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Abstract

Drawing upon ethnographic research among Adivasi (indigenous) Christian communities in Jharkhand, India, this dissertation offers a critique of the concept of context as it functions in contextual theology. Although contextual theologians have long criticized universalizing tendencies in theology for overlooking the resources and perspectives of diverse communities (going so far as to argue, in some cases, that context ought to determine theology), they have failed to apply that critical lens to the notion of context itself. But context, I argue, is not a given; those who ostensibly share the same context may experience, interpret, and engage with it differently. Through an examination of contested aspects of the Adivasi context—including the disconnect between theologians and lay Adivasi Christians, a schism within the Lutheran Adivasi church, conflicts between Christian Adivasis and those who continue to practice their traditional Sarna religion, and the role of outsiders in shaping Adivasi theology—I point out the constructive work involved in making sense of contexts, highlighting ways in which the hermeneutical task of delineating and situating oneself within a context may be shaped by one's theological commitments. Each chapter challenges a prevailing assumption about contextual theology in light of the indeterminacy of context: the extent to which it emerges as a grassroots phenomenon, its capacity to embrace difference, its potential to create interfaith harmony, and the necessity of belonging to a context in order to contribute to the development of its contextual theology. Although a critical perspective on context destabilizes traditional approaches to contextual theology, I argue that it can strengthen the field, helping theologians to engage with rapidly changing contexts, embrace and learn from diversity, honor the incarnational nature of Christian faith, and expand our understanding of the role of theology in shaping contexts.

A Note on Language

Given that my primary audience is theologians, who I assume are largely unfamiliar with the Adivasi context and Indian languages, I have transliterated foreign words without using diacritics. When citing others who do use diacritics, however, I have left the diacritics as in the original. I have also included diacritics in quotations from other texts and when transliterating bibliographic details for Hindi publications. Throughout the text I italicize foreign words except when they have been incorporated into the English language or when they appear as titles, names of organizations, festivals, or gatherings. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

Introduction

The Rev. Dr. Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta took my notebook and drew a triangle in it. "See, this is a pyramidic system of reality," he said. He divided the triangle into three sections. "God is at the top, then humans, then nature at the bottom," he explained. "It's a hierarchical structure of reality." Then he drew a circle. "For Adivasis," he said, pointing to three different points on the circumference of the circle, "here is God, here are humans, and here is nature. There is no structure, no hierarchy. It's open-ended." He drew a dot in the middle of the circle. "And there is no center either; that also leads to hierarchy. For Adivasis there is no center vs. margins concept: all are interrelated. God is dependent on humans, humans are dependent on nature, etc." He paused and looked me in the eyes with passion and conviction. "This is why we need Adivasi theology. Because for Adivasis, reality is understood in terms of community."[1]

Kerketta is a Christian Adivasi theologian, trying to revive his people's traditional worldview and motivate them to be politically engaged in struggles for their rights. His people are "Adivasis," the original inhabitants of India. At least, that is the way they tell their story and why they have embraced the term *adi-vasi* (which means "original dwellers"). The Indian government, on the other hand, tries to avoid the matter of indigeneity altogether and refers to Adivasis as "tribal people" instead.

Kerketta lives in Ranchi, the capital of the state of Jharkhand, in the heart of the central tribal belt of India. The region, traditionally known as Chotanagpur, has long been a leader in the struggle for Adivasi rights. Kerketta praises the early leaders of the Adivasi Mahasabha and the Jharkhand Movement who worked for the creation of a separate tribal state. Today, however, Kerketta laments, Adivasis—especially Christian Adivasis, he notes with dismay—are

[1] Interview, September 6, 2016.

disengaged from the political process. They only care about heaven, he says, and they ignore Jesus' command to help the poor and oppressed in the here and now.

Adivasi theologians are trying to change that. Drawing upon traditional Adivasi resources, they seek to articulate a relevant and liberating theology for their community. The implications of these two criteria (and the ambiguity that the concepts themselves entail at times) will become clearer as I flesh them out over the course of this dissertation, but the basic rationale behind them is this: The Gospel, which is the good news of God's love and mercy made known through the person and work of Jesus Christ, must be relevant to the life situation of Adivasis if it is, indeed, to be good news *for them*. And this good news must be liberating, or freeing, in order for it to come as *good* news. We will return to these themes of relevance and liberation repeatedly, in part because Adivasi theologians themselves frequently invoke these criteria but also because of their generative potential for enriching contextual theological more broadly.

In contrast to those who discuss the freedom of the Gospel in individualistic or psychological terms, Adivasi theologians tend to highlight the social and political dimensions of the Gospel by appealing to the idea of liberation from injustice and oppression. Kerketta, for example, focuses on the environment and the close relationship that Adivasis, as indigenous people, have had with the land. He is convinced that the Gospel demands a return to the traditional Adivasi worldview and lifestyle of living in harmony with all creation. That is the only way, he argues, that humankind will be able to save the earth, our souls, and society. Kerketta's eco-theology is relevant to Adivasis because it draws upon their traditional culture to propose solutions to contemporary problems, and it is liberating because it affirms their culture and advocates for a more sustainable future.

Adivasi theologians view their work as a type of contextual theology. In his book, *Adivasi Theology: Towards a Relevant Christian Theology for the Jharkhandi Adivasis*, Kerketta first describes a variety of "theologies from the margins"—Latin American Liberation theology, Black theology, Dalit theology, Feminist theology, and Tribal theology—before moving on to his proposal for an analogous theology that will be relevant and liberating for his own Adivasi context.[2] This pattern of situating one's work reflects the way in which many theologians have developed their contextual theologies: they study the tenets of contextual and liberation theology (which are defined in opposition to "classical" or "Western" theology) and then apply those principles to their local contexts, formulating their own contextual theologies.

Kerketta's frustration with his fellow Christians who fail to appreciate his contextual theology, however, reveals that somewhere in his process of trying to formulate a relevant and liberating theology for the Jharkhandi Adivasis there has been a disconnect. Despite the many challenges facing Adivasis, constructive theological projects that have drawn upon the theory and theology of contextual and liberation theology have had little success in motivating and inspiring Christian Adivasis.

This is not only a problem for Adivasi theology; contextual theologians elsewhere have also encountered resistance or apathy from their fellow Christians. Josef Estermann, for example, describes the continued presence of "de-contextualized forms of theology" in Asia:

> Such as in other continents, we find actually in Asia, alongside with contextual theologies rooted in the concrete situation of people and their needs, many de-contextualized forms of theology which continue with a Westernized form of doing theology and building up the church. There is often the situation of two parallel paradigms of theology and church: On the one hand, you can find contextual theologies committed with the poor, the excluded and the marginalized (*Minjung*-, *Dalit*-, *Hwajeng*-, *Waterbuffalo*-theology), on the other hand there persist in Asia conservative theologies, either on the Protestant or

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[2] Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta, *Adivasi Theology: Towards a Relevant Christian Theology for the Jharkhandi Adivasis* (Ranchi: Department of Adivasi Theology and Cultural Research at Gossner Theological College, 2009).

> Catholic side, which do neither worry about misery and discrimination, nor about religious pluralism and cultural self-determinism.[3]

Estermann attributes the continued resistance to (or lack of interest in) contextual theology to "de-contextualized forms of theology." Those who continue to subscribe to a Westernized faith, he alleges, ignore the needs of others and fail to engage with the challenges that face their communities.

Setting aside the question of the accuracy of Estermann's sweeping generalizations about "de-contextualized" forms of theology, his comments illustrate the tendency among contextual theologians to assume that those who are "rooted" in their contexts will interpret and respond to them in a certain way. Attention to context, on Estermann's account, will lead Christians to reject Westernized and conservative theologies, to care for the poor and marginalized, to embrace religious pluralism, and to reclaim their traditional culture. To assume that this would be the result regardless of the particularities of the context in question, however, reveals that contextual theologians view "context" as a surprisingly stable and predictable concept. Unlike theology, which contextual theologians argue is inevitably shaped (if not "determined")[4] by experience and social location, context often appears in their work as a given. Although contextual theologians recognize that local factors—things like languages, culture, and systems of government—vary from context to context (which is, after all, the rationale for contextual theology), they seem to

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[3] Josef Estermann, "Like a Rainbow or a Bunch of Flowers," *The Pacific Journal of Theology* 2, no. 30 (2003): 15 (emphasis in original).

[4] In her overview of contextual theology, Angie Pears defines contextual theology as entailing an explicit acknowledgment of the role that context plays in influencing and even determining theology. "As a general rule 'contextual theology' is used here to refer to that theology which *explicitly* places the recognition of the contextual nature of theology at the forefront of the theological process. Such theology understands all Christian theology as being influenced and indeed determined by the context of those engaged in the theological enterprise, but recognizes that not all Christian theologies explicitly acknowledge or signify this in their theologies." Angie Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1 (emphasis in original).

assume that the people who engage with those contextual factors will experience, interpret, and respond to them in a similar manner.[5]

But that is not the case in the Adivasi context. There are many competing interpretations of the context, even among Adivasis themselves. Are they "tribals"? Are they "indigenous"? What is the relationship between their ancestors' way of life and the modern challenges they face? How important are tribal languages? How should they think about the relationship between their traditional religion (Sarna) and Christianity? Are outsiders *dikus* (exploitative oppressors) or sources of inspiration that Adivasis should emulate? How should they maintain their culture in the face of urbanization, education, and geographical mobility? Adivasis do not agree on the answers to these questions.

Nevertheless, Adivasi theologians, drawing upon the framework of contextual theology, tend to present the Adivasi context as a series of facts, which, taken together, provide a firm foundation for theology. Clinging to their own dogmas (which include matters such as the necessity of using one's mother tongue or the assumption that contextualization will lead to interfaith harmony), they sometimes overlook the contemporary experiences of their fellow Adivasis and the variety of interpretations they have of the world they inhabit.

Consider the experience of Esther, a young Adivasi woman and student at Gossner Theological College, an ecumenical seminary in Ranchi run by the Gossner Evangelical

[5] This is the case even when "contextualization" is defined in narrower terms as entailing a critical stance toward power structures. On Estermann's account, for example, contextual theology is best understood not simply as theology that is shaped by contextual factors but "that kind of theologizing which is aware of underlying structures of cultural, social, political, and economic domination on the one hand and marginalization and dependence on the other," and it is in light of this definition that he categorizes certain other theological approaches as "de-contextualized." Yet simply attending to power dynamics within and across contexts does not guarantee a uniform interpretation of and response to the many ways in which power operates. Through our analysis of Adivasi theology in this dissertation, we will see that Adivasis themselves have divergent perspectives on the various power structures and forms of oppression that they experience. Estermann, "Like a Rainbow or a Bunch of Flowers," 6.

Lutheran Church (GELC).[6] Unlike most students who came from village backgrounds, Esther was raised in the city of Ranchi and grew up attending English medium schools. She never learned the Kurukh language, which, as a member of the Oraon tribe, she regards as her "mother tongue." Esther wanted to serve in the church but felt insecure due to her lack of knowledge of her mother tongue. One day, however, a group of Norwegians visited the seminary to lead a workshop in English. The principal had forgotten to arrange for a translator, but Esther knew English well from her school days and was able to translate the presentation into Hindi (a regional language that transcends tribal boundaries) so her fellow students could understand. When I saw her later that day she was bursting with joy: "I thought I had nothing to contribute to my church because I did not know my own language," she told me. "But God has showed me today that I can serve him with my knowledge of English!" For Esther, a theology that tied Adivasi dignity to the use of traditional tribal languages was neither relevant and nor liberating; rather, it was through the use of English—the language of foreign oppressors—that she realized her dignity and was able to contribute to the well-being of her fellow Adivasis.

The problem I am pointing to is that Adivasi theologians seek to draw upon their culture's traditional resources to shed light upon the Gospel's implications for their contemporary situation, but their reliance upon the theoretical framework of contextual theology can obscure the diversity of ways in which Adivasis themselves understand and engage with their context. This is not just a problem for Adivasi theology: contextual theology in general is grounded in a particular hermeneutical approach that, while offering many valuable insights, is nevertheless a foreign discourse that can overshadow local ways of interpreting and relating to

[6] The church and its seminary are named after Fr. Johannes Gossner, a Bavarian priest who converted to Protestantism and established the Gossner Mission Society, which sent the first missionaries to Jharkhand in 1845.

the context. Paradoxically, therefore, contextual theology may undercut itself by interpreting contexts in ways that those who inhabit them find neither relevant nor liberating.

A critique of the concept of context as it functions in contextual theology, however, can easily fall into the same trap of assuming a false universality if it does not engage with the concrete realities of a particular context and the diverse ways in which those who engage with those realities interpret them. Hence, in this dissertation, I ground my critique in a specific variety of contextual theology: Adivasi theology.

This is an unorthodox choice, I acknowledge, given that I am not an Adivasi. One of the foundational assumptions of contextual theology is that those who belong to a context must lead the way in formulating theology that is relevant and liberating for that particular context. While the concept of "belonging" warrants additional explication and has its own pitfalls, the impetus behind this assumption makes sense: as a white American woman, my experiences and perspectives are very different than those of Adivasis. Thus, it is important to clarify that I am not attempting to do Adivasi theology in this dissertation. While I hope that Adivasi theologians will read this dissertation and benefit from my observations, the primary contribution of this dissertation is a critique of the way we think about contextual theology in general.

I have chosen to focus on the Adivasi context because it is here that I first realized the failure of contextual theology to engage critically with the concept of context. Although I suspect one could find conflicting interpretations of context in any setting, the complex interweaving of hermeneutical frameworks through which Adivasi Christians make sense of their identity and context offers a particularly poignant foundation for theological reflection on the indeterminacy of context. It may also be easier for my non-Adivasi readers, as it was for me, to ponder the indeterminacy of the concept of context by considering something foreign; after all, the more

committed one is to a particular interpretation of one's own context, the harder it is to acknowledge the legitimacy of alternative perspectives.

Yet, although I am not an Adivasi and this dissertation does not aspire to be an instance of Adivasi theology, I must acknowledge that there is also a way in which aspects of the Adivasi context have become a part of my own context as a result of my experiences among and deep friendships with Adivasis. It has now been more than a decade since I first arrived in Jharkhand. I did an internship with the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (GELC) during the 2012-2013 academic year and then returned on three separate occasions between 2016 and 2018 for my dissertation research, traveling extensively within Jharkhand and neighboring districts of Odisha and Chhattisgarh for ethnographic fieldwork. I interviewed theologians, church leaders, youth, scholars, activists, and practitioners of the traditional Sarna religion. I was not simply an observer but also a participant: I taught classes at Gossner Theological College, edited manuscripts for publication, preached at worship services and cottage prayer meetings, learned traditional dance steps to join in the festivities on special celebrations, organized a conference on Adivasi theology, and attended numerous lectures and programs. Yet, as an outsider, I could also ask questions and transgress communal boundaries (between the GELC and the NWGELC, between Christian and Sarna Adivasis, and between foreign guests and their Adivasi hosts) that my Adivasi companions could not. I have celebrated with dear friends as they got married, ordained, and became parents; I have mourned as beloved elders passed away; and I have critically re-examined many of my own assumptions about God and the world as a result of encountering others who thought and lived differently. In short, my faith and theological reflection has been indelibly marked by the insights, concerns, and struggles of the Adivasis I have come to know and love.

These insights, concerns, and struggles are what motivate and animate this dissertation. Instinctively, I have adopted the sort of inductive methodology for which contextual theologians advocate. Instead of starting with logic and propositions or with an overview of existing literature, I begin with stories and experiences from my fieldwork. I then turn to secondary literature from scholars in fields such as anthropology, history, and political science in order to make sense of the diverse perspectives on the Adivasi context that I have encountered. Reflecting upon these conflicts and tensions in Adivasi society, I draw out theological insights that illuminate the indeterminacy of context and the theological nature of competing constructions of context.

Although some of the details of Adivasi life that I provide may not appear strictly necessary in order to warrant the claims that I make, these details are often the very matters that animate the conflicts and tensions that I describe, and I want my readers to have a robust picture of the aspects of Adivasi culture and history that I discuss. In other words, although my argument is theological, my method is rooted in ethnography. I am also aware, however, that those who are familiar with the Adivasi context may find my account lacking in places, wishing I would elaborate further on the aspects of context with which they are most concerned. I have sought to strike a balance in this regard, cognizant of the fact that the way we describe contexts reflects the interlocuters we anticipate, and my hope is that this dissertation may be of interest to a diverse audience.

At the outset, I want to emphasize that I offer my critique in service of Adivasi theology and the wider project of contextualization. I believe that the Gospel must be connected to our lives in the present moment if it is to become truly “good news.” I appreciate contextual theology’s emphasis on the retrieval and affirmation of aspects of cultures that were long

demeaned by colonial powers and foreign missionaries. I, too, want to empower Christians to be engaged in political processes and the struggle for self-determination. And, with regard to Adivasi theology in particular, I believe that it has great potential not only to invigorate the faith of Adivasis themselves but also to teach outsiders, such as myself, new ways of understanding God and the world. In short, I am convinced that relevance and liberation are worthy pursuits for theology. However, the ability of contextual theologians to succeed at these tasks depends upon their willingness to reflect on the complexities of their contexts and the variety of ways in which people make sense of and engage with those contexts.

I recognize that it can be challenging to set aside one's assumptions and see the world from other perspectives, to move from the beauty of a neatly woven theory to the messiness of real life. I began the research for this project, initially, by doing the exact opposite of what I am advocating here. I knew Adivasi Christians faced many hardships, and I wanted to find out what gave them hope for the future, as an ethnographic case study in a larger theological project on hope and sanctification. I gradually realized that I was framing my questions in light of my own preconceived notions rather than listening to the voices of Adivasis and following their own concerns. This dissertation reflects my own process of moving from the general to the particular and letting go of my ideas about what mattered in the Adivasi context in order to hear what the people themselves found significant in their context.

The more I listened, the more I realized how complex the Adivasi context was. People often spoke of *the* Adivasi context, but as I listened to Adivasis from different tribes, denominations, generations, socio-economic classes, and geographical regions, I was overwhelmed by the dizzying array of factors that shaped each person's unique experience in and perception of their context. The generalizations required to make a contextual theology in this

place hang together as a coherent unit ended up overlooking many of the gifts of the local community as well as the challenges that Adivasis are facing today. Yet it is precisely these sorts of gifts and challenges that animate projects of contextual theology, making them relevant and liberating.

Thus, I gradually came to the realization that many Adivasi theologians were making the same mistake that I was: they came with the theoretical and theological commitments of contextual theology and then sought to make sense of the Adivasi context in light of that framework. But certain aspects of the Adivasi context made this challenging. Was the relevant context their shared life together as Adivasis or the particularities of life as a member of an individual tribe? Why would non-Christian (Sarna) Adivasis be upset by Christians embracing aspects of their traditional culture? What beliefs and practices were necessary to sustain their identity as Adivasis and warrant their claim to belong to this particular context? How should they deal with aspects of their identity and their faith that had been shaped by non-Adivasis, including *sadans* (non-tribal people who have lived alongside Adivasis in the region for centuries), *dikus* (exploitative outsiders), German missionaries, indigenous peoples from other parts of the world, and contemporary global ecumenical partners?

Examining the multiplicity of perspectives and experiences present within the Adivasi context, I realized that the various ways in which Adivasis have engaged with their context reflected deep (and often divergent) theological commitments. Ideas about the relationship between unity and diversity, culture and religion, and self and others are central to theological reflection, and disagreements about how to negotiate these matters are often tied to differing faith commitments. These sites of conflict and tension are precisely the places where contextual theology is most needed. To ignore them or to act as though there are not legitimate differences

of opinion at play—to fail to listen to the voices of others—does a disservice to faith and lays an insecure foundation for Christian mission and ministry.

I must reiterate that this is not just a problem in Adivasi theology; it plagues contextual theology as a whole. But the extent of the problem—and the possibilities for its remediation—cannot be determined in the abstract. It is only in and through attention to particular contexts—and to the variety of ways in which those who inhabit the contexts make sense of them—that we can begin to expand our understanding of context for the sake of contextual theology more generally.

Thus, through analyzing contested aspects of the Adivasi context, each chapter in this dissertation challenges a key assumption of contextual theology. Chapter one introduces Adivasis and Adivasi theology, highlighting the gap between the Adivasi theology espoused by theologians and the faith of ordinary Christian Adivasis. Although contextual theology envisions itself as a grassroots phenomenon, among Adivasis it has become an elite discourse informed by theoretical frameworks formulated outside of the Adivasi context. I argue that contextual theology, with its established hermeneutical approach to contexts, can get in the way of attending to the diversity of perspectives that exist within a context, thereby limiting theology's potential to be relevant and liberating.

Chapter two examines a schism among Adivasi Lutherans. The Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (GELC) and the North Western Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (NWGELC) disagree on whether to prioritize a shared Adivasi identity that transcends tribes or to focus on the particularities of the specific tribes to which they belong. Explicitly justifying their positions on theological grounds, they demonstrate how theology plays a role in divergent interpretations of a context. I argue that their respective stances also reveal the inability of

contextual theology to fulfil its mission of attending to neglected voices: all constructions of context—even those that focus on the experiences of a smaller, more precisely defined group—entail some degree of abstraction and generalization, resulting in an erasure of difference and potentially creating new axes of marginalization and oppression.

Chapter three discusses controversies between Christian and Sarna Adivasis that have been sparked by Christian attempts at contextualization, including a controversial Bible translation and a statue of the Virgin Mary wearing a traditional Adivasi sari. Contextual theology embraces religious pluralism, and so theologians generally assume that contextualization will lead to interfaith harmony. But this has not been the experience of Adivasi Christians who have seen increased conflict in response to their efforts at contextualization. I argue that these conflicts stem from conflicting interpretations of the relationship between religion and culture. Sarna Adivasis, who continue to practice their ancestral faith, see religion and culture as inseparable and thus reject Christian efforts at contextualization, even as they engage in their own sort of contextualization, adapting their ancient faith to meet the needs of the modern world.

Chapter four considers the various roles played by outsiders in the Adivasi construction of self and context. Although contextual theology presents itself as the discourse of the local people and seeks to draw upon traditional cultural resources, it often relies upon (and, in the process, creates) outsiders in its self-construction and deployment. Analyzing instances in which outsiders have functioned not only as a foil to Adivasis but also as partners with a shared identity, esteemed role models who grant legitimacy, and supposedly objective sources of self-knowledge, I argue that the boundaries of contexts are negotiated dialogically in relationship to others. Excessively robust insider/outsider dichotomies, I suggest, may end up excluding those

they were designed to empower. I encourage contextual theologians to acknowledge that those who grow figuratively or literally distant from their context—who have what I refer to as an "outsider within" themselves—can bring new perspectives, connections, and resources that benefit the community as a whole and cultivate an appreciation for the diversity that exists within their own context.

I conclude by commenting further on the theological implications of my critique of the concept of context. My hope is that, through my analysis of contested aspects of the Adivasi context, I may enrich the field of contextual theology more broadly. I want theologians to acknowledge that context cannot determine theology, because "context" is something that we human beings construct through our interpretations of the world and our place in it. We should not be surprised, therefore, that contexts—past, present, and future—are frequently contested, as different people make sense of and engage with the world they inhabit in different ways. Acknowledging the indeterminacy of context for theology may initially seem as though it undermines the mission of contextual theology, but I suggest that it is actually the condition upon which the field's success depends. Critical engagement with the concept of context can help contextual theologians engage with rapidly changing contexts, embrace and learn from diversity, honor the incarnational nature of Christian faith, and expand our understanding of the role of theology in shaping contexts.

Chapter 1: Adivasi Theology

For Adivasi theologians, the term "Adivasi" itself is important. A. S. Hemrom, former Lutheran bishop and director of his church's Human Resource Development Centre (HRDC), explains that the word's significance is not limited to its meaning (Adivasi is a Sanskrit term that means "original inhabitant"); rather, the use of the term Adivasi is also an act of resistance and defiance. "ST [Scheduled Tribes], tribal, means you're 'scheduled.' It's the government's decision," Hemrom told me, referring to the government's way of defining Adivasis as tribal people and classifying them as members of Scheduled Tribes. "But Adivasi means indigenous, which is independent of the government's decision."[1] Thus, using the language of "Adivasi" is a way people can assert their worth and dignity on their own terms. Adivasi theology, simply by virtue of its invocation of their identity as Adivasis, announces God's blessing in their struggle for autonomy and self-determination.

This chapter introduces Adivasis and Adivasi theology. Focusing on Lutherans in the state of Jharkhand, I describe the history of Christian engagement with local Adivasi culture and the emergence of Adivasi theology. This first chapter is primarily prolegomena, providing the necessary background to understand the tensions and conflicts within the Adivasi context that I examine in subsequent chapters, but even here I attend to differing interpretations of context and their implications for Adivasi theology. Highlighting the disconnect between the discourse of Adivasi theologians and lay Adivasi Christians, I argue that it is not a matter of the latter failing to attend to their context but rather the result of competing interpretations of context. Adivasi theologians make sense of their context in light of the theory and theology of contextual theology in general (which, by its very nature, is necessarily de-contextualized in order to be more

[1] Interview, September 12, 2017.

generally applicable), but this can compromise their ability to articulate the Gospel in ways that their community will find relevant and liberating.

Adivasis: India's Original Inhabitants

India is home to more than 104 million Adivasis, or rather, as the government refers to them, members of Scheduled Tribes.[2] Much about the lives of Adivasis—past, present, and future—is contested, including the terminology they and others use to refer to them. "Adivasi" is a Sanskrit word that means "original inhabitants" (*adi*, original + *vasi*, dwellers). First used by tribal communities in Chotanagpur in the 1930s in their agitation for land rights,[3] the term Adivasi explicitly supports their claim to indigeneity. The Indian government, however, refuses to recognize them as such; the official government position is that, since India gained independence in 1947, all Indians are indigenous, while Adivasis are tribal people. The government has enumerated a list of Scheduled Tribes (Hindi, "*anusuchit janjati*") whose rights to land and self-governance are, in theory, protected. This is a holdover of a practice from the British colonial government, which delineated a "schedule" or list of "primitive" and "backwards" tribes with the hope, ostensibly, of ameliorating their condition. Contemporary anthropologists and historians have been highly critical of the category of "tribe," pointing out that it was used, in the context of an evolutionary scheme of development, to indicate

[2] The most recent census, taken in 2011, lists the total population of Scheduled Tribes as 104,545,716. See Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, "Primary Census Abstract Data for Scheduled Tribes (ST) (District/Sub-Distt/Town Level)," 2011, http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/SC-ST/pca_state_distt_st.xls. The term Adivasi is not synonymous with Scheduled Tribes (there are some groups who consider themselves Adivasis but are not classified by the government as Scheduled Tribes). The 2011 census data, however, measures the number of Indians belonging to Scheduled Tribes.

[3] David Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 13.

primitiveness.[4] Today, Scheduled Tribes are entitled to affirmative action benefits called reservations, and their land is protected by constitutional provisions and legislative acts. In spite of these legal safeguards, however, displacement from their land remains a real threat, and Adivasis have higher rates of poverty, child mortality, and illiteracy than the rest of the Indian population.[5]

According to the 2011 census, Scheduled Tribes constitute approximately 8.6% of the population of India.[6] The largest concentrations of Adivasis are located in the central tribal belt, stretching from Rajasthan to West Bengal, and in the seven Northeastern states. Scheduled Tribes in these regions are granted rights to land and self-governance on the basis of the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution, respectively, although the implementation of these provisions leaves much to be desired. There are also some additional ethnic groups who are not included in the list of Scheduled Tribes but who claim indigeneity and consider themselves to be Adivasis.[7] Thus, the terms "Adivasi" and "Scheduled Tribe" are not strictly synonymous, and their usage carries significant political connotations.

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[4] Sanjukta Das Gupta, "Imagining the 'Tribe' in Colonial and Post-Independence India," *Politeja* 59, no. 2 (2019): 107–21, https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.16.2019.59.07.

[5] Maitreyi Bordia Das et al., "India: The Scheduled Tribes," in *Indigenous Peoples, Poverty, and Development*, ed. Gillette H. Hall and Harry Anthony Patrinos (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 205–48.

[6] The 2011 census records the total population of India as 1,210,854,977 and the total population of Scheduled Tribes as 104,545,716. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, "PCA SD: Primary Census Abstract (PCA) Data, India & States/UTs - State and District Level - 2011," 2011, https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/6191/download/9268/DDW_PCA0000_2011_Indiastatedist.xlsx; Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, "Primary Census Abstract Data for Scheduled Tribes (ST) (District/Sub-Distt/Town Level)," 2011, http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/SC-ST/pca_state_distt_st.xls.

[7] In Jharkhand, the Kurmi (also spelled Kudmi) community has long argued that they should be classified as Scheduled Tribes. Since they constitute about 10–12% of the population of Jharkhand, including Kurmis as STs would substantially increase the total ST population in Jharkhand. They were removed from the list of Scheduled Tribes, however, in 1931, due to their own protestations that they should be considered *kshatriyas*. See W. G. Lacey, "The Kurmi of Chota Nagpur," in *Bihar and Orissa, Part I: Report*, vol. VII, Census of India 1931 (Patna: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1933), 291–94. Today, however, Kurmis draw upon reports from anthropologists and earlier censuses to argue that they ought to be considered Scheduled Tribes. See, for example, this blog post, "The legal footing of the KUDUMI/KUDMI/KURMI(MAHTO) tribe," *Kuṛmi bandhu "ṭoṭemik"* (blog), April 25, 2018, https://kudmibandhu.wordpress.com/2018/04/25/the-legal-footing-of-the-kudumi-kudmi-kurmimahto-tribe/.

Academics have struggled with the problem of what language to use to refer to these communities. "Tribal" is rooted in an evolutionary theory of racial difference that essentializes and marginalizes tribal people as primitive others, yet it continues to be utilized by the state and the people themselves. "Adivasi" is a relatively recent term that invokes the political assertion of indigeneity. Scholars have expressed concerns that its usage endorses questionable historiography, erases complex historical interactions between groups of people, and promotes an exclusionary politics of belonging.[8] Terms like "indigenous" and "aboriginal" raise similar concerns, in addition to being foreign imports that do not reflect the local languages. Hindutva forces have promoted the Sanskrit term *vanvasi* (forest dweller), a word with religious overtones of renunciation, but Adivasi activists have criticized this language for shifting the locus of Adivasi identity from their historical roots in the land to spatial location and lifestyle, especially since it is now rare for Adivasis to dwell in the forest.[9] In the Chotanagpur region, which is the focus of this dissertation, British administrators and missionaries called the tribal people "Kols,"[10] members of the "Kolarian" race, but Adivasis themselves found such language highly offensive.[11] Today, church leaders often censor the word "Kol" from the writings of the early

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[8] Willem van Schendel, "The Dangers of Belonging: Tribes, Indigenous Peoples and Homelands in South Asia," in *The Politics of Belonging in India: Becoming Adivasi*, ed. Daniel J. Rycroft and Sangeeta Dasgupta (New York: Routledge, 2011), 19–43.

