

## **Faith on the Margins of the Schedule: Religious Identification, Tribal Identity Salience and the Delisting Debate among Scheduled Tribes of Ranchi District, Jharkhand**

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### **Abstract**

The demand to “delist” religious converts from India’s Scheduled Tribe (ST) rolls — propelled to national visibility by the Janjati Suraksha Manch’s mass mobilisation in New Delhi in May 2026 and by competing appeals during the ongoing census enumeration in Jharkhand to record “Sarna” rather than “Hindu” in the religion column — has reopened a foundational question of Indian sociology: is tribe a category of descent, culture and territory, or one of faith? This paper examines the relationship between religious identification and tribal identity among ST respondents in Ranchi district, Jharkhand, using a structured survey instrument administered to a stratified sample of 412 adult respondents across eight blocks. Three findings stand out. First, tribal identity salience remains high across Sarna, Hindu and Christian respondents alike; religious affiliation explains less than 8 per cent of its variance, lending little support to the premise that conversion dissolves tribal identity. Second, religious identification is nevertheless the single strongest predictor of position on delisting: Christian respondents are overwhelmingly opposed, while Sarna and Hindu-identifying respondents are split, with small majorities in support. Third, and counter-intuitively, higher identity salience predicts opposition to delisting net of religion, suggesting that the strongest identifiers understand tribal identity in inclusive, descent-and-community terms rather than confessional ones. The paper reads these patterns through the Ghurye–Elwin controversy, Barthian boundary theory, Weberian perspectives on religious community, and Virginius Xaxa’s critique of the conflation of tribe and religion, and argues that the delisting debate is best understood as a contest over who controls the boundary of the tribe — the state, religious entrepreneurs, or the community itself.

**Keywords:** Scheduled Tribes; delisting; Sarna code; Adivasi identity; religious conversion; Jharkhand; ethnic boundaries; reservation policy

## 1. Introduction

On a May 24<sup>th</sup> morning in 2026, lakhs of Adivasis converged on New Delhi under the banner of the Janjati Suraksha Manch (JSM) to demand a “Delisting Bill”: a constitutional amendment to Article 342 that would remove Scheduled Tribe status — and with it reservation in education, employment and legislatures — from tribal persons who have converted to Christianity or Islam. A week earlier, as census enumerators began moving through Jharkhand’s villages on 16 May, a counter-mobilisation circulated through the same hamlets: appeals to write “Sarna”, the indigenous faith of the sacred grove, in the religion column — not “Hindu”, and not blank. In June, former Chief Minister Champai Soren reiterated the delisting demand and sought a probe into conversions and church land-holdings, while the ruling alliance renewed its commitment to a separate Sarna religion code, first passed as a resolution by the Jharkhand Assembly in November 2020 and still awaiting central recognition.

These three simultaneous movements — delisting, the Sarna code, and the politics of the census column — are not merely policy disputes. They are competing answers to a single sociological question that has shadowed the category “tribe” since the colonial ethnographic state first enumerated it: what is the relationship between tribal identity and religion? The delisting demand answers that religion is constitutive — to leave the faith of the ancestors is to leave the tribe. The Sarna code demand answers that tribal religion is real and distinct, but distinct above all from Hinduism, into whose census category it has been silently absorbed for seven decades. And the everyday practice of mixed villages — where Sarna, Christian and Hindu Oraons share clans, marriage networks, sarhul processions and land — suggests a third answer: that tribe is lived as descent, kinship, language and territory, with religion layered upon rather than foundational to it.

This paper brings survey evidence from Ranchi district — the demographic and political heartland of the Oraon and Munda peoples and the epicentre of both the Sarna code and delisting mobilisations — to bear on this question. It asks three questions. First, does religious affiliation correspond to differences in the strength of tribal identity — in other words, is the delisting movement’s core empirical premise, that conversion erodes tribal identity, borne out? Second, how does religious identification structure positions on delisting and on the Sarna code? Third, what do these patterns reveal about the underlying logic by which respondents construct the boundary of the tribe — confessional, primordial, or civic-communitarian?

