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Anti-Conversion Laws and the Governance of Belonging Under Hindu Nationalism

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Abstract

This study analyzes how state-level anti-conversion laws in India—ostensibly enacted to protect the religious freedom of vulnerable communities—can structurally generate minority–minority conflicts within Adivasi (tribal) populations. Similar patterns have surfaced across multiple regions. This study examines cases from Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Jharkhand as illustrative modalities of this broader pattern: spectacular violence, everyday exclusion, and legal weaponization. The analysis identifies three mechanisms that produce these conflicts. Firstly, the "Hindu-plus" classificatory framework incorporates diverse indigenous traditions into an expanded Hindu category while positioning non-Indic religions as external. Secondly, anti-conversion laws frame religious change as a threat to indigenous cultural identity, and the state delegates enforcement to village councils, customary authorities, and judicial–administrative institutions. Thirdly, the politics of belonging translates these classificatory and enforcement practices into membership boundaries that operate through territorial control and cultural claims to authenticity, producing inclusion and exclusion. The findings suggest that anti-conversion laws operate as a political technology of protection, generating minority–minority conflicts while channeling disputes over rights into nationalist boundary-making over minority identity and belonging.

Keywords: anti-conversion laws; Hindu nationalism; Adivasi/tribal; religious freedom; minority conflict; Indian secularism

1. Introduction

Since Independence—and especially under the current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government—India has witnessed a proliferation of state-level anti-conversion laws.[1] These statutes typically prohibit conversions obtained through "force, fraud, or allurement", require prior or ex post facto notification to local authorities, and prescribe enhanced penalties when converts are women, minors, or members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/STs) (USCIRF 2025; Law Library of Congress 2018). While widely regarded as legislation that risks curtailing religious freedom, these laws have been consistently justified as protective measures designed to prevent coercive or fraudulent conversions among vulnerable populations such as Dalits (SC) and Adivasis (ST).

Especially in Adivasi contexts, they often structure tensions between those who convert—most commonly to Christianity—and those who remain within ancestral traditions or Hindu folds. In many communities, ancestral religiosity is often described as nature- and place-based and articulated through locality and ritual practice rather than sharply bounded doctrinal affiliation. As a result, conversion-related disputes tend to unfold less as theological confrontations than as struggles over cultural authenticity and

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communal belonging.[2] Rather than simply pitting a Hindu majority against minority faiths, these statutes often mobilize local actors around such projects, drawing intra-community boundaries and deepening divisions (Sundar 2016).

Scholarship on anti-conversion laws has developed on the foundations of legal-historical analyses of anti-conversion governance (Jenkins 2008; Hertzberg 2020) and studies of Indian secularism and the governance of marginalized populations (Bhargava 2007; Chatterjee 2004). Building on these, existing scholarship has largely operated within a majority–minority frame, focusing either on the problems of Christian missionary activity (Viswanathan 1998; Hardiman 2008; Bauman 2015) or on the structural and cultural violence arising from the laws themselves (Saiya and Manchanda 2020; Selvaraj and Nielsen 2025). This study draws on this literature while shifting the analytical frame from majority–minority to minority–minority. It asks how the same legal environment produces conflict within Adivasi communities, and how these intra-minority conflicts converge with Hindu nationalist projects of boundary-making and identity consolidation. By theorizing anti-conversion law as a political technology of protection, this study contributes to scholarship on Hindu nationalism and the governance of religious identity in tribal India.

To address this question, this study adopts a qualitative, secondary-source case study design. It draws primarily on contemporaneous media reporting (2022–2025) to reconstruct event sequences and identify key actors, claims, and sites of contestation, and triangulates interpretive claims against legal and policy texts (including state Freedom of Religion Acts and relevant rules), court orders where available, and civil-society fact-finding reports. Where accounts diverge or documentation is incomplete, the analysis adopts a conservative reading and limits conclusions to what can be supported across sources. The aim is not statistical generalization but analytic explanation.[3] The three cases—Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Jharkhand—were selected for analytical clarity and documentation availability, and because they capture variation in how exclusion is enacted in tribal-majority settings under active anti-conversion laws. It traces spectacular violence in Chhattisgarh, everyday exclusion in Odisha (especially around burial and ritual practice), and the legal weaponization of anti-conversion provisions in Jharkhand (most clearly in disputes over marriage).[4]

Analytically, the study employs a multidisciplinary framework. It draws on postcolonial governmentality (Chatterjee 2004) to examine how the Indian state governs marginalized populations through law and administration, and on the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011) to analyze how community boundaries are constructed and policed. It further argues that these intra-community conflicts are structurally linked to a Hindu-plus framework[5] that classifies religions as indigenous or foreign, enabling asymmetric treatment of conversion. Contemporary Indian secularism has increasingly drifted toward majoritarian secularism in practice (Bhargava 2007), within which tribal traditions are often claimed as part of a wider Hindu civilizational heritage (Jaffrelot 1996). Consequently, Adivasi conversion to Christianity is framed not merely as a change in faith but as a departure from tradition and an implied exit from the national category of "Indianness".