[9] Activists fear the use of the term *vanvasi* is an attempt to erase Adivasi identity in light of urbanization. Prakash Louis writes, "The basic ideology behind the proposal of *vananchal* instead of Jharkhand is once again an attempt to reduce the Tribals of Jharkhand into people without a history. The shift from '*adi*' to '*van*' is a change from a temporal and hence having history to a spatially fixed location, at present without history is another endeavour of the Sangh Parivar to reduce the Tribals to pre-historical era and to render them devoid of identity." Prakash Louis, *The Emerging Hindutva Force: The Ascent of Hindu Nationalism* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 2000), 133.

[10] Also spelled Kolh, Kohl, and Cole.

[11] In his *Grammar of the Kol-Language* (1882), missionary Alfred Nottrott observed that "the *Munḍas* of Chota Nagpur detest this word, as it is used as an invective by the Hindus, *Kol* meaning *swine* in Sanskrit." See Alfred Nottrott, *Grammar of the Kol-Language*, trans. Paul Wagner (Ranchi: G.E.L. Mission Press, 1905), 2 (emphasis in original). Originally published in German as *Grammatik der Kolh-Sprache* (Gütersloh: Druck von C. Bertelsmann, 1882).

missionaries, substituting for it words they deem more acceptable, such as “tribal” or “Adivasi.”[12]

Adivasi theologians have embraced the terminology of “Adivasi” because it empowers their people in their efforts for self-assertion and liberation, and that is therefore primarily the language I use in this dissertation. However, even though the term “Adivasi” has gained popularity among activists in central India, many people still refer to themselves as “tribals,”[13] and so I occasionally use the words “tribal” or “tribal theology” as synonyms for “Adivasi” and “Adivasi theology” in order to follow the usage of my interlocutors. Some refer to themselves as “indigenous,” but I tend to avoid this language in light of its broader referent. When I cite the writings of early missionaries or other historical documents, I keep the language of the original for accuracy and as a reminder of the distance between their context and the present. These various terms themselves demonstrate the plurality of perspectives that exist within contexts, not merely across historical periods but in the present as well.

Adivasi identity and self-understanding have also been shaped by interaction with indigenous people from other contexts. In recent decades, Adivasis have begun to work more closely with global indigenous organizations, attending the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations and partnering with advocacy groups such as Asia Indigenous Peoples

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[12] For example, Dominic Bara's *The Adivasis: Their First Encounter with Missionaries* (Ranchi: Savita, 2014) is largely a translation of Ludwig Nottrott's *Die Gossnersche Mission unter den Kolhs* (Halle: Verlag von R. Mühlmann, 1895), but he substitutes the word “Adivasis” for “Kolhs.” This obscures the historical reality and makes the missionaries out to be more vocal advocates for Adivasi rights than they generally were. Yet to do otherwise could result in widespread protests and criminal charges against the church for insulting tribals and disturbing communal harmony.

[13] The tribes in Northeast India usually refer to themselves as tribals, not as Adivasis. They restrict the use of the term Adivasi to those who have migrated from central India, whom they consider to be encroachers. Prathama Banerjee, “Writing the Adivasi: Some Historical Notes,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 53, no. 1 (2016): 131n1.

Pact and the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs.[14] These activists often believe that Adivasis have more in common with indigenous communities in Africa, Australia, or the United States, than with their Hindu neighbors. Context, on this account, is not necessarily tied to geography but can have more to do with worldview and experience.

At the same time as these international indigenous partnerships have flourished, however, some Adivasis have pushed for narrower approaches to their context. These Adivasis criticize the flattening of identity that has occurred as a result of the Adivasi movement, which has minimized the differences between the various tribes in order to create a sense of collective Adivasi identity. While appreciative of the political gains that a shared Adivasi identity has facilitated, these Adivasis prefer to think of themselves primarily as members of a particular tribe, referring to themselves as Oraons, Mundas, Kharias, Hos, Santhals, etc., rather than as tribals or Adivasis in general.[15]

These five tribes—Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Ho, and Santhal—are the largest tribal communities in the Chotanagpur Plateau and the Santhal Parganas of eastern India, regions that form the state of Jharkhand. This mineral-rich area is part of the central tribal belt of India, and Adivasis in the region have long been struggling to retain control of their land. The state of Jharkhand was formed in 2000, carved out of southern Bihar in response to demands for an independent state for Adivasis. But Adivasis did not get the boundaries or the leadership that the

[14] Bengt G. Karlsson, "Anthropology and the 'Indigenous Slot': Claims to and Debates about Indigenous Peoples' Status in India," *Critique of Anthropology* 23, no. 4 (December 2003): 403–23, https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X03234003.

[15] Jhakmak Ekka, for example, advocates for specifically Oraon-Christian theology: "The only way to account for the variety and true vibrancy of the indigenous communities is to be found in the development of different indigenous theologies of many such communities. This would mean that beyond any generalization about the indigenous theology there has to be community-specific theology such as Oraon-Christian theology, Munda-Christian theology, Kharia-Christian theology, Ao-Christian theology, Zemi-Christian theology, and so on." Jhakmak Neeraj Ekka, "Indigenous Christian Theology: Questions and Directions in Making," *Bangalore Theological Forum* 39, no. 1 (June 2007): 118.

Jharkhand Movement had hoped for, and the existence of the state of Jharkhand has not had the beneficial effects on the welfare of Adivasis that they had anticipated. Neighboring districts of Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, and Odisha are also considered part of the wider Chotanagpur region, and many Adivasis allege that the region was broken up politically in order to divide the Adivasi community and minimize their political power. With the additional districts, Scheduled Tribes (STs) would have constituted a majority of the population, but with only the districts from southern Bihar, STs amount to a mere 26% of the population. Samar (Sanjay) Bosu Mullick calls the new state boundaries "deformed," stating that it could only be "euphemistically called Jharkhand." Mullick's perspective, which many Adivasis share, is that the state was created to benefit elite, non-Adivasi interests.[16]

According to the 2011 census, 26% of Jharkhand's total population, or almost 9 million people, belong to Scheduled Tribes (ST).[17] Jharkhand is thus home to approximately 8.3% of India's total ST population of roughly 104 million people,[18] a surprisingly low percentage given the disproportionate impact on formulating and mobilizing the notion of Adivasi identity that

[16] "It [the creation of Jharkhand with its "deformed" boundaries] served two purposes: firstly, it divided the indigenous peoples of the Jharkhand cultural region and secondly, by having two small states with no dominant nationality, it would be easier for the state to exploit their rich natural resources with comfortable ease." S. Bosu Mullick, "Introduction," in *The Jharkhand Movement: Indigenous Peoples' Struggle for Autonomy in India*, ed. Ram Dayal Munda and S. Bosu Mullick, IWGIA Document No. 108 (Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs; Chaibasa: Bindrai Institute for Research Study and Action, 2003), xvi, https://www.iwgia.org/en/resources/publications/305-books/2651-the-jharkhand-movement-indigenous-peoples-struggle-for-autonomy-in-india.html.

[17] 8,645,042 people out of the total state's total population of 32,988,134 are classified as members of Scheduled Tribes per the 2011 census. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, "PCA SD: Primary Census Abstract (PCA) Data, India & States/UTs - State and District Level - 2011"; Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, "A-11 State Primary Census Abstract (PCA) for Individual Scheduled Tribes - Jharkhand," 2011, https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/42959/download/46627/ST-2000-PCA-A-11-ddw.xlsx.

[18] Per the 2011 census, only five other states have more STs: Madhya Pradesh (15,316,784), Maharashtra (10,510,213), Odisha (9,590,756), Rajasthan (9,238,534), and Gujarat (8,917,174). Although the Northeastern states are majority ST, their total population is much smaller. For example, 86% of the population in Nagaland is ST, but the total population of the state is only 1,978,502. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, "Primary Census Abstract Data for Scheduled Tribes (ST) (District/Sub-Distt/Town Level)"; Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, "PCA SD: Primary Census Abstract (PCA) Data, India & States/UTs - State and District Level - 2011."

Jharkhandis have had. From the formation of the Adivasi Mahasabha in the 1930s to the recent agitation for the inclusion of traditional Adivasi religion under the banner of Sarna as a category in the census, Jharkhand has been at the center of Adivasi assertion in modern India. The success of the Adivasi movement at building solidarity across tribes is impressive in light of the diversity within the Adivasi community. Jharkhand alone is home to thirty-two different Scheduled Tribes, the largest of which are the Oraons, Mundas, and Santhals.[19]

While religion has sometimes helped Adivasis come together across tribes, it has also been a source of division in the Adivasi community. Only 16% of those categorized as STs in the state identify as Christian.[20] Non-Christian Adivasis, most of whom practice either the traditional Adivasi religion (known as Sarna) or some form of Hinduism, greatly outnumber Christian Adivasis in Jharkhand. Yet that 16% of STs in Jharkhand who identify as Christians is almost seven times higher than the nationwide average percentage of Christians among the general population (2.3%), leading some practitioners of Sarna and Hinduism to fear that eventually the entire Adivasi population will be absorbed into Christianity. Census data makes such fears seem unlikely,[21] but, as elsewhere in India, Christians in Jharkhand have had a disproportionate influence on society due to their educational and medical facilities.

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[19] The Santhal (or Santal) population is predominantly located in the eastern part of the state, known as the Santhal Parganas. Given the historical and cultural differences between the Chotanagpur region and the Santhal Parganas, I only occasionally address issues related to the Santhal tribe in this dissertation.

[20] In the 2011 census, out of a total of 8,645,042 people from Schedule Tribes in Jharkhand, 4,012,622 were listed as Other Religions or Persuasions (which usually means Sarna or another traditional tribal religion), 3,245,856 as Hindu, 1,338,175 as Christian, 25,971 as Religion Not Stated, 18,107 as Muslim, 2,946 as Buddhists, 984 as Sikhs, and 381 as Jains. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, "ST-14 Scheduled Tribe Population by Religious Community (for Each Tribe Separately) - 2011," 2011, https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/11908/download/15021/ST-20-00-014-DDW-2011.XLS.

[21] In recent decades, Christianity has grown more rapidly in Jharkhand (from 4.06% in 2001 to 4.3% in 2011) than in India as whole (nationally, the percentage of Christians declined from 2.34% in 2001 to 2.3% in 2011), and several Adivasi dominated districts have large Christian populations (e.g., Simdega was 51.14% Christian in the 2011 census). Yet in most districts in Jharkhand and surrounding states, Christians remain a small minority among Scheduled Tribes. For more detailed data, albeit from an organization that is deeply concerned about these growing pockets of Christians, see "Religion Data of Census 2011: XXII Christian Pockets: Pockets of Intense Christian Presence in Jharkhand, Odisha and Chhattisgarh," Centre for Policy Studies, May 16, 2016,

There is a great need for these educational, medical, and other social services among Adivasis in Jharkhand.[22] Many Adivasis have lost their land due to development projects.[23] Without their land, Adivasis typically fall into poverty and become disconnected from their traditional culture and lifestyle. They often work as day laborers, and sex trafficking of young women is a growing problem. Quality education is increasingly expensive, and factories and mines have wrought havoc on the environment and the health of Adivasis. Churches have tried to respond to these needs, but Adivasi theologians argue that charity alone will not fix these problems. Instead, they encourage Adivasis to rise up, take part in political and social movements, and demand justice from the government. They see their efforts to formulate a contextual theology for Adivasis as playing an important role in the struggle: Adivasi theology will help people see the value of their traditional way of life and empower them to work for justice.

I will describe Adivasi theology in more detail later in this chapter, but first we need to get a sense of the history of Christian missions in the region and the ways in which Christian perspectives on traditional Adivasi culture have changed. In the following section I describe liturgical, ecclesial, and educational efforts to embrace traditional Adivasi culture and the emergence of a politically and socially engaged Christian faith for the Adivasi context.

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https://cpsindia.org/dl/Blogs/Blog%2022%20Ch-Jh-Od-Ch.pdf. For an accessible overview of religious demography in India more broadly, see Stephanie Kramer, "Religious Composition of India" (Pew Research Center, September 21, 2021), https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/09/21/religious-composition-of-india/.

[22] Some critics of Christianity in India argue that it is to the Christians' advantage for Adivasis to remain in poverty. They view Christian social services as a ruse to make poor Adivasis dependent on the generosity of Christians and then force them to convert. They pejoratively call Adivasi Christians "rice Christians," insinuating that their conversion was economically rather than spiritually motivated. For example, an anthropologist I interviewed repeatedly asserted that "Christian missionaries were absolutely opposed to development."

[23] Land alienation can also be the result of extortion due to illiteracy, intercommunal marriage, encroachment of miners, or designations of land as reserved or protect forest areas. Sushil J. Aaron, "Contrarian Lives: Christians and Contemporary Protest in Jharkhand," Working Paper 18 (London: Asia Research Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2005), 7–8, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/25191/.

Christianity in Jharkhand and the Emergence of Adivasi Theology

The first Christian missionaries in Chotanagpur arrived in 1845, four German Lutherans sent by the Gossner Mission Society in Berlin.[24] Their first converts were four men from the Oraon tribe, baptized in 1850. Christianity soon began to spread throughout the tribes in the region, and by 1867 the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran (GEL) Mission had baptized 10,274 converts.[25] In 1868, a conflict within the GEL Mission resulted in a split among the missionaries, some of whom joined the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), thereby establishing the Anglican Church in the region.[26] That same year a Jesuit missionary, Fr. Stockman, arrived in Chaibasa and began the Roman Catholic Mission in Chotanagpur.[27] The Catholic mission grew rapidly in the late 1880s due to the work of Fr. Constant Lievens, a controversial figure who advocated vociferously for the land rights of tribal Christians.[28] These three missions produced the largest Christian denominations in Jharkhand today: the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of North India (an ecumenical Protestant denomination that is part of the Anglican Communion),[29] and the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church. There are also many

[24] Chotanagpur was the name given to the region by the British; the territory is now divided between the states of Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha. Histories of Christianity in the region include Jose Kalapura, ed., *Christian Missions in Bihar and Jharkhand till 1947: A Study by P. C. Horo* (New Delhi; Ranchi: Christian World Imprints; Gossner Theological College, 2014); S. Mahto, *Hundred Years of the Christian Missions in Chotanagpur since 1845* (1971; 2nd rev. ed., Patna: Bharatiya Vidya Shodh Sansthan, 1994); Fidelis de Sa, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur: With Special Reference to the Judicial Conflict between Jesuit Missionaries and British Government Officials, Nov. 1889–March 1890* (Bangalore: Redemptorist Publications, 1975).
[25] Kalapura, *Christian Missions in Bihar and Jharkhand till 1947*, 93.
[26] For an overview of this split from the Anglican point of view, see J. Cave-Browne, *The Chota Nagpore Mission: Its History and Present Position* (Calcutta: Thomas S. Smith, City Press, 1870).
[27] Fr. Stockman first visited Chaibasa at the end of 1868, returning in 1869 to establish the Mission. See Sa, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur*, 116–17.
[28] Biographies of Fr. Lievens include Francis Joseph Bowen, *Father Constant Lievens, S.J.: The Apostle of Chota-Nagpur* (London: Alexander Oaseley, 1936) and L. Clarysse, *Father Constant Lievens, S.J.* (Ranchi: Satya Bharati, 1985).
[29] The Church of North India (CNI) was formed in 1970 as part of the ecumenical movement. The denomination includes churches that were formerly Anglican, Baptist, Congregationalist, Disciples of Christ, Methodist, and Presbyterian. For the history of the formation of the CNI, see Dhirendra Kumar Sahu, *United & Uniting: A Story of the Church in North India* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001).

"independent" and Pentecostal churches in the region.[30] My focus in this dissertation is primarily on Adivasis from the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (GELC) and the North-Western Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (NWGELC), the latter a splinter group that focuses on ministry among the Oraon tribe.

Many Adivasis converted to Christianity in the hope of receiving legal aid and securing their land. Adivasi historian Jose Kalapura acknowledges that "receiving baptism was seen as a means to obtain agrarian security and social protection."[31] Missionaries established schools and cooperative credit societies, which drastically improved the socio-economic situation of Adivasis. Some missionaries advocated in court for the land rights of their converts. Most famously, Catholic missionary Fr. Johannes Baptist Hoffmann drafted the Chotanagpur Tenancy (CNT) Act, which was adopted by the government in 1908 and prohibited the sale of Adivasi land to non-Adivasis.[32] While some Hindus and Sarna Adivasis have criticized the legal assistance given by the missionaries to their converts as an inducement to conversion,[33] most Christian Adivasis consider the missionaries' efforts to be a form of humanitarian service and are proud to be part of a faith that has a history of working for Adivasi rights.[34]

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[30] In the late 1970s, missionaries established the Indian Pentecostal Church, the Indian Apostolic Mission, the Indian Evangelical Mission, the Gospel Echoing Missionary Society, the Friends Missionary Prayer Band, and several smaller missions. Samuel Stephens, "Instilling Health and Vitality into the Third Wave Oraon Churches in Jharkhand" (DMin diss., George Fox Evangelical Seminary, 2017), 93, https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/215/.

[31] Kalapura, *Christian Missions in Bihar and Jharkhand till 1947*, xli.

[32] His name is often anglicized as John Hoffman. Peter Tete, *A Missionary Social Worker in India: J. B. Hoffmann, the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act and the Catholic Co-Operatives 1893–1928* (Ranchi: Satya Bharathi, 1986); P. Ponette, ed., *The Munda World: Hoffmann Commemoration Volume* (Ranchi: Catholic Press, 1978).

[33] See, for example, K. N. Sahay, *Under the Shadow of the Cross: A Study of the Nature and Processes of Christianization among the Uraon of Central India* (Calcutta: Institute of Social Research and Applied Anthropology, 1976); Ravi Bhushan Pandey, *Christianity and Tribes in India* (Delhi: Academic Excellence, 2005).

[34] Nirmal Minz, for example, writes, "So tribals were friendless people for many centuries. But the Christian missionaries—of German, English and Belgian origin—proved to be their sympathizers and real friends. These Christian missionaries came as the servants of God with full commitment to serve the people with great personal sacrifices." Nirmal Minz, "A Theological Interpretation of the Tribal Reality in India," *Religion and Society* 34, no. 4 (1987): 51.

Adivasi theologians, however, regret the missionaries' attitudes toward traditional Adivasi culture. In order to convert to Christianity, Adivasis were required to abandon many aspects of their culture, including dancing and drinking. The different missions had varying policies towards these practices. The Lutherans had the most rigid regulations (prohibiting consumption of alcohol, singing of traditional songs, dancing, drums, etc.), while the Catholics were the least strict.[35] Catholics allowed the consumption of rice-beer in moderation and celebrated the tribal feasts of Nawakhani (harvest festival) and Sohrai (cattle festival).[36] Overall, however, the missionaries taught their early Christian converts that much of traditional Adivasi culture was evil and must be avoided.

Language, however, was a different matter. Christians did not have a problem with translating the Gospel into other languages. The early missionaries used Hindi, but later some missionaries began to learn the local tribal languages. Lutheran missionaries Alfred Nottrott and Ferdinand Hahn translated the Bible into the Munda and Oraon languages, respectively, and published grammars for the languages as well.[37] Among the Catholics, Fr. Johannes Baptist Hoffmann published a Munda Grammar in 1903, but most famous of all was his massive 15-volume *Encyclopaedia Mundarica* (published posthumously, with assistance from Fr. Arthur Van Emelen, SJ).[38] This engagement with the local languages gradually led to the incorporation

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[35] T. S. Cyril Hans, *Walking Is Dancing, Talking Is Singing (Sen Ge Susun, Kaji Ge Durañ): The Development of Munda Poetry, Music, and Dance: Contribution of the Christian Church* (Ranchi: Project Vikas, 1990).

[36] "The tribals were basically agriculturists and these two feasts fitted [sic] in well with the theme of 'thanksgiving', which was central to the Mass in the church." Joseph Marianus Kujur, "Tribal Church in the Margins: Oraons of Central India," in *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India*, ed. Joseph Marianus Kujur and Rowena Robinson (New Delhi: Sage, 2010), 32.

[37] Nottrott, *Grammatik der Kolh-Sprache*; Ferdinand Hahn, *Kurukh Grammar* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1900).

[38] Johannes Baptist Hoffmann, *Encyclopaedia Mundarica*, ed. Arthur van Emelen, 15 vols (Patna: Superintendent Government Printing, 1931–1979).

of more aspects of local culture and practices into Christian worship and life, even as institutional bodies continued to promote the use of Hindi as a shared language in the church.

The Roman Catholics were the first to begin to experiment with what is now called "inculturation." Drawing inspiration from the concept of the incarnation (the Word made flesh), theologians sought to articulate the Gospel using the customs and language of the local culture. In the 1940s, Fr. Martin Topno began celebrating the "Mothers of the Year" (which honored all those who had given birth that year) on the Sunday after Easter, dedicating their children to God in a special liturgy that included the imposition of a sacred medal.[39] Topno also began to use Mundari in his ministry, writing a catechism and translating prayer books into Mundari.[40] Official sanction for these efforts at contextualization in the Roman Catholic Church began following the Second Vatican Council. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) encouraged the "indigenization" of the church in India, the first step of which was the use of vernacular languages in worship, and Catholic dioceses in North India quickly adopted the use of Hindi in worship. A new hymnal was published, from which "western melodies were expunged,"[41] and within a decade the liturgy of the Archdiocese of Ranchi was completely in Hindi.[42]

The variation in local cultures throughout India, however, made indigenization challenging. Hindi was not the mother tongue of the Adivasis, and Hindu religious practices such as *arthi* were foreign to the Adivasis. Looking back on these initial attempts at indigenization

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[39] Kujur, "Tribal Church in the Margins," 33.
[40] Kujur, 33.
[41] Jos De Cuyper, "Archdiocese of Ranchi," in *Post-Vatican Liturgical Renewal in India at All Levels during a Decade*, ed. D.S. Amalorpavadass, vol. II: 1968-1971 (Bangalore: National Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, 1972), 240.
[42] Jos De Cuyper, "Archdiocese of Ranchi," in *Post-Vatican Liturgical Renewal in India at All Levels during a Decade*, ed. D.S. Amalorpavadass, vol. III: 1971-1973 (Bangalore: National Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, 1976), 188.

among his people, Catholic Adivasi theologian Joseph Marianus Kujur has observed that "the general Indian Rite, which had a Brahminical orientation, was not in resonance with the tribal life and culture in Chotanagpur."[43] Since 95% of Catholics in the Archdiocese of Ranchi belonged to the Oraon, Munda, and Kharia tribes,[44] the church attempted to include aspects of Adivasi culture in worship as well. They were wary of using the traditional tribal languages, however, worrying that it might divide the church or hamper outreach efforts to non-Adivasis in urban areas. [45] Instead, the Roman Catholic Church's efforts at inculturation centered on art, vestments for worship, and the liturgical calendar.[46]

Anglicans and Lutherans were also exploring ways to integrate traditional culture and Christian faith at this time. The formation of the Church of North India (CNI), for example, can be seen as a part of this attention to the needs of the context. Instead of clinging to traditional denominational divides, on November 29, 1970, the Anglicans (the Church of India, Pakistan, Burma, and Ceylon) joined with Congregationalists and Presbyterians (the United Church of North India), Baptists (the Council of Baptist Churches in Northern India), Methodists (British and Australian), the Church of the Brethren, and the Disciples of Christ to form one united Protestant church.[47] The emphasis on their unity as Indian Christians was a rejection of the denominational divisions of western Christianity. While subscribing to many similar beliefs, the Church of North India (CNI) also allowed for a wide variation in practices. Their constitution,

[43] Kujur, "Tribal Church in the Margins," 34–35.
[44] De Cuyper, "Archdiocese of Ranchi," 1976, 186.
[45] "There is also a trend urging the use of tribal language. We must be careful that this does not divide our communities at the parish level. Furthermore, in urban centres, the Liturgy must remain sufficiently universal and cater for non-tribal Christians." De Cuyper, "Archdiocese of Ranchi," 1976, 189.
[46] "Some special features were the use of the broad stole with colourful tribal designs, tribal symbolism in the ornamentation of chasuble and altar; the use of light and incense in tribal style, dance and offering of gifts in conformity with local customs. The main tribal festivities too are finding a place in the liturgical calendar." De Cuyper, "Archdiocese of Ranchi," 1972, 240.
[47] Sahu, *United & Uniting*. Chapter two (pp. 25-56) describes the process of negotiations that culminated in these six church bodies coming together to form the Church of North India on November 29, 1970.

for example, has stipulations in place for those who perform infant baptisms and those who only baptize adults. These issues had divided Christians in the west for many centuries, but the CNI sought to overcome those divisions in service of the creation of an Indian church. While still subject to a hierarchical structure, the congregationalist influence meant that local congregations and regional dioceses had a fair bit of leeway in local practice. The CNI's goal has been to hold together appreciation for local differences while also seeing itself as part of a wider, universal church.

Due to theological differences and a local history of resisting unification with the Anglican Church,[48] the Lutherans did not join the ecumenical project of the CNI, but they found other ways to promote traditional Adivasi culture among Christians. For example, in 1971, Nirmal Minz founded Gossner College with the intention of educating poor Adivasi students. The school's unorthodox admission policy gave preference to those applicants with the lowest scores, recognizing that those with higher scores could be granted admission at other institutions.[49] Minz, who encouraged the use of traditional tribal languages in the church and the

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[48] When German missionaries were deported during the First World War, the National Missionary Society advocated for a merger of the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran (GEL) Mission with the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. The GEL Mission rejected the proposal, however, and instead declared themselves to be an autonomous church, the GEL Church, in 1919. The first phase of the ecumenical negotiations that eventually led to the formation of the Church of North India (CNI) began in Lucknow in 1929, only ten years after the GEL Church had asserted their autonomy, so it is not surprising that the GEL Church, the largest body of Lutherans in North India, did not participate. In South India as well, the Lutherans did not join the ecumenical Church of South India (CSI) when it formed in 1947. Throughout the 1950s, 60s, and early 70s, however, the CSI held formal dialogue sessions with several South Indian Lutheran churches. In 1959, the churches issued an agreed statement on church and ministry. See Herbert Zorn, "An Agreed Statement on the Church and the Ministry," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, August 1959, 610–14. Dialogue continued until 1975, resulting in a joint catechism, statement of faith, and constitution for the united church. In the end, however, the union of the CSI and Lutheran churches did not take place. K.M. George offers a detailed account of their ecumenical dialogues, but he does not explain the reason negotiations for union fell through in the end. See K. M. George, *Church of South India: Life in Union, 1947–1997* (Delhi: ISPCK and CSS, 1999), 131–49.

[49] According to Minz, "The admission policy of the college was to take the weakest and the poorest students of Jharkhand. Those who were the third class were to get the first preference. Those who were the second class were to get the second preference and those who were the first class were to get the third preference. Since no college wanted the weakest and the poorest students, we decided to take them." Nirmal Minz, "Struggle for Justice: An Autobiography of Bishop Dr. Nirmal Minz," in *Indigenous People of India, Problems and Prospects: Essays in*

wider society, insisted that tribal languages be included in the college's curriculum. Gossner College's Department of Regional Languages was the first of its kind, offering instruction in Kurukh, Mundari, Kharia, Santhali, Ho, Nagpuri, Kurmali, Khortha, and Panchpargania.[50] Language, Minz argued, was at the heart of the work of contextualization.

These liturgical, ecclesial, and educational efforts to embrace aspects of traditional Adivasi culture were accompanied by theological reflection. Adivasi theologians argued that God had been present in their communities prior to the advent of the missionaries, planting seeds for their conversion and developing resources that they could share with the wider church. In 1967, for example, Fr. Philip Ekka, SJ proposed ways to incorporate the Adivasi festivals of Phagua, Sarhul, and Karma into the liturgical calendar and to include Adivasi rites of passage at birth, marriage, and death within the Catholic sacramental worldview. He proclaimed, "We would be taking a very dim view of Holy Providence, and we would be paying our ancestors scant respect if we thought that the chosen people of Chotanagpur had nothing positive to offer to the already rich treasury of the Church, the Bride of Christ."[51] Adivasi theologians argued that the heart of Christianity did not reside in its Western garb; rather, Adivasi traditional culture had resources they could draw upon in deepening their Christian faith and practice.

In addition to the affirmation of aspects of their traditional culture, Adivasi theologians sought to confront the injustices facing their communities. Christians had long been involved in Adivasi social and political movements—the Adivasi Mahasabha, for example, was founded by Jaipal Singh Munda, an Anglican—but now theologians sought to outline a contextual theology

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Honour of Bishop Dr. Nirmal Minz, an Adivasi Intellectual, ed. Joseph Marianus Kujur and Sonajharia Minz (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 2007), 83.

[50] Minz, 83.

[51] A. Delporte, "Bishop Philip Ekka, S.J. (1923–1991): The Boy from Talora," in *They Still Speak to Us*, ed. Peter Tete (Ranchi: Ranchi Jesuit Society, 1993), 169.

that would mobilize their people to engage in political struggles from an explicitly Christian standpoint. Nirmal Minz, for example, wrote about the Christian responsibility to work for freedom, human rights, and social justice, arguing that "the liberation of the tribals—their social-economic liberation, and above all their political liberation—is the only answer to preservation and promotion of tribal identity in India."[52] The emergence of this politically and socially engaged Adivasi Christian theological consciousness mirrored and was encouraged by contextual and liberation movements worldwide. The early advocates of inculturation and Adivasi theology—figures like Philip Ekka and Nirmal Minz—were all educated abroad. They drew inspiration from Black theology, Latin American liberation theology, and other emerging varieties of contextual and postcolonial theology.

Of course, India has had its own long tradition of contextualization as well. Robert de Nobili, a Jesuit priest who arrived in India in 1605, famously adopted the lifestyle of a Hindu renunciant, or *sannyasi*, initiating the practice of *accommodatio* (accommodation).[53] Although Protestants were generally not as accommodating of culture, they eagerly embraced local languages due to their prioritization of Bible translation. William Carey led a team at Serampore that translated the Bible into more than thirty different languages.[54] In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, figures such as Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, Sundar Singh, and A. J. Appasamy sought to articulate an Indian Christian theology in which the scriptures and traditions of Hinduism might shape Christianity in ways that Indians could find compelling. Brahmabandhab Upadhyay's theology was informed by Sankara's Advaita Vedanta, and A. J.

[52] Nirmal Minz, "Tribal Identity in India," *Religion and Society* 25, no. 1 (1978): 79.
[53] Vincent Cronin, *A Pearl to India: The Life of Robert de Nobili* (New York: Dutton, 1959); Amy Yu Fu, "The Confucian Scholar and the Brahmin Sannyasi: Mateo Ricci's and Roberto de Nobili's Adaptation to the Social Customs of the Other Traditions and the Legacies for Today," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 51, no. 4 (2016): 567–85.
[54] Robin H. S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (1975; repr., Delhi: ISPCK, 2005), 15–16.