## 2. The Contemporary Conjuncture: Delisting, the Sarna Code and the Census

### *2.1 The delisting demand and its genealogy*

The demand to strip converted tribals of ST status is not new. Its proponents trace it to the Lok Sabha member and Oraon leader Kartik Oraon, who in 1967–70 moved for an amendment excluding converts from the Schedule and gathered the signatures of 348 members of Parliament on a memorandum to the Prime Minister — a memorandum that was neither adopted nor formally rejected. The constitutional asymmetry that animates the demand is real: under the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, Scheduled Caste status is restricted to Hindus, later extended to Sikhs (1956) and Buddhists (1990), so that a Dalit convert to Christianity or Islam loses SC benefits — a position recently reaffirmed by the Supreme Court. Scheduled Tribe status, by contrast, carries no religious test: Article 342 and the associated orders define STs by community, not creed. Delisting proponents — prominently the JSM, widely described as affiliated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram — argue that this asymmetry allows converts, who they claim are educationally and economically advantaged, to corner reservation benefits while abandoning the customs and faith on whose protection the Schedule is premised.

Opponents make three counter-arguments. Constitutionally, they note that ST status was never premised on religion but on indicators of geographical isolation, distinctive culture and socio-economic disadvantage, so a confessional test would import into Article 342 a logic foreign to it. Sociologically, they argue that conversion does not extinguish the disabilities — land alienation, displacement, discrimination — that reservation addresses. Politically, they read delisting as a Hindutva strategy of boundary-drawing: the same organisations that would expel Christian converts from the Schedule simultaneously claim Sarna and “Sanatan” as one cultural stream, so that, as critics in Jharkhand have observed, the converted Christian is marked as an outsider while the converted Hindu is naturalised as kin. Notably, sections of Sarna activists in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh have extended solidarity to Christian Adivasis against delisting even while contesting Christian proselytisation — an alignment that complicates any simple Sarna-versus-Christian reading of the conflict.

### *2.2 The Sarna code and the politics of the census column*

Running parallel, and in partial tension, is the demand for a separate Sarna religion code in the census. Until 1951 the Indian census enumerated “tribal religions” separately; the category was subsequently dropped, after which adherents of Sarna and cognate faiths were largely absorbed into the “Hindu” column or scattered under “Other”. In the 2011 Census, nearly five million respondents nationally wrote “Sarna” under “Other religions and persuasions” — the largest unrecognised religious return in the country — with the bulk concentrated in Jharkhand, where STs constitute 26.2 per cent of the population. The Jharkhand Assembly’s unanimous resolution of November 2020 demanding a “Sarna Adivasi Dharam” code remains pending with the Union government. The 2026 enumeration has therefore become a referendum conducted one doorstep at a time: to write Sarna is to assert that tribal religion is neither Hindu nor Christian; and the size of that return will shape every subsequent argument about who the “authentic” tribal is.

### **3. Theoretical Framework: Four Sociological Readings of Tribe and Faith**

#### ***3.1 The Ghurye–Elwin controversy redux***

The delisting debate restages, with uncanny fidelity, the founding controversy of Indian tribal sociology. G. S. Ghurye (1943) famously characterised tribals as “backward Hindus” — communities on a continuum with caste society, gradually absorbed into the Hindu fold — and viewed their separate administrative treatment with suspicion. Verrier Elwin, by contrast, insisted on the cultural distinctiveness of tribal lifeworlds and warned that unregulated contact with the plains — missionary, Hindu reformist or commercial — produced a “loss of nerve”. The contemporary positions map almost exactly: the Sangh-affiliated claim that Sarna is a stream of Sanatan tradition is Ghurye’s thesis in mobilisational form, while the Sarna code movement is an Elwinian (and, more proximately, an Adivasi-intellectual) insistence on distinctiveness — turned, crucially, against Hindu absorption rather than missionary influence. What is new is that the delisting demand weaponises Elwin’s premise of distinctiveness (the tribe has an authentic faith) in the service of Ghurye’s conclusion (that faith belongs within the Hindu civilisational fold).

#### ***3.2 Barth: the boundary, not the cultural stuff***

Fredrik Barth’s (1969) canonical move — that ethnicity persists through the maintenance of boundaries rather than the persistence of cultural content — illuminates why the delisting question

is so explosive. If tribal identity were simply a bundle of cultural traits, conversion would be one trait-change among many, no more identity-dissolving than migration to Ranchi city or salaried employment. The delisting demand is intelligible only as an attempt to install religion as the diacritical marker of the boundary — to make confession do the work that descent, clan exogamy, language and village membership have historically done. Barth would direct our attention to the boundary entrepreneurs: which actors gain from a confessional boundary? The answer — organisations competing for the political loyalty of a quarter of Jharkhand's electorate — suggests that the boundary is being redrawn from outside the community as much as from within it.