These perspectives illuminate a triangular dynamic among Hindu nationalist projects, Christian missionary movements, and tribal communities themselves. Anti-conversion laws purport to mediate this tension by "protecting" vulnerable populations. Yet protection functions as a political technology that empowers dominant actors while rendering minorities within minorities vulnerable. The central focus of this study is how anti-conversion laws mediate struggles over religious freedom, cultural survival, and community belonging, producing minority–minority conflicts through legal mechanisms of classification and enforcement.

This study argues that Hindu nationalist projects can instrumentalize Adivasi religious difference to consolidate a broader Hindu identity, translating intra-tribal contestation into

governable boundary enforcement. It seeks to examine how minority–minority conflicts within Adivasi communities, mediated through the legal apparatus of anti-conversion law, may feed into the reorganization of religious identity and the construction of belonging.

This study proceeds in five sections. Section 2 outlines the analytical framework. Section 3 presents the three case studies. Section 4 synthesizes the cases to specify the mechanisms through which anti-conversion regimes produce minority–minority conflict. The conclusion reflects on the implications for the governance of religious difference.

2. Governing Religion and Belonging in India

2.1. The Hindu-Plus Framework and Nationalization of Religious Identity

To understand the structural roots of the conflicts in Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Jharkhand, it is necessary to examine the specific nature of the Indian state's relationship with religion. While India is constitutionally a secular state, its secularism has not operated as a strict separation of religion and state, nor as strict neutrality. Rajeev Bhargava characterizes this as "principled distance", though he notes it has drifted toward "majoritarian secularism" in practice (Bhargava 2007). This framework functions by grouping certain religions as indigenous while marking others as external. This study terms this structure the Hindu-plus framework, rooted in India's specific religious, historical, and political context. In Anderson's terms, the nation is sustained through shared categories and boundary markers. The Hindu-plus framework can be read as a classificatory infrastructure through which indigeneity and "outsideness" become legible within an imagined national community (Anderson 2006).

To begin with, the term "Hindu" originated as an administrative label under the Mughals, distinguishing non-Muslims from Muslims. Under European colonial rule, the term "Hinduism" emerged to designate the religion of Hindus (Lorenzen 1999; Parpola 2015). As such, "Hinduism" came to function as an umbrella category for a plurality of traditions. Gavin Flood suggests that a "river model" is more appropriate than a single-origin account, since it highlights Hinduism's multiple sources. He argues that these traditions can be "subsumed under three broad headings": brahmanical orthopraxy, renouncer traditions (such as Buddhism and Jainism), and popular or local traditions (Flood 1996). These traditions were historically autonomous, with different practices, authorities, and worldviews. The category "Hinduism" as a unified religion encompassing all three strands is thus a relatively recent construction.

What is today called Hinduism emerged from the colonial encounter through deliberate consolidation. During the independence movement, the need for a cohesive national identity provided additional impetus to consolidate these varied traditions into a single Hindu religion and, by extension, a single Hindu nation (Thapar 1989; King 1999; Lorenzen 1999). The category "Hindu" thus functioned as a political technology for managing diversity through consolidation. Both the Hindu religion and the Hindu nation were thus constructed—not as reflections of timeless cultural unity but as political responses to colonial rule and the demands of nation-building.

This process of consolidation was given explicit political form in the ideology of Hindutva. V.D. Savarkar, who articulated this ideology in the 1920s, defined the Hindu nation expansively. He explicitly included all religions indigenous to India—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism—within a single category. He wrote that these communities collectively constituted "Hindudom, i.e., the Hindu people as a whole," since India was their common "fatherland and holy land" (Savarkar [1928] 2005). Christophe Jaffrelot explains that this was a strategic broadening of Hindu identity. By constructing a pan-Indic civilizational bloc, Hindu nationalists could claim an overwhelming demographic majority while absorbing the distinct identities of Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists (Jaffrelot 2007). Within

this framework, Christianity and Islam are positioned as external religions. Their adherents, regardless of how many generations they have lived in India, are marked as having spiritual allegiances beyond the nation's borders.

After Independence, the Hindu-plus framework was partially institutionalized through constitutional provisions. Article 25 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion but includes Explanation II, which stipulates that for legal purposes, references to "Hindus" include persons professing the Sikh, Jaina, or Buddhist religions (Government of India 2020). Legal scholar Marc Galanter observed that this constitutional provision created "competing equalities"—the Constitution proclaims equal respect for all religions, yet it institutionalizes a hierarchy wherein Hindus (broadly defined) become the normative baseline (Galanter [1984] 1991). This legal dimension of the Hindu-plus framework was further consolidated through personal law reforms. The Hindu personal laws enacted in the 1950s—the Hindu Marriage Act, Succession Act, and others—apply equally to Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs (Galanter [1989] 1992). Martha Nussbaum notes that even the Hindu Undivided Family, a special legal status conferring tax advantages, is extended by law to Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs, "subtly reinforcing a broader Hindu identity" (Nussbaum 2007). At the same time, the legal category of "Hindu" is also constituted through exclusion—defined against Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Parsis—thereby positioning these communities "outside" the legal category.