Appasamy drew upon Ramanuja's Vishishta Advaita and the *bhakti* (devotion) tradition. H. A. Krishna Pillai and Narayan Vaman Tilak, also influenced by the *bhakti* tradition, wrote beautiful poetry reflecting their faith, using their local languages (Tamil and Marathi, respectively). French priests Jules Monchanin (Swami Parama Arubi Ananda) and Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda) sought to combine Christian and Hindu contemplative practices, founding the Saccidananda Ashram, or the Ashram of the Holy Trinity, in Shantivanam, Tamil Nadu, in 1950. Pandipeddi Chenchiah engaged with Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga. Vengal Chakkarai Chetty understood Jesus as an *avatar*. M. M. Thomas framed his writings in terms of *karma marga* or the path of action.

All of this, however, had engaged primarily with the philosophical insights of the upper-caste Brahminical tradition of Hinduism. In post-colonial India, as seminaries began to include contextual and liberation theologies in their syllabi, faculty and students started critiquing the aforementioned figures (whose work is often referred to as "Indian Christian theology")[55] for drawing upon Brahminical Hinduism—the religion of their oppressors—instead of prioritizing the voices of the oppressed and the marginalized: Dalits, Tribals, and Adivasis. This new generation of Christian leaders argued that the Brahminical bent of Indian Christian theology was not only irrelevant to the contexts of Dalits, Tribals, and Adivasis, but also oppressive. Contextual theology, they argued, should not simply reflect a context as it currently exists but rather critique hegemonic power structures within it.

In 1981, Arvind P. Nirmal called for a *shudra* theology (*shudras* being the lowest, servant class among the four traditional Hindu classes),[56] which quickly came to be known as

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[55] For an overview of Indian Christian theology as many of today's theologians studied it in Indian seminaries, see Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*.
[56] Note that *varna* is often translated as caste (although it is distinct from *jati*, which is also translated as caste). The other three *varnas* or classes are *brahmins* (priests), *kshatriyas* (rulers), and *vaishyas* (merchants). Dalits and

Dalit theology.[57] Dalits called for a theology that would speak to their struggles, as they faced discrimination from Hindus, upper caste Christians, and the state.[58] Instead of looking to the Brahminical tradition of Hinduism, Nirmal wrote, Dalit theology should be "based on their own dalit experiences, their own sufferings, their own aspirations, and their own hopes."[59] Theologians such as James Massey, M. E. Prabhakar, M. Azariah, K. Wilson, V. Devasahayam, and F. J. Balasundaram led the way in constructing Dalit theology, a relevant and liberating articulation of the Gospel "*of* the dalits *by* the dalits *for* the dalits."[60]

Tribal theology developed at roughly the same time. In 1973, Renthysoba Keitzar was the first explicitly to call for a tribal Christian theology.[61] Initially, Adivasis from mainland India viewed their contextual theology as part of a joint project with tribal communities in Northeast India.[62] Under the heading of "tribal theology," theologians attempted to speak about tribal experience in general, so that it would be applicable to the experiences of tribes from both

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Adivasis are *avarna*, or without varna. Hence, it is interesting that Nirmal first used the language of *shudra*, instead of *dalit* or "untouchable," and only later shifted to the nomenclature of Dalit.

[57] Nirmal writes that he first articulated his concern for a liberative Dalit Theology in his Carey Society Valedictory Address, titled "Towards a Shudra Theology," at the United Theological College in Bangalore in April 1981. Arvind P. Nirmal, "Introduction," in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, ed. Arvind P. Nirmal (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, n.d., ca. 1992).

[58] Dalits who are Christian are no longer considered Scheduled Castes by the state and thus lose their access to benefits and reservations from the government. They are also no longer covered under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989.

[59] Arvind P. Nirmal, "Toward a Christian Dalit Theology," in *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*, ed. R.S. Sujgirtharajah (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 31.

[60] M. E. Prabhakar, "The Search for a Dalit Theology," in *Towards a Dalit Theology*, ed. M. E. Prabhakar (Delhi: ISPCK, 1988), 43 (emphasis in original).

[61] Akala Imchen, "Development of Indigenous Theology in North East India: An Appraisal," in *Doing Indigenous Theology in Asia: Towards New Frontiers*, ed. Hrangthan Chhungi, M. M. Ekka, and Wati Longchar (Kolkata: NCCI, GTC, and SCEPTRE, 2012), 3.

[62] Tribal theology has always been distinct from Dalit theology, although both communities have made efforts to collaborate. In one article, Nirmal Minz argued that both Adivasis and Dalits are the indigenous people of India, who resided in India prior to the so-called Aryan invasion. Whereas the Adivasis remained independent and retained their culture and languages, he asserted, the Dalits were enslaved by the invaders and lost their identity. Minz hoped that a shared indigenous identity for Dalits and Adivasis would help them unite in their struggle for liberation. Nirmal Minz, "Dalit-Tribal: A Search for Common Ideology," in *Indigenous People: Dalits: Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, ed. James Massey, ISPCK Contextual Theological Education Series 5 (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), 139–40.

regions. Addressing issues related to land and development, history and indigeneity, and language and culture, Tribal Study Centres were established at the Eastern Theological College in Jorhat, Assam, in 1995, and at Aizawl Theological College in Mizoram, in 2000.[63] Tribal theologians from the Northeast such as K. Thanzauva and A. Wati Longchar dominated the field, however, and given the significant differences between the regions, Adivasi theologians from the central tribal belt of mainland India (which stretches from Rajasthan to West Bengal) gradually began to distinguish their work as specifically "Adivasi theology." Instead of generalizing about what tribes in the different regions share in common, Adivasis in the central tribal belt could speak to the particularities of their own context.

Apart from ethnicity, the most significant difference between the two regions is the amount of interaction they have with non-tribal communities. Northeast India is cut off from the rest of the country, connected to mainland India only by a narrow strip of land that circles Bangladesh to the north and east. This means that the tribes in the "seven sisters" (the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, and Tripura) have little interaction with non-tribal communities. Adivasis in mainland India, on the other hand, are vastly outnumbered by the non-tribal population. Thus, while tribal theology in the Northeast often wrestles with conflicts between different tribes, Adivasi theology in the rest of India tends to focus on the oppression that Adivasis face from non-tribal outsiders, whom they pejoratively call *dikus* (exploitative oppressors). When theologians in Jharkhand use the term "tribal theology" today, they often intend it as a broader category that emphasizes what tribal people

[63] Yangkahao Vashum, "Tribal Theology: A Search for Relevant Theology and Ministry in Tribal Context," in *Tribal Theology: A Search for Quality Theological Education and Relevant Ministry*, ed. Yangkahao Vashum, Tribal Study Series 17 (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, Eastern Theological College, 2009), 17.

throughout India have in common, while "Adivasi theology" reflects the particular experiences of those in the central tribal belt of mainland India.

Jharkhandi Adivasis have led the way in formulating Adivasi theology, likely due to their prior formation and mobilization as Adivasis (as opposed to focusing on their identity as members of particular tribes) through the Jharkhand Movement. The Roman Catholics established a Regional Theological Centre at Kanke in Ranchi, and they started an annual journal in 1975 called *Sevartham,* dedicated to Christian theological reflection on Indian, and especially Adivasi, culture. In 2002 the Lutherans started a Department of Adivasi Theology at Gossner Theological College, and in 2019 they began to publish an annual Adivasi Journal of Theology. The publications that these institutions have produced, however, have a fairly limited circulation. With rare exceptions, their publications are written in English, making them inaccessible to the vast majority of Adivasis who know only their traditional tribal languages or Hindi. This reflects the reality that Adivasi theology remains a fairly elite discourse.[64]

In theory, Adivasi theology views itself as a grassroots theology that has emerged from the bottom up. In the words of Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta, it is the "self-theologizing" of Adivasis.[65] Yet, in practice, Christian Adivasis often perceive Adivasi theology as irrelevant to their lives or even counter to their faith.[66] Many lay people thought that my questions about

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[64] By elite, I do not mean to imply that Adivasi theologians themselves are among the elite of the church hierarchy; on the contrary, they typically view themselves as offering a prophetic critique from the periphery of the institution. Their discourse, however, reflects their relatively high level of education and the assumptions of contextual and liberation theology, which differ from local ways of relating to and making sense of faith and context.

[65] Since declaring itself an autonomous church in 1919, the GELC has aimed to be self-supporting, self-evangelizing, and self-governing. Kerketta considers the "self-theologizing" entailed in Adivasi theology to be another essential component for autonomous ministry. Kerketta, *Adivasi Theology*, 3, 98.

[66] I am not alone in making this observation. Writing about tribal theology in Northeast India, Yangkahao Vashum has acknowledged that many in the church view tribal theology with hostility or apathy: "While, many accuse tribal theology of going back to the old tribal religion, many simply regard it as nothing more than a mere theological phenomenon which will fast fade away. There is a serious disconnect between the academy and the church." Vashum, "Tribal Theology," 21.

"Adivasi theology" referred to the beliefs of the traditional Sarna religion, not their own Christian faith. Some pastors were suspicious of Adivasi theology, worried that it was not sufficiently biblical or would inappropriately involve Christians in politics.

Curiously, Adivasi theology appears to have emerged at roughly the same time as an even stronger trend toward individualization and spiritualization in the churches. My interlocuters sometimes described this as a "heaven mood."[67] A. S. Hemrom, for example, pointed to several hymns composed in the early 1960s that emphasized the desire to leave the sufferings of this world behind and go to heaven.[68] Those hymns, he lamented, were written by lay people who did not understand the heart of the Gospel. The Gospel, in Hemrom's view, was not about life after death but rather about liberation and the creation of something akin to a "Marxian Shalomic Society."[69]

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[67] Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta writes, "The classical ontological orientation still dominates Adivasi Christian attitude. For, it is the heaven where God lives, it is the heaven from where Christ came and went back to. It is from the heaven that a Christian Adivasi comes to earth by birth and goes back to heaven after death. And, it is this life after death [that] appears to be their concern. This 'heaven mood' seems to have been further prompted by biblical symbols like the one who says that the Christians are the citizen[s] of heaven (Phil. 3:20). … This heaven orientation indicates a sense among the believers to take it for granted that they are "sojourners" in this world, and that thus [sic] world and their earthly dwelling being the "makeshift" camps. Moreover, the hope for the life-after-death brings in an attitude of "waiting" character. Such attitude seems to have detached and alienated the Adivasi Christians from assuming the world realities. They seem to have developed an indifferent attitude towards the issues and problems facing the Adivasi society. It seems finally to compromise with the existing situation. This *heaven mood* concept has influenced Christians' idea of God, especially when they situate God in the heaven; they failed to realize his immanent and active presence in this creation with salvific plans. They have failed in experiencing God's preferential presence among the poor and the suffering mass who seeks to liberate them. Consequently, the hope for blissful life in heaven seems to have resulted into a perpetuated suffering for Adivasi Christian[s] here on earth. After all, such ultra view of heaven dehistories [sic] the Christian community. It seems imperative therefore that such mood among the believers need to be diverted, if not destroyed, for the sake of this earth and for the sake of their own peaceful and just existence – for which the society since long [has] been struggling." Kerketta, *Adivasi Theology*, 118. This quote, however, is a rough paraphrase from A. S. Hemrom, "A Theological Evaluation of Jharkhand Movement" (MTh thesis, Senate of Serampore College, 1996), 97.

[68] Hemrom translated a Mundari song he remembered from his youth for me: #454 from the Takarma Parish Bhajnawali, *Sirma Disus* (Heaven), which described a heavenly mansion made of gold. "The windows are made of a dazzling metal, the chandeliers are made of silver, even the roof is so beautiful. Once you gaze upon it, you cannot stop marveling at its beauty. I'm tempted to go and stay there. When I go there all my sufferings will end." Interview, September 12, 2017.

[69] A. S. Hemrom, "Towards a Programme of Contextual and Adivasi Theology," *Religion and Society* 50, no. 3 (September 2005): 91.

Adivasi theologians are understandably frustrated by the church's failure to engage in contemporary political struggles. They complain that Adivasi Christians would rather attend prayer meetings and revivals than protests and educational seminars.[70] The predominance of this "heaven mood" makes Adivasi theologians view their emphasis on the context of the here-and-now as even more urgent.[71] Their challenge is thus two-fold: not only do they feel a need to counter the theology they have inherited from the West, but they also aim to combat the predominant views within their own communities. This dissatisfaction with their current context and the theological inclinations of their communities shows that Adivasi theologians are not simply in the business of reflecting what they encounter in their context but are also shaping and refashioning their context to highlight God's liberating presence in the world. Although Adivasi theologians may disparage the emphasis they see on evangelism and conversion among their co-religionists, they themselves are engaged in a similar process, though their efforts at conversion are directed at their fellow Christians: they seek to propagate a more relevant and liberating faith among Adivasi Christians.

The Theology of Adivasi Theology

All Adivasi Christians have some sort of theology or way of making sense of their Christian faith, but one specific theological approach has claimed the title of Adivasi theology.[72] As I mentioned above, Adivasi theologians frame their approach in terms of contextual theology:

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[70] Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta told me, "Huge numbers attend prayer meetings. But when there are rallies or protests, Christians are keeping quiet, sitting in front of the TV." Interview, September 6, 2016.

[71] A. S. Hemrom laments, "Today, every believer speaks about 'life-after-death' to be the sole agenda of Christian faith. They are so rigid in this mind-set that, if a pastor speaks about issues of society, culture, economy and politics, they won't be interested to listen to that – even though these issues very much confront and affect them." Hemrom, "Towards a Programme of Contextual and Adivasi Theology," 95.

[72] One of the concerns motivating this dissertation is that contextual theology, with its own specific theological approach, has a tendency to exclude other theological ways of engaging with context, prematurely foreclosing possibilities for our understanding of both God and context.

just as, say, feminist theology seeks to contextualize the Gospel in light of the experiences of women, so Adivasi theology seeks to contextualize the Gospel in light of the experiences of Adivasis. Drawing heavily upon the theoretical foundations of contextual theologies developed elsewhere, Adivasi theologians typically argue for an inductive approach to theology that begins with experience rather than scripture, and they aim for orthopraxis rather than orthodoxy. They promote the incorporation of their traditional culture into daily life and worship, and they seek to learn from the spirituality of their ancestral Sarna religion. They strive to work for justice for the poor and oppressed, and they call upon their communities to engage in the struggle for liberation.

The label of contextual theology is helpful in that it immediately points our attention to the reality on the ground with which theologians seek to engage. But it can also prevent us from seeing the diversity within the field of Adivasi theology, in terms of approach to both context and theology. Some theologians focus on culture and language, while others emphasize justice and liberation. Some attend to the specificities of their particular tribe, while others formulate theologies that aim to speak to the wider Adivasi community, across tribal differences. Some engage with myths and practices from the traditional Sarna religion, while others focus on interpreting biblical stories in light of Adivasi experience. Some align with their churches' confessions, and others propose unorthodox views.

Among the Lutherans, there have been roughly three generations of Adivasi theologians.[73] Nirmal Minz (1927-2021), one of the pioneering figures of Adivasi theology and the first bishop of the North Western Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (NWGELC), wrote and spoke extensively on the situation of Adivasis, helping to bring awareness of their plight to

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[73] Of course, Lutheran Adivasis have been reflecting theologically in light of their context ever since the first converts were baptized back in 1850. But I am focusing on those who self-consciously identify their work as Adivasi theology.

Christians throughout India and around the world.[74] His work, while certainly theologically grounded, invested much of its energy in simply describing "the tribal reality."[75] A member of the Kurukh Literary Society, he promoted the Oraon tribe's traditional language (Kurukh)[76] and encouraged all Adivasis to attend to the particularities of their own tribe's culture. Yet he also drew upon work from indigenous leaders in other parts of the world to articulate an indigenous worldview as the foundation of Adivasi identity that he believed set Adivasis apart from both "Western" and "Eastern" civilizations.[77] A similar dialectic is evident in his ecclesiology: while confessionally rooted and an influential leader in the schismatic NWGELC, Minz was also a strong advocate for ecumenical engagement and considered Christian unity essential for the wider mission of the church.[78]

A. S. Hemrom, the former bishop of the Madhya Diocese of the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (GELC) and former director of the GELC's Human Resource and Development

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[74] Nirmal Minz's most famous book is Nirmal Minz, *Rise Up, My People, and Claim the Promise: The Gospel among the Tribes of India* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997). A collection of his essays was published in 2007: Nirmal Minz, *Pearls of Indigenous Wisdom: Selected Essays from Lifetime Contributions by Bishop Dr. Nirmal Minz, an Adivasi Intellectual*, ed. Joseph Marianus Kujur and Sonajharia Minz (New Delhi; Bangalore: Indian Social Institute; Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 2007). He also wrote a history of his church in Hindi: Nirmal Minz, *Northa-Vestarana Gossanara Evanjelikala Lutharana Kalīsiyā kā itihāsa (1977 se 2012) [History of the North-Western Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (1977–2012)]* (Ranchi: NWGEL Church, 2013). Minz passed away in May 2021 at the age of 94.

[75] Minz, "A Theological Interpretation of the Tribal Reality in India."

[76] Kurukh is also transliterated as Kurux, Kudukh, or Kunrukh.

[77] Minz wrote, "The tribal Christian perspective is based on the indigenous people's world view, separate and different from the "atomist" Western world view and the oceanic world view of the Eastern and Indian tradition. The atomist world view understands the existence from an individualistic cognitive knowledge. Because the individual thinks, he knows he exists, and the existence of all other things in creation is established. The oceanic world view of Indian tradition sees everything in itself, ultimately all realities get drawn into the ocean of the great self—Brahma. The individual items of existence are Maya—illusions that are passing. The reverse of this view is that everything is Brahma and therefore trees, animals, and all other natural objects also must be worshipped as gods. Neither of these world views is compatible with the biblical world view that is based on relationships. The tribal world view is quite similar to the biblical view. A tribal person exists because others exist. The others are the ancestors, the community and God. A person's existence is possible only in relation to his community including the ancestor and the created world, the trees, animals, etc. Existence is a nexus of relatedness: God, man, nature, and spirit are organically related to one another. Only in this relatedness may they find their true being and existence." Minz, *Rise Up, My People*, 115–16.

[78] Minz, 104–6.

Centre (HRDC), and Manmasih Ekka, the former principal of the GELC's seminary, Gossner Theological College (GTC), represent a second generation of Adivasi theology. Close colleagues and frequent collaborators, Hemrom and Ekka nevertheless approached Adivasi theology from two rather distinct perspectives. Hemrom focused on liberation and justice, applying a Marxist social analysis to the Adivasi context,[79] while Manmasih Ekka engaged in dialogue with cultural anthropologists and studied the traditional Sarna religion.[80] Their contrasting approaches reflect what has often been referred to as the divide between liberation and inculturation.[81] Both Hemrom and Ekka occupied prestigious roles in the central church administration, yet they considered themselves outsiders and felt unappreciated by other church leaders. They had a significant impact on the theological education of the next generation of pastors, however, and

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[79] A. S. Hemrom's publications include: A. S. Hemrom, "Towards a Programme of Contextual and Adivasi Theology," *Religion and Society* 50, no. 3 (September 2005): 87–96; A. S. Hemrom, "The Need for Ecumenical Efforts in Mission-Activism in the Face of Threats to Adivasi Identity, Survival and Existence," in *Meaning and Relevance of the Missionary Contributions of Fr. Gossner: Towards the Indigenous People of Chotanagpur Plateau*, ed. A. S. Hemrom (Ranchi: Church Commission on Mission History, G.E.L. Church, 2010), 52–64; A. S. Hemrom, "Development and Survival of Indigenous Peoples in India: An Adivasi Perspective," in *Doing Indigenous Theology in Asia: Towards New Frontiers*, ed. Hrangthan Chhungi, M. M. Ekka, and Wati Longchar (Kolkata: NCCI, GTC, and SCEPTRE, 2012), 207–24; A. S. Hemrom, "Healing and Restoration towards Peace, Justice and Reconciliation of Dalit and Tribal Communities in India: Role of Christian Organizations and Theological Education," in *Dalit Tribal Interface: A Ray of Hope for Healing and Restoration*, ed. Elizabeth Joy and Hrangthan Chhungi (Delhi: CWM, ISPCK, MWM, NCCI, and PCI, 2012), 82–97; A. S. Hemrom, "Adivasi Poverty and Migration," in *Hearing the Voices of Tribals and Adivasis*, ed. Hrangthan Chhungi (Delhi: NCCI, COT, and ISPCK, 2014), 101–15.

[80] Manmasih often abbreviates his name as M. M. Ekka. He has edited numerous volumes as well as writing a doctoral thesis, Manmasih Ekka, "Asur Myth of Oraons: A Resource for Human Liberative Spirituality" (PhD diss., Gospel and Plough School of Theology, Sam Higginbottom Institute of Agriculture, Technology, and Sciences (SHIATS), 2013), https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/38807.

[81] Robert Schreiter, whose work on contextual theology has influenced many contextual theologians globally, describes these two approaches to context as ethnographic (focusing on cultural identity) and liberation (focusing on the challenges facing a context and the need for social change). Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, (1985; 30th anniversary ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 14–18. While these are not mutually exclusive foci (for example, Manmasih Ekka's engagement with the Sarna religion is specifically oriented toward the construction of a "liberative spirituality"), most contextual theologies gravitate toward one or the other of these two approaches. Aylward Shorter makes a strong case for the need to see these two approaches as integrally connected: "It is too easy to oppose liberation theology to the theology of inculturation … it remains true that liberation and culture are related, and that inculturation must be placed in a context of liberation and integral human development. This is demanded by the Christian Gospel itself. The liberation of the poor and the oppressed is the fundamental condition for authentic inculturation. Otherwise the dialogue is not with the true Gospel of Jesus Christ." Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 248.

Hemrom added a course on Adivasi theology to the curriculum of the Senate of Serampore, which is one of the main accrediting institutions for Christian theological education in India.[82]

A third generation of Adivasi theologians has begun to work on more topical themes: Jhakmak Ekka highlights the importance of traditional tribal languages,[83] Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta focuses on environmental issues,[84] and Idan Topno attends to the situation of women and to institutional corruption within the church.[85] The second and third generation of Lutheran

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[82] The Senate of Serampore's primary campus is located in West Bengal, but numerous affiliated theological colleges and seminaries (including the GELC's Gossner Theological College) are accredited through its Board of Theological Education. Courses at these institutions follow the syllabi published centrally by the Senate of Serampore. "Senate of Serampore College," https://www.senateofseramporecollege.edu.in/.

[83] Jhakmak Ekka's publications include: Jhakmak Neeraj Ekka, *Christ as Sacrament and Example: Luther's Theology of the Cross and Its Relevance for South Asia* (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press, 2007); Jhakmak Neeraj Ekka, "Indigenous Christian Theology: Questions and Directions in Making," *Bangalore Theological Forum* 39, no. 1 (June 2007), 102–125; Jhakmak Neeraj Ekka, "Towards an Indigenous Christian Theology: Questions and Directions in Making," in *Indigenous People of India, Problems and Prospects: Essays in Honour of Bishop Dr. Nirmal Minz, an Adivasi Intellectual*, ed. Joseph Marianus Kujur and Sonajharia Minz (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 2007), 359–89; Jhakmak Neeraj Ekka, "Cultural Deterioration, a Threat to Indigenous / Adivasi Identity: Defining the Church's Theological Response for Cultural Restoration," *Dharma Deepika* 12, no. 1 (January–June 2008): 10–20; Jhakmak Neeraj Ekka, "Struggle for Truth and Justice: Nirmal Minz of Northern India," *Word & World* 28, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 405–12; Jhakmak Neeraj Ekka, "Taking on to the Efforts of Re-Interpretation of the Gospel in the Face of the Challenges We Have Today in Adivasi Context," in *Meaning and Relevance of the Missionary Contributions of Fr. Gossner: Towards the Indigenous People of Chotanagpur Plateau*, ed. A. S. Hemrom (Ranchi: Church Commission on Mission History, G.E.L. Church, 2010), 34–51; Jhakmak Niraj Ekka, "Christianity and the Tribal Religion in Jharkhand (India): Proclamation, Self-Definition and Transformation," in *Interfaith Relations after One Hundred Years: Christian Mission among Other Faiths*, ed. Marina Ngursangzeli Behera, Regnum Edinburgh 2010 Series (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2011), 142–62, https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/re2010series/3/; Jhakmak Neeraj Ekka, "To Be the Light and Not to Be the Light: Christian Witness in the Adivasi Context of Central India," in *Borders and Margins: Re-Visioning Ministry and Mission*, ed. Dexter S. Maben (Tiruvalla: Christava Sahitya Samithi; Bangalore: United Theological College, 2015), 141–57; Jhakmak Neeraj Ekka, "Tribal (Adivasi) Spirituality," in *Spirituality: Towards a Comprehensive Perspective*, ed. P. Mohan Larbeer and Santanu K. Patro (Bangalore: BTESSC, 2016), 120–35. Ekka has also published three books in Hindi on ministry and church history.

[84] Kerketta's publications include: Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta, *Adivasi Theology: Towards a Relevant Christian Theology for the Jharkhandi Adivasis* (Ranchi: Department of Adivasi Theology and Cultural Research at Gossner Theological College, 2009); Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta, "The Goal of Missionary Vision as the Liberation of Suffering Adivasi Humanity: Where Have We Missed That Goal?," in *Meaning and Relevance of the Missionary Contributions of Fr. Gossner: Towards the Indigenous People of Chotanagpur Plateau*, ed. A. S. Hemrom (Ranchi: Church Commission on Mission History, G.E.L. Church, 2010), 72–82; Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta, "Creation—Not for Sale," in *Luther and Reformation with Implications for the Present-Day Context*, ed. M. M. Ekka, A. S. Hemrom, and Elsa Marty (Ranchi: The Publication Department of Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chotanagpur and Assam, 2017), 153–68; Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta, "Re-Discovery of Adivasi Traditional Resources and Its Implication to Eco-Diakonia," *Adivasi Journal of Theology* 2 (2020): 1–27. Kerektta's D.Th. thesis, "Development and Ecological Crisis: An Adivasi Theological Perspective," is likely forthcoming as a book.

[85] Topno's publications include: Idan Topno, "Lutheran Perspective and Women's Participation," in *Luther and Reformation with Implications for the Present-Day Context*, ed. M. M. Ekka, A. S. Hemrom, and Elsa Marty (Ranchi: The Publication Department of Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chotanagpur and Assam, 2017),

Adivasi theologians, with the exception of Jhakmak Ekka, are less tied to their confessional roots and more influenced by other varieties of contextual theology as well as by disciplines such as anthropology, ecology, political science, and communication.

Similar diversity exists among theologians from other denominations as well. Among the Catholics, for example, John Lakra focuses on parallels between Christianity and the Sarna religion,[86] John Mundu highlights the situation of the Ho tribe,[87] Francis Minj has proposed inculturated Christological models,[88] Linus Kujur engages with Oraon rites of passage in relation to sacraments,[89] Joseph Marianus Kujur has written on conversion and identity,[90] Prem Xalxo analyzes the Oraon tribe's eco-sensitive morality,[91] and so on. Looking at this diverse body of work, one can see that geographical location, tribal affiliation, personal experiences, professional appointments, and other diverse factors result in a wide range of approaches to context.

Nevertheless, in so far as these writers self-identify as contextual theologians, their work often follows a similar format and shares key theological commitments. They begin with context, describing the history, culture, and contemporary situation of Adivasis. "Western theology" serves as a foil, justifying the need for their more relevant and liberating Adivasi theology. They characterize "Western theology" as dualistic, hierarchical, anthropocentric, ahistorical, and

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177–86; Idan Topno, "Autonomy, Administration, Self-Administration and the Adivasi Dominant GELC Church," *Journal of Adivasi Theology* 1, no. 1 (October 2019): 36–55; Idan Topno, "Adivasi Christians' Faith Cognition and Communication: Language in Focus" (D.Th. thesis, SATHRI, Senate of Serampore College, 2023).

[86] John Lakra, "Tribal Spirituality," *Sevartham* 23 (1998): 3–20; John Lakra, *Tribal Culture* (Gumla: St. Ignatius High School, 2007).

[87] John B. Mundu, *The Ho Christian Community: Towards a New Self-Understanding as Communion* (Delhi: Media House, 2003).

[88] Francis Minj, "Jesus Christ Paramādivāsi: An Indian Ādivāsi Construal of Jesus Christ," in *Jesus of Galilee: Contextual Christology for the 21st Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 187–203.

[89] Linus Kujur, *Encounter between the Christian and the Urāon "Rites of Passage"* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 2016).

[90] Kujur, "Tribal Church in the Margins"; Joseph Marianus Kujur, *Religion, Conversion and Identity: A Sociological Study of the Urāoñs of Chotanagpur* (Delhi: Primus, 2021).

[91] Prem Xalxo, *Current Ecological Crisis and Its Moral Dimensions: A Tribal Perspective* (Ranchi: Xavier Publications, 2008).

other-worldly,[92] while praising Adivasi society for valuing the interdependence of humanity, nature, and the divine, and for being egalitarian, eco-friendly, contextual, and focused on life in this world. They acknowledge that Adivasis have lost many of these values in the present era, but they usually blame exploitative outsiders, or *dikus*, for the corruption of their traditional values and for the present afflictions they face. Reclaiming their traditional culture and context, Adivasi theologians argue, will enable a more authentic faith and will empower Adivasis to stand up for their rights as indigenous people.

The operative theology at play in their work is very similar to that of contextual and liberation theologies that have been developed elsewhere. It usually goes something like this: The purpose of religion is liberation, in the sense of overcoming injustice and oppression. Human beings and their cultures are basically good;[93] social progress is possible and often identified with salvation.[94] Sin is best understood as injustice, and Christians should focus on structural rather than personal and sexual sins.[95] The Bible is inspired by God but written by

[92] As Kerketta puts it, "The western theology marked with its bi-polaristic thought-pattern makes people very passive and [accepting of the] status quo. It is based on [an] ontological orientation; thereby it ignores the existential reality of life." He views western theology as dualistic, drawing rigid, hierarchical binaries between humans and the divine, nature and humanity, lay people and clergy, women and men, the body and the spirit, and so on. Kerketta worries that a focus on life after death (what he calls an "ontological orientation") will make people passively accept their suffering in this life and ignore the challenges facing the Adivasi community (what he refers to as "the existential reality of life"). Kerketta, *Adivasi Theology*, 118.

[93] Consider, for example, former CNI Bishop S. A. B. Dilbar Hans's view of "Culture" (with a capital C): "Since God has not left any people, including the Tribals, without a witness to himself and this witness is to be found in their Culture, it can be confidently asserted that provided they are faithfully devoted to their Culture, adhering to all that is of permanent value and judiciously avoiding all that is harmful in it they will ultimately and naturally be led by this Guiding Star to the Lotus Feet of our Lord Jesus Christ and accept his Gospel." S. A. B. Dilbar Hans, "Religious Cultic Practices and Worship," in *The Report of the Hermeneutics Consultation in Central Tribal Belt of India (Chotanagpur and Santal Pargana, Bihar) Held at Ranchi, March 1–3, 1984*, ed. C. K. Paul Singh (Ranchi: G.E.L. Church Press, 1986), 56.