### *3.3 Weber and Srinivas: religion, community and mobility*

A Weberian lens treats religious affiliation as constitutive of community (*Gemeinschaft*) and status honour: conversion is then not merely belief-change but a transfer of communal membership, with consequences for commensality, marriage and trust — precisely the registers in which village-level tensions between Sarna and Christian households are reported. M. N. Srinivas's concept of Sanskritization names the other vector: the gradual adoption by tribal households of Hindu ritual idioms, vegetarian fasts and deity worship, which proceeds without the legal-bureaucratic event of “conversion” and therefore escapes the delisting lens entirely. Herein lies the asymmetry that opponents of delisting emphasise: Christianisation is a countable, certifiable event (baptism), whereas Sanskritization is a diffuse process — so a confessional test would penalise the legible conversion while exempting the illegible one.

### *3.4 Xaxa and the Adivasi critique: tribe as its own discourse*

Virginius Xaxa (1999, 2005) has argued most forcefully that Indian sociology's habit of defining tribes by what they lack (caste, literacy, “world religion”) or by their imputed location on a march toward Hinduism misses how Adivasis constitute themselves: as peoples defined by descent, territory and a shared history of dispossession — “indigenous” in the political sense. On this reading, religion is an attribute of tribal persons, not the criterion of tribal personhood; the community precedes and survives confessional change. André Beteille's (1986) caution that “tribe” in India is an administrative-political category as much as a sociological one completes the frame: because the Schedule is a legal artefact, its boundary is necessarily an object of political struggle — and delisting is that struggle in its present form. The empirical questions this paper

poses follow directly: if Xaxa is right, identity salience should be high across religious categories; if the confessional thesis is right, it should collapse among converts.

#### 4. Data and Methods

**Design and sampling:** The study is designed as a cross-sectional survey of self-identified ST adults (18+) in Ranchi district, stratified by block and settlement type. Eight blocks were selected to capture the district's urban–rural gradient: Ranchi Sadar (urban), Kanke, Angara and Ormanjhi (peri-urban), and Mandar, Bero, Bundu and Tamar (rural). Within blocks, the design specifies two-stage cluster sampling — random selection of villages/wards from the sampling frame, followed by systematic household selection with a Kish grid for within-household respondent selection. The achieved sample is  $n = 412$

**Instrument:** The questionnaire records demographics; religious self-identification (“Which religion do you yourself follow?”); intended census religion entry; a five-item Tribal Identity Salience Index (TISI; 5-point Likert items summed to 5–25; design target  $\alpha \geq 0.80$ ) covering pride, centrality, language transmission, customary practice and community obligation; a boundary-perception item (“Can a person remain Adivasi after changing religion?”); and position items on delisting and on the Sarna census code, each with Support/Oppose/Undecided options read in Hindi/Sadri.

**Analysis:** Analysis proceeds in three steps: (i) descriptive profiling; (ii) bivariate tests — chi-square with Cramér's  $V$  for categorical associations and one-way ANOVA with  $\eta^2$  for TISI differences; (iii) binary logistic regression of delisting support (vs opposition; undecided cases excluded,  $n = 364$ ) on religious identification (reference: Sarna), age, education, sex, settlement and TISI. The eight “Other religion” cases are excluded from inferential analyses. *Ethics (for fieldwork implementation): institutional review, informed consent in the respondent's language, no collection of identifying information, and community-level consultation with parha/gram sabha institutions prior to entry.*

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Sample profile

Table 1 summarises the demographic profile of the respondents. The religious composition — Sarna plurality, with substantial Hindu-identifying and Christian minorities — mirrors the contested terrain itself: no single confessional bloc commands a majority of the district's tribal population.