In recent decades, particularly under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), this implicit framework has become an explicit political strategy. Hindu nationalist discourse casts Muslims and Christians as outsiders whose loyalties are suspect (Jaffrelot 1996; Hansen 1999). Recent developments reinforce this binary between "Indic" religions and "foreign" faiths. The consecration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya (Pathi and Saaliq 2024) and the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA 2019)—which facilitates citizenship for non-Muslim refugees from neighboring countries—mark the hardening of this distinction (Basu 2021; USCIRF 2025).

This Hindu-plus framework has profound implications for tribal populations. Flood's "river model" indicates that diverse local and regional traditions have historically been subsumed under the Hinduism category. Adivasi nature-worship traditions are thus understood as falling within this framework. This framework is reinforced in census and other state documentation, where many Adivasi traditions, including Sarna, are recorded under "Hindu" rather than as separate religions. Within this logic, when Adivasis convert to Christianity, they are perceived as exiting the national category of "Indianness." Similarly, contemporary Adivasi efforts to secure separate Sarna Code[6] recognition is interpreted as an attempted exit from the Hindu-plus framework. Such perceived exits generate anxiety about demographic loss and national unity. This structural anxiety sets the stage for the minority–minority conflicts examined in the following sections, where non-Christian Adivasi, emboldened by this state narrative, clash with their Christian neighbors over the boundaries of belonging.

2.2. Mechanisms of Control: Anti-Conversion Laws as Postcolonial Governmentality

The Hindu-plus framework operates not only as ideology but also through concrete mechanisms of governance. Understanding these mechanisms requires examining the concept of postcolonial governmentality.[7] Michel Foucault developed the concept of "governmentality" to describe how modern states use laws, classifications, and administrative systems to regulate populations and produce compliant subjects (Foucault 1991). Governmentality operates less by direct coercion than by techniques that render populations governable—censuses, welfare targeting, legal definitions, expert knowledge (Foucault 1991; Cohn 1996).

Partha Chatterjee argues that independent India, despite its anti-colonial origins, inherited and adapted many techniques of colonial governance to manage its diverse population (Chatterjee 2004). In Chatterjee's analysis, the Indian state views marginalized communities not simply as individual citizens with rights, but as populations that must be governed through welfare, surveillance, and control. This creates what Chatterjee calls the distinction between "citizens" and "populations": the elite exercise rights as citizens, while the poor—including most Adivasis—are managed as populations requiring state guardianship (Chatterjee 2004).

Tribal Adivasi communities are a prime example. They have been constitutionally recognized as Scheduled Tribes (STs) deserving of protection and special governance, yet this protection often comes with a paternalistic attitude that seeks to preserve these communities in a primordial cultural state. Anthropologist Nandini Sundar notes that the Indian state's relationship with tribal populations has long been characterized by this dual logic: protection coupled with the assumption that tribals are incapable of autonomous decision-making (Sundar 2016). This paternalism extends to religious matters, where the state claims authority to determine which conversions are "genuine" and which are "induced."

Anti-conversion laws exemplify this postcolonial governmentality. Enacted in the name of safeguarding tribals from "illegitimate" religious inducement, these laws position the state as custodian of tribal tradition, empowered to intervene in the private realm of belief. In effect, the state assumes a colonial-era role of deciding what cultural or religious changes are "authentic" or "forced," thus subjecting tribals to an official gaze that judges their faith choices. Laura Jenkins observes that anti-conversion legislation builds on colonial-era anxieties about "mass conversions" and postcolonial concerns about national unity (Jenkins 2008). These laws create a bureaucratic apparatus—requiring notifications, investigations, and approvals—that treats religious conversion as inherently suspicious and requiring state verification.

The implementation of anti-conversion measures in tribal regions often involves decentralizing power to local authorities. This aligns with the framework of PESA (PESA Act 1996), which grants village councils in Scheduled Areas the authority to uphold customary law and manage community resources. While PESA was meant to enable tribal self-governance, in practice, it can become an instrument for enforcing conformity.

This creates what might be called "outsourced sovereignty":[8] the state delegates its regulatory power to local majoritarian actors who then enforce religious conformity in the name of custom and law. The anti-conversion statute provides the legal framework, while village councils provide the enforcement mechanism. This dual structure allows the state to manage religious difference without direct intervention, maintaining a facade of neutrality while enabling local-level coercion.

This dynamic is a legacy of treating marginalized groups as populations requiring guidance and supervision—a "protective" impulse that can quickly become coercive. The next section examines how these governance mechanisms translate constitutional rights into tests of community membership, producing fractured communities through the politics of belonging.