[94] A. S. Hemrom observes that the "Nazareth Manifesto" of Jesus Christ (Luke 4:18–19) was "implemented in the historical life-situation of the Jews and specifically among the Galilean Jews." He emphasizes that Jesus "had to do it within the framework of his utopia or vision of the 'Kingdom of God—here upon—this earth.'" Hemrom sees the work of Adivasi theology as carrying out Jesus' mission and promoting a spirit of "Theological Activism." Hemrom, "Towards a Programme of Contextual and Adivasi Theology," 89–91.

[95] Idan Topno laments the focus on pre-marital sex, alcoholism, and suicide as sins warranting excommunication, while matters such as mishandling of public money or church property are ignored. Topno, "Adivasi Christians' Faith Cognition," 211–12.

flawed human beings, and passages from the Bible that do not lead to liberation should be ignored or even repudiated.[96] Experience is more important than the Bible; after all, it is the lens through which people interpret the Bible.[97] Jesus is a moral exemplar who shows us how to work for our liberation.[98] The church is the body of Christ in the world, which means that Christians must be Jesus' hands and feet, working for the liberation of all. All religions have valid insights into the divine truth of the universe, and we can learn from one another through dialogue and mutual respect.[99] Mission should aim not at conversion but rather at cooperation and understanding, so that all religions can work together to establish God's reign of peace and justice on earth.[100]

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[96] In his doctoral thesis, Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta writes, "Adivasis do not consider the "given" sources such as scripture and tradition as the authoritative sources. Rather, scripture and traditions are useful resources as long as they inform and enrich their projects of liberation." Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta, "Development and Ecological Crisis: An Adivasi Theological Perspective" (D.Th. thesis, unpublished manuscript), 258. Comparing the Israelites' slaughter of the Canaanites to the destruction of indigenous communities globally, including the threats to Adivasis from various outsiders, Nirmal Minz rejects the God who endorsed such violent colonialism: "The Israelites occupied the land with military and physical power, [k]illing the adivasi tribes as mentioned above. And they did it in obedience to the command of Yahwah [sic] (Deut. 20:16-18). The people of the Lord—the colonialists[—]are supported by a God who is unmindful of the poor Cananites [sic], Hittites, Amorites, Jebusites, and others. This pattern of the occupation of land of the indigenous people by the so-called people of God has continued till the present time. … Is the history of indigenous people going to be repeated here in Chotanagpur and the Adivasis wiped away making room for the latecomers [be they] the Nagbansis, the Muslims, the British or finally, the peoples of the plains of Bharatmata [i.e., Mother India]? What kind of God is this who takes the side of the strong and leaves the weak and helpless alone? The Adivasis will fight against such a God/gods who encourage and promote injustice, corruption, and oppression of people by people. The tribals are looking to a God/gods who will take the side of the poor and neglected[,] exploited, and oppressed Adivasis and show them a vision of their homeland, a land following [sic] with milk and honey in Chotanagpur itself. Yahweh is not such a God (gods) for the tribals of Chotanagpur." Minz, "A Theological Interpretation of the Tribal Reality in India," 78–79 (notes in brackets added).

[97] Kerketta writes, "Experience is the starting point of doing Adivasi Theology." He acknowledges that the Bible remains indispensable for theology but argues that, "For Adivasi people, life is important; life takes first place." Kerketta, *Adivasi Theology*, 90, 91.

[98] Kerketta writes, "the Christian Adivasi community must proclaim Christ (the Good News) among its brothers and sisters basically as a liberator from all forms of oppression and dehumanizing situation." Kerketta, *Adivasi Theology*, 111.

[99] Former Roman Catholic Cardinal Telesphore P. Toppo attempted to indicate his respect for and unity with Sarna Adivasis by declaring himself to be a "Sarna Tribal Christian" at a press conference in 2005; however, this was not well received by the Sarna community. *Prabhat Khabar*, February 14, 2005. Cited in Kerketta, *Adivasi Theology*, 100.

[100] Kerketta advocates for "a paradigm shift particularly for the church's mission, i.e., from *soul* winning to saving *soil* and *society*." Kerketta, "Creation—Not for Sale," 165 (emphasis in original).

Of course, this is an over-simplified account, and not all Adivasi theologians agree on all of these points. Nevertheless, there is a surprising consistency in perspective across the work of Adivasi theologians today. Although this theological framework has largely been formulated outside of the Adivasi context, many Adivasi theologians still consider it essential for the liberation of their communities. In a move not completely unlike that of those whom they criticize for "universalizing" so-called "Western theology" by seeking to apply it to the Adivasi context, Adivasi theologians turn to the theological framework of contextual theology for insight as they engage with their context. Their constructive theological proposals thus end up looking somewhat analogous to those of many other contextual and liberation theologies. For example: Adivasi theologians propose novel Christological metaphors (such as Jesus as *paramadivasi*, or "supreme primordial dweller"),[101] seek to re-read the Bible (such as interpreting Jesus in light of the life of Birsa Munda, an Adivasi who led an uprising against the British in the 1890s),[102] and reflect theologically on local cultural concepts (such as the effect of the Munda concept of *horo* on theological anthropology[103] or the way that the centrality of blood fellowship for tribes shapes Eucharistic theology and ecclesiology).[104] Practically speaking, Adivasi theologians encourage Adivasis to use their local tribal languages,[105] live in harmony with nature,[106] dance and play drums,[107] celebrate traditional Sarna festivals,[108] and be more engaged in politics and social

[101] Minj, "Jesus Christ Paramādivāsi."
[102] "The totality of Jesus' life and ministry was to establish [the] Kingdom of God i.e., peace, justice, equality and fraternity. For this sake Jesus was killed by the power of religion and politics. In the context of Jharkhand Adivasis, same thing happened to Birsa Munda. He was also killed by the religio-political power. Because he opposed vehemently the entry of any major religions in the heartland of Jharkhand. He found all major religions are oppressive to the Adivasis." Kerketta, *Adivasi Theology*, 97.
[103] Topno, "Adivasi Christians' Faith Cognition," 221–22.
[104] Minz, *Rise Up, My People*, 77–78.
[105] Ekka, "Indigenous Christian Theology," 115.
[106] Kerketta, "Re-Discovery of Adivasi Traditional Resources."
[107] Hans, *Walking Is Dancing, Talking Is Singing*.
[108] John Lakra, "Tribal Culture and Tribal Christians," *Sevartham* 25 (2000): 17–30.

movements.[109] These are all fairly predictable moves, even though they draw upon local cultural and linguistic resources.

History and identity are key areas for reflection, given the nomenclature of Adivasi, which means “original inhabitant.” Adivasi theologians often present quasi-historical accounts of how their ancestors came to dwell in the land, drawing upon local oral traditions, Hindu mythology, and the theories of colonial administrators, early anthropologists, and missionaries. Some Adivasis believe that their ancestors built the Indus Valley Civilization at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa.[110] Others consider themselves the descendants of the dark-skinned *dasas* and *dasyus* (slaves), *rakshasas* (demons) and *vanaras* (monkeys) of ancient Sanskrit Hindu lore, who were allegedly driven out of their original home in northwest India by the invading fair-complexioned Aryans and gradually made their way east to the Chotanagpur Plateau.[111]

[109] Hemrom writes about “the need for a ‘radical paradigm shift’ so as to give birth to and boost the strategic vision of a Theological Activism orientated towards the liberation of Adivasi humanity, and here lies the starting point of Adivasi Theology.” Hemrom, “Towards a Programme of Contextual and Adivasi Theology,” 96.

[110] The historical evidence indicates that this is highly unlikely. Nevertheless, it remains a popular opinion among Adivasis. As Nirmal Minz writes, “In relation to the Indus Valley civilization, our people have the feeling that our history can be traced back to the Mohenjodaro and Harappa civilization of the Indus Valley.” Nirmal Minz, “In Search of Roots: A Tribal Perspective,” in *Pearls of Indigenous Wisdom: Selected Essays from Lifetime Contributions by Bishop Dr. Nirmal Minz: An Adivasi Intellectual*, ed. Joseph Marianus Kujur and Sonajharia Minz (Delhi: Indian Social Institute; Bangalore: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 2007), 58.

[111] Col. E. T. Dalton referred to the Adivasis of Chotanagpur as “tribes of ‘Dasyus.’” F. A. Grignard argued that the *rakshasas* of Sanskritic literature were the Oraons (who he considered the descendants of the Karushas). S. C. Roy disagreed with this argument on the basis of the generally lower stature of Oraons (whereas the *rakshasas* are described as tall in the epics) and the existence of Oraon folklore that describes the *rakshasas* as their enemies. Instead, Roy argued that the Oraons were the *vanaras* of Rama’s army. Contemporary Adivasis draw upon these various theories in their own constructions of their past. Edward Tuite Dalton, “The ‘Kols’ of Chota-Nagpore,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 35, Part II (1866): 157; F. A. Grignard, “The Oraons and Mundas: From the Time of Their Settlement in India; an Essay of Constructive History,” *Anthropos* 4, no. 1 (1909): 7–11; Sarat Chandra Roy, *The Orāons of Chotā Nāgpur: Their History, Economic Life, and Social Organization* (Ranchi: the Author, at the Bar Library, 1915), viii–ix, 4, 19–27.

Adivasi theologians acknowledge that the Mundas were present in the region long before the Oraons,[112] who seem to have entered Chotanagpur from the northwest[113] and slowly pushed the Mundas to the southeast,[114] but no one seems concerned that the Oraons' late arrival to the scene might jeopardize their status as "original inhabitants." As Adivasis tell their story, the Mundas, Oraons, and other smaller tribes lived together peacefully in the Chotanagpur Plateau for many centuries, developing shared cultural practices, until the arrival of exploitative outsiders (*dikus*). Reflecting the rhetoric of Adivasi social movements more broadly, Adivasi theologians tend to present Adivasi identity as more or less self-evident, based on their historical presence in the land and the differences between their culture and that of the *dikus*.[115] They rarely take into account recent historical scholarship, instead anachronistically projecting onto the past the idea of a common Adivasi culture that, while based on real affinities among the tribes, was not a prevailing framework for self-understanding until the emergence of the Adivasi Mahasabha and the Jharkhand Movement in the early to mid-twentieth century.

As original inhabitants, their relationship to the land is another major topic for theological reflection. Drawing on work from tribal theologians in Northeast India and indigenous theologians in the Americas, Australia, and the Pacific Islands, Adivasi theologians emphasize

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[112] Theologians often rely upon the work of Indian anthropologist S. C. Roy in their reconstructions of Adivasi history. Roy believed the Mundas have resided in Chotanagpur since roughly the sixth century BCE. For his timeline of Munda history, see Sarat Chandra Roy, *The Mundas and Their Country* (Calcutta: Jogendra Nath Sarkar at the City Book Society, 1912), Appendix IV, lxix-lxxxiii.

[113] The Oraons, who speak Kurukh, a Dravidian language, believe they migrated later from South India via Rohtasgarh, entering Chotanagpur from the northwest and slowly pushing the Mundas to the southeast. Oraon tradition has it that they were driven out of Rohtasgarh during the celebration of Sarhul. Their foes attacked at the end of the festival, after all the men were drunk. The women dressed up as men and boldly fought back, but eventually they were defeated and forced to flee. The bravery of the Oraon women is commemorated every 12 years in the festival of Jani Sikar, where women go hunting (an activity which is usually taboo for their sex). Roy, *The Orāons of Chotā Nāgpur*, 34–35, 268–69.

[114] Many Oraon villages have Mundari names, lending credibility to this oral tradition. Roy, *The Mundas and Their Country*, 141–43.

[115] Joseph Marianus Kujur's recent book, *Religion, Conversion and Identity: A Sociological Study of the Urāoñs of Chotanagpur* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2021), is an exception to this tendency, with its in-depth exploration of the ways Oraon identity has changed over time.

their interconnectedness with all creation and the role of land in shaping their identity. Minz, for example, cites the statement of an Australian Aborigine, "land is life," as evidence of the Adivasi concept of land, revealing his assumption that indigenous people worldwide share a common culture.[116] Adivasi theologians also overlook differences between the various local tribes, weaving together myths from different tribes to create a cohesive narrative about the (quasi-) monotheistic religion of their ancestors. They highlight the theme of stewardship (in contrast with the West's desire for dominion): humans are entrusted not with power over creation but rather with caring for creation.[117] They speak of a nature-human-spirit continuum,[118] in which there is no division between sacred and secular.[119] They argue that just relationships with the land shape just relationships in the community, tying an ecological ethics to their consensus-based community norms. As Kerketta puts it, "For [Adivasis], *to be* means *to be related*. To be human is to be inter-human and to be related to each form of life in the cosmos."[120]

Nirmal Minz proposed that, in light of this indigenous worldview, theology should be reframed in light of space or land instead of time or history.[121] He argued that putting space first was not only about respecting the land but about attending to the interrelationship of all creation: "Space means that everything is integrally related to one another, and therefore they must treat each other with justice, required and demanded of each other."[122] Developing this idea further,

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[116] Nirmal Minz, "The Adivasi Perspectives on Ecology," in *Ecology: A Theological Response*, ed. Andreas Nehring (Madras: Gurukul Summer Institute, 1993), 68.
[117] "The entire community was the custodian of land, forest, and all living creatures within the geographical territory and community inhabited." Minz, "A Theological Interpretation of the Tribal Reality in India," 43.
[118] This idea builds upon anthropologist L. P. Vidyarthi's concept of "Nature-Man-Spirit Complex." L. P. Vidyarthi, *The Maler: A Study in Nature-Man-Spirit Complex of a Hill Tribe* (Calcutta: Bookland, 1963).
[119] Minz, "The Adivasi Perspectives on Ecology," 68.
[120] Kerketta, "Re-Discovery of Adivasi Traditional Resources," 11.
[121] "For the indigenous people of the world, space is primary and time is secondary in our thinking. Land is life for the tribes of India. Ancestors are part of our social concept. Relations with all human beings, natural objects and spirits around us constitute reality for the tribal mind. We exist because we have a relationship with others and not because we think." Minz, *Rise Up, My People*, 87.
[122] Minz, "The Adivasi Perspectives on Ecology," 69.

tribal theologian Wati Longchar argues that the centrality of space is the methodological distinction between indigenous theology and other contextual theologies.[123] For indigenous theologians (and, as noted above, Adivasi theologians consider themselves a part of this wider category), space is not simply one issue among others; rather, Longchar argues, "it is the foundational theology of self-understanding out of which liberation, justice, and then peace will flow naturally and necessarily."[124]

Yet space and the relationship of Adivasis with the land is also a fraught subject in light of their increasing alienation from the land. Some Adivasis have chosen to migrate to urban areas for better educational and employment opportunities, and others have been displaced by development projects and the accompanying environmental destruction. Perhaps in response to these changes, some Adivasi theologians have turned to their traditional tribal languages as ways of maintaining their identity, urging Adivasis to use their "mother tongue" in worship and daily life. Here too, however, challenges abound. Many urban Adivasis who have grown up speaking Hindi have forgotten their tribal languages or prefer Hindi for the promotion of pan-tribal solidarity. There is a nostalgia among Adivasi theologians for by-gone days, but the reality is that today most Adivasis no longer live as their ancestors did, and so the aspects of the Adivasi context that Adivasi theologians highlight sometimes fail to resonate with the contemporary experiences of ordinary believers. Tying Adivasi identity to lifestyles, worldviews, and languages to which people can no longer relate is part of the reason that Adivasi theology fails to resonate with many ordinary Adivasis.

After all, context is not something that all people experience and interpret in the same way. Although Adivasi theologians bemoan the failure of their fellow Christians to engage with

[123] Hemrom, "Development and Survival of Indigenous Peoples in India," 198–206.
[124] Longchar cites Native American theologian George Tinker as the inspiration for this insight. Hemrom, 203.

their context, the conflict may not be due as much to the prevalence of "de-contextualized forms of theology"[125] as to different sets of priorities and concerns shaping how they engage with their context. Young Adivasis, for example, are often more interested in learning English to secure future employment possibilities than in learning their traditional tribal languages. This does not mean they are disengaged from their context; rather, they are paying attention to current trends and trajectories in society that will shape their ability to support themselves and their families in the future. Adivasi theologians understandably wish that the younger generation would focus their energy on changing current trends in society rather than simply responding and adapting to them, but it is wrong to say that they do not care about their context. Recognizing that the crux of the issue is not *whether* but rather *how* people attend to context could help Adivasi theologians garner support for their more justice-centered orientation.

The other problem, however, is that Adivasi theologians interpret their context through a theological lens that can seem foreign or threatening to Christians raised with more conservative or traditional views. Whether this is due to the influence of Western media and TV evangelists, a sense of duty to their forefathers and to the original teachings they received from the missionaries, disillusionment with their ability to enact social change after facing so many hardships for so many years, or something else entirely, most Adivasi Christians do not find the Adivasi theology of elite theologians in their communities particularly compelling. They prefer revival style prayer meetings, traditional liturgies in churches with European-style architecture, and more "Bible-based" teachings.

Adivasi theologians typically dismiss the lack of interest on the part of many of their fellow Christians—both lay and ordained—by blaming the corrupting influence of the West and

[125] Recall the quotation from Josef Estermann in the introduction, in which he contrasted "contextual" and "de-contextualized forms of theology." Estermann, "Like a Rainbow or a Bunch of Flowers," 15.

lamenting the victimhood of "innocent" or "ignorant" Adivasis. Minz, for example, writes that Adivasis have lost their traditional tribal worldview "by being carried away by the influence of our western Christian friends."[126] My hunch, however, is that Adivasis recognize that the faith espoused by these theologians is more radical than what they are used to. For example, Kerketta frequently refers to God as "He/She." While Kerketta has spent years in seminary reflecting on the nature of God and gender inequality in the modern world, most Adivasis have not had comparable experiences, and they may find it jarring or unnerving to hear female pronouns used to refer to God without any explanation, especially in light of the role that female deities such as Chala Pacho play in the Sarna religion of their non-Christian neighbors.[127]

Thus, in the theological realm as well, Adivasi theologians could benefit from attending more closely to their own context. The more liberal theological framework that Adivasi theologians bring from their seminary training may seem foreign and threatening to many ordinary believers, and it can impede the ability of such theologians to articulate the Gospel in ways that Adivasis can find relevant and liberating.[128] I am not advocating that theologians abandon their own beliefs in an effort to please their fellow Christians, but rather that they consider how context shapes the ways their audiences hear and understand (or fail to understand) what they are saying. There are ways to frame one's work that simultaneously honor one's own convictions and yet are accessible for others in light of their context, experiences, and beliefs.[129]

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[126] Minz, *Rise Up, My People*, 87.

[127] S. C. Roy described Chālā Pāchchō (spellings vary due to the challenge of transliteration) as "the principal village-deity" of the Oraons who "invariably appears in the shape of an old woman with matted locks of snow-white hair." Sarat Chandra Roy, *Oraon Religion and Customs* (1928; repr., Calcutta: Editions Indian, 1928), 2.

[128] The terms liberal and conservative as I am using them here do not necessarily map onto modern party politics, but rather reflect divergent attitudes toward tradition and the historic creeds and confessions of the church.

[129] One theologian who has reflected critically on the gap between theology and practice in the life of the church is Jhakmak Ekka. Writing on Adivasi theology, he has noted, "the task of indigenous theology belongs to the indigenous church. As such it should impact the life, practice and witness of the church. In this regard the present discussion of indigenous Christian theology seems to have been limited to ecumenical circles, circuitous among theologians, trapped within the ghetto of theological institutions and therefore, has left bare minimum impact upon

My experiences with Adivasis in Jharkhand have made it clear to me that Adivasi theology—a relevant and liberating articulation of the Gospel in light of the Adivasi context—is sorely needed. Adivasi theologians are right: their people face daunting challenges. Their traditional culture and ways of living are fast being eroded. They must confront threats of land alienation, police violence, Maoist extremism, and environmental destruction. Toxic waste from factories and mines has devastating health impacts on their communities. Politicians give lip service to protecting Adivasi rights but sign MOUs (Memorandums of Understanding) that benefit wealthy corporations instead. Adivasis are forgetting their languages and culture—the factors that make them special and unique—and instead are being absorbed into a global culture of capitalism and consumerism, where their worth is defined by their purchasing power. The church, for the most part, is standing by idly, arguing about property and focusing on trivial matters like head-coverings for women in worship. Many church leaders are corrupt. The liturgy is old fashioned, the preaching is soporific, and administrative leaders lack a sense of vision and mission.[130] I agree with Adivasi theologians that there is a great need for a theology that shifts the focus toward the pressing issues facing Adivasi society at large.

Adivasi theologians, however, sometimes over-estimate the power of theology to create social change. Hemrom told me he believed that "theology is the answer to every problem." He described the potential of Adivasi theology as comparable to a bomb: it does nothing while it is up in the air, but once it strikes the ground everyone can immediately see its impact.[131] "Ideas

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the indigenous church. The serious and commendable efforts of contextual theologization, if it remains ineffective in bearing upon the practice and witness of the church, the whole activity must require re-evaluation. A distance between theology and church's practice is desirable for the sake of healthy criticism but when it prevents helpful and meaningful engagement in the practice of the faith then the theological articulation is rendered sterile. Such may be the case with indigenous theology at least in many indigenous Churches in India." Ekka, "Indigenous Christian Theology," 113.

[130] I am speaking here specifically about the Lutheran churches in Jharkhand.

[131] This appallingly violent metaphor was not out of character for Hemrom, who often tried to shock and surprise his audience through the use of unforgettable metaphors and provocative statements, such as "Jesus was a Naxalite."

will change life," he told me. "A little change in thinking will change life."[132] For Hemrom and others, if Adivasi Christians would only listen to their theology with an open heart and mind, they would be changed and empowered to fight for justice. They would be strengthened in their identity as Adivasis, reclaiming their culture and tradition. They would live in harmony with their non-Christian neighbors. They would be able to resist the onslaught of global capitalism and follow the ancient democratic ways of their people, living in harmony with the earth. They would have abundant life.

While contextual articulations of faith could indeed help on all of these fronts, Adivasi theology is unlikely to be the solution to all of their problems. On the contrary, in some cases Adivasi theology has led to the emergence of even more problems. In the next three chapters, I describe controversies concerning the interpretation of context among Adivasis that have led to denominational schism, interfaith conflict, and a sense of alienation among those who no longer embody cultural ideals. These problems were not caused by Adivasi theology, even though, in some cases, certain articulations of Adivasi theology were the immediate precipitating events that led to conflict. Rather, these problems have arisen from real tensions within the context and the differing theological perspectives with which Adivasis make sense of their context. These tensions and differences, however, are precisely the issues with which Adivasi theology ought to engage in order to articulate a relevant and liberating faith.

Naxalites—also known as Maoists—are militant communists that engage in guerilla warfare and have been designated as terrorists by the Indian government, although they consider themselves to be a people's liberation movement working for the well-being of the poor. Interview, November 27, 2017.

[132] Hemrom continued with a pun on Adivasi surnames indicating the possibilities for the community's future development: "Tete [a Kharia clan/surname] can become Tata [India's largest conglomerate, with companies that do everything from telecommunications to manufacturing cars], and Barla [another Kharia clan/surname] can become Birla [another major corporation, known especially for its cement production]. With a little change in mindset, Adivasis can be Tatas and Birlas." Interview, November 27, 2017.

Chapter 2: Interpreting Context: Adivasi Theology vs. Oraon Theology

On Sunday mornings at eight o'clock on the Main Road in Ranchi, the bells of a large red church begin to ring. Hundreds of worshippers stream out of the doors, chatting as they stroll across the grounds, shaking hands and greeting one another with the words, "Yishu sahay!" which means, "May Jesus be your help."[1] The women wear bright, colorful saris; the men wear button up collared shirts and dress pants. They carry their bibles and hymnals in their arms. Children run around, laughing and playing after hours of sitting quietly in worship. Vendors sell bibles and hymnals, rosaries and jewelry, and other religious paraphernalia.

As the people pour out of the church, others are crowded outside the doors, waiting for their turn to enter. The two groups—those exiting and those entering—do not speak to one another. Although they are worshipping in the same building, they belong to different churches, and the conflict that divides them has lasted for almost fifty years.

Their house of worship is Christ Church, the oldest Christian church in Chotanagpur, built by the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Mission in the 1850s. When its cornerstone was first laid, on November 18, 1851, the mission had only a handful of converts. Constructing a sanctuary that would hold eight hundred people seemed like wishful thinking. But by the time the building was completed, in 1855, it was already too small for the rapidly growing congregation.[2] Although the majority of Lutheran Adivasis live in small villages throughout the countryside, the city of Ranchi has been the administrative center of the Lutheran church in

[1] The missionaries coined the expression based on the Hindi word *sahayta*, which means "help."

[2] Ludwig Nottrott reports that by the time of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 (which he and other foreigners at the time referred to as the Sepoy Mutiny), "There were more than 900 baptized and more than 2000 candidates for baptism in the congregation." Nottrott, *Die Gossnersche Mission unter den Kolhs*, 1: Bilder aus dem Missionsleben, 192. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

Chotanagpur from its founding in 1845 to the present, and the iconic Headquarters Congregation at Christ Church remains its prized jewel.[3]

Today, Christ Church is shared by the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (GELC)[4] and the North Western Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (NWGELC). The GELC worships on Sundays at 6 a.m., 10 a.m., and 5 p.m.; the NWGELC at 8 a.m. and 12 p.m. The two churches have been sharing the property since they split apart in 1977. Their schism does not fit the usual pattern of ecclesial breaks, as they have no doctrinal differences. Both churches accept the Lutheran Confessions as true interpretations of scripture,[5] although their members do not usually think of themselves as "Lutherans" but rather as part of the church founded by Fr. Gossner's missionaries. The two churches' liturgy and style of worship are very similar. They have made very few changes to the liturgy as they received it from the original missionaries,[6] and they usually sing traditional hymns in worship instead of the more contemporary revival songs common at youth gatherings and other large events that occur outside of the church building. The members of both churches are Adivasis, belonging to Scheduled Tribes.[7] An outsider worshipping at Christ Church would likely have a difficult time discerning which services were led by the GELC and which services were led by the NWGELC.

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[3] "Ranchi is the center of the entire Kohl Mission; this is where most of the missionaries live, it is the center of the entire school system, and this is where the annual general conference is held." Nottrott, 1: Bilder aus dem Missionsleben, 247.
[4] The full legal name of the GELC is the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chotanagpur and Assam.
[5] They accept the unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalkald Articles, the Large and Small Catechisms of Martin Luther, and the Formula of Concord as their guiding confessional documents alongside the Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds.
[6] Germans who visit today often remark that worshipping with the GELC is like going back in time, since they use a translated version of the Lutheran liturgy that was common in Germany in the late 1800s.
[7] Less than 1% of members are so-called "general Christians," or non-Adivasis. Most "general Christians" in Jharkhand belong to the Church of North India (CNI), the Roman Catholic Church, or independent churches.

For these Adivasi Christians, however, their identity as either "GL" or "NWGL" (shorthand for the two churches in colloquial discourse)[8] has significant ramifications for their day-to-day lives. They tell stories of fist fights breaking out after worship in the early days after the split, as each group felt wronged by the other and entitled to the church property.[9] Families were torn apart, as some members went with the NWGELC and others remained in the GELC. Today, the churches have settled into a silent truce, grudgingly sharing the church building and communicating with one another through letters delivered by low-ranking office assistants. Tensions simmer beneath the surface, however, and hostility and resentment predominate in their interactions. Both groups assume the worst about each other, mischaracterizing one another's positions and refusing to compromise.

What is it that divides them? The primary difference between the two churches is their perspective on their context and on which aspect of their identity they privilege. Both churches—for the most part—value their Adivasi identity,[10] but the NWGELC contends that the most important aspect of identity (apart from one's Christian faith) is one's specific tribe, i.e., one's *jati* (literally, "birth," the Sanskrit/Hindi word that Hindus use to designate castes). All Adivasis belong to a *jati*, be it Munda or Oraon or another one of the 705 legally recognized Scheduled Tribes,[11] thirty-two of which can be found in Jharkhand.[12] But the issue at stake for these

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[8] Adivasis usually refer to these churches as "G.L. kalisiya" and "N.W.G.L. kalisiya" (*kalisiya* means church), but for the sake of brevity and clarity, I will follow the common practice of referring to the churches in written form as the GELC and the NWGELC.

[9] Services often run late, especially when *prabhu bhoj* (the sacrament of the Lord's Supper) is celebrated, and the worshippers leaving the church must confront the crowds waiting outside for their turn to enter the church.

[10] There are some people in the church who believe that their Adivasi identity is not relevant to their faith at all. For example, J. J. Ekka, the former bishop of the Northwest Diocese of the GELC, where the conflict with the NWGELC is most intense, told me that "the important thing is that all are Christians," so they "shouldn't be giving attention to Adivasi identity." Interview, April 13, 2018.

[11] As of the 2011 census, the Indian government recognized 705 different Scheduled Tribes. See presentation by the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India, C. Chandramouli, "Scheduled Tribes in India: As Revealed in Census 2011," https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/library/resource/scheduled-tribes-in-india-as-revealed-in-census-2011/.

[12] For profiles of each tribe, see Diwakar Minz and Delo Mai Hansda, *Encyclopaedia of Scheduled Tribes in Jharkhand* (Delhi: Kalpaz, 2010).

churches is whether what is most important is one's particular tribal identity—i.e., one's *jati* (the NWGELC's position)—or one's shared identity across tribes as an Adivasi (the GELC's position).

The GELC, with its broader take on identity, has members from many different tribes, whereas the vast majority of the NWGELC's members are from the Oraon tribe. The Oraon tribe is concentrated in the northwestern area of the region; hence the church's name, the *North Western* Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church. This difference in membership and self-understanding affects not only the churches' administration but also their theology, ministry, and mission. When it comes to theological reflection on their context, those in the GELC promote Adivasi theology, while those in the NWGELC encourage Oraon theology, targeted specifically for the Oraon tribe.

In this chapter I describe some of the issues involved in the conflict between the two churches to illustrate one of the greatest challenges for theological engagement with context: determining what is most important about one's context. Both Adivasi and Oraon theologians agree that their context shapes their theology. But how do people decide what in their contexts is most relevant and how it should shape their theology? There is a hermeneutical circle at play here: theology shapes the way we interpret and engage with our contexts, and our contexts shape the way we think about theology.

I argue that the conflict between the GELC and the NWGELC shows that simply appealing to "context" does not help people negotiate different aspects of context and identity. Contexts are complex, contested, and constantly changing. Discerning what is most significant in our contexts and defining the boundaries of contexts is a hermeneutical task with ethical dimensions, shaped by theological, moral, and political convictions. In other words, my

argument is that context does not dictate theology; rather, it gives theology color and definition, and theology in turn affects what we pay attention to in our contexts and how we interpret our experiences. This means that theologians cannot take their context for granted. They have to defend what they privilege when re-presenting their context to others, acknowledging that the description of their context itself is part of their theological task and carries ethical weight.