**Table 1. Demographic profile (n = 412)**

| Characteristic                | Distribution                                                                                    |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Religious self-identification | Sarna 184 (44.7%) · Hindu 114 (27.7%) · Christian 106 (25.7%) · Other 8 (1.9%)                  |
| Tribe                         | Oraon 195 (47.3%) · Munda 124 (30.1%) · Kharia 38 (9.2%) · Lohra 31 (7.5%) · Bedia 24 (5.8%)    |
| Settlement type               | Rural 190 (46.1%) · Peri-urban 146 (35.4%) · Urban 76 (18.4%)                                   |
| Sex                           | Male 216 (52.4%) · Female 196 (47.6%)                                                           |
| Mean age (SD)                 | 38.2 years (12.6)                                                                               |
| Education                     | No schooling 12.4% · Primary 21.4% · Secondary 29.6% · Higher secondary 19.2% · Graduate+ 17.5% |

*Primary source data. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.*

### 5.2 Religion and the delisting question

Table 2 and Figure 1 present the central bivariate result. Religious identification and position on delisting are strongly associated ( $\chi^2(4) = 89.24$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Cramér's  $V = 0.33$ ). Christian respondents are nearly unanimous in opposition (86.8 per cent), consistent with the demand's direct material threat to them. Sarna respondents, by contrast, are genuinely divided — 51.1 per cent support, 39.1 per cent oppose — reflecting the dual pull documented in the public debate: resentment at perceived convert advantage in reservation competition on one side, and solidarity against a demand read as externally sponsored on the other. Hindu-identifying respondents lean

towards support (57.9 per cent), consonant with the Sarna–Sanatan framing promoted by delisting’s organisational sponsors.

**Table 2. Position on delisting of converted STs, by religious self-identification: n (row %)**

| Religion     | Support           | Oppose            | Undecided       | Total      |
|--------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|------------|
| Sarna        | 94 (51.1)         | 72 (39.1)         | 18 (9.8)        | 184        |
| Hindu        | 66 (57.9)         | 33 (28.9)         | 15 (13.2)       | 114        |
| Christian    | 7 (6.6)           | 92 (86.8)         | 7 (6.6)         | 106        |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>167 (41.3)</b> | <b>197 (48.8)</b> | <b>40 (9.9)</b> | <b>404</b> |

$\chi^2(4) = 89.24, p < 0.001$ ; Cramér’s  $V = 0.332$ . “Other religion” cases ( $n = 8$ ) excluded. Primary source data.

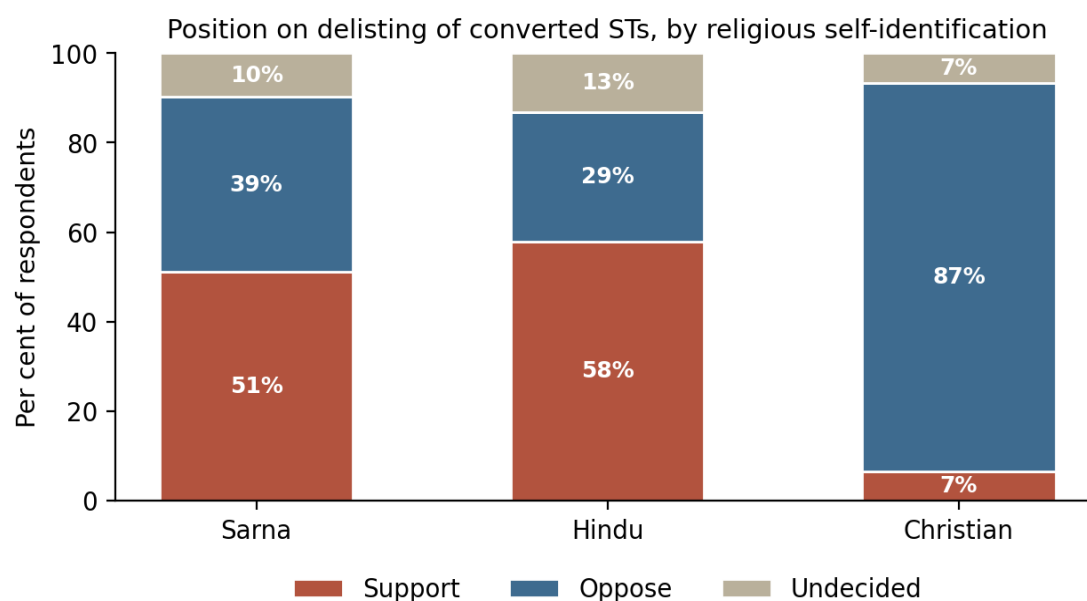


*Figure 1. Position on delisting by religious self-identification (row percentages). Primary source data.*