2.3. Fractured Communities: The Politics of Belonging

Under the pressure of such state mechanisms, local communities redefine their boundaries. The concept of the politics of belonging, as articulated by Yuval-Davis (2006, 2011), centers on how collectivities are constructed through inclusion and exclusion—how boundaries of who "belongs" to a community or nation are politically shaped and policed. Yuval-Davis distinguishes between "belonging" as an emotional attachment and feeling

"at home," and "the politics of belonging" as the explicit political projects that construct and contest these boundaries (Yuval-Davis 2006, 2011).

Belonging often remains implicit and taken for granted until it is threatened or challenged. When such challenges arise, conflicts over belonging intensify. These conflicts operate simultaneously at multiple scales—local, regional, national—and become particularly acute when these scales produce contradictory membership criteria (Antonsich 2010). The politics of belonging become especially intense in contexts of rapid social change, where previously stable identities are destabilized (Yuval-Davis 2006, 2011).

In the contexts examined in this study, the relevant community is the Adivasi tribe or village, and religion has become a key criterion for belonging. Scholarship on tribal India has documented how communal identities were historically more fluid and porous than contemporary politics suggest (Dasgupta 2018). Nandini Sundar's ethnographic work in Bastar shows that tribal communities traditionally exhibited religious syncretism and plural identities, where Christianity, Hinduism, and indigenous practices coexisted within kinship networks (Sundar 2006). When some members convert to Christianity, shared traditional belief systems and cultural practices become disputed. Community activists and leaders construct a narrative in which authentic tribal identity requires adherence to ancestral religion and traditional ways of life (Sundar 2006). Within this framing, conversion is cast as betrayal of the community. Converts are depicted as having forfeited their belonging unless they renounce Christianity and return to traditional practices.

This hardening of boundaries can be understood through what Baumann (1996) calls "reification of culture"—treating fluid cultural practices as fixed essences that must be defended against contamination (Baumann 1996). In tribal contexts, this reification transforms religious practice from one aspect of identity into the defining criterion of authentic membership. The result is what might be termed "bounded belonging": membership becomes absolute rather than gradual, enforced through exclusionary practices like burial denial and social boycott.

With the Hindu-plus framework (Section 2.1), anti-conversion laws as postcolonial governmentality (Section 2.2), and the politics of belonging (Section 2.3) established, the analysis that follows treats minority conflict not as a spontaneous eruption of religious hostility but as the outcome of three interacting processes: (i) the classification of religions into "indigenous" and "external", (ii) the decentralization of regulatory power through legal and administrative mechanisms, and (iii) the reconfiguration of community boundaries in everyday life. The next section applies this integrated framework to three case studies in tribal-majority regions in Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Jharkhand.

3. The Politics of Belonging in Tribal India

This section examines three cases from Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Jharkhand. The cases are not intended as a statistically representative sample but as analytically revealing sites for mechanism tracing. Each illustrates a distinct modality through which anti-conversion regimes translate classificatory asymmetry into enforceable local boundaries: spectacular violence over church sites (Chhattisgarh), the denial of burial rights as everyday exclusion (Odisha), and the enforcement of religious conformity by village councils through legal mechanisms (Jharkhand).

Together, they suggest how anti-conversion laws generate permissive conditions for boundary-policing within minority–minority conflicts. They also show how contests over belonging intersect with claims to tribal autonomy, with the Hindu-plus framework shaping which religious identities are recognized as indigenous and which are marked as foreign.

3.1. Policing Religious Space and Spectacular Violence: Chhattisgarh

Chhattisgarh, located in central-eastern India, has one of the highest proportions of Scheduled Tribe (ST) populations in the country, with tribal communities constituting approximately 30% of the state's population (Census 2011).[9] The Bastar division in southern Chhattisgarh is predominantly Adivasi, with tribal populations exceeding 70% in some districts (Census 2011). While Christians remain a small minority at the state level, missionary activity has been particularly concentrated in tribal areas like Bastar, resulting in a significant presence of Christian Adivasis alongside those who practice Sarna nature-worship traditions or forms of Hinduism.

The state's anti-conversion law, amended in 2006 as the Chhattisgarh Freedom of Religion Act, requires prior district authority permission for any conversion and criminalizes conversions achieved by fraud or inducement (Law Library of Congress 2018). The law's impact intensified in 2014, when Gram Sabhas (village assemblies) in multiple Bastar villages passed resolutions banning "non-Hindu missionary activities" (Times of India 2014). Such village-level resolutions belong to a broader repertoire of boundary-policing: appeals to custom, local authority, and the idiom of protection can be mobilized to regulate Christian presence through seemingly lawful channels (Kaiser et al. 2025).

Although these resolutions were later withdrawn following legal challenges,[10] conflicts over missionary and anti-missionary mobilization in tribal areas continued to escalate. In late 2022 and early 2023, this escalation became visible in coordinated attacks and social boycotts targeting Christian Adivasis in Narayanpur and neighboring areas, including church vandalism and forced displacement.[11] Yet exclusion did not operate only through spectacular episodes of violence. It also took everyday forms: social boycotts, fines, threats, and other sanctions that worked to isolate Christian households from village life (Kaiser et al. 2025).