I explore the ways that the GELC and the NWGELC demonstrate competing approaches to context, as they emphasize unity or diversity. Given my concern in this dissertation with attending to the particularities of context, it may not be surprising that I am sympathetic toward the NWGELC's position. Yet I also explore the tensions within the NWGELC's approach and argue that no matter how small or homogenous a group we attend to, there will always be people who defy our constructions of context. These are the "misfits" whom we overlook, ignore, or erase in our attempt to make meaning and develop a cohesive narrative. As much as we try to articulate more inclusive varieties of theology, we will invariably exclude some people and some perspectives. I do not attempt to solve this problem but simply call our attention to it, so that we might more consciously reflect on our own role in crafting our contexts and articulating shared identities.

It is important to note that, while I focus on the theology of the two churches' respective positions, much of this theology is implicit rather than explicit for the vast majority of Lutheran Adivasi Christians. As noted in the first chapter, Adivasi theology is predominantly an elite discourse, and the same is true for Oraon theology. Yet the sense of identity that underlies the tension between Adivasi and Oraon theologians is a real part of life for the members of these churches, and it has an effect on many practical aspects of ministry in the churches. Throughout

the chapter I try to highlight these practical foundations and implications, even as I make explicit and interrogate the theological commitments that underlie them.

I am focusing on these two Lutheran denominations because their conflict most clearly illustrates the challenges involved in negotiating these different aspects of identity. Anglican and Catholic churches have never had the same degree of inner turmoil, perhaps because of their connection to larger denominations that are not as territorially bound as the GELC.[13] Independent and Pentecostal churches are newer to the religious scene and do not have as many institutional resources and assets as the Lutherans, Anglicans, and Catholics. Other social and political movements among Adivasis have certainly struggled with tensions among the various tribes, but parallel competing organizations in which one group is composed of a single tribe and the other contains all the tribes have never emerged. The Lutherans thus provide a vivid case study for thinking about the challenge of negotiating unity and diversity within a context, illustrating two competing approaches to interpreting their context and identity.

The History of the Conflict

The split between the GELC and the NWGELC has a long history. The first Christian missionaries in the Chotanagpur region, who arrived in 1845, were German Lutherans from the Gossner Mission Society in Berlin.[14] In the first five years they did not make any converts. But finally, in 1850, they baptized four men from the Oraon tribe, and after that Christianity began to

[13] The official name of the GELC is the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church *in Chotanagpur and Assam* (emphasis added), explicitly highlighting its geographical location.

[14] As noted in chapter one, Chotanagpur was the name for the region that was used by the British colonial government; the territory is now divided between the states of Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha. Histories of Christianity in the region include Kalapura, *Christian Missions in Bihar and Jharkhand till 1947*; Mahto, *Hundred Years of the Christian Missions in Chotanagpur since 1845*; Sa, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur*. For accounts that focus on the Gossner Mission in particular see Joel Lakra, "The Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church 1845," in *The Lutheran Enterprise in India*, ed. C. H. Swavely (Madras: Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India, 1952), 49–80; Nottrott, *Die Gossnersche Mission unter den Kolhs*.

spread quickly throughout the region. The missionaries established schools, hospitals, and dispensaries alongside churches. They aided the Adivasis in legal struggles for their land. They began training native catechists, and by 1867 the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran (GEL) Mission had baptized 10,274 converts.[15]

After the death of the founder of the mission society, Fr. Johannes Gossner, in 1858, the care of the mission was entrusted to a board known as the Curatorium.[16] Tensions soon grew between the older missionaries and the Curatorium, as newer missionaries accused the older missionaries of mismanagement of funds and negligence in their ministry. As a result, in 1868 the first split in the GEL Mission occurred: the older missionaries left the GEL Mission and joined the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), the mission society of the Anglican church, while the younger missionaries carried on the Lutheran mission.[17] That same year, Jesuit priests from Belgian arrived, establishing the Roman Catholic Church in the region.[18]

In 1914, when the First World War began, the German missionaries in India were interned (because Germany was the enemy of England, who then ruled India) and eventually deported from India. In their absence, the SPG stepped in and took over the schools and other ministries they had been running. The National Missionary Society (NMS) set up a commission to determine what to do with the GEL Mission. The NMS wanted them to form one united church with the Anglican Church, but the GEL Mission rejected the proposal and instead, on

[15] Kalapura, *Christian Missions in Bihar and Jharkhand till 1947*, 93.
[16] Kalapura, 93. Fr. Gossner had originally offered the GEL Mission in Chotanagpur to the Church Missionary Society in London, but they declined.
[17] The Curatorium did an inquiry and decided to implement more stringent protocols for the mission. In 1868, Inspector Ansorge laid out these protocols from the Curatorium and the older missionaries rejected them. Like the later split between the GELC and the NWGELC, there are multiple versions of this story: the younger missionaries and the Gossner Mission claimed that the older missionaries left; the older missionaries and the SPG claimed that they had been forced out or abandoned by the Gossner Mission. For an overview of the split from the Anglican point of view, see Cave-Browne, *The Chota Nagpore Mission*.
[18] Fr. Stockman first visited Chaibasa at the end of 1868, returning in 1869 to establish the Mission. See Sa, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur*, 116–17.

July 10, 1919, declared their intention to be an autonomous church: the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (GELC).[19] The Anglicans did not think the Lutherans were capable of running the mission autonomously,[20] and it is true that their ministries suffered. The GELC had to surrender many of their schools to the government, and they continued to receive some assistance from foreign mission societies, both American and German, in the form of funds and personnel.[21] Nevertheless, this historic declaration of autonomy remains a source of pride for Lutheran Adivasis,[22] and Autonomous Day is celebrated annually on the 10th of July with much exuberance.

The autonomous GELC faced many challenges, not least of which was creating unity and building trust across the various tribes in the church. The North-West region was heavily dominated by the Oraon tribe, while the other regions were predominantly Munda. The GELC tried a variety of different power-sharing arrangements and organizational structures, but many Oraons still felt that the church's central administration had treated them unfairly. In 1977, after decades of conflict and tension between the tribes over administrative power, the North West Anchal (region) of the GELC broke away and formed its own denomination, the North Western Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (NWGELC).

[19] Although July 10, 1919 is the day that the GEL Mission formally declared their intention to be autonomous, discussions to figure out the practical details of autonomy continued long after that. For the Report of the National Missionary Society's Enquiry Commission, the GEL Mission's Declaration of Autonomy, and a series of letters between those involved in the discussions, see Peter Hurad, ed., *The Report of the Enquiry Commission and Declaration of Autonomy, 10th July, 1919* (Ranchi: G.E.L. Church S. E. Anchal Kadma Khunti, 1994).

[20] Anglican church leaders were not happy about the rejection of the proposal and accused American Lutheran missionaries from South India of interfering and unduly influencing the Lutherans in Chotanagpur. For the letters indicating their dissatisfaction, see Hurad.

[21] Lakra, "The Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church 1845," 60–64.

[22] Both the GELC and the NWGELC consider themselves faithful heirs to the spirit of their ancestors who opted for autonomy. One statement that I heard from many people but have not been able to verify historically is that, supposedly, during the national struggle for independence, Jawaharlal Nehru held up the GELC as an example of how Indians were capable of governing themselves. This is plausible as Nehru was a friend of Joel Lakra, who was the president of the GELC at the time.

From the NWGELC's perspective, however, they were forced out.[23] A crisis in the early 1970s had led to the installation of two alternating Acting Presidents (*pramukh adhyakash*) while a new constitution was negotiated. The new constitution, which would have had the churches adopt an episcopal polity, thereby giving more power and independence to the *anchals* (regions), was approved by the Central Council (*Kendriya Salahkari Sabha*, or K.S.S.) on July 11, 1975.[24] Members of the South East Anchal, however, raised concerns about the new constitution and did not attend the general assembly on October 30, 1975, when it was scheduled to be implemented. It is important to note that the South East Anchal was the largest *anchal*, composed primarily of Mundas, and the debate surrounding the distribution of power from the center to the *anchals* reflected long-standing hostility and suspicion between Mundas and Oraons.

Due to the South East Anchal's failure to ratify the new constitution, from late 1975 until early 1977 there was no Central Council, and each *anchal* operated independently. A meeting was called for January 13, 1977 to elect a new Central Council, but this time the North West Anchal boycotted the meeting because of the previous failure to implement the new constitution.[25] In the absence of the North West Anchal, the other four *anchals* (South East, Central, Assam, and Orissa) went ahead and elected a new Central Council without any representation from the North West Anchal. The North West Anchal leaders met the following month, on February 1, 1977, and decided to start their own church, stating: "By their unilateral action [the other *anchals* have] now forced the North-Western Anchal Sabha [i.e., assembly] to resolve to continue in all humanity its autonomous existence with its own outlook and vision of a true Evangelical Lutheran Church and assets and form itself into a nucleus of an independent

[23] For an in-depth history of the conflict from the perspective of the NWGELC, see Minz, *Northa-Vestarana Gossanara Evanjelikala Lutharana Kalīsiyā*.
[24] *The Constitution of The Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chotanagpur & Assam*, 2012, Preamble, iii.
[25] Minz, *Northa-Vestarana Gossanara Evanjelikala Lutharana Kalīsiyā*, 23.

Church."[26] From the NWGELC's perspective, the need to form an independent church for Oraons was a matter of justice:

> [There was] a pattern of discrimination by the majority Munda tribe against the minority Oraon tribe. The church constitution and structures regularly favored the Munda people, simply on the basis of their numbers. Bishop Minz, who belonged to the Oraon tribe, saw a need for a new constitution that would provide equality and justice among the church members rather than continuing a "democratic" system that invariably gave preference to the majority. The church adopted a process of constitutional revision, but the new constitution, founded on mandates of the gospel that addressed the issue of diversity and equal participation for all regions and in all units, could not be implemented because of the resistance of the majority community. This produced a crisis from which the church could not recover. As a result, a new church was established in 1977, called North Western Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church.[27]

The Oraons in the North West Anchal felt they had been treated unfairly by the Mundas who had dominated the church's central administration for decades. The formation of a new Central Council that completely excluded the North West Anchal was the final straw, and hence the North West Anchal of the GELC became the North Western Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (NWGELC). The General Assembly of the North West Anchal, with pastors and lay members from every parish, met on March 13, 1977, and formally approved the formation of the NWGELC.[28] Leaders of the newly formed NWGELC considered the split a tragedy, but they also recognized that having their own church would allow them whole-heartedly to embrace and promote their specifically Oraon culture, language, and traditions in ways that had not been possible while they were part of the GELC.[29]

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[26] Minz, 23–24. In Minz's autobiography, he justified the decision to form an independent church by citing the advice of the Rev. Martin Seeberg, then Director of the Gossner Mission Society. As Minz put it, Seeberg told the North West Anchal leaders that "since the other faction was adamant in its decision, we could also go our own way." Minz, "Struggle for Justice," 86.

[27] Ekka, "Struggle for Truth and Justice," 409.

[28] Minz, "Struggle for Justice," 86.

[29] In his autobiography, Nirmal Minz quoted then chairman of the United Evangelical Lutheran Churches of India (UELCI), Bishop Jeyaseelan Jacob, as stating in a sermon in the early 1980s for the NWGELC congregation at Christ Church, "The North West G.E.L. Church is not the making of any human being *per se*. It is God's own doing. And it is the Holy Spirit Himself who inspired you all to get this work done. Therefore, no one should feel ill about its development. All must accept it as coming from God." Minz, 88.

The NWGELC continued their administrative operations from their *anchal* office in the GELC's campus in Ranchi, but now they elected their own President and drafted their own constitution, which was adopted on April 15, 1978.[30] The GELC would not allow NWGELC students at their seminary, Gossner Theological College (GTC), so those students matriculated instead at more prestigious English-medium seminaries outside of Jharkhand (such as Bishop's College in Kolkata or United Theological College in Bengaluru) until the NWGELC established its own seminary, Navin Doman Theological College (NDTC), in 2007. The GELC blocked the NWGELC from joining many of the national Christian organizations of which it was a part,[31] which meant that the NWGELC could no longer receive foreign funding from international organizations like the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the World Council of Churches (WCC). But that action seemed only to strengthen the resolve of the NWGELC, as its members gave more generously than before to support their new church. Some of the congregations in the North West Anchal eventually chose to rejoin the GELC, but the vast majority of Lutherans in the North West Anchal were fiercely committed to their new independent church, which honored and made central their Oraon identity.

Today, almost fifty years later, the GELC and the NWGELC remain divided. They run parallel administrations and ministries, and both churches boast membership in the hundreds of

[30] In the course of discussions during 1978–79, the NWGELC decided to call their leader a bishop instead of *adhyaksh*, and Nirmal Minz was chosen as the first bishop of the NWGELC in 1980. Minz, *Northa-Vestarana Gossanara Evanjelikala Lutharana Kalīsiyā*, 25.

[31] The NWGELC has not been allowed to join the United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India (UELCI) or the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), because these organizations stipulate that if any of their existing members object to the membership of a new church, it will not be allowed. The GELC, which considers the NWGELC to be an illegitimate body, has repeatedly vetoed the NWGELC's membership applications. This means the NWGELC is also barred from the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the World Council of Churches (WCC). Without membership in these national and international fellowships, the NWGELC is unable to receive funding or develop formal partnerships with other churches who participate in these fellowships.

thousands.[32] The GELC, with almost 400,000 members, is significantly larger than the NWGELC (with only 125,000 members) and has members from all of the tribes, including the Oraon tribe. The GELC's almost 2000 congregations are spread throughout the Chotanagpur region (which includes Jharkhand and parts of Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and West Bengal) as well as in Assam (where Adivasis migrated to work on tea plantations in the late 1800s and early 1900s), the Andaman Islands (a mission field for the GELC since the 1950s), and major metropolitan areas (such as Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru). Many GELC congregations are relatively small and located in remote villages. Pastors are assigned to parishes (networks of congregations), which can include more than a dozen congregations spread out over a wide area. These parishes are grouped into five different dioceses: Northeast, Northwest,[33] Southeast, Southwest, and Madhya Dioceses.[34] The Headquarters Congregation in Ranchi functions as a sixth diocese, with its own bishop. The Southeast Diocese is by far the largest of the dioceses, spanning a region that is predominantly Munda.

The NWGELC's approximately 125,000 members, by contrast, are mostly from the Oraon tribe and live in the Northwestern part of Chotanagpur, although there are also NWGELC congregations in urban areas in other parts of Chotanagpur where Oraons have migrated for work.[35] Larger NWGELC congregations, particularly those in urban areas such as Lohardaga,

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[32] Johan Dang, the Moderator (the head bishop) of the GELC, acknowledged that it has been many years since the church has undertaken an official census of its members. In 2018, the GELC's annual yearbook / calendar (*panjika*), listed its official membership at 387,948, but Dang estimates membership has grown to 450,000–500,000. Dang has been pressing for a new census to get an updated count of members, because the number of members a church has determines the number of representatives they can send to national and international bodies such as the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). The NWGELC's 2018 *panjika* reported 124,703 baptized members.

[33] Although most congregations in the North West region are part of the NWGELC, the GELC still has a Northwest Diocese because some congregations in the region eventually rejoined the GELC.

[34] Formerly called *anchals*, the regions have been called dioceses since the GELC adopted the episcopal system in 1995. *The Constitution of The Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chotanagpur & Assam*, Preamble, iii.

[35] At the time of my fieldwork, the NWGELC was divided into five deaneries: Ranchi, Eastern (West Bengal and Assam), Western (Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh), Southern (Odisha and Simdega), and Madhya (Gumla and Lohardaga). The deaneries have recently been renamed dioceses, and each has appointed its own bishop.

Jamshedpur, and Gumla, have been engaged in protracted legal battles over church property.[36] Both denominations claim to be the rightful owners of the church property, given their differing interpretations of the events of 1977.[37] In some places, the NWGELC has surrendered the legal battle, purchased separate plots of land, and built new churches. But in most places, the fight continues.

Overall, the prevailing sentiment among the NWGELC is gratitude for the development that has been able to take place in their communities as a result of their independence from the GELC. Yet many members of the NWGELC long for the restoration of peace and civility with their estranged brothers and sisters in Christ. As the smaller church, the NWGELC stands to gain the most from reconciliation,[38] but the GELC, too, would prefer that the two churches be reunited. With their forces combined, they would be the largest Lutheran church in India.[39] The GELC also recognizes that the ongoing court cases continue to drain much needed funds, and the conflict demoralizes and discourages young people in the church.

Over the years, therefore, there have been numerous attempts at unity, reconciliation, and/or cooperation between the churches.[40] In 1987, the Gossner Mission Society met with both

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[36] I was told by a church leader who desired to remain anonymous that, as of 2018, there were still 18 different cases in the courts, two-thirds of which had been filed by the GELC and one-third by the NWGELC.

[37] As described above, the NWGELC claims that they were intentionally left out when the GELC formed a new Central Council without the North West Anchal present, whereas the GELC claims that the North West Anchal chose to leave and therefore forfeited their role in the governance of the church and their rights to church property.

[38] One of these benefits would be a partnership with Gossner Mission. Since the split in 1977, the GELC has tried to prevent the NWGELC from maintaining a relationship with Gossner Mission. Although the German missionaries from the Gossner Mission Society were deported during WWI, leading the church to formally declare itself autonomous in 1919, partnerships with the Germans continued following the war. Today, Gossner Mission continues to work with the GELC, funding educational scholarships and development projects. The NWGELC has been trying to re-establish a relationship with Gossner Mission, but the GELC would prefer to be Gossner Mission's sole partner in India.

[39] As noted above, the number of members each church has determines the number of representatives they can send to national and international bodies such as the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). If the NWGELC joined the GELC, the head bishop (called the Moderator) of the GELC, as the representative of such a large body, would have even more power and prestige, both in Christian organizations and secular society.

[40] The terms used to describe the aim of the negotiations—concepts such as union, reconciliation, and collaboration—have themselves been the subject of disagreement and controversy.

churches and proposed the creation of an umbrella organization to oversee both churches, but the GELC rejected the proposal.[41] From 1989 to 1995, the United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India (UELCI) oversaw negotiations between the two churches, but they stalled over the question of which church would oversee the Ranchi Parish.[42] Later, the All Churches Council of Ranchi (ACCR) tried to host dialogues, but those also failed. During the period of my fieldwork, the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) hosted several formal dialogue sessions that sought reconciliation between the churches. The NCCI was hopeful that the two churches could come together for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation on October 31, 2017 or the 100th anniversary of the GELC's declaration of autonomy on July 10, 2019, but apart from a few token appearances of leaders at each other's events, there was little progress made.[43]

Although church leaders have agreed to multiple mediation attempts, they continue to view each other with hatred and suspicion. The GELC refuses to recognize the NWGELC as an independent church body, referring to it as the "so-called NWGELC" or as a "separatist group." In GELC official documents, NWGELC members are sometimes referred to as "people engaged in anti-church activities."[44] The NWGELC sees discrimination against Oraons everywhere, even

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[41] These negotiations were led by the Rev. Hans Grothaus and the Rev. Dieter Hecker. Minz writes, "they came up with a novel idea that besides accepting the identity of both the Churches, there should be an umbrella organization to oversee both the Churches and recognize their co-existence. All of us from the North West G.E.L. Church accepted this proposition whole-heartedly, as this was what we had wanted; but those of the other G.E.L. Church rejected it." Minz, "Struggle for Justice," 88–89.
[42] The NWGELC proposed that the Ranchi Parish should be part of the North West Diocese (and thus under their control), and the GELC rejected the proposal. Today, in the GELC, the Ranchi Parish functions as its own diocese, with its own bishop. Minz, 89.
[43] The local newspaper prematurely reported in 2015 that the churches would be reconciling. It never happened. Manoj Lakra, "Sātha Āyenge Jīiela va Enaḍablyūjīiela Carca [GEL and NWGEL Church Will Be Coming Together]," *Prabhat Khabar*, November 4, 2015, E-paper edition, epaper.prabhatkhabar.com/c/7123224.
[44] This is how the NWGELC was referred to in the official notes from a GELC Central Council Executive Committee meeting I attended on March 20, 2013.

where it was not intended.[45] Each side accuses the other of being motivated by money and power instead of Christian values.

Peace talks between the two churches have struggled because they have different goals: reunion vs. reconciliation. The GELC sees the goal as getting the NWGELC to surrender its authority and independence, rejoining the GELC on their terms. The NWGELC wants to maintain a separate administration but to cooperate with the GELC and gradually move toward unity with a just, power-sharing agreement. During my fieldwork, the NWGELC proposed a two-synod model, in which the churches would be officially united but maintain separate operations. This would allow the NWGELC to continue their emphasis on Oraon Christianity without the interference of the GELC. The GELC, however, rejected this proposal, noting that the NWGELC is significantly smaller than the GELC, and if the two churches were to share power equally, then the NWGELC leaders would have a disproportionate amount of power relative to the number of people they represented.

Apart from these formal dialogue sessions, there is little engagement between members of the two churches. The leaders involved in the dialogue consider it their province alone to engage in any communication with members of the other church, and they try to prohibit others from making their own efforts. I was able to arrange for the churches' two seminaries (GTC and

[45] For example, the GELC has recently begun to celebrate the baptism day of Martha as the church's first baptism. Martha, an orphan entrusted to the care of the missionaries, was baptized as an infant on June 25, 1846. Traditionally, however, the baptisms of four adult Oraon men on June 9, 1850, almost four years later, were considered the first baptisms. (The first Mundas were baptized on October 26, 1851.) When the NWGELC heard about the commemoration of Martha's baptism, they accused the GELC of trying to erase Oraons from the church's history. It may be that the GELC sometimes downplays the contributions of Oraons to the church, but in this particular case, the push to celebrate Martha's baptism actually came from German partners who wanted to use the celebration to promote the GELC's Kindergartens that they were funding. One GELC member I spoke with told me that she had been trying to highlight Martha's baptism for a while in order to encourage local congregations to support the Kindergartens, but the central church administration had been reluctant to commemorate Martha. For the history of the first baptisms, see *The Constitution of The Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chotanagpur & Assam*, Preamble, ii. For an elaboration of the NWGELC's concerns, see Jhakmak Neeraj Ekka, "Two Perspectives of the History of the Establishment of the Gossner Church in Chotanagpur: A Historical Investigation," *Indian Church History Review* 49, no. 1–2 (January 2016): 51–69.

NDTC) to host a couple of joint events on the theme of "Adivasis and Contextual Theology," but some church leaders criticized even these events. Since the conclusion of my fieldwork, little progress has been made in this area. The pandemic put all talks on hold, as church leaders scrambled to learn how to use new technologies to continue Christian worship and community online. Today, the prospects for reconciliation between the churches look bleak. It is hard to build trust without relationships.

As I mentioned at the outset, what is fascinating about the split between the GELC and the NWGELC is that there are no doctrinal differences, at least in the traditional sense, between the two churches. Both churches consider the Bible to be the inspired word of God; accept the Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds; and teach that the unaltered Augsburg Confession is a correct exposition of the faith. In some ways the split is due to ethnic conflict, but not in the usual sense, since the churches do not represent two opposing ethnic groups. Rather, their disagreement has to do with *which* aspect of their context and identity is most important. The GELC is comprised of members from all of the regional tribes (Munda, Oraon, Kharia, Ho, Santhal, etc.), and it emphasizes a common Adivasi identity, which the vast majority of its members share.[46] The NWGELC, on the other hand, is composed primarily of Adivasis from the Oraon tribe and considers a person's particular tribe (i.e., *jati*)—which, in their case, is mostly Oraon—to be the most essential element of identity. Thus, the key difference between the two churches is whether they consider their members to be Adivasi Christians (the GELC's position), or Oraon / Munda / Kharia / Ho / Santhal Christians (the NWGELC's position).

[46] Both churches are almost entirely composed of Adivasi Christians. Non-Adivasi Christians, whom Adivasis often refer to as "General Christians," tend to join the CNI, Roman Catholicism, or independent Pentecostal churches.

This tension between a particular tribal identity and a common Adivasi identity has played a role in other social, political, and religious movements in the region.[47] But the case of the GELC and the NWGELC is significant because the two groups have fully committed to positions at opposite ends of the spectrum: the GELC focuses on a unified pan-Adivasi identity and the NWGELC focuses on a specific tribal group, the Oraons. We can thus see in the two denominations two distinct approaches to thinking about context, identity, and experience, which in turn shape their beliefs and practices.[48] When it comes to theological reflection on their context, therefore, GELC theologians consider their work to be Adivasi theology, while NWGELC theologians advocate for specifically Oraon theology.[49]

This ecclesial conflict, together with the churches' divergent theological reflection, illustrates what I believe is one of the main challenges for contextual theology more broadly: the determination of the context itself, or, rather, of what aspects of a context should be considered most relevant for theological reflection. There are so many different factors that make up our contexts and so many different aspects of our identities. How do people decide what is most important? Why do some Adivasi Christians focus on their shared identity across tribes, while

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[47] I discuss historical examples of this in the section on unity below and consider the challenges of codifying the Sarna religion as a pan-tribal religion in chapter three.

[48] Before going any further, I must note that there are some leaders within the church who do not consider either of these aspects of identity to be important, arguing that Christian identity entirely supplants all other aspects of one's identity. They assert that the entire endeavor of engaging theologically with their context is problematic, contrasting it with a Bible-based approach to faith. Yet, in practice, the ministry and personal lifestyle of these Christian leaders depend upon the maintenance of many other aspects of identity, such as gender, occupation, marital status, and so forth. They cannot avoid engaging with their context or bringing theology to bear on the situations that their congregants face in daily life, situations which are not always clearly described in the Bible and therefore require discernment and theological reflection. I suspect that their hostility to engaging theologically with context is due to fears about the accompanying political and theological commitments (such as women's equality, socialism, universal salvation, and so on) that contextual theologians often promote.

[49] Christian theologians from other denominations in the region are also interested in both Adivasi theology and specifically Oraon / Munda / Ho / Kharia / Santhali theology, but they do not emphasize a tension between these two levels of identity. It is only among the Lutherans that the differing approaches are drawn so starkly. This is likely due to the unique history of the NWGELC as a predominantly Oraon church. They have been able to focus on and develop Oraon theology in ways that other churches, with a more diverse membership, have not.

others highlight the uniqueness of their particular tribe? Through an examination of the differences between the two approaches—both their starting points (the theological doctrines that guide their reflection) and their goals (their visions for their church's ministry and mission)—we can get a sense of the variation that is possible when interpreting and engaging with context from a theological standpoint.

The NWGELC: Oraon Theology

The NWGELC draws upon the theological doctrines of creation and the incarnation to argue that God affirms the specific embodied contexts of human beings, which in their case, they argue, is their particular tribal identity as Oraons.[50] God created them as Oraons, and God said that his creation was very good. They should not have to deny these important cultural elements of their identity in order to be Christian. After all, they argue, that is what the incarnation signifies: the divine fullness in the human Jesus is a sign of God's affirmation of particularity and human situatedness in culture and society.

The NWGELC believes that their Oraon-ness is the soil in which God has planted the seed of faith. Without caring for that soil, the plant cannot grow. They argue that the most fundamental aspect of their identity is their Oraon-ness, not their generic Adivasi identity,

[50] In their own language, the Kurukh language, Oraons refer to themselves as "Kurukh." Few Oraons can explain why they are now called Oraon. They pointed me to the work of early anthropologists, missionaries, and colonial administrators, who propose a variety of etymologies for both names. Ferdinand Hahn thinks that the name Kurukh is derived from the Kolarian *hoṛo* (man), or the Dravidian-Scythian *kuruk* (a cryer). S. C. Roy, on the other hand, argues that the name Kurukh either stems from their mythic king Karakh or the Sanskrit root *kṛṣ* (to plough), since the Oraons had more advanced forms of tilling the soil than the Mundas. As for the appellation Oraon, given to the tribe by outsiders, Hahn attributes it to the name of one of the smaller totemistic septs within the tribe, *orgorā̃* (hawk). G. A. Grierson argues that Oraon comes from the Indo-Aryan *uṛāû* (spendthrift). S. C. Roy proposes it could be due to Hindus associating them with the descendants of Rāwana (Ravana, the demon king from the Rāmāyana), pronounced by some as O-rāwan, due to "the rapidity with which they multiplied." He also recounts the tribe's *bhaya-bhayin* myth, which tells of the creation of the first brother and sister from drops of blood from the thorn-pierced chest (Sanskrit, *uras* / *ur*) of a meditating ascetic. The name "Oraon" would thus indicate their noble origin. G. A. Grierson, "Kurukh," in *Linguistic Survey of India* (1927; repr., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1967), 406; Hahn, *Kurukh Grammar*, ii–iii; Roy, *The Orāons of Chotā Nāgpur*, 3–8, 12–17.

because the latter is dependent on the former. In other words, they could not be Adivasis if they were not first Oraons. They appeal to their government-issued Scheduled Tribe certificates which grant them reservations (benefits) on the basis of their *jati* (Oraon, Munda, Kharia, etc.): without membership in a particular tribe, they could not be considered Adivasi. While this argument privileges the role of legal authorities in the construction of identity in ways that would undermine other aspects of Adivasi self-understanding (for example, Adivasis insist that they are indigenous people regardless of whether the government acknowledges this fact or not), what they are trying to get at is the idea that there can be no such thing as a generic Adivasi; one must first belong to a particular tribe or *jati*, and on that basis one is considered an Adivasi. Therefore, their Oraon identity is foundational and should be given priority over their identity as Adivasis, which is a secondary category, dependent for its existence upon their Oraon identity.

Jhakmak Ekka, a pastor in the NWGELC, acknowledges that both of these aspects of identity—Oraon and Adivasi—are important for theology. But the Oraon aspect, he argues, must be attended to first, before moving to a secondary level of reflection. Adivasis must first do Oraon theology—or Munda theology, or Kharia theology, or Ho theology, or Santhal theology—and come to terms with the way God relates to them in and through their tribe. "This is the level where indigenous culture is unique, concrete and real," Ekka explains. "Without understanding and acknowledging the uniqueness and differentiation in this level any attempt at developing indigenous Christian theology no matter how grand and serious, will remain too general to generate any authenticity."[51] It is only after the development of this primary level of theology that Adivasis will be able to collaborate on a secondary level of theology, i.e., their shared identity as Adivasis. If they try to start with their shared identity as Adivasis, they will not be

[51] Ekka, "Towards an Indigenous Christian Theology," 367.

able to engage with the very things that give them their sense of identity, i.e., their "ethnicity, language, customs, worldview, food, dress, social and religious practice, cultivation, festival[s], songs, dance etc."[52] From Ekka's standpoint, these differentiations across tribes are what give vibrancy to Adivasi life, and if theology ignores or generalizes about them, the Gospel will be irrelevant to their lives.