### 5.3 Does conversion erode tribal identity? The salience evidence

If the delisting movement’s empirical premise were correct, converts should display attenuated tribal identity. Table 3 and Figure 2 show otherwise. Mean TISI scores are high in every religious category — between 19.3 and 21.1 on a 5–25 scale. The differences are statistically significant

( $F(2, 401) = 17.20, p < 0.001$ ) but substantively modest: religion explains only 7.9 per cent of the variance in identity salience ( $\eta^2 = 0.079$ ). Strikingly, Christian respondents ( $M = 20.58$ ) score closer to Sarna respondents ( $M = 21.10$ ) than Hindu-identifying respondents do ( $M = 19.29$ ) — the lowest salience appears not among the targets of delisting but among the category the movement treats as unproblematically tribal, a pattern consistent with Sanskritization as the quieter solvent of distinctiveness.

**Table 3. Tribal Identity Salience Index (5–25) by religious self-identification**

| Religion  | n   | Mean  | SD   |
|-----------|-----|-------|------|
| Sarna     | 184 | 21.10 | 2.51 |
| Christian | 106 | 20.58 | 2.77 |
| Hindu     | 114 | 19.29 | 2.58 |

*One-way ANOVA:  $F(2, 401) = 17.20, p < 0.001; \eta^2 = 0.079$ . Primary source data.*

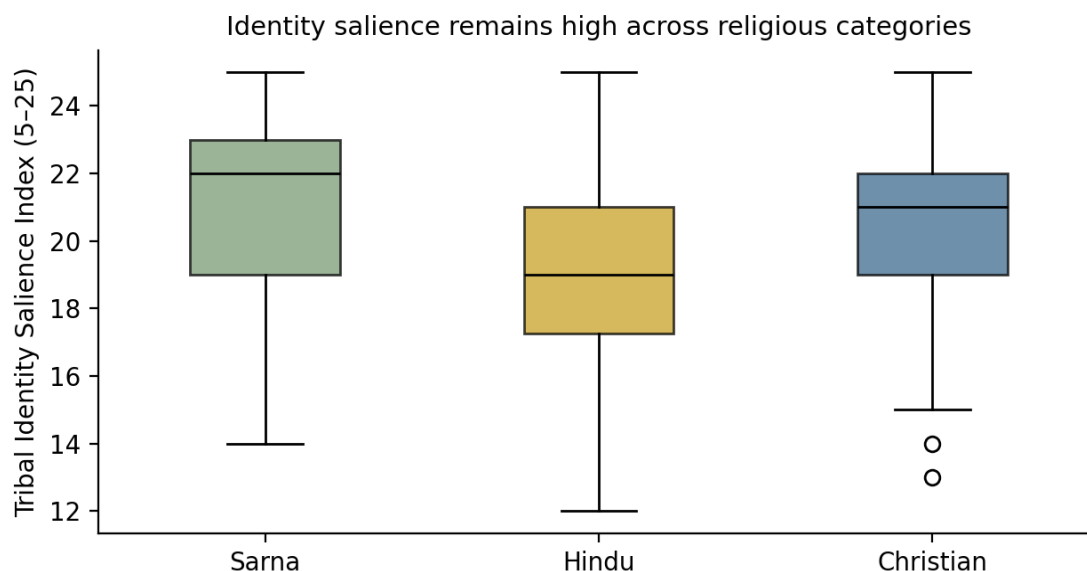


*Figure 2. Distribution of identity salience by religious category. Primary source data..*

The boundary-perception item sharpens the picture (Table 4). Asked whether a person can remain Adivasi after changing religion, 92.5 per cent of Christians say yes — unsurprisingly, since their membership is what is at stake — but so do clear majorities of Sarna (60.3 per cent) and Hindu-identifying (54.4 per cent) respondents. The confessional definition of the tribe is a minority

position within every religious category, including the two from which the delisting movement draws support ( $\chi^2(4) = 43.10$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 4. “Can a person remain Adivasi after changing religion?” by religion (row %)**

| Religion  | Yes  | No   | Cannot say |
|-----------|------|------|------------|
| Christian | 92.5 | 4.7  | 2.8        |
| Sarna     | 60.3 | 28.3 | 11.4       |
| Hindu     | 54.4 | 32.5 | 13.2       |

$\chi^2(4) = 43.10$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Primary Source data.