In Chhattisgarh, disputes over access to burial grounds recurred through village-level resolutions and routine administrative and policing practices, making burial a critical site of conflict (Kaiser et al. 2025). In 2024 and early 2025, multiple Christian families were forced to seek High Court intervention to secure burial rights, with some cases reaching the Supreme Court (Supreme Court of India 2025; Masih 2025). While such disputes also surfaced, the Odisha case below shows how burial denial can become an especially routinized modality of everyday exclusion.

What underlies the Bastar incidents is a narrative of "cultural protection" widely cultivated by Hindu nationalist organizations. The RSS and its affiliate, the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), have operated in Chhattisgarh's tribal areas since the early 1950s with the explicit aim of countering Christian missions (Poyam 2025). These organizations frame their work as protecting tribal culture while simultaneously seeking to absorb tribal traditions into a Hindu fold (Sundar 2016). By the 2000s and 2010s, groups like the Vishva Hindu Parishad promoted the idea that Adivasi customs equal Hinduism, coining the term "Hindu Adivasi" identity.

This conflation of tribal traditions with Hinduism can be read as illustrating the Hindu-plus framework in action. Many Adivasis practice Sarna dharma, a nature-based religious tradition. By constructing "Hindu Adivasi" identity that subsumes Sarna under Hinduism, these organizations reframe intra-tribal religious diversity as Hindu–Christian conflict. What could be understood as internal religious pluralism becomes recast as external (Christian) aggression against indigenous (Hindu/Sarna) culture. In Bastar, this narrative manifested through spectacular violence—church attacks, mass displacement, and coordinated mob action that made religious exclusion highly visible.

Yet alongside these episodes, exclusion also operated through routine mechanisms: village resolutions imposing fines for contact with Christians, social boycotts, and denial

of access to village commons. The following case from Odisha reveals how burial denial functions as everyday exclusion.

3.2. Everyday Exclusion and Burial Rights: Odisha

Odisha has a long history with conversions and anti-conversion laws: it was the first state in India to enact a Freedom of Religion Act (in 1967), upheld by the Supreme Court in 1977, which set a precedent for others (Government of Odisha 1967; Hertzberg 2020). Odisha's tribal population (about 22% of the state) has seen significant Christian missionary activity over the past century, especially among communities like the Kondh, Gond, and Paraja (Census 2011). The infamous Kandhamal riots of 2008—where Hindu mobs attacked Christian Dalits and tribals—remain a grim testament to how explosive this mix can become (National People's Tribunal on Kandhamal 2010).

In Odisha, the memory of the Kandhamal riots keeps the possibility of spectacular violence latent, even when large-scale attacks are absent. While everyday exclusion is enacted openly in village life, it is most visible in disputes over access to common burial grounds. In late 2024 and early 2025, poor Christian families from tribal and Dalit communities in Odisha are being denied the right to practice their faith or bury their dead (UCA News 2025b). These families faced threats of social boycott and abuse if they did not comply with the customs of the majority. In some cases, village leaders have gone so far as to demand the effective "reconversion" of the deceased before allowing burial (UCA News 2025a; ICC 2025b).

The requirement to reconvert the deceased before burial points to the absolutist logic now governing community belonging. As in Chhattisgarh, village elders invoke custom to justify exclusion, claiming it violates tradition for someone who "left the faith" to be buried in the village cemetery. Yet what is framed as ancient custom is not always stable or uncontested (Baumann 1996). Historically, many tribal communities practiced relative religious syncretism—tribal Christians often participated in village festivals, and vice versa (Sundar 2006). In this sense, the current hardline stance reflects less an organic continuity of tradition than the local uptake of Hindutva-inflected narratives that frame conversion as cultural betrayal (Jaffrelot 2011).

Reconversion demands function not simply as the reverse of conversion, but as a mechanism through which communities test membership and enforce the boundaries of belonging. One "belongs" only insofar as one remains within (or returns to) the ancestral religious order. Burial denial, therefore, operates as more than a ritual dispute. It is a decision about who may remain within the community's moral and territorial universe. This exclusionary logic extends far beyond burial grounds into everyday life. Christian families are barred from village commons, excluded from collective labor, denied water access, and prohibited from community festivals (National People's Tribunal on Kandhamal 2010). Burial denial stands as the most visible and symbolically condensed expression of this spatial exclusion—marking converts as outside community boundaries not only in daily life but even in death.

3.3. Legal Weaponization and Outsourced Sovereignty: Jharkhand

The third case illustrates how anti-conversion laws can allow village councils to weaponize legal statutes in policing religious boundaries. Jharkhand, located in eastern India, has one of the country's highest proportions of tribal populations, with STs constituting approximately 26% of the state's total. In several districts—including Khunti, Simdega, and Gumla—ST majorities exceeding 70% (Census 2011). In 2017, Jharkhand (under a BJP state government) passed its own Freedom of Religion Act, joining the roster of states with anti-conversion statutes (Government of Jharkhand 2017; Law Library of Congress 2018).