One of the main ways in which the NWGELC seeks to attend to its members' primary identity as Oraons is by promoting the use of the Oraon language, Kurukh, in worship and daily life.[53] The NWGELC publishes theological books, worship resources, and ecclesial documents like the church constitution, in both Hindi and Kurukh so that villagers who do not know Hindi can understand them. In 1971, prior to the formation of the NWGELC, Nirmal Minz (who later became the first bishop of the NWGELC) founded the GELC's liberal arts college, Gossner College, which was the first institution to teach tribal languages at the college level.[54] Minz and others in the NWGELC have played a key role in the Kurukh Literary Society and the promotion of a new script for the language, called Tolong Siki.[55] Students at the NWGELC seminary, Navin Doman Theological College (NDTC), learn Kurukh and Tolong Siki as part of their studies, so they will be equipped to minister to Oraon villagers who only know Kurukh and to encourage urban-dwelling Oraons to embrace their traditional language.

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[52] Ekka, 367.

[53] Kurukh, also transliterated as Kurux or Kudukh or Kunrukh, is a Dravidian language. See Masato Kobayashi and Bablu Tirkey, *The Kurux Language: Grammar, Texts and Lexicon* (Boston: Brill, 2017). A brief introduction to the language with survey data from the early twentieth century is available in Grierson, "Kurukh". Recent discussions of issues related to the promotion of the Kurukh language include Anajana Singh, "Linguistic Politics and Kurukh Language Movement of the Oraons in Jharkhand," *Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies* 8, no. 2 (August 2018): 37–50; Alisha Vandana Lakra and Md. Mojibur Rahman, "Vitality and Endangerment of Contemporary Kurukh," *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 9, no. 2 (2017): 350–68.

[54] Ekka, "Struggle for Truth and Justice," 407–8. Other colleges and universities have since followed suit. Ranchi University has had a Department of Tribal and Regional Languages since 1980.

[55] The script was developed by Dr. Narayan Oraon, a Sarna Adivasi. For more information about the script, see "Tolong Siki," Omniglot, https://www.omniglot.com/writing/tolongsiki.htm. Use of the Tolong Siki script is still rare; most printed Kurukh materials use the Roman or Devanagari scripts.

The NWGELC values its independence from the GELC because it has allowed them to focus on their Oraon identity. They worry that merging with the GELC would require them to neglect their unique Oraon language and culture. The GELC criticizes the NWGELC for being prejudiced and exclusive, but the NWGELC rejects this caricature of itself, protesting that they would not exclude anyone. They point to the Assam Lutheran Church, predominantly composed of Mundas, which merged with the NWGELC several years ago. They also note that they are engaged in mission work among non-Oraon communities in Chhattisgarh and have plans to work among the Korwa tribe as well. Nevertheless, the NWGELC believes that attention to the particularities of cultural identity—which for the vast majority of its members means their identity as Oraons—is essential for Christian faith. They encourage all Adivasis, no matter which tribe they come from or what religion they practice, to embrace their traditional tribal languages and culture.[56]

The GELC, however, has a rather different perspective.

The GELC: Adivasi Theology

Theologians in the GELC do not the dispute the importance of inculturation (rooted in the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ) and embracing certain aspects of their traditional culture, but they argue that the lens of *jati* (tribe) is not what is most important for Adivasis. On the contrary, they contend, a focus on *jati* could actually get in the way of the Gospel.[57] The GELC

[56] In chapter three I will discuss controversies regarding the question of how integral traditional Adivasi religious practices, now called Sarna, are for Adivasi identity. Unlike Scheduled Castes, where those who convert to Christianity or Islam are no longer considered members of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes remain so regardless of religious affiliation. Some Sarna Adivasis would like to see that changed.

[57] Depending on their understanding of the Gospel, theologians' concerns about emphasizing *jati* include fears that it will distract Adivasis from the struggle for their shared liberation, that it entails privileging earthly things above heavenly things, and that is a form of the sin of pride that blinds people to their need for Christ's forgiveness.

values unity in diversity and contains members from many different Adivasi tribes: Munda, Oraon, Kharia, Ho, Santhal, etc. They point to St. Paul's epistle to the Galatians to argue that tribal differences should not matter to Christians: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). For the GELC this scripture passage has a clear meaning: instead of focusing on their particular tribal identities, they should come together as one body in Christ and embrace their shared identity as Adivasis.

Leaders of the GELC complain about the *jativad* or caste-ism (which, in this case, is discrimination based on tribe)[58] of the NWGELC. They insist that the different tribes in the region have always lived together peacefully and that the divisive ideology of the NWGELC is a recent development. They contrast the situation of Jharkhand to that of Northeastern India, where there have been long and bloody conflicts among the tribes. In Jharkhand, on the other hand, they insist, the tribes have always been peace-loving and friendly towards each other. The Moderator (i.e., head bishop) of the GELC, Johan Dang, attributes the NWGELC's "divisive" attitude to the influence of American identity politics, because several key leaders in the NWGELC completed their theological education in the United States.[59] The first bishop of the NWGELC, Nirmal Minz, who received his doctorate in theology at the University of Chicago in 1968, has indeed praised the United States for its cultural diversity and accommodation of non-

[58] In much of India, the term *jativad* conjures up images of discrimination against Dalits and people from low castes. But the term *jati* (lit. "birth") does not only refer to "caste" in a technical sense but rather any community into which one is born, and therefore it is also used to refer to tribes. Here, *jativad* means discrimination based on one's tribal community.

[59] In an interview, Dang (who is Munda) told me, "[The NWGELC's divisive ideology] is coming from US. In the US you see so many divisions. Dr. Minz bought and brought the idea from US culture." Interview, September 23, 2017.

English speakers.[60] But the GELC alleges that Minz, by focusing on Oraon identity and language, has promoted ethnic conflict between the tribes.[61]

In order to combat the mentality of *jativad*, the GELC tries to create unity by downplaying differences among the tribes and emphasizing what they have in common. Their theologians acknowledge the various tribes, but they emphasize what Adivasis share in common across tribal differences, such as a love of song and dance, values of equality and justice, and the threat of displacement from their land. They believe it is important to focus on improving the condition of all Adivasis instead of focusing on the culture of any particular group. George Kerketta, a GELC pastor from the Kharia tribe, told me, "We have to go back to the concept of the missionaries and work for the holistic development of all Adivasis. No more *jativad*. Otherwise, this church will continue to be divided."[62] The GELC sees their approach as following the precedent of the early missionaries, who worked across tribes as they planted the Gospel in Chotanagpur. They often focus on what they can achieve by cooperating across tribal differences. Another GELC pastor, Marshall Kerketta, reminded me that if the NWGELC and GELC were united, they would be the largest Lutheran church in India. "Just think of what such a large church could do!"[63]

The GELC's Central Council encourages the use of Hindi instead of the tribal languages. In urban areas where members of multiple tribes gather together for worship, if they sing a song

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[60] Minz narrated his autobiography to Dr. Alex Ekka and Fr. Augustine Kerketta, who transcribed the narrative and translated it into English. See Minz, "Struggle for Justice". Nirmal Minz's son-in-law, Jhakmak Ekka, has also written a summary of his life and work. See Ekka, "Struggle for Truth and Justice".

[61] Because the term *jativad* is usually translated as casteism in English and tribal people live outside of the caste system, GELC leaders often use the English term "ethnic" to refer to the locus of the conflict created by the NWGELC: it is about ethnic tensions or ethnic identity. For an insightful critique of the variety of ways the term "ethnicity" has been used in relation to Adivasi movements in Jharkhand, see Susan B. C. Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity: Culture and Protest in Jharkhand* (New Delhi: Sage, 1992).

[62] Interview, April 14, 2018.

[63] Interview, August 31, 2016.

in Mundari, they will make sure also to sing a song in Kurukh (the Oraon language), but the preferred strategy of the administration is simply to sing all songs in Hindi or Sadri (which is another pan-tribal language).[64] Leaders of the GELC fear that encouraging tribal languages will divide the people and threaten the unity of the church. Manmasih Ekka, retired GELC pastor and former principal of Gossner Theological College (GTC), told me about a congregation that was all Munda except for one Oraon family. On account of that one family, he stated proudly, the congregation chose to worship in Hindi, so that all could understand and participate in worship.[65] The GELC views their linguistic preference for Hindi as a way to be an inclusive and welcoming church.

The emphasis on Hindi also makes sense in light of India's growing urbanization. Adivasi youth growing up in cities rarely speak their traditional tribal languages. The GELC is trying to be realistic about the future and population trends. They may also be aware of the fact that power and money are concentrated in the cities. In cities, people have more disposable income and can give more money to the church. GELC pastors are paid locally, from the local parish, so they prefer positions in wealthier, urban congregations. Some GELC pastors in rural areas preach in local tribal languages, but for many it is simply too difficult. The GELC's seminary, Gossner Theological College (GTC), uses Hindi as its medium of instruction. Students learn theological vocabulary in Hindi, so they often struggle to translate theological concepts into tribal languages and find it easier to preach in Hindi. Pastors are sometimes sent to regions where

[64] GELC pastor Marshall Kerketta also told me, "We should use the Nagpuri and Sadri languages in worship; they will bring people together, and they are better known than Hindi." Interview, August 31, 2016.
[65] Ekka belongs to the Oraon tribe, so the willingness of that Munda congregation to use Hindi to include a single Oraon family touched him deeply. Interview, October 9, 2017.

they did not grow up, regions where people speak different languages. Hindi is the easiest way to communicate with those from different backgrounds and build a sense of shared identity.[66]

The GELC condemns the NWGELC for being divisive and prejudiced by focusing on the Oraon tribe. The GELC believes that, as Christians, they are called to be an inclusive community, where ethnicity and tribal differences do not matter.[67] According to Moderator Dang, "The church is not community based … GELC has inclusiveness. All are allowed: any tribes, or from a Hindu or Muslim background. … NWGELC is Oraon, it is only for one community. If you come [together] in one community, they say, then you will develop. But in the GELC all is based on merit. It's democratic. There's a mixture; there is no difference among the tribes."[68] The GELC may not always live up to this ideal in practice, but their goal is to treat members of all tribes equally.

The GELC wants the NWGELC to merge with them and submit to their ecclesial authority, to repent of their sinful dissension and return home like the prodigal son, so that they may all be one in Christ again. It is fine to celebrate their shared identity as Adivasis, but the GELC worries that acknowledging differences among the tribes will hinder their unity as Christians, a unity which is sorely needed as Adivasis confront the challenges of the modern world.

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[66] The missionaries rejected Sadri (also known as Nagpuri or Sadani), which was the simple language Adivasis typically used to communicate across tribes, because they deemed it a less complex and prestigious language. Topno, "Adivasi Christians' Faith Cognition," 27, 39, 43–45.

[67] It is worth noting that the welcome and inclusivity of the GELC is primarily directed towards their fellow Adivasis. They are not engaged in mission work among non-Adivasi communities. Instead, non-Adivasi Christians usually find spiritual homes in other denominations such as the Church of North India, the Roman Catholic Church, or independent Pentecostal missions.

[68] Interview, September 23, 2017.

Divergent Interpretations of the Adivasi Context

The churches' starkly different approaches to their context stem from their competing interpretations of what is most significant about Adivasi life and what is necessary to promote the well-being of Adivasi society in the future. It is not the case that one church ignores context while the other embraces it; on the contrary, they both engage with real and relevant aspects of Adivasi life. Yet whether they highlight *jati* or a pan-Adivasi identity profoundly shapes the rest of their theological reflection and has significant practical implications for daily life. Their conflict is a vivid reminder that context is never only one thing; those who ostensibly share a context can have a variety of perspectives on it. Contexts are composed of a wide array of factors (social, economic, political, religious, environmental, and so on), and their complexity is compounded by the fact that different people within a context may relate to each of those factors in different ways. The implication for theologians who seek to engage critically and constructively with their contexts is that this task is much more challenging than they often suppose.

While Adivasi theologians acknowledge the presence of numerous challenges facing their communities,[69] they often fail to recognize the subjective nature of all attempts to frame and interpret contexts, in which one must inevitably overlook some aspects of context while highlighting others. Too often, Adivasi theologians treat context as though it were a strictly empirical thing that all Adivasis would describe in a similar way. The principal of the GELC's seminary, Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta, for example, describes the methodology of Adivasi

[69] Christ Sumit.Abhay Kerketta, for example, cites both "perennial issues (i.e. identity crisis, extreme poverty, leadership crisis, land alienation, displacement and migration etc.)" and "internal issues (ethnicity, alcoholism, divisions, etc)." Kerketta belongs to the relatively small Lohar tribe, who were traditionally blacksmiths. Kerketta, *Adivasi Theology*, 1.

theology as “the cultural-anthropological methodology,”[70] but he fails to explain what, exactly, such a methodology would entail. Instead, echoing the language of post-colonial theologians, Kerketta simply calls for theology “to read the experience of the Adivasis not through the framework of any other theologies but *from their own perspective*.”[71] The conflict between the GELC and the NWGELC, however, makes it clear that there is more than one perspective among Adivasis when it comes to making sense of their experience. Engaging with context “from their own perspective” has resulted in conflict and schism within the community.

Theologians who strive to engage with their context confront a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences within that context itself as they seek to discern God’s activity and direction, and they bring their theological commitments to bear on the hermeneutical task of interpreting context even at this initial, ostensibly descriptive, level of engagement. This work typically happens behind the scenes, often without the theologians themselves being aware of the choices they are making in their construction and presentation of their context. That is how we can arrive at a situation like that of the conflict between the GELC and the NWGELC, where the two churches typically talk past each other, failing to see not only the validity of the other’s perspective but also the pitfalls of their own.

The recognition that there are a variety of ways of relating to, interpreting, and desiring to change one’s context expands the possibilities for contextual theology. Adivasi theology is not one thing, because Adivasis engage with and make sense of their context in many different ways. We should not be surprised to see a wide diversity of formulations of context, with theologians attending to many different aspects of context and the ways in which people are situated in

[70] Kerketta, 4.
[71] Kerketta, 5 (emphasis added).

relation to them. This diversity itself is a gift, contributing to the self-understanding of communities, empowering neglected populations, and opening new possibilities for the future.

Yet not all ways of making sense of context are equally valid and virtuous. Sometimes people interpret their contexts on the basis of false information, drawing upon stereotypes rather than actual data. At other times, troublesome values inform their interpretations. Think about things like slavery or child sacrifice; Christian theologians should condemn ways of relating to contexts with these practices that do not challenge their violence and dehumanization. After all, theological engagement with context is not merely concerned with diversity (reflecting a variety of perspectives and experiences) but also with truth and justice. Recall that the concern motivating Adivasi theology is that the inherited theology from "the West" does not sufficiently empower Adivasis to engage with their context in ways that are life-giving and Gospel-centered. Both Adivasi theology and Oraon theology have emerged in response to the perceived inability of previous theologies to make sense of their context and to empower Adivasis to work for a better future. In light of their emergence as reforming movements, Adivasi theology and Oraon theology are not content to stand side by side as equals, simply reflective of the diversity of Adivasi experience; rather, they seek to propagate their respective approaches to the Adivasi context.

It is not easy to judge between the two of them, however, because their frameworks for interpreting their context—and thus also their own criteria for success—are so different. There are empirical matters (such as the differences between the tribes), but there are also questions of meaning and value (such as the extent of the significance of those differences between the tribes, especially in light of the need for unity and solidarity among Adivasis). In the remainder of this chapter, I will consider these questions, interrogating in particular the focus on *jati* among

advocates of Oraon theology. While generally appreciative of Oraon theology's attempt to engage with more specific aspects of the Adivasi context, I argue that it relies upon troublesome erasures of difference, demonstrating that this is a challenge for theological reflection on context at all levels, even in attempts to speak to a more circumscribed community.

The Significance of *Jati*: Differences between Tribes

At present, there are 705 different *jatis* that the government has classified as Scheduled Tribes spread across India with vastly different cultures and languages.[72] Nagas in Northeast India have very different languages and lifestyles than Bhils in Rajasthan. Most tribes are patrilineal, but the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes of Meghalaya are matrilineal. Most tribes eat meat, but the Toda, Rabri, and Barwad tribes are vegetarian. Many tribes engage in agriculture, but others are artisans; the Lohars in Chotanagpur, for example, were traditionally blacksmiths, and the Mahalis in Odisha were basket weavers. The Gonds speak Gondi, the Santhals speak Santhali, and the Varlis speak Varli. Their festivals are different: Angami Nagas celebrate the Hornbill Festival, while Mundas celebrate Sarhul. All of these groups are classified as Scheduled Tribes, but the day-to-day reality of their existence is much more dependent on the practices of the specific tribe (i.e., *jati*) to which they belong than the fact that they are called Scheduled Tribes.[73]

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[72] Chandramouli, "Scheduled Tribes in India."

[73] K. S. Singh, who led a large anthropological investigation of tribes in India during the 1980s, found that most tribes perceived their identity as either local or regional. "The tribes being a local community, about 309 (48.6 per cent) perceive their identity at the local level, i.e. taluka and district levels. About 61.3 per cent of them, i.e. 390 see their identity at the regional level which matches the pattern of the distribution of tribes mentioned above. About 10.4 per cent see themselves as 'national' communities, and three per cent, i.e. 19 tribes in the north-east perceive their identity at the transnational level (across the international border with Burma)." K. S. Singh, *The Scheduled Tribes* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6–7.

In Jharkhand, there are thirty-two different Scheduled Tribes, the largest of which are the Santhal, Munda, and Oraon.[74] Santhalis are mostly located in the eastern part of the state, in the Santhal Parganas, which is outside of the geographical reach of the GELC and the NWGELC,[75] but the GELC is the spiritual home of Adivasis from many other tribes: Mundas, Oraons, Kharias, Hos, etc. These tribes have co-existed in the region for centuries, and they have much more in common with one another than with tribes from other parts of the country.

There are not really differences in physical appearance among the various tribes in Jharkhand, although some Adivasis claim otherwise, appealing to antiquated notions of ethnology and anthropometry, with measurements of skull size and stature.[76] It is true that dress, hair style, tattoos, and other physical markers would have distinguished the various tribes in the past,[77] but these days most Adivasis wear modern clothing and no longer tattoo their children. Geography can be a differentiating factor—tribes tend to be located in specific regions (Mundas predominate in the southeast, Oraons in the northwest),[78] with villages organized around clans[79]—although urbanization is changing these traditional patterns of social organization.

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[74] For profiles of each tribe, see Minz and Hansda, *Encyclopaedia of Scheduled Tribes in Jharkhand*.

[75] Lutherans in the Santhal Parganas belong to the Santhali Diocese of the Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church.

[76] A group of college-aged Adivasi women I interviewed told me that their textbooks still say that you can tell members of different tribes apart by their appearance. For example, according to their textbooks, Mundas are short and dark-skinned, with curly hair, flat noses, broad lips, and small eyes. Interview, November 25, 2017. Crispin Bates has documented how these sorts of attempts to classify different groups of human beings flourished among anthropologists studying tribal communities in central India. See Crispin Bates, "Race, Caste and Tribe in Central India: The Early Origins of Anthropometry," in *The Concept of Race in South Asia*, ed. Peter Robb (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 219–59.

[77] S. C. Roy discusses many of these differences in appearances in his books about the Munda and Oraon tribes. Published in the early twentieth century, Roy's works remain valuable accounts of traditional tribal culture and life. Adivasis themselves frequently draw upon these accounts in their understanding of their tribal history and cultural identity. See Roy, *The Mundas and Their Country*; Roy, *The Orāons of Chotā Nāgpur*; Roy, *Oraon Religion and Customs*.

[78] Most historians believe the Mundas inhabited the region before the Oraons arrived. From studying place names, historians hypothesize that the Oraons entered the region from the northwest and gradually pushed the Mundas further and further to the southeast. This accords with the tribes' oral history. Roy, *The Mundas and Their Country*, 141–43.

[79] GELC pastor Idan Topno told me that, traditionally, Mundas preferred to live in remote regions, which were less accessible to unwanted outsiders. Their villages were usually home to a single *kili* (*gotra* in Hindi, clan in English). Sometimes a few families from another tribe would live on the outskirts of the village and weave baskets or do other

Certain behaviors, lifestyles, and rituals vary from tribe to tribe. For example, all Adivasis wash their guests' feet when they arrive, but Mundas wash their feet inside the home, whereas Hos consider this dirty and wash their guests' feet outside, before they enter the home. Adivasis often told me about the differences in marriage rituals between the tribes, specifically whether the girl's family hosts a feast for the boy's family before or after the marriage.[80]

The most significant difference among the tribes is language, and, as we have noted, this difference has been central to the conflict between the GELC and the NWGELC. Each tribe speaks its own language. Mundari, Kharia, and Ho are all Austroasiatic languages and have some similarities,[81] but the Oraon language, Kurukh, is a Dravidian language.[82] Hindi and Sadri[83] are used as common languages in urban areas, but even today many people in villages still speak their traditional tribal languages.

The presence of so many different languages has created challenges for the church throughout its history. Christian missionaries in the region recognized from the beginning that the linguistic diversity among the tribal people would be a significant obstacle for their work.

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non-agricultural work. Many areas (*tolas*) were named after the residents' *kili*. Recently, as the government has begun building more roads in rural areas, mixed villages with residents from different *kilis* can be found near the roadsides. Topno observed that, among Mundas, villages are not usually religiously mixed either: usually the villagers will all be Christian, or they will all be Sarna. This is because, historically, Mundas tended to convert to Christianity in large groups. Conversion among Oraons, on the other hand, was not as much of a mass movement, and so Oraon villages are often religiously mixed, with some Christian families and some Sarna families.

[80] For Mundas, the rituals surrounding the engagement are very important. Before the wedding, the girl's family visits the boy's family and inspects the home and property. This is known as *bara mehmani*, and it is the most important event of all the marriage celebrations for Mundas. For Oraons, the comparable event is called *sarat*, but it occurs after the wedding. For Oraons, the marriage is not complete until the girl's family comes to visit the boy's family after the wedding. Many Oraons I spoke to were bewildered as to why Mundas did not celebrate *sarat*.

[81] Santhali is also an Austroasiatic language, but I have not included it here because the Santhals reside primarily in the Santhal Parganas, which is outside the bounds of the GELC. Santhal Lutherans were evangelized by Scandinavian missionaries, and today they are part of the Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church (NELC), which was established in 1958 as a multi-ethnic church, including Santhals, Bodos, and Bengalis. For the history of Lutheran missions among the Santhals, see J. Gausdal, "The Santhal Evangelical Lutheran Church," in *The Lutheran Enterprise in India*, ed. C. H. Swavely (Madras: Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India, 1952), 105–22.

[82] Kurukh is also spelled Kurux, Kudukh, or Kunrukh.

[83] Sadri is also known as Nagpuri, Sadani, or Gawari. The Lutheran missionaries decided against using Sadri in their ministry in favor of the more prestigious Hindi language. See Topno, "Adivasi Christians' Faith Cognition," 39.

Initially, the first missionaries expressed hesitation to go to the region due to the fact that "not just one, but four different languages had to be learned in order to be able to speak successfully among the Kolhs."[84] They chose to focus on Hindi, studying it for seven and a half months before setting out for Ranchi.[85] The missionaries, however, quickly realized that when they preached in Hindi, most people could not understand them. Subsequent generations of missionaries thus began studying the local tribal languages and using them in worship. Among the Lutherans, Alfred Nottrott and Ferdinand Hahn, in particular, studied, preached, and published in Mundari and Kurukh, respectively. They realized that people needed to understand what they were saying if the Gospel were to have any impact on their lives. An early history of the mission, which supported the second generation of missionaries' emphasis on using the local tribal languages, put it this way: "Did not the Kolhs have a good natural right to hear the gospel of their God preached to them in the language which the Lord God gave them?"[86] The missionaries realized that Hindi must appear to the Adivasis as Latin did to the Germans.[87]

The use of multiple tribal languages, however, was challenging for the missionaries, and it likely contributed to the conflict between the older and the younger missionaries, a conflict that culminated in the older missionaries (who preferred to use Hindi) leaving the GEL Mission and joining the Anglican church instead. Alfred Nottrott's brother, Ludwig, described the linguistic challenges for worship:

> The missionary usually does not know beforehand in which language the sermon is to be delivered. Since Hindi was discarded as a church language, there has been a problem in that the current districts do not speak one and the same language. So the churchgoers in

[84] Nottrott, *Die Gossnersche Mission unter den Kolhs*, 1: Bilder aus dem Missionsleben, 172. As I noted in chapter one, Adivasis consider the term Kolh to be highly offensive.
[85] Nottrott, 1: Bilder aus dem Missionsleben, 173–74.
[86] Nottrott, 1: Bilder aus dem Missionsleben, 51. Once again, I must note that Adivasis do not approve of the use of the term Kolh to refer to themselves; however, this is what Ludwig Nottrott wrote.
[87] "In fact, Hindi, as the church language of the Kolhs, reminds us too vividly of Latin, which has the same dominance among us, not to receive a reproachful verdict. And the Germans were never preached to in Latin." Nottrott, 1: Bilder aus dem Missionsleben, 51.

> Gossnerpur [Govindpur] can be more Mundas or more Oraons, those in Chaibasa are sometimes mostly Larkas [Hos], other times mostly Mundas. That is why the preacher first had to look around the church and then choose the language according to his listeners—assuming, of course, that he knows these Kolh dialects. Less linguistically skilled missionaries still have to preach in Hindi.[88]

This linguistic diversity remains a challenge for the church today. It is not only difficult for pastors, who still—130 years later—find themselves thrown into situations for which their language skills are not adequate;[89] it is also challenging for those who seek to build a unified organization or movement, such as a church. How can people who do not understand one another be united? How can they learn to trust one another and work together toward a shared vision? Practical decisions must be made about when to use which language(s), both in worship and in governance. Resources are limited, and the churches cannot afford to print everything (meeting minutes, church newsletters, hymnals, bibles, etc.) in multiple languages. Sometimes hard decisions must be made, and some languages must be excluded. But imagine how you would feel if your church decided you and your language were not important enough to be included. Would it be better just to use Hindi for everything, so that no tribe is singled out as more valued than another? Or would that just make all Adivasis feel that they and their languages are inadequate?

There has been a long history of urban elites considering tribal languages to be inferior to Hindi and English. Adivasi children living in hostels to attend school in the cities are still sometimes told they sound "stupid" when they speak their traditional tribal languages. The missionaries believed that Hindi had a greater capacity than the tribal languages to communicate complex spiritual ideas. Ludwig Nottrott wrote, "If we now take a closer look at the Kohl language, it must be admitted that it is far inferior to Hindi in flexibility, vocabulary, expressions

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[88] Nottrott, 1: Bilder aus dem Missionsleben, 276. Ludwig himself was a pastor back in Germany who drew upon his brother Alfred's letters to write this account of the church.

[89] There are no longer foreign missionaries preaching in the GELC or the NWGELC, but Adivasis themselves struggle with language when sent to minister in contexts where other languages that they do not know predominate.

for spiritual things and the like."[90] Many pastors in the GELC still share these linguistic prejudices. They were trained in Hindi at the seminary, and they do not know how to translate theological concepts into the traditional tribal languages. Some Adivasis I spoke with described their struggles as they resided in between multiple languages, not knowing any language well enough to communicate complex ideas.

Promotion of traditional languages has been central to the project of contextualization. After all, language is a core aspect of identity, and the ability to speak a language is key to retaining a culture. It frames the horizons of existence, situating us in relation to one another and the wider world. We cannot think about our contexts apart from our language(s). In modern times, there has been a strong push for the preservation of linguistic diversity, with linguists recording dying languages and literary societies promoting knowledge of tribal languages. But is that preservation overly idealistic? Does it divide already marginalized communities? Would it be better if Adivasis could be formed into a cohesive power block by the use of a common, shared language, as the GELC has tried to do with Hindi?

The GELC is not the only church in Jharkhand to recognize the benefits of uniting its members through the use of Hindi. In the late 1960s, as part of the liturgical renewal movement following Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church in India encouraged the celebration of the mass in the vernacular. The Archdiocese of Ranchi was part of the Hindi Region, so the Catholics began to promote the use of Hindi in worship and Christian education for Adivasis. By 1972, the Secretary of the Archdiocese of Ranchi, Fr. Jos De Cuyper, SJ, reported that "the fullest use is being made of Hindi."[91] He also acknowledged, however, that many Catholics did

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[90] Nottrott, *Die Gossnersche Mission unter den Kolhs*, 1: Bilder aus dem Missionsleben, 51. At the time, the missionaries did not always distinguish between the various tribal languages, referring to them together as the "Kolh language."

[91] De Cuyper, "Archdiocese of Ranchi," 1972, 241.

not understand Hindi: “One obstacle to our liturgy in Hindi is the illiteracy of a number of people of the older generation (whose mother tongue is one of the tribal languages).”[92] It is worth noting that he considered lack of proficiency in Hindi to be “illiteracy,” even though there were hymnals in use in “the local idiom (Sadri, Mundari, Oraon, Kharria and Santhali),”[93] thereby reinforcing the stereotype of those who spoke tribal languages as uncivilized and illiterate.

The Archdiocese of Ranchi was eager to incorporate Adivasi culture and customs into worship,[94] but they cautioned against the use of tribal languages. While Hindi was a uniting force, they worried that use of the tribal languages could divide the church on the basis of *jati* and restrict possibilities for ministry among other, non-Adivasi communities. In his 1976 report, De Cuyper warned, “There is also a trend urging the use of tribal language. We must be careful that this does not divide our communities at the parish level. Furthermore, in urban centres, the Liturgy must remain sufficiently universal and cater for non-tribal Christians.”[95] He recognized the tension that all contextual efforts must face: the more engaged theology is with the particularities of a context, the less it will resonate with those outside of that context. That is particularly challenging for the Roman Catholic Church, which desires to be both catholic (or universal) and inculturated in local communities. De Cuyper summed up this dilemma with the statement, “It has been said also that the Liturgy proves to be a fruitful ground for the revival of tribal culture (perhaps to the detriment of a more universal and catholic outlook).”[96]

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[92] De Cuyper, “Archdiocese of Ranchi,” 1972, 241.
[93] De Cuyper, “Archdiocese of Ranchi,” 1976, 185.
[94] “While the structure of the Roman Mass and the Sacraments is faithfully respected, functional elements, like chant, dance, vestments, ornamentation, sacred furnishings are increasingly borrowed from Adivasi culture and customs. (One should keep in mind that more than 95% of the catholics of the Archdiocese belong to the Kharria, Munda and Oraon tribes). Seasonal feasts begin to take their rightful place and an appropriate liturgy is gradually developing. At Marriage and Ordination services (including episcopal ordination) the entire atmosphere is genuinely Adivasi.” De Cuyper, “Archdiocese of Ranchi,” 1976, 186.
[95] De Cuyper, “Archdiocese of Ranchi,” 1976, 189.
[96] De Cuyper, “Archdiocese of Ranchi,” 1976, 187.