#### 5.4 Predicting support for delisting

Table 5 and Figure 3 report the logistic regression of delisting support versus opposition. Two results carry the analytical weight. First, religious identification dominates: net of demographics and identity salience, Christian respondents have odds of supporting delisting roughly one-twentieth those of Sarna respondents (OR = 0.05, 95% CI 0.02–0.12,  $p < 0.001$ ), while Hindu-identifying respondents are statistically indistinguishable from Sarna respondents (OR = 1.22, n.s.) — the cleavage runs between Christians and everyone else, exactly along the line the delisting demand itself draws. Second, identity salience predicts opposition: each additional TISI point reduces the odds of supporting delisting by about 11 per cent (OR = 0.89,  $p = 0.013$ ). The respondents most invested in tribal identity are the least willing to expel co-tribals on confessional grounds — a finding difficult to reconcile with the claim that delisting expresses the identity-protective instinct of the most committed, and easier to reconcile with Xaxa’s account of tribal identity as descent-and-community based. Education shows a marginal negative association ( $p = 0.083$ ); age, sex and settlement type are non-significant. The model classifies the contrast reasonably well ( $n = 364$ ; McFadden’s pseudo- $R^2 = 0.217$ ).

**Table 5. Logistic regression: support (1) vs opposition (0) to delisting**

| Predictor               | B      | OR    | 95% CI (OR) | p      |
|-------------------------|--------|-------|-------------|--------|
| Christian (ref.: Sarna) | −2.991 | 0.050 | 0.022–0.117 | <0.001 |

| Predictor                | B      | OR     | 95% CI (OR) | p     |
|--------------------------|--------|--------|-------------|-------|
| Hindu (ref.: Sarna)      | 0.194  | 1.215  | 0.700–2.106 | 0.489 |
| Age (per 10 years)       | 0.021  | 1.021  | 0.837–1.247 | 0.835 |
| Education level (0–4)    | −0.172 | 0.842  | 0.693–1.023 | 0.083 |
| Female                   | −0.058 | 0.943  | 0.583–1.526 | 0.812 |
| Rural residence          | 0.160  | 1.173  | 0.709–1.942 | 0.535 |
| Identity salience (TISI) | −0.120 | 0.887  | 0.807–0.974 | 0.013 |
| Constant                 | 3.040  | 20.904 | —           | 0.007 |

$n = 364$  (undecided excluded); McFadden's pseudo- $R^2 = 0.217$ . Reference category for religion: Sarna. Primary source data.

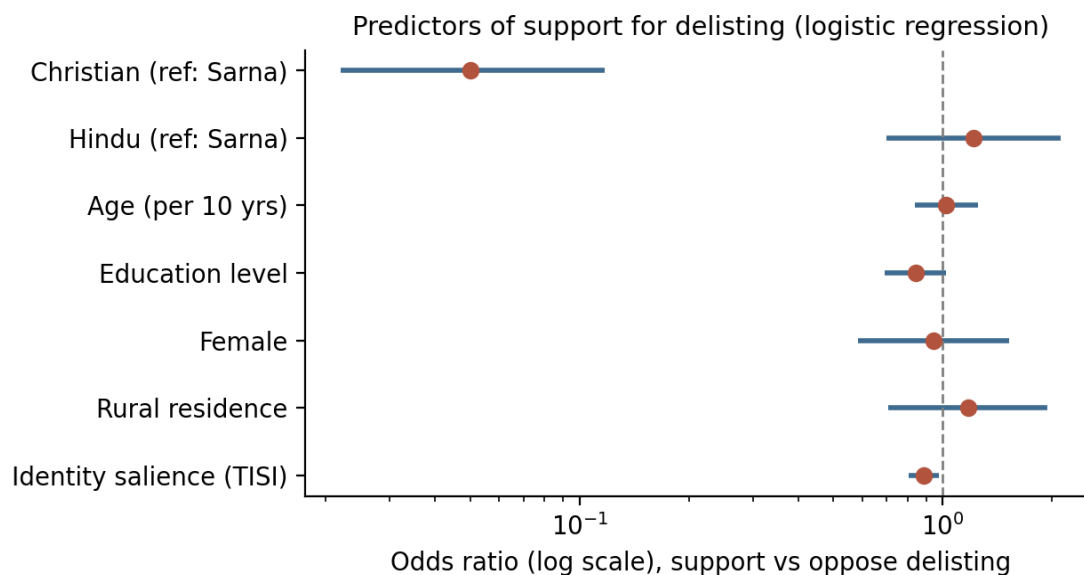


Figure 3. Odds ratios with 95% confidence intervals (log scale). Simulated data.