By 2018, this law was being enforced in ways that directly interfered with the private lives of Adivasis who had adopted Christianity.

According to reports, in 2018, when a Santhal[12] couple in Simdega district decided to hold a Christian marriage ceremony, the village council invoked the Act to have the pastor and groom arrested and charged (Rashid 2025). This case reveals the operation of outsourced sovereignty most directly. The village council did not enforce boundaries through mob action or cemetery denial but by deploying legal statutes—invoking the Freedom of Religion Act to criminalize the pastor and couple. This illustrates the mechanism outlined in Section 2: the state does not directly regulate religious practice but empowers local village councils to function as regulatory proxies. The anti-conversion law provided the legal framework; the village council supplied the enforcement; and the police executed arrests. Sovereignty is outsourced downward, yet the coercive power remains state-sanctioned.

This incident unfolds within a broader, more complex political landscape. In 2020, the Jharkhand government under Hemant Soren passed a resolution seeking a Sarna Code—a separate recognition for tribal religion in the national census (The Hindu 2020). This move was celebrated by many Adivasi organizations as a long-overdue recognition of their belonging neither to Hinduism nor Christianity but to their own faith. The Sarna Code demand is itself partly a reaction to both conversion and Hindutva: it signals that tribals want to assert an independent identity (Marty 2023). The Jharkhand case also suggests that these conflicts should not be understood as if an original and internally unified tribal identity simply existed prior to conversion. Adivasi communities are internally differentiated along religious, political, and social lines, and their collective identities are continually remade rather than merely inherited (Dasgupta 2018). Seen from this perspective, the assertion of a distinct Sarna identity may function not only as a claim for recognition but also as a site where the boundaries of legitimate tribal belonging are actively contested.

At the same time, this assertion of separate identity can also harden internal boundaries. In Hindutva-inflected discourse, Sarna is more readily treated as indigenous and thus compatible with a broader Hindu fold, whereas Christianity is more easily marked as external (Marty 2023; Selvaraj and Nielsen 2025). While Jharkhand's tribal communities are internally diverse—comprising Sarna, Christian, and Hindu adherents—the Sarna Code campaign, despite seeking recognition distinct from Hinduism, operates within the Hindu-plus framework's binary logic. Sarna traditions are framed as indigenous and thus aligned with the broader Hindu fold despite asserting distinctiveness, whereas Christianity remains marked as foreign. This reinforces exclusion of Christian converts not merely from Sarna community belonging but from the category of authentic tribal identity itself.

This Jharkhand case thus reveals how the politics of tribal authenticity, when combined with anti-conversion law, produces a three-way tension: Hindu nationalist organizations seeking to absorb tribals, Sarna activists asserting independence, and Christian converts excluded by both. The anti-conversion law does not resolve this complexity—it weaponizes it, providing legal tools for boundary enforcement regardless of which identity claims precedence.

Taken together, these cases do not represent three separate problems but three modalities of the same governance regime. Anti-conversion discourse allows local authorities to reframe religious rights as tests of community belonging. Customary autonomy and the legal availability of anti-conversion provisions make this exclusion both enforceable and legitimate. While each case exhibited distinctive features—spectacular violence in Chhattisgarh, spatial exclusion in Odisha, legal enforcement in Jharkhand—they also revealed common underlying dynamics. The next section shifts from describing these modalities to analyzing the mechanisms that enable them.

4. Protection as Political Technology: Anti-Conversion Laws and the Governance of Belonging

The conflicts examined in Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Jharkhand often appear on the surface as religious clashes—non-Christian Adivasis versus Christian converts. Yet these conflicts emerge from more complex dynamics involving state ideology, legal frameworks, and competing claims to authenticity and belonging. Nor can they be explained simply by Christianity's historical "newness" in India: Christianity has a long presence in the subcontinent, yet the forms of boundary-policing examined here have intensified in recent decades under specific political and legal conditions. These local conflicts enact, in miniature, the boundary-work: "indigenous" religion is folded into the nation, and Christianity is more readily rendered external.

This section demonstrates that minority–minority conflicts over conversion are not accidental byproducts of poorly designed laws but structural outcomes of how anti-conversion regimes govern religious difference. The analysis identifies three mechanisms—classificatory logic, delegated enforcement, and boundary hardening—that converge to transform "protection" into a technology of exclusion. This reveals a fundamental inversion: laws ostensibly safeguarding vulnerable populations function instead to empower dominant actors, criminalize minority choices, and produce outcomes that align with Hindu nationalist projects of identity consolidation. Understanding anti-conversion laws as political technologies rather than neutral regulations illuminates how legal frameworks produce the very problems they claim to solve.