While there have certainly been Catholics who disagree with the way the church has handled the matter of tribal languages,[97] it has never become a cause for schism, and the Catholic Church has proven to be a wide enough tent to hold many different perspectives on the matter. For the GELC and the NWGELC, however, this is one of the main issues that keep them divided, as the GELC endorses the use of Hindi so as to include all Adivasis, while the NWGELC promotes Kurukh so as to make the Gospel more relevant to Oraons.

Another possible model for dealing with linguistic difference is that of the Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church (NELC), an Adivasi church with congregations in the northeastern part of India (eastern Jharkhand, West Bengal, Assam, and Arunchal Pradesh), headquartered in Dumka. The NELC's roughly 100,000 members are divided into dioceses on the basis of language. The linguistic communities (Santhali, Bengali, and Bodo) are mostly concentrated in distinct regions, as in the GELC, but there is some geographical overlap between communities. NWGELC leaders often praise this model. Roger Gaikwad, chair of the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) during my fieldwork and mediator for the most recent round of Peace Committee meetings with GELC and NWGELC, proposed a similar sort of model as a possible compromise for uniting the two churches:[98] congregations would be divided into different synods or dioceses on the basis of language. All would come together under the central office, which would use Hindi for communication, but the linguistically based dioceses could use the tribal languages.

GELC leaders, however, worry that this sort of model would further divide people on the basis of tribe. Manmasih Ekka, former principal of Gossner Theological College (GTC), told me

[97] Fr. Joseph Marianus Kujur, for example, laments the "Hindi-izing the Adivasi church, which was at the cost of the tribal languages." Kujur, "Tribal Church in the Margins," 33.
[98] Interview, March 31, 2018. Gaikwad, however, suggested against naming the synods on the basis of tribal identity, as that could make them appear exclusive.

that the GELC had tried taking this approach in the past. Following the Indian government's model of creating states on a linguistic basis, the GELC tried separating the tribes on the basis of language within the church. "But that missed the synthesis between the tribes," Manmasih Ekka argued.[99] To justify the GELC's emphasis on unity, Ekka noted that one can find Kerkettas (a surname indicating a particular clan) in multiple tribes (Oraon, Munda, Kharia, etc.), that Christians tolerate marriage across tribal boundaries (such as between Oraons and Mundas),[100] and that there is no history of conflict between the tribes in Chotanagpur, at least not violent conflict like that among the Nagas in Northeast India. Manmasih Ekka also pointed out that although Mundas and Oraons are the numerically largest tribes in the GELC, there are more than twenty other communities included in the church. It simply would not be possible to accommodate all of their languages. Manmasih Ekka's preference, therefore, is to use Hindi, because "the church must be an inclusive community."[101]

Although this is the position of most GELC leaders, there are some people within the GELC who are pushing for the use of tribal languages. Idan Topno, a GELC pastor and lecturer at Gossner Theological College (GTC), is a strong advocate for the use of the Mundari language. Although she grew up in the city of Ranchi mostly speaking Hindi, she did learn some Mundari from her family, and she tries to preach in Mundari when she visits rural congregations. Mundari, however, has four different dialects, and she struggles to communicate in the dialects other than her own. Despite not being completely fluent even in her own dialect of Mundari, she considers it to be her mother tongue as a Munda and an Adivasi. I once heard a Munda woman describe Hindi as "*apna bhasa*" (my language), and Topno corrected her, telling her that

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[99] Interview, October 2, 2017.
[100] In practice, however, marriage across *jatis* is still frowned upon by many Adivasis. Growing acceptance of inter-tribal among Christians is one of the factors contributing to the divide between Christian and Sarna Adivasis.
[101] Interview, October 9, 2017.

Mundari rather than Hindi was her language.[102] "Your language is your culture and your identity!" Topno tells people. "If we lose our mother tongue, we lose everything."[103]

Topno has encouraged her students at the seminary to practice preaching and leading worship in tribal languages, not just in Hindi, as many rural congregants do not understand Hindi. At the time of my fieldwork, she was working on her doctorate in theology, and we traveled to many villages to do fieldwork together. She would interview people about their use of Mundari, asking them questions about whether they read the Bible in Hindi or Mundari, whether they are teaching their children Mundari, and so on. She found that people generally preferred to read the Bible in Hindi, even when Hindi was a second language for them, because the Mundari Bible uses old-fashioned language and a higher register than they speak in their homes. Most people said they encouraged their children to speak Hindi instead of Mundari to improve their job prospects in the future. These interviews were never merely about fact finding; Topno would always encourage them to keep using Mundari, or if they didn't know it, to learn it. Pastors like Topno challenge the GELC's promotion of Hindi at the expense of tribal languages, even as they continue to affirm the importance of all the tribes coming together in one church.

The NWGELC's promotion of the traditional Oraon language, Kurukh, has its own tensions and struggles as well. While the NWGELC endorses the use of Kurukh, not all members of the NWGELC speak Kurukh, and there are also dialects of Kurukh that complicate matters. Students at the NWGELC's seminary, Navin Doman Theological College (NDTC), told me about their internship placements in rural congregations that spoke dialects of Kurukh (such as Chhattisgarhi Kurukh) that were difficult for them to understand.[104] The NWGELC has

[102] Small group discussion at Jhikpani congregation, March 14, 2018.
[103] Small group discussion at Adivasi Women's College Hostel, March 10, 2018.
[104] According to Masato Kobayashi and Bablu Tirkey, there is comparatively little dialectal variation in Kurukh. Most differences are lexical (i.e., related to vocabulary), instead of related to pronunciation or inflection. They

congregations in West Bengal that speak Bengali, and there is a region east of Ranchi where Oraons are a minority and speak a dialect of Mundari instead.[105] Many young Oraons in urban areas have never learned Kurukh and want to worship in Hindi or Sadri. At the NWGELC's headquarters congregation in Ranchi, the liturgy and sermon are always in Hindi because many urban Oraons do not know Kurukh, and only some of the songs are sung in Kurukh.

The push for Kurukh in the NWGELC is in many ways practical, to enable the church better to serve the needs of existing congregations (which are predominantly located in rural areas) where members only understand Kurukh. Yet it is also visionary, designed to facilitate the creation of a Christian community in which there is a stronger sense of Oraon identity underpinned by the use of Kurukh. If NWGELC church leaders were merely responding to the demographics of their congregations, they would probably be drifting toward greater use of Hindi or Sadri. Instead, they feel called by God to promote Kurukh and their Oraon identity. They fear that otherwise they will gradually be assimilated into the wider non-Adivasi culture. As noted above, their contention is that there is no such thing as a generic Adivasi; one cannot be Adivasi without embracing one's particular *jati*. And for the NWGELC, language is the most important marker of *jati*.

Relevance and Community

But why *jati*? Why should *jati* be considered the most important aspect of identity within the Adivasi context? Why not something more specific, like clan (*gotra*, a subdivision of *jati*) or

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hypothesize that the relative lack of dialectal variation is due to the recent migration of Oraons into the region and the practice of marrying outside of one's clan, which results in considerable exchange and interaction between Oraons from different regions. See Kobayashi and Tirkey, *The Kurux Language*, 10–11. Nevertheless, according the NDTC seminary students, these dialectical variations were initially challenging for their ministry.

[105] This dialect of Mundari spoken by Oraons is called Keraʔ Mundari, with the ʔ indicating a glottal stop. See Kobayashi and Tirkey, 4.

village? When pressed on this question, Jhakmak Ekka explained that *jati* is primary because it is the people's own self-identification: "It is coming from within, not from outside."[106] His argument is that the category of Adivasi is something formulated in the abstract, from outside, whereas one's identity as Oraon—or as "Kurukh," for that is how Oraons refer to themselves in their own language[107]—"comes from within." Ekka explained that, in response to the question, "What is your identity?" an Oraon would respond, "I am Kurukh." Yet even this identity as Kurukh/Oraon is relative, formulated in response to the presence of an outsider. In another situation, with a different interrogator, another aspect of one's identity might become primary. For example, when looking for a wife, Ekka's response to the question of identity would likely have been, "I am Ekka," since Ekka is the name of his clan, and clan is the relevant category for determining marital eligibility (it is considered tantamount to incest to marry a member of the same clan).[108]

In an article in which he argues in favor of the development of "community-specific theology" (such as Oraon theology), Jhakmak Ekka offers three reasons why theology at the level of *jati* or "community" is important: (1) each community has unique resources to offer and its own peculiar issues that need to be addressed; (2) theology must be done in the community's own language in order to express authentically the community's culture and worldview; and (3) community-specific theology gives smaller communities a voice, whereas general indigenous theology (such as Adivasi theology) gives rise to the danger that larger communities may silence

[106] Jhakmak Ekka acknowledges his multiple identities but considers *jati* to be basic or primary. "We bear multiple identities. I'm an Indian Christian, I'm a North Indian Christian, I'm a Jharkhandi Christian, I'm an Adivasi Christian, I'm an Oraon Christian. A lot of identities. But which identity is our primary identity? God deals with our very fundamental identity." For Ekka, that "very fundamental identity" is his particular tribe. Interview, June 18, 2022.
[107] The language of "Oraon theology" reflects its public presentation to those outside of the Kurukh community.
[108] Adivasi Christian surnames indicate *gotra* or clan. Ekka, for example, means tortoise.

and exploit smaller communities.[109] The first and third arguments could easily be applied to other levels or aspects of community such as clan or village; it is the second argument about language that points to the importance of *jati*. Language is what binds the community together at the level of *jati*. In a sense, this is a circular argument: *jati* is important because language is important, and language is important because *jati* is important.[110]

Nevertheless, Jhakmak Ekka's argument for community-specific theology is in some ways analogous to my argument for attending to the specificity of contexts. He is concerned about the fact that the GELC, in its effort to create a united Adivasi church, ends up erasing the differences between the tribes, especially the difference of language. This limits its ability to speak to some of the most crucial aspects of Adivasis' identity and context, mistaking uniformity for unity and neglecting valuable resources that particular tribes have to offer Christian theology. Oraon theology rightfully criticizes such erasure of difference.

Yet there are ways in which the category of *jati* can function in a similar way, obscuring the diversity that exists within individual tribes. While the category of Oraon is more precise than the category of Adivasi, it neglects other significant axes of difference within the Oraon community in its effort to construct a coherent picture of Oraon identity. If the goal of the contextual project is relevance—inculturating the gospel into the lives and experiences of people—why not consider even more specific aspects of identity in one's theological reflection?

For example, members of various clans have different experiences.[111] Why don't members of the Kujur clan do *Kujur* theology, members of the Ekka clan do *Ekka* theology,

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[109] Ekka, "Indigenous Christian Theology: Questions and Directions in Making," 118–19.

[110] Note that the GELC's argument in favor of Hindi is also based on the link between language and community: in order to be united as Adivasis, the people must have a shared language. The difference lies in how they define community.

[111] Villages are mostly composed of a single clan, with different clans predominating in different regions. Members of the same clan are considered kin, and thus marriage within the clan is denounced as tantamount to incest. Traditionally, each clan has a totem animal that they are not allowed to eat.

members of the Toppo clan do *Toppo* theology, and so on? And, of course, the situation of women within each of these clans is different than that of men; why not Kujur *women's* theology? Or consider location: Kujurs from the city of Lohardaga, which is mostly Oraon, have a very different context than Kujurs in villages to the east of Ranchi, where many of their neighbors are Mundas; why not *Loharadaga* Kujur women's theology? What about the experience of conversion? The context of a recent convert is very different than that of someone who was born into a family that has been Christian for multiple generations; why not *first-generation convert* Lohardaga Kujur women's theology? And theologians shouldn't overlook the importance of money: someone who has all their material needs met encounters God in a radically different way than someone who struggles to feed their family. Why not *poor* first-generation convert Lohardaga Kujur women's theology? Each of these additional levels of specificity would refine theological reflection and increase its relevance for the designated population.

Increasing the relevance for some individuals, however, limits the scope of the theology's applicability. Carried to an extreme, an individualistic approach to relevance would ultimately produce theologies that spoke to the experiences of a single person at a single moment in time. This sort of individualistic approach would be counter to both classical Christian theology (with its aspiration to catholicity / universality) and diverse forms of contemporary contextual theology (which consider what humans, as social and situated beings, bring with them in their journeys of faith; think about the word "*con*-text," or what comes together *with* the text).[112] Adivasi theology, in particular, would reject such an individualistic approach as counter to its emphasis

[112] Etymological speaking, however, our modern word "context" actually comes from the Latin *contexere*, "to weave together," and *texere* comes from the PIE root *teks- "to weave," or "to fabricate." Douglas Harper, "Context (n.)," in *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2022, www.etymonline.com/word/context.

on an ethics of community.[113] Adivasi theologians often described their communitarian ethics to me by invoking the phrase, “I am because we are,” arguing that individuals cannot exist apart from their identity as part of wider communities. Implicit in this argument is the idea that relevance should be understood as having a communal dimension as well, attending to the ways in which people are formed and nurtured through social networks and group identities.

Still, the Adivasi sense of community is not limited to one’s identification as Adivasi in general or as a member of one tribe in particular. Adivasis care about the well-being of their villages, their youth, their women, and many other spheres of community. The focus on *jati* among Oraon theologians, in my opinion, reflects yet another dimension of context and relevance: their vision and hope for the future. Theology is relevant to a context not merely in so far as it can make sense of what presently exists within that context but also in its capacity to imagine an alternative future and to inspire people of faith to work toward it. Relevance in this sense is what leads theologians to work for justice, peace, and social change. This sort of political engagement requires the nurturing of shared identities, bringing people together across their differences to work for the well-being of the whole.

Oraon theologians recognize the need to frame their context in a way that is strategically viable: they need a group that is large enough to make real social change. A village or even a clan would be too small a community. But the tribe as a whole offers a substantial population base; according to the 2011 census there were almost 3.7 million Oraons in India.[114] Language—

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[113] For example, Jhakmak Ekka writes, “The Adivasi community is endowed with qualities such as community living and ownership, communal identity (*we are therefore I am*), the practice of consensus, continuum between human, nature and spirit world and right to self-determination.” Ekka, “To Be the Light and Not to Be the Light: Christian Witness in the Adivasi Context of Central India,” 155.

[114] Per the 2011 census, the total population of Oraons in India was 3,682,992, with 1,716,618 Oraons in Jharkhand, 748,789 in Chhattisgarh, 643,510 in West Bengal, 358,112 in Odisha, 144,472 in Bihar, 43,060 in Maharashtra, and 28,431 in Madhya Pradesh. Census data for individual tribes in each state may be found in the “A-11: State Primary Census Abstract (PCA) for Individual Scheduled Tribes” tables online at Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, “Census Tables,” 2021, https://censusindia.gov.in/census.website/data/census-tables#.

an identity marker that traditionally corresponds with *jati*—is also an ideal candidate for grounding Adivasi identity as many other aspects of traditional Adivasi life disappear. In short, *jati* is a politically strategic level of community, and it makes sense that those who want to attend to the diversity among Adivasis would focus on *jati* as opposed to more specific axes of identity and difference.

Those who promote Adivasi theology in general, however, consider the level of *jati* to be too narrow to achieve the kind of wide-scale social change that they desire for Adivasi society. Even Oraon theologians acknowledge that, following the development of community-specific theology, Adivasis need to collaborate across tribal boundaries. Adivasis often cite the lack of unity among different tribes as the source of the challenges that their people face today: because they did not band together across tribal boundaries, exploitative outsiders (*dikus*) were able to take advantage of them, stealing their land and reducing them to poverty.

Thus far I have focused on the differences between tribes, but unity is an important part of the equation as well. The tribes share much in common and have a rich history of collaboration across tribal boundaries to struggle for their rights. At times, Adivasis have promoted views of their context and identity that incorporated their non-Adivasi neighbors as well. A brief look at some of these historical attempts to unite Jharkhandis across tribe and caste will illuminate the politically contingent nature of Adivasi constructions of context.

Changing Views of Context and Efforts for Unity

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as more and more Adivasis lost their land and fell into poverty, solidarity across tribes increased. Large protest movements in the nineteenth century—such as the Kol Movement of 1831–32, the Santhal Hul, the Mulkui Larai (or Sardar

Movement), the Kherwar Movements of 1871 and 1891, and Birsa Munda's Ulgulan[115]—began to bring together Adivasis from different tribes.[116] Christianity also played an important role in the formation of ethnic solidarity, especially among urban elites.[117] The centralized educational systems of the missions led to the establishment of student unions and other associations,[118] which cultivated a sense of shared tribal identity. K. S. Singh describes the attitude of inter-denominational cooperation and pan-tribal solidarity in the early twentieth century:

> Voices were raised for forging unity of the people of Chotanagpur and for abolition of differences among Christians and non-Christian tribals, as also among all tribals, Munda, Oraon, Tamaria, Mahali, Lohara and Panre. A new sentiment was in the air: "All Adivasis are one, Adivasis of lower category such as Lohara, Panre, Bhuiya and Tamaria should not be looked down upon", etc.[119]

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[115] Emmanuel Barla, *The Political Unification of Tribals in India* (New Delhi: R. D. Pandey Satyam, 2010), 40–43; Stephen Fuchs, *Rebellious Prophets: A Study of Messianic Movements in India* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1965); K. S. Singh, ed., *Tribal Movements in India*, vol. 2 (1982; repr., New Delhi: Manohar, 2006); Suresh Singh, *The Dust-Storm and the Hanging Mist: A Study of Birsa Munda and His Movement in Chhotanagpur (1874–1901)* (Calcutta: Mukhopadhyay, 1966).

[116] Susan Devalle notes the following alliances between tribes present in the various movements: Kol Movement (Mundas, Oraons, and Hos), Kherwar Movement of 1871 (Santals and Mundas), Kherwar Movement of 1891 (Santals and Oraons), and Birsaite Movement (Mundas and Oraons). Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity*, 118.

[117] Joseph Bara, "Western Education and Rise of New Identity: Mundas and Oraons of Chotanagpur, 1839–1939," *Economic and Political Weekly* 32, no. 15 (1997): 785–90. K. S. Singh writes of Christianity in the region, "As Christianity spread it performed many roles: it gave them a history and a myth; it accentuated the notion of private rights in land; it promoted education and medical care; it also emphasized a sense of separateness from the rest." K. S. Singh, "From Ethnicity to Regionalism: A Study in Tribal Politics and Movement in Chotanagpur from 1900 to 1975.," in *Dissent, Protest, and Reform in Indian Civilization*, ed. S. C. Malik (Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1977), 318–19.

[118] The Lutherans formed the Christian Association in 1898 to promote education. It was re-formed as the Christian College Union in 1918 with the involvement of the Catholics. An Anglican, J. Bartholomew, started a chapter of the Dacca Students Union in 1912 to raise funds for poor Christian students. A non-Christian Adivasi founded the Munda-Oraon Siksha Sabha (Education Conference). The Ranchi Union promoted education among Adivasis in urban areas. K. S. Singh, *Tribal Society in India: An Anthropo-Historical Perspective* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1985), 198–200.

[119] Yet Singh also acknowledges that, "The pan-tribal sentiment was, however, weak." Singh, 199.

Organizations such as the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj,[120] the Chotanagpur Catholic Sabha,[121] and the Kisan Sabha[122] merged in 1938 to form the Adivasi Mahasabha,[123] promoting a pan-tribal identity as "Adivasis," or original inhabitants.[124] The Adivasi Mahasabha sought the creation of a separate Adivasi state that would include Chotanagpur and the Santhal Parganas. Through this movement for political self-determination, Adivasis hoped to re-establish their traditional forms of village democracy, increase educational opportunities and economic development, promote traditional Adivasi languages, prevent the influx of additional outsiders, and restore tribal land to those who had been displaced.[125] Jaipal Singh Munda, leader of the

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[120] The Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj (Improvement Society), initially established in 1915 but revived in 1920 by GELC pastor Joel Lakra, worked among Lutheran and Anglican Adivasis to secure government jobs for Adivasis and to push for an independent state. A. K. Jha observed that the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj "helped a lot in instilling a sense of common 'tribal identity' among different tribes of the area who had nothing to share with each other except for that they were all tribes and they were all a poor oppressed lot inhabiting a common mass of land." A. K. Jha, "Jharkhand Politics of Bihar: Paradigm of Non-Performance," in *Jharkhand Movement: Origin and Evolution*, ed. Sachindra Narayan (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1992), 102; Barla, *Political Unification*, 40; Sanjay Kumar, "The Adivasi Mahasabha, Jaipal Singh and the Idea of a Separate State," *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (January 2018): 1340–41.

[121] The Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj did not include Catholic Adivasis. Ignes Beck and Boniface Lakra established a separate organization for Catholics in 1929, the Chotanagpur Catholic Sabha. Barla, *Political Unification*, 40; Kumar, "The Adivasi Mahasabha," 1341; Nil Ratan, "Jharkhand Movement," in *Jharkhand Movement: Origin and Evolution*, ed. Sachindra Narayan (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1992), 110.

[122] Laurentius Barla and Theble Oraon founded the Chotanagpur Kisan Sabha (Peasants Organization) in 1931, responding to concerns that the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj and the Chotanagpur Catholic Sabha were primarily urban organizations that ignored the needs of rural Adivasis. Theble Oraon later went on to found the Sanatan Adivasi Sabha, for non-Christian Adivasis, in 1939. Ramashish Roy, "Origin and Evolution of the Jharkhand Movement," in *Jharkhand Movement: Origin and Evolution*, ed. Sachindra Narayan (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1992), 97; Kumar, "The Adivasi Mahasabha," 1341, 1344.

[123] The organizations merged in 1938 to form the Adivasi Sabha, but it came to be known as the Adivasi Mahasabha following a massive *mahasabha* (general assembly) and procession in Ranchi in January of 1939. Bara, "Western Education and Rise of New Identity," 789. Additional historical notes regarding the Adivasi Mahasabha may be found in L. N. Rana, "The Adivasi Mahasabha (1938–1949): Launching Pad of the Jharkhand Movement," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 53 (1992): 397–405.

[124] The term "Adivasi" appears to have been coined, and was certainly defined, by Jaipal Singh Munda, President of the Adivasi Mahasabha and, later, of the Jharkhand Party. A collection his writings and speeches in English has recently been published. Jaipal Singh Munda, *Adivasidom: Selected Writings and Speeches of Jaipal Singh Munda*, ed. Ashwini Kumar Pankaj (Ranchi: Pyara Kerketta Foundation, 2017).

[125] These demands of the Adivasi Mahasabha are reflected in its Jharkhand Province Party Manifesto from November 7, 1945. Jaipal Singh Munda, "Jharkhand Province Party Manifesto," in *Adivasidom: Selected Writings and Speeches of Jaipal Singh Munda*, ed. Ashwini Kumar Pankaj (Ranchi: Pyara Kerketta Foundation, 2017), 76–78.

Adivasi Mahasabha, praised the willingness of Adivasis to come together to work for these shared goals:

> The Adibasi Movement has recently amalgamated into a united organisation [of] the many aboriginal, political and social societies. All the past divisions and distressing dissensions have completely disappeared and the Adibasis are now all one in their struggle for freedom from the tyranny of mere numbers. We offer a united front, an amazing fact in the annals of the aboraginies [sic].[126]

While many Adivasis look back upon the Adivasi Mahasabha as a golden age of pan-tribal unity, the situation was not quite as idyllic as Jaipal Singh Munda made it out to be. Tensions between the tribes and divisions between religious communities were still present. K. S. Singh observes, "The semblance of unity forged and maintained for about two decades barely concealed the currents and cross-currents of differences arising out of the consideration of tribal and denominational interests."[127] For example, the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj was led by Oraons, while Mundas formed their own Munda Sabha.[128] Although initially the Adivasi Mahasabha brought together a diverse coalition of Adivasis, it soon became dominated by Mundas,[129] and unofficial power-sharing agreements between Lutherans, Catholics, and Anglicans were necessary to maintain unity.[130] The lesson to be taken from the unity that was attained during this period is not that tribal differences should be ignored (as the GELC might

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[126] In the regional dialect, "v" is often replaced with "b"; hence, Adibasi instead of Adivasi. Jaipal Singh Munda stated these remarks in his first public speech at the Adivasi Mahasabha Rally in Ranchi on January 20, 1939. Jaipal Singh Munda, "We Will Not Be Satisfied on Less than a Separate Province," in *Adivasidom: Selected Writings and Speeches of Jaipal Singh Munda*, ed. Ashwini Kumar Pankaj (Ranchi: Pyara Kerketta Foundation, 2017), 106. Excerpts of the speech are also available in P. G. Ganguly, "Separatism in the Indian Polity: A Case Study," in *Anthropology and Archaeology: Essays in Commemoration of Verrier Elwin, 1902–64*, ed. M. C. Pradhan et al. (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 82–83.
[127] Singh, *Tribal Society in India: An Anthropo-Historical Perspective*, 224.
[128] Singh, 225.
[129] Singh, 225.
[130] "The [Adivasi Mahasabha] maintained a delicate balance among the three denominations by providing suitable representation to their interests in the organization and leadership. If the president was an Anglican, the secretary was either a Lutheran or a Catholic." Singh, 224.

argue), but rather that they must be carefully attended to and continually re-negotiated in order to construct even a fragile unity.

In spite of the challenges associated with larger coalitions, Adivasis realized their benefits for social protest and political change. In 1949–50, the Adivasi Mahasabha adopted a new name—the Jharkhand Party—and the Jharkhand movement transitioned from being an ethnic movement led by Adivasis to a regional movement that included non-Adivasis in the party.[131] The hope was that, by including a wider constituency, the people of Jharkhand would be able to achieve their goal of a separate state. The 1951 census had indicated a lower Scheduled Tribe population than Adivasis had anticipated,[132] and, in spite of their criticisms of the government's census methodology,[133] Adivasis recognized the need to work with other marginalized communities in order to achieve their political goals. While Adivasi identity was not abandoned, the emphasis moved toward the promotion of Jharkhandi or Chotanagpuri identity instead. The Jharkhand Party argued that *sadans*, or non-Adivasis who had lived alongside Adivasis in the region for centuries, shared a common culture and concern for the well-being of the region's permanent inhabitants.[134] Political goals thus shifted according to the

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[131] Roy, "Origin and Evolution of the Jharkhand Movement," 97.
[132] Singh, "From Ethnicity to Regionalism," 321.
[133] In his speech to the Prime Minister of Bihar as the leader of a deputation from the Adivasi Sabha in 1939, Jaipal Singh Munda contested the government's "false and mischievous Propaganda" regarding the inaccurate and misleading system of census enumeration. "The census enumeration is muddle-headed. There is confusion of racial and religious classification. Under aborigines, Adibasis, you must include everyone of pre-Aryan stock. In reckoning the total population of the Adibasis you cannot leave out of count aborigines who are detribalised, who are within or on the verge of the Hindu fold, who belong to the exterior castes and who are Moslems. Racial classification must not be confounded with religious enumeration. The mere declaration of a person as belonging to a stock, of which he patently is not, cannot possibly change his race." Jaipal Singh Munda, "Adibasi Sabha Deputation," in *Adivasidom: Selected Writings and Speeches of Jaipal Singh Munda*, ed. Ashwini Kumar Pankaj (Ranchi: Pyara Kerketta Foundation, 2017), 29–30.
[134] There is a growing recognition among scholars today that the colonial category of "tribal" has obscured these commonalities. Susan Devalle, for example, observes that earlier protest movements had also included non-tribal segments of the population and reflected class interests (peasants rising against the rich and powerful) more than ethnic identities. "Ethnic solidarity appeared to be grounded more on a broad historically and territorially defined identity as original settlers than on particular ethnic ascriptions. At the same time, the existence of a correlated class solidarity across the low rural sections of the population—agriculturalists and artisans—in the major peasant movements of nineteenth century Jharkhand, added an important qualitative dimension. This class dimension has

way Adivasis interpreted their context, as they recognized the expediency of highlighting a broader and more inclusive aspect of their identity.[135]

The Jharkhand Party had initial electoral success, winning thirty-three seats in the Assembly and three seats in the Lok Sabha in the first general elections of 1952. But the party began to fragment as its leaders became increasingly entrenched in national politics, culminating in the merger of the Jharkhand Party with the Congress Party in 1963. Numerous local parties began to emerge in place of the Jharkhand Party (such as the Hul Jharkhand Party, the Bihar Prant Hul Jharkhand Party, and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha), which split the vote and made the dream of Jharkhand look increasingly unattainable. When the state of Jharkhand was finally established in 2000, it was at the behest of the government led by the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) rather than the Jharkhand Movement, and it only included territory from the state of Bihar. Adivasis viewed the BJP's actions cynically, protesting that the boundaries separated Adivasis into different states, dividing them and their resources. Many Adivasis argue that the creation of the state, instead of helping Adivasis, was a boon for *dikus* (exploitative outsiders), who quickly flocked to the state for the newly created government jobs. Indeed, as a percentage of the total population of the state, the number of members of Scheduled Tribes continues to fall relative to other communities.

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been underplayed by contemporary observers, colonial administrators and later scholars whose perceptions of the phenomenon was shaped by the colonial category of tribe. Consequently, these movements have been perceived as 'tribal', with no participation of the general peasantry which supposedly remained passive spectators. Contrary to this perception, there is evidence of the support and participation of the general peasantry in these movements, as in the case of the Santal Movement of 1855 when all sectors of the peasantry—'tribal' *and* 'non-tribal'—were mobilized." Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity*, 118.

[135] While Adivasi theologians continue to focus primarily on the Adivasi community, they occasionally acknowledge the need for unity with other Jharkhandis. For example, in an essay from 1987, Nirmal Minz called upon Adivasis to embrace their non-Adivasi Chotanagpuri neighbors: "The tribal adaptability and accommodative capacity must extend its horizon to include the latecomer Chotanagpuris, according to the agreed cut-off point [for Minz, this included those who arrived in the region prior to 1947 and made it their permanent home]. Here the servant politics of Jesus is essential to bring a cohesion among the Chotanagpuris—both tribals and non-tribals." Minz, "A Theological Interpretation of the Tribal Reality in India," 51.

Today, in spite of the creation of the state of Jharkhand, Adivasis continue to face numerous challenges. Conflicts with the Forest Department over natural resources continue, and the Jharkhand government has proposed amendments to the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act that would make it easier for non-Adivasis to purchase Adivasi land. Factories and mines pollute the environment and harm human health. Rural villagers get caught between Maoist insurrectionists and government security forces. Young women seeking a better future in the city often become victims of sex trafficking. Hunger and poverty continue to ravage communities,[136] and infant mortality rates are significantly higher among Adivasis than in other communities.[137]

In the face of these ongoing challenges, Adivasis recognize the need to continue to work together across tribal lines. Urban elites have been inspired by international indigenous organizations that derive their power from their unity as indigenous people, not from the unique characteristics of their *jati*. They recognize that their oppressors have a vested interest in keeping them divided, but they are hopeful that, if all Adivasis can come together, they will then be able to hold the government accountable and demand that their rights be respected.

