival now only exists in our memories.



A Durga idol. Representative image

There was a custom of celebrating Dussehra with great pomp in our village for generations, as representatives from the village as well as our family used to visit the world-renowned Bastar Dussehra. Our grandfather received a hero's welcome as a representative in the Jagdalpur Dussehra. But things changed with time.

Now, Ramleela is organised in our neighbourhood and the burning of Ravan's idol takes place, which never happened before.

The deities of tribals have now been completely replaced by Hindu gods and goddesses. In many tribal areas, Hindu festivals have replaced the native festivals too.

My grandfather once recollected that there was a lot of controversy regarding the consumption of meat in our village. The matter even took a violent turn. People who had stopped eating meat under the religious influence of Hindu maths used to pressurise the rest to do the same.

There were brawls over beef eating, incidents that may draw a parallel from the battles between the Brahmins and the *rakshasas* or demons, as recorded in Hindu mythology.

When we were kids, young boys and girls used to gather at the Ghotul every evening to sing and dance. But with the propagation of Hindu customs and practices, the Ghotul culture came to an end.

Along with Ghotul, tribal songs and dances have almost disappeared and instruments like *mather*, *dhol* and *chitkuri*, as well as tribal furnishings have also nearly disappeared.

Marriage customs have also changed, with the adoption of Hindu practices. Weddings have become an expensive affair too.

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