The three sites are treated here not as exceptional local anomalies but as illustrative cases of a broader pattern that has diffused across multiple tribal regions. Across the three cases, conversion is repeatedly framed not as individual religious choice but as cultural betrayal. In Chhattisgarh, Hindutva-affiliated organizations promoted "Hindu Adivasi" identity, conflating Sarna practices with Hinduism. This framing positioned Christian converts as outsiders to tribal authenticity (Sundar 2016). In Odisha, village elders invoked custom to deny burial rights, framing Christians as culturally inauthentic despite earlier patterns of syncretism (Sundar 2006). In Jharkhand, disputes around tribal identity unfolded in a context already shaped by conversion politics and the legal availability of anti-conversion provisions. This intensified pressures to treat religious affiliation as a decisive marker of belonging.

Such stigmatization can generate anxieties about cultural erosion and identity loss. The narrative suggests that tribal culture itself faces a threat from Christian presence. This framing can help legitimate coercive boundary-policing. Church attacks, burial denial, and criminal complaints may be presented as acts of "cultural protection". Crucially, anti-conversion laws provide a legal vocabulary for such actions. What might otherwise appear as vigilante violence or communal discrimination can be recast as law enforcement—stopping "illegal conversion", protecting "culture", and maintaining "public order". In doing so, anti-Christian mobilization reworks indigeneity and belonging through intertwined ideological and regulatory means (Selvaraj and Nielsen 2025).

The Hindu-plus framework structures a classificatory logic in which some identities are treated as indigenous and protectable, and others are marked as foreign. As outlined in Section 2, this framework is rooted in Hindutva ideology. It is reinforced through constitutional and administrative classifications that expand the scope of "Hindu" while positioning Christianity as structurally external. Within this classificatory environment, Sarna traditions—despite their distinctiveness from Brahmanical Hinduism—are frequently framed as indigenous and compatible with a broader Hindu civilizational fold. Christianity, by contrast, remains coded as foreign. This asymmetry shapes the criteria for belonging. As Marty (2023) observes, Adivasi religion itself can become a "proxy battleground" in Hindu–Christian contestation, sharpening boundary-making around authenticity and belonging.

Conversion to Christianity is interpreted as an "exit" requiring suspicion and verification. "Return" to the Hindu/Sarna fold, however, is framed as cultural restoration.

Even where Sarna movements seek separate census recognition, they do not necessarily escape the Hindu-plus binary that structures belonging. Such recognition may reconfigure internal taxonomies of tribal identity without dissolving the deeper insider/outsider distinction through which conversion is evaluated—an asymmetry that can intensify the exclusion of Christian converts from claims to "authentic" tribal identity.

This compounded exclusion points to what might be termed graded belonging: membership in the community—and, by extension, in the national body—is not simply binary but stratified across three tiers. Hindu Adivasis occupy a position of full national belonging. Sarna Adivasis are recognized as indigenous within Adivasi communities, yet at the national level, they are conditionally absorbed into a wider Hindu civilizational fold. Christian Adivasis are pushed to the margins at both levels: marked as culturally inauthentic within the community and as legally suspect outsiders at the national level. Anti-conversion law thus does not merely exclude; it differentiates and ranks.

This asymmetric classification is accompanied by asymmetric governance. "Reconversion" to Hinduism is often portrayed as *Ghar Wapsi* (homecoming). It may be framed as cultural restoration that receives tacit support or public celebration. Conversion to Christianity, however, often becomes subject to heightened suspicion, procedural burdens, and criminalization under India's anti-conversion laws (Sonkar 2022; Saiya and Manchanda 2020). In this sense, anti-conversion laws raise the costs of exit from the expanded Hindu category while framing "return" as cultural normalization. Christian Adivasis may thus face compounded exclusion. They can be positioned as religious outsiders to the indigenous fold and as culturally inauthentic members of tribal society.

These mechanisms can converge to produce minority–minority conflicts that enable indirect governance. The state does not always directly coerce religious conformity. Instead, it may create permissive conditions for local enforcement. Village councils and allied networks can invoke anti-conversion discourse and the threat of legal action to obstruct Christian practice, legitimate exclusion, and translate communal pressure into police intervention. This outsourcing of sovereignty—delegating enforcement to gram sabhas, customary authorities, and Hindutva-aligned networks—allows the state to govern religious difference while maintaining distance from direct coercion.

The result is that what appears as intra-tribal conflict can function as state-structured exclusion. Burial grounds become boundary markers. Marriage ceremonies become sites of criminal complaint. Churches become targets of mob violence justified through the language of cultural protection. Minority–minority conflict thus emerges not simply from organic community tension. Rather, it can result from the convergence of three dynamics: legal frameworks that make exclusion actionable, ideological mobilization that frames conversion as betrayal, and state mechanisms that empower dominant actors while rendering minorities within minorities vulnerable.

Anti-conversion laws can therefore be understood as political technologies that convert religious choice into tests of belonging and translate cultural anxiety into enforceable claims. The "protection" these laws offer appears to be selective: it may protect the collective authority of dominant actors to enforce conformity while diminishing constitutional protections for converts within tribal communities.