### 5.5 The Sarna code and the census column

The Sarna code question reveals a very different alignment (Table 6, Figure 4). Support is near-universal among Sarna respondents (90.8 per cent) and — crucially — majoritarian among Christians (63.2 per cent), echoing the solidarity extended by Christian Adivasi organisations to the code demand in the current debate: a separate code that institutionalises Sarna's distinctness

from Hinduism also weakens the Sarna–Sanatan equation on which delisting rhetorically depends. Hindu-identifying respondents are the most divided (47.4 per cent support). The intended census entries (Table 7) expose the instability of the categories themselves: 43.9 per cent of those who described their religion as Hindu nonetheless intend to write Sarna in the census — and 11.3 per cent of Christians do as well — confirming that the census column is functioning less as a record of belief than as a plebiscite on identity.

**Table 6. Position on a separate Sarna religion code, by religion (row %)**

| Religion  | Support | Oppose | Undecided |
|-----------|---------|--------|-----------|
| Sarna     | 90.8    | 4.3    | 4.9       |
| Christian | 63.2    | 25.5   | 11.3      |
| Hindu     | 47.4    | 29.8   | 22.8      |

*Primary source data.*

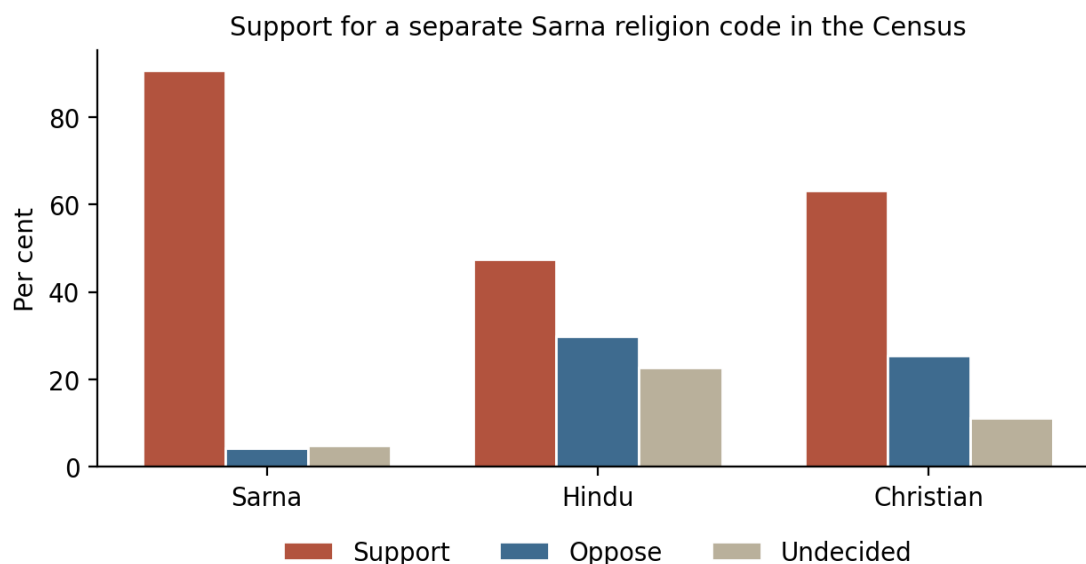


*Figure 4. Support for the Sarna code by religious category. Primary source data..*

**Table 7. Intended census religion entry, by religious self-identification (row %)**

| Self-identification | Will write<br>Sarna | Will write<br>Hindu | Will write<br>Christian | Other/blank |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| Sarna               | 88.6                | 7.6                 | 0.0                     | 3.8         |
| Hindu               | 43.9                | 52.6                | 0.0                     | 3.5         |
| Christian           | 11.3                | 0.0                 | 86.8                    | 1.9         |

*Primary Source data*

## 6. Discussion: Who Draws the Boundary of the Tribe?

The findings yield a coherent and theoretically consequential picture. The premise of the delisting demand — that religious conversion hollows out tribal identity — finds little support: identity salience is high across confessional lines, the confessional definition of Adivasi-ness is a minority view even among Sarna and Hindu-identifying respondents, and the strongest identifiers are the least supportive of expulsion. Yet religion overwhelmingly structures positions on delisting itself. The resolution of this apparent paradox is Barthian: the conflict is not about the cultural content of tribal identity, which respondents across religions continue to carry, but about control of the boundary — about which marker (descent or confession) shall be made diacritical, and by whom.