5. Conclusion: Protection as Political Technology and the Governance of Belonging

This study has examined minority–minority conflicts over conversion in tribal India in the context of intensified Hindu nationalist mobilization. It argues that these conflicts are

difficult to explain as episodic religious disputes or as reactions to Christianity's supposed "newness". They become intelligible within a governance environment in which law, local authority, and competing claims to authenticity and belonging converge to render religious difference governable. State anti-conversion laws are presented as safeguards for the vulnerable. Yet they function as instruments that translate religious difference into a problem of belonging, enabling exclusionary practices to proceed through seemingly lawful channels.

As demonstrated in Section 4, anti-conversion laws can function as political technologies through three mechanisms—the Hindu-plus framework, postcolonial governmentality, and the politics of belonging. These mechanisms can converge to produce minority–minority conflicts that serve majoritarian ends—a majoritarianism that, in today's India, is concretely embodied in Hindu nationalist ideology and political mobilization. Minority–minority conflict thus emerges not simply from organic community tension but from the convergence of legal frameworks that make exclusion actionable, ideological mobilization that frames conversion as betrayal, and state mechanisms that render minorities within minorities vulnerable. Underlying this convergence is a broader process in which the othering of Christianity serves as a vehicle for displacing Adivasi identity in favor of a Hindu one.

Anti-conversion law, in this sense, is not only a restriction on religious choice. It is also a nation-making technology through which Hindu nationalism reorganizes religious identity and graded belonging within tribal India.

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Notes

1 Throughout this study, the term *anti-conversion laws* refers to a set of state-level statutes formally titled *Freedom of Religion Acts*. Despite their nomenclature, these laws primarily regulate religious conversion by prohibiting conversions obtained through "force, fraud, or allurement," mandating prior or post facto notification to state authorities, and prescribing enhanced penalties when converts are women, minors, or members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/STs). India has no uniform national anti-conversion statute; such laws are enacted at the state level (Government of Odisha 1967).

2 For a historian's perspective on the constructed and contested character of "Adivasi" identity—formed through representation, classification, and boundary-making, see Dasgupta (2018).

3 Because the analysis relies on secondary sources rather than original fieldwork, it prioritizes publicly documented episodes of contestation and cannot fully capture less visible negotiations or accommodations; triangulation across independent source types mitigates this constraint.

4 Similar incidents linked to state anti-conversion ("freedom of religion") laws are documented across multiple Indian states and are summarized annually in USCIRF's *Annual Report*, India chapter, and in its 2024 Country Update—for example, in Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Rajasthan (USCIRF 2024, 2025, Country Update).

5 In this study, "Hindu-plus framework" is used as an analytic shorthand (not an established term) for the combined legal and discursive logic through which a broadly defined "Hindu" category functions as the normative baseline of national belonging, formally aggregating certain "Indic" minorities within it (Constitution of India, Art. 25, Explanation II; Galanter [1984] 1991). The "plus" signals that this is not a claim about Hindu theology but about a state-enabled classification regime whose boundary extends in political practice to other indigenous traditions, with consequences for how belonging is policed at the local level (see Section 2).

[6] Sarna Code refers to the demand by sections of Adivasi communities—particularly in Jharkhand and neighboring states—for the recognition of Sarna as a distinct religious category in the Indian census and related legal-administrative frameworks. At present, Sarna and other indigenous traditions are typically subsumed under the category "Hindu" in census enumeration. Proponents argue that separate recognition is necessary to protect indigenous religious identity and prevent forced assimilation, while also raising concerns about access to constitutionally mandated affirmative action (reservations), since Scheduled Tribe status and associated benefits are linked to legal classification. Although the Jharkhand state assembly passed a resolution in 2020 urging the Union government to introduce a separate Sarna Code, implementation depends on central approval, and as of the latest available reports, the demand remains unresolved at the national level.

[7] On postcolonial governmentality—law, classification, and administrative techniques that render populations "governable"—see (Foucault 1991; Scott 1998).

[8] Following Hansen and Stepputat (2006), "outsourced sovereignty" refers to situations where sovereign practices (coercion, regulation, adjudication) are delegated to sub-state or non-state actors.

[9] State- and district-level demographic figures cited in this article draw on the Census of India 2011, since the decadal Census 2021 was postponed and remains delayed, leaving 2011 as the latest fully published census baseline at the time of writing. Census tables are available at https://censusindia.gov.in/ (accessed on 27 November 2025).

[10] For the interim restraint and subsequent dismissal, see (High Court of Chhattisgarh 2015 (W.P.(C) 1759/2014, order of 6 October) and High Court of Chhattisgarh 2016 (final order of 11 January, dismissed as infructuous)); see also (High Court of Chhattisgarh 2025, para. 10).

[11] For event sequences, see Mishra (2023) and Naidu (2023) on the December 2022 incidents and the 2 January 2023 attack on the Sacred Heart Church in Narayanpur. For documentation of village-level assaults and displacement, see Poyam (2025). For subsequent incidents in 2024, see CSW (2024) and ICC (2025a).

[12] The Santhal is one of India's largest Adivasi communities spread across Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal. Traditionally, Santhals follow Sarna dharma, often articulated through sacred groves and related ritual practices (Carrin 2022).

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