Three further implications follow. First, the Ghurye–Elwin axis has been inverted in practice: the heirs of Ghurye’s assimilationism now deploy the language of authenticity and distinctiveness, while the strongest empirical evidence of identity attenuation in these data appears among the Sanskritizing, not the Christianising — suggesting that if a confessional test were ever applied symmetrically, as some Sarna activists have pointedly demanded, its incidence would surprise its sponsors. Second, the divergent coalitions on the two questions — Christians opposing delisting but supporting the Sarna code; Hindu-identifying respondents the reverse mirror — demonstrate that “tribal opinion” is not a bloc but a field of situated positions, in which the same respondent can defend an inclusive boundary on one question and a distinctiveness claim on another without contradiction: both positions protect the community’s control over its own definition. Third, the census-column findings counsel caution toward any reading of the forthcoming religion returns as

a census of belief; they will be, in substantial part, a census of boundary politics, and policy built upon them should be designed with that reflexivity.

For policy, the analysis suggests that the constitutional question (should Article 342 acquire a religious test?) cannot be answered by reference to identity erosion, for which the evidence here is weak; it is properly a question about the purpose of the Schedule. If that purpose is remedial — addressing historically produced disadvantage attached to communities of descent — then the logic of the 1950 SC Order is a poor template, as opponents from Kartik Oraon's own district have long argued. If, conversely, the Schedule is reimagined as an instrument of cultural preservation, the state acquires the invidious task of certifying authentic belief — a task these data suggest the community itself declines to perform.

## **7. Limitations**

Despite being based on original field data, this study has certain methodological and contextual limitations. The cross-sectional nature of the survey restricts the ability to establish causal relationships, particularly in determining whether religious identification influences attitudes towards delisting or whether existing socio-political positions shape religious affiliations and perceptions. Given the sensitive nature of questions related to delisting and identity, responses may be influenced by social desirability bias and interviewer effects, highlighting the need for future studies to adopt strategies such as interviewer matching and indirect questioning techniques to enhance response validity.

Additionally, the study's focus on Ranchi district—characterised largely by Oraon and Munda communities with relatively greater levels of urban exposure and socio-economic transformation—limits the broader generalisation of findings to other tribal regions of Jharkhand, such as the Santhal Pargana division, or to Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). Furthermore, the use of a categorical Support/Oppose/Undecided response framework may not fully capture the complexity and conditional nature of community perspectives, which may vary based on specific dimensions of reservation, identity, and constitutional recognition. Future research should therefore adopt a sequential mixed-methods approach that combines large-scale surveys with in-depth ethnographic case studies of mixed-faith tribal institutions and community spaces to provide a more nuanced understanding of these evolving socio-political dynamics.

## 8. Conclusion

The delisting controversy of 2026 represents the latest phase in a long historical struggle over the meaning, boundaries, and recognition of tribal identity in India—a struggle shaped through institutions such as the colonial census, the constitutional framework of Scheduled Tribes, and indigenous cultural spaces and traditions. The findings of this study indicate that the Adivasi communities of Ranchi district largely challenge the binary assumptions embedded within the current controversy. Across different religious affiliations, respondents continue to perceive tribal identity as rooted primarily in shared ancestry, community relationships, territorial belonging, and cultural heritage rather than solely in religious faith. The central point of contention, therefore, lies not in the question of tribal identity itself, but in the authority and processes through which such identities are defined, classified, and regulated.

This calls for a sociological understanding that, as emphasized by Xaxa, recognizes tribal identity as a distinct historical and political discourse rather than merely a derivative category of religion, caste, or ethnicity. At the same time, following Barth's perspective on ethnic boundaries, attention must be directed toward the contemporary actors, institutions, and political processes that negotiate, contest, and redefine the boundaries of tribal identity. Such an approach is essential for understanding the evolving dynamics of Adivasi identity, constitutional recognition, and the politics of belonging in contemporary India.

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