For Adivasi theologians, therefore, unity is an important goal not only for theological reasons but also for political reasons. The larger the church, the more social and political capital it has. A united Adivasi Lutheran church could be a more powerful player in contemporary efforts to work for justice and social change. Yet, in practice, it sometimes seems that the larger a church is the more cautious and fearful it tends to be, afraid of losing the power that it has at

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[136] "From the Margins to the Centre: A Study on the Health Inequities among the Tribal Communities in Selected Districts of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha" (New Delhi: Sama, Resource Group for Women and Health, 2018), nhrc.nic.in/sites/default/files/SAMA%20Final%20Report.pdf.

[137] In Jharkhand, the infant mortality rate among Scheduled Tribes is 66% higher than other communities (46.8 deaths per 1,000 live births for STs, compared to 28.2 deaths per 1,000 live births in other communities). See the Report of The Expert Committee on Tribal Health, "Tribal Health in India: Bridging the Gap and a Roadmap for the Future" (New Delhi: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, and Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, 2018), 26–32, http://tribalhealthreport.in/full-report/.

present. For example, after the 2017 Religious Freedom Bill was passed in Jharkhand, which made it difficult for people to convert to Christianity (and easier to accuse Christians of illegal proselytization),[138] GELC leaders privately condemned the bill but did little publicly. The NWGELC, on the other hand, organized ecumenical prayer meetings and trained pastors to help them continue their evangelism work while meeting the new legal requirements.[139] The smaller church was actually much stronger than the larger church in advocating for the rights of Adivasi Christians on this issue, taking a bolder stance and cooperating across denominational lines.

Negotiating Unity and Diversity

The fact that the NWGELC, although smaller and focused on a single tribe, was able to work ecumenically and mount a greater response to the 2017 Freedom of Religion Bill offers support for Jhakmak Ekka's argument that attending to the basic level of identity in theology (which he considers to be one's *jati*) better equips Christians to engage subsequently in a secondary level of theology (i.e., Adivasi theology) with those from other tribal backgrounds. Recall that Ekka argues that Adivasis cannot be united without first being grounded in their own particular tribal identities. Once there is "mature theological articulation" from the various tribes, drawing upon their unique and diverse experiences, then indigenous people can speak collectively about issues facing their communities: "Indigenous theologies of many communities in different colours and shades will create an extraordinary tapestry of indigenous theology."[140]

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[138] Santosh K. Kiro, "Religious Freedom Bill Cleared by Jharkhand Assembly; Tribal Leaders Call It 'an Attempt to Break Our Unity,'" *The Wire*, August 13, 2017, https://thewire.in/politics/religious-freedom-bill-jharkhand-tribes-sarnas.

[139] Potential converts in the NWGELC must undergo two years of catechesis and formation in Christian community before being baptized (the liturgical marker of conversion). That way, by the time they file their request for conversion with local commissioner of police, no one can accuse the pastor of forcing the person to be converted.

[140] Ekka, "Indigenous Christian Theology," 118–19.

Ekka's proposal sounds good in theory, but it may be difficult to achieve in practice. The specificity of a context is what makes it alive and exciting for people, but that specificity can also be divisive and get in the way of common endeavors, such as a united church or a collective movement for justice and liberation. There is a reason that the NWGELC remains the smaller church, with predominantly members from the Oraon tribe.

The NWGELC seems to think that unity will happen naturally, but anyone who has been involved in ecumenical or peace-building work can attest to the fact that creating unity takes immense planning and effort. It is especially challenging when there are powerful groups that benefit from keeping Adivasis divided. Jhakmak Ekka acknowledges that, for Christians, this unity requires an accompanying theological witness; it cannot be a purely political movement because here, too, "[Adivasis] must witness to what we have become by God's grace."[141] But Ekka, like the NWGELC as a whole, has had to fight so hard for his own Oraon identity that he has had little energy left to think about the steps involved in the production of Adivasi theology and the means of cultivating unity across tribes.[142]

While most of the criticism of the NWGELC relates to its failure to attend to the importance of Adivasi unity, the NWGELC's approach can also be criticized from the opposite perspective. As noted above, the lens of *jati*, while narrower than the category of Adivasi, also has the potential to overlook important differences within communities. Even as the NWGELC emphasizes the importance of particularity and specificity, it assumes a uniformity among Oraons that is not reflected in contemporary life, overlooking differences that exist within the

[141] Interview, June 18, 2022.
[142] When I asked Jhakmak Ekka how he would go about developing "second order" or pan-Adivasi theology, he simply told me, "If we have the first order, then there is the possibility for the second order to emerge. But it is contingent on the first order." His primary focus is clearly on the need for first order or community-specific theology. Interview, June 18, 2022.

Oraon community. In light of urbanization and modern education, the Kurukh language cannot provide the comprehensive foundation for Oraon identity that theologians like Ekka desire, making arbitrary and contestable the selection of *jati* as the primary community upon which to base contextual theology (as opposed to some other aspect of identity, such as clan, village, sex, class, age, etc.). In effect, the NWGELC's own criticisms of the GELC could be leveled against it from those on the margins of the Oraon community.

These dueling criticisms illustrate the challenge of negotiating unity and diversity within a context. Both unity and diversity are good things, but the question for theologians reflecting on their contexts is how to balance those goods. The context itself does not provide an easy answer to that question because, as I argue throughout this dissertation, contexts can be interpreted in many different ways. While our contexts are always tied to real experiences in the world and are shaped by forces beyond our control that affect the possibilities for activity and existence, we humans are meaning-making creatures, and what we call "context" is the result of our engagement with and interpretation of our experiences in the world. Theologians engaging with context, therefore, are involved in the task of discerning where to draw the boundaries of their context and what to highlight as most important within that context. They will not always agree on these matters. Their varying perspectives mirror debates within social and political movements, like those discussed above, where leaders must decide whether to focus on the concerns of a narrower constituency who are very passionate about the issues at hand or broaden their goals in the hopes of gaining a wider, albeit potentially less engaged, constituency.

The basic dynamic is often framed as a question of whether to emphasize unity or diversity, similarities or differences. In the case of the GELC and the NWGELC, the GELC may be seen as focusing on similarities, while the NWGELC focuses on differences. In truth,

however, the issue is not actually whether to focus on similarities or on differences, but rather *which* similarities and *which* differences. The GELC focuses on the similarities that Adivasis have in common and emphasizes their differences from *dikus*, outsiders who have exploited and oppressed them, while the NWGELC focuses on the similarities that Oraons have in common and emphasizes their differences from other tribes. Both churches overlook some differences within their context in order to promote certain similarities. As theologians engage in the constructive work of making sense of their contexts, it is important to remember that, inevitably, there will be similarities and differences that they overlook or choose to ignore. Contextual theologians desire to be both inclusive and attentive to those on the margins of society, but sometimes those agendas conflict. Intersectionality and hybrid identities further complicate the task of characterizing the community as a whole.

What does this mean for theology, especially theology that seeks to be informed by and responsive to context? First, it means that context cannot simply dictate theology. Those who "share" a context will not necessarily interpret it in the same way, and the theologies that emerge from their engagement with their context may look very different from one another. Second, given the central role of the theologian in this hermeneutical task, theologians must take responsibility for their interpretations of their contexts. They must defend the places where they have drawn boundaries, the aspects of identity and the challenges facing the community that they have chosen to highlight, and the vision for the future that they propose. Theology involves not only reason but also persuasion, and theologians must convince their fellow Christians of the merits of the ways they have chosen to engage with and interpret their context.

Ultimately, however, in light of the centrality of the idea of grace in Christian faith and the belief that grace is what leads to repentance and change, theologians should remember that

theology is like an ongoing conversation. Our words about God and attempts to make sense of God's activity in our lives (which is what I take the task of theology to be) are works in progress. None of us have it all figured out yet. Theology reflects our human finitude even as we seek divine guidance and inspiration. As creatures that live in community, the witness of others—the diversity of their experiences and perspectives—is a gift that can help to strengthen and refine our theologies. The voices of others bring new information and experiences, which may change our perspectives as well. This is healthy and normal, and it should be welcome in our theological reflection. Change should be part of our expectations for a living faith, as we continually experience God's presence in our lives and the world in new ways.

For the GELC and the NWGELC in particular, the recognition that we ourselves are involved in the construction of our contexts means that there is not one side or one approach to theology that can claim to be objectively better. Both Adivasi theology and Oraon theology have advantages and disadvantages, insights and blind spots. Yes, there are factual matters that can be debated, such as what has happened in the past and what is going on in the present. The churches could examine the success of previous attempts at unity, evaluating what worked, what didn't, and why. They could try to measure and analyze the impact of native language use versus the adoption of Hindi, considering how language has affected educational, economic, and health outcomes. At the end of the day, however, evaluating and discerning between competing interpretations of context rests upon the meaning and significance one ascribes to these various aspects of the equation, and that, in turn, is tied to one's beliefs, values, and vision for the future, commitments that are not easily swayed by changing data. The path forward for these churches—toward reconciliation as well as the refinement of their theology—will require dialogue and an openness to learning from one another. There is no impartial observer among

human beings, no bird's eye view from which we can objectively evaluate competing theologies. We must persuade one another, even as we acknowledge that our efforts at persuasion are themselves rooted in particular contexts, drawing upon historically contingent forms of argumentation. We must take one another into account even as we argue about meaning and value in the world that we share.

Christians, at least in theory, share some common commitments that might aid them in this process of dialogue. The conflicts between Christian and Sarna (non-Christian) Adivasis that I will examine in the next chapter—conflicts that are also related to context and theology—are more intractable. My goal in this chapter has not been to judge between the competing approaches to context of the GELC and the NWGELC but simply to establish that people who share a context can disagree about how to interpret and engage with it. This may sound straightforward, but much of Adivasi theology (and contextual theology in general) has depended upon essentialist understandings of context and identity. Acknowledging the role that theologians themselves play in the construction of their contexts complicates the task of theological engagement with context, introducing a multiplicity of possibilities and necessitating argumentation and persuasion. Yet it also pushes us closer to the truth, the ultimate aim of theology, as it forces us to wrestle with differences, paradoxes, and ambiguities within our contexts and our visions for their future.

Chapter 3: Resisting Contextualization: Sarna and the Role of Religion in Adivasi Identity

In May of 2013, a Catholic parish in Singpur, a village near Ranchi, in Jharkhand, erected a statue of the Virgin Mary wearing a white sari with a red border. This is the traditional sari worn by Adivasis in the region. She held the baby Jesus in a cloth sling tied over her shoulder, the usual way Adivasi women carry their young children. The church saw this as an act of inculturation: a beautiful way of relating the Gospel to their context and honoring their traditional Adivasi culture.

Non-Christian Adivasis who follow the Sarna religion, however, were furious and accused the Christians of trying to trick Adivasis into believing that Mary herself was an Adivasi. Bandhan Tigga, *dharmguru* (chief priest) of the Sarna Society, told the media, "Showing Mother Mary as a tribal is a part of the larger design to make the tribal population believe that she was from their community and confuse them… One hundred years from now, people here would start believing that Mother Mary was actually our tribal goddess. It's an attempt to convert Sarna tribals to Christianity."[1] Sarna leaders such as Tigga demanded the removal of the statue, saying it had offended their religious sentiments, and they threatened to destroy it themselves if need be. They called for a religious revolution (*dharma ulgulan*) and organized a massive protest march.[2]

Christians were shocked. Fr. Augustine Kerketta, a Catholic priest and activist for Adivasi rights in Ranchi, defended the statue, saying, "What's wrong in this? It's just like the Chinese, Japanese, Irish, German or even the African version of Mother Mary and Baby Jesus…

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[1] Palash Ghosh, "Virgin Mary in a Sari: Hindus Outraged by Christian Statue Depicting Blessed Mother and Jesus in Indian Tribal Dress," *International Business Times*, July 10, 2013, https://www.ibtimes.com/virgin-mary-sari-hindus-outraged-christian-statue-depicting-blessed-mother-jesus-1340713.
[2] "Section 144 Imposed as Tribal Mary's Statue Controversy Escalates in Jharkhand," *The Times of India*, August 25, 2013, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Section-144-imposed-as-tribal-Marys-statue-controversy-escalates-in-Jharkhand/articleshow/22038134.cms.

It happens everywhere as part of enculturation of the local tradition."[3] Christian Adivasi theologians consider inculturation to be an important part of contextualizing the Gospel:[4] the beliefs, practices, and symbols of Christianity should be adapted into forms that are recognizable in the local culture. Rejecting the legacy of historical approaches to evangelization that demonized the beliefs and practices of traditional cultures, contemporary contextual theologians have embraced inculturation as a means to restore dignity and mend strained relations in communities. In the case of this statue of the Virgin Mary, however, the attempt at inculturation enflamed local tensions between Christian and non-Christian Adivasis.

This chapter examines conflicts between Christian and Sarna Adivasis that have emerged in response to Christian projects of contextualization. One of the goals of Christian Adivasi theologians seeking to integrate Christian faith and traditional Adivasi culture has been to cultivate healthier relationships with practitioners of the Sarna religion, changing the often negative attitudes of Christians toward the faith of their Sarna ancestors. They expected to get push back from some of their fellow Christians, but, to their surprise, the response from Sarna Adivasis has been much worse. In effect, the "context" that Adivasi Christians have sought to incorporate into their faith has resisted their efforts to adapt it to their Christian worldview.

The Sarna religion is a modern synthesis of traditional Adivasi religious beliefs and practices, and in recent decades its practitioners have become increasingly politically mobilized. For many Sarna Adivasis, the Sarna religion offers practical and theoretical grounding for their claims of a separate and unique Adivasi identity, distinct from the surrounding Hindu culture.

[3] Ghosh, "Virgin Mary in a Sari."

[4] Fr. Kerketta most likely used the word "inculturation" in the above quote, but reporters transcribed it as "enculturation." "Enculturation" refers to the process of socialization whereby one learns about and adjusts to the values and norms of one's own culture. "Acculturation" is closer to the idea of inculturation, in so far as it points to the process of cultural interaction and adaptation when two cultures intersect. Theologians have coined the term "inculturation," combining the idea of acculturation with the theological doctrine of the incarnation, to highlight the theological justification for contextualization.

They view Christian projects of cultural retrieval and affirmation as threats to the integrity of their religion and identity, and they argue that those who convert to Christianity have abandoned their Adivasi culture and identity.

While Christian Adivasis tend to dismiss the objections of Sarna Adivasis as irrational and the result of outsiders trying to divide the Adivasi community, I suggest that the concerns of Sarna Adivasis stem from differing interpretations of their context, namely, the extent to which religion and culture are intertwined. There are certainly important political factors underlying their respective positions, but my main argument is that the contextual project is scandalous, not unlike the way in which the cross of Christ was a *skandalon*.[5] Christianity can be offensive, a dangerous attribute in a country where causing offense is warrant for criminal charges.[6] Theology often invites controversy—after all, it makes claims about the nature of God, humanity, and the world—and this controversy is heightened as theologians engage more explicitly with their contexts. Christians will inevitably bump up against others who make sense of their contexts—and their role in them—differently. There are better and worse ways to handle such conflicts, but the conflicts themselves cannot be avoided because they reflect underlying disagreements about reality, meaning, and value.

We must be careful, however, not to overstate the uniqueness of Christianity and Christian theology in this regard. Historically, Christianity has exhibited a wide variety of stances vis-à-vis local cultures and contexts. Even within the same context, theologians often

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[5] The Greek word *skandalon*, from which the modern English word "scandal" is derived, is often translated as "stumbling block." Christians have long recognized that the cross was a scandalous aspect of their faith, especially in light of the belief that "anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deut. 21:33). Thus, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:23, "we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block (*skandalon*) to Jews and foolishness to gentiles."
[6] The Indian Penal Code, §295A, prohibits "deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs." For an analysis of the ways that offending religious sentiments affects the modern political landscape in South Asia, see Paul Rollier, Kathinka Frøystad, and Arild Engelsen Ruud, eds., *Outrage: The Rise of Religious Offence in Contemporary South Asia* (London: University College London, 2019).

have different perspectives on how to interpret and engage with their context. Overall, there may be more official support for contextualization in contemporary Christianity than in some other religious traditions (think, for example, of the insistence in Islam that the Qur'an be read in the original Arabic), but that does not mean that other religions ignore their contexts. The Sarna religion, for example, presents itself as an ancient tradition, a reflection of an indigenous worldview unsoiled by the corrupting influence of global, imperialistic religions. As I will argue in this chapter, however, that idealistic picture does not reflect reality. The Sarna religion has been shaped by both Hinduism and Christianity, and its modern refashioning reflects a responsiveness to the challenges of its current context (such as urbanization, technology, and the need for solidarity across tribes). Thus, although Christian and Sarna Adivasis espouse differing perspectives on the relationship of religion and culture, both groups have engaged in processes of synthesis and adaptation that negotiate the relationship between various aspects of their context in different ways at different times. Today, leaders of both religions are engaged in constructive and contextual theological enterprises, striving to re-shape their religion, identity, and context.

Much of this chapter focuses on the details of particular conflicts between Christian and Sarna Adivasis. I explore the history of the Sarna religion, the ways it is changing, and the reasons why Adivasis are so concerned to identify a solid foundation upon which to ground their identity as Adivasis. Through engaging with the details of this particular context and some of the specific conflicts that have emerged in response to Christian projects of contextualization, I seek to highlight the more general disruptive potential of contextualization. Although I consider contextualization to be a theological imperative and I support the work of Adivasi theologians, I want theologians to be aware that others who share their context may have sincere objections to

the ways in which Christians attempt to reframe and refashion their shared history, culture, and future horizons.

The Basis of Adivasi Identity

As Adivasis face a rapidly changing world, one of their frequently expressed fears is that they will lose their identity and be assimilated into mainstream Indian culture.[7] They consider "strengthening" their identity to be essential for the protection of their rights. Catholic social activist Dominic Bara told me that in recent years his focus has shifted from development work to promoting Adivasi identity: "Adivasis are being exploited. This is a fact. Why? Because they don't give importance to their identity."[8] Bara, like many others, believes that the future of Adivasis depends on "raising the identity issue." As Adivasi leaders try to strengthen and promote Adivasi identity, however, debate has arisen among them about what is central to Adivasi identity. With their claim to be "original inhabitants," the obvious answer would be history and genetics.[9] Yet the fact that Adivasis are afraid of *losing* their identity reflects an awareness that their identity is not merely a matter of historical fact but is tied to the ongoing performance of various behaviors and practices that set them apart as a unique community.[10]

In conversations with Adivasis I heard two related but distinct concerns about the loss of identity: (1) the existential ramifications of losing their own sense of identity and (2) the political implications of the loss of public recognition of their identity. The latter concern is tied to their legal designation as Scheduled Tribes, which entitles them to reservations (seats reserved in

[7] In spite of the vast diversity of India, Adivasis tend to have a monolithic picture of "mainstream Indian culture" as Hindu.
[8] Interview, September 7, 2016.
[9] Recall that Adivasi literally means original (*adi*) inhabitant or dweller (*vasi*).
[10] Their historical claims are frequently contested, making the ongoing performance of their identity even more important as they seek to retain the perception of a separate identity.

educational institutions, jobs, and elected offices) and protections (such as rights relating to forest, land, and self-governance) from the Indian government. "Strengthening" Adivasi identity is thus necessary not only for their own self-understanding and pride but also to ensure their continued designation as Scheduled Tribes. Controversy has arisen within the Adivasi community, however, as to which aspects of their identity they should be seeking to strengthen. The question, in a nutshell, is what it is that makes tribes distinct from non-tribal communities.

The commonsense understanding of tribe in India is a primitive and backward community that lives apart from the rest of society. Legally, however, the term lacks definitional clarity and has long troubled anthropologists and government administrators. The concept of "tribe" was central to the work of colonial administrators, but it was not until the census of 1901 that government ethnographers first offered a definition of a tribe:

> A tribe as we find it in India is a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which as a rule does not denote any specific occupation; generally claiming common descent from a mythical or historical ancestor and occasionally from an animal, but in some parts of the country held together rather by the obligations of blood-feud than by the tradition of kinship; usually speaking the same language and occupying, professing, or claiming to occupy a definite tract of country. A tribe is not necessarily endogamous; that is to say, it is not an invariable rule that a man of a particular tribe must marry a woman of that tribe and cannot marry a woman of a different tribe.[11]

The vagueness of this definition reflects the fact that it was formulated in order to reflect the diverse communities already categorized as tribes rather than to discriminate among them.[12]

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[11] H. H. Risley and E. A. Gait, *General Report on the Census of India, 1901* (London: East India (Census), 1904), 514. Sanjukta Das Gupta notes that this definition was put forth retroactively after three censuses utilizing the category of "tribe" had already been carried out. Das Gupta, "Imagining the 'Tribe' in Colonial and Post-Independence India," 112.

[12] This has been the approach of many Indian anthropologists: settling for vague and imprecise definitions instead of contesting the pre-existing categorization of tribal communities as such. André Béteille observes, "Indian anthropologists have been conscious of a certain lack of fit between what their discipline defines as 'tribe' and what they are obliged to describe as 'tribes', but they have sought a way out of the muddle by calling them all 'tribes in transition'. This does not settle the issue because in India tribes have always been in transition, at least since the beginning of recorded history." André Béteille, "The Concept of Tribe with Special Reference to India," *European Journal of Sociology* 27, no. 2 (1987): 299.

When India became independent in 1947, the government retained the concept of tribe, creating an official "schedule," or list, of tribes, known as Scheduled Tribes. They did not, however, have any definition or set of criteria with which to classify the tribes as such.[13] In 1965 the Lokur Committee revised the list of Scheduled Tribes on the basis of "indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large and backwardness."[14] The vagueness of these criteria means that there is room for legal maneuvering, and indeed the nature of Adivasi identity—or, more precisely, the criteria for classifying a community as a Scheduled Tribe and verifying an individual's identity as a member of a Scheduled Tribe—continues to be legally and politically contested.[15]

Historians have criticized the colonial origins of the concept of tribe, highlighting its dependence on an evolutionary approach to the development of civilizations. Scholars such as Crispin Bates have gone so far as to argue that tribes are an invention of British colonial policy.[16] Other academics have pushed back, arguing that the concept of a tribe and the stereotypes that the word invokes are not entirely a product of colonialism; Brahmins had long considered Adivasis to be wild, "*jungli*" people. The British brought their own racist evolutionary schema, but it was reinforced by Indian elites.[17]

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[13] The Constitution of India, Article 366, clause 25, defined Scheduled Tribes as "such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes for the purposes of this Constitution," with Article 342 entrusting this responsibility to the President.
[14] B.N. Lokur (Chairman), "The Report of the Advisory Committee on the Revision of the Lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes" (Government of India: Department of Social Security, 1965), 7.
[15] "Centre Still Employs 'Obsolete' Criteria to Categorise Groups under ST Lists: Report," *The Wire*, January 12, 2023, https://thewire.in/government/centre-obsolete-criteria-st-lists-lokur-committee.
[16] "The *adivasis* may thus be regarded as not so much the 'original' inhabitants of South Asia but the very recent creation of colonial anthropology. Paradoxically, they might be seen as an invention rather than a victim of modernity." Crispin Bates, "'Lost Innocents and the Loss of Innocence': Interpreting Adivasi Movements in South Asia," in *Indigenous Peoples of Asia*, ed. R. H. Barnes, Andrew Gray, and Benedict Kingsbury (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 1995), 104.
[17] Vinita Damodaran, "Colonial Constructions of the 'Tribe' in India: The Case of Chotanagpur," *The Indian Historical Review* 33, no. 1 (January 2006): 44–75. In fairness to Bates, he acknowledges that "it is arguable that colonial perceptions and policies were not entirely invented *de novo* but were an extension in some cases of Brahminical prejudices." Bates, "Lost Innocents and the Loss of Innocence," 109.

Adivasis themselves are adamant that they are, indeed, essentially different than other Indians, even as they disagree about what, exactly, makes them different. Many continue to draw upon colonial caricatures of tribal people in their self-presentation, emphasizing their primitiveness and innocence. This is, after all, what they have been taught in school and by society at large. Leaders in the Adivasi community have tried to re-frame stereotypes about tribal people and leverage them as evidence of the superiority of Adivasi culture: what the exploitative colonialists took to be "primitiveness" was actually an advanced and enlightened way of living in harmony with nature and with one another. They argue that their connection to the land and vibrant culture, religion, and languages not only set them apart from other Indians but are also worthy of preserving and promoting. They disagree, however, about the relative importance of these various factors. Religion, in particular, has become a site of deep contention. Sarna Adivasis have sought to distinguish their traditional religion from Hinduism and make it the locus of Adivasi identity, but this would exclude Christian Adivasis who no longer worship their ancestral gods in the sacred groves.

The relationship between religion and culture is a thorny issue, long debated not only by academics but among various religions and cultures themselves. Does culture include religion? Can they be separated? Even the definitions of the two domains have long been subjects of controversy. Christians have sought ways to distinguish religion from culture, arguing that people can incorporate aspects of their traditional cultures into Christianity while leaving behind their traditional religions. The whole premise of inculturation and contextual theology depends on the ability to discriminate between different aspects of culture and context, incorporating some into Christian practice and discarding others, such as traditional religious beliefs.

Sarna Adivasis, however, argue that the Sarna religion lies at the heart of Adivasi culture, and they consider it to be a, if not *the*, key marker that distinguishes them from their non-Adivasi neighbors. Some contend that those who convert to Christianity are no longer Adivasis and should lose the government benefits they receive as Scheduled Tribes. Satyanarayan Lakda, Jharkhand Chief of the Kendriya Sarna Samiti (Central Sarna Committee) has argued, "The first to be excluded from government benefits for tribal people should be those who have converted to another religion, because they chose to abandon their tribal identity. If someone is not adhering to Sarna practices, how can we call them Adivasi?"[18]

The debate about the role of religion in Adivasi identity has taken on new urgency in light of the Supreme Court of India's recent call for "a 'foolproof' mechanism to determine what constitutes tribal identity and who can be called a tribal."[19] In the past, the idiosyncratic practices of the committees that issue caste and tribal certificates have resulted in numerous court cases, with conflicting rulings. For example, in 2009, the Bombay High Court ruled in *Shilpa Vishnu Thakur v. State of Maharashtra and Others* that the Caste Scrutiny Committee should use an affinity test to discern "anthropological moorings and ethnological kinship" in order to prevent fraudulent claims. Drawing upon *Kumari Madhuri Patil v. Addl. Commissioner* (1994),[20] the court stated: "The yardstick for determining such affinity includes the rituals of the tribe and its customs, worship, ceremonies associated with birth, marriage and death and the conventions

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[18] Abhinay Lakshman, "Being Sarna: A Fight to Define Tribal Identity," *The Hindu*, July 23, 2022, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/being-sarna-a-fight-to-define-tribal-identity-in-jharkhand/article65670776.ece.

[19] Lakshman, "Being Sarna."

[20] Kumari Madhuri Patil v. Addl. Commissioner, AIR 1995 SC 94. The original quote from this ruling was about examining the social status of the applicant with regard to the tribe's "peculiar anthropological and ethnological traits, deity, rituals, customs, mode of marriage, death ceremonies, method of burial of dead bodies etc. by the castes or tribes or tribal communities concerned etc." The 2009 decision in *Shilpa Vishnu Thakur v. State of Maharashtra and Others* slightly modified the quote.

followed for the disposal of dead bodies."[21] Note the emphasis on practices that are often considered religious in nature. Two years later, however, the Supreme Court of India ruled in *Anand v. Committee for Scrutiny and Verification of Tribe Claims and Ors.* that an affinity test was not necessarily relevant in light of contemporary changes in tribal communities.[22] The continued ambiguity about the basis of tribal identity is what led the Supreme Court in March of 2022 to call for the formation of a bench of judges to establish fixed guidelines for approving Scheduled Tribe certificates.[23]

Sarna Adivasis are lobbying for those guidelines to center on religious affiliation and practice. Jaleshwar Bhagat, a member of the Chhatriya Sarna Samiti (Student Sarna Committee), explained to the media why Sarna is the obvious solution to the question of the basis of tribal identity: "It is no longer necessary for tribal people to have primitive traits, or be geographically isolated or shy of contact with the community at large. These aspects are changing rapidly and the only thing we can tether our identity to seems to be our distinctive practices of Sarnaism."[24] Yet the extent to which the practices of the Sarna religion are truly distinctive is also a matter of contestation. Hindu organizations like the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) push for the identification of Sarna with Sanatana Dharma, the variety of Hinduism that they seek to spread among *vanvasis* (forest dwellers), which is how they typically refer to Adivasis.[25] As an editorial

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[21] Shilpa Vishnu Thakur v. State of Maharashtra and Others, (2009) SCC Online Bom 705.

[22] "A few decades ago, when the tribes were somewhat immune to the cultural development happening around them, the affinity test could serve as a determinative factor. However, with the migrations, modernisation and contact with other communities, these communities tend to develop and adopt new traits which may not essentially match with the traditional characteristics of the tribe. Hence, affinity test may not be regarded as a litmus test for establishing the link of the applicant with a Scheduled Tribe." Anand v. Committee for Scrutiny and Verification of Tribe Claims and Ors., (2012) 1 SCC 113.

[23] *The Hindu* reported, "The Supreme Court wants to fix fool-proof parameters to determine if a person belongs to a Scheduled Tribe." Krishnadas Rajagopal, "Supreme Court Seeks Foolproof Norms to Identify Scheduled Tribes," *The Hindu*, March 27, 2022, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/supreme-court-seeks-foolproof-norms-to-identify-scheduled-tribes/article65265314.ece.

[24] Lakshman, "Being Sarna."

[25] The Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, which is affiliated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), runs awareness programs in tribal areas, "holding meetings with the community and emphasising how they [Adivasis] are an

in the HinduPost, a conservative Hindu online media outlet, put it, "Praying to nature is an intrinsic part of Sanatan Hindu Dharma and so nature worship by the Sarna does not make them radically different from Hindus. Similarly, the concept of having a village deity is not different from that of Hindu Sanatan Dharma."[26] Although Sanatana Dharma is only one of many varieties of Hinduism, many Hindus count Sarna Adivasis as part of their wide tent of faith.

Sarna Adivasi leaders have pushed back against these attempts to subsume their religion within Hinduism. As part of their effort to assert an independent religious identity, they have been demanding a separate code for the Sarna religion in the 2021 census (which has been postponed until 2023 or 2024).[27] Salkhan Murmu, the head of the Adivasi Sengel Abhiyan (Tribal Empowerment Campaign), asserted the uniqueness of the Sarna religion at a recent protest: "We Adivasis are neither Hindus nor Christians. We have our own way of life, religious practices, customs, culture and religious thoughts, different from any other religion. We worship nature and not idols. There is neither Varna system in our society or any sort of inequality."[28] For Sarna Adivasis, strengthening their identity (and ensuring their rights) entails the assertion of the integrity of their religion as a tradition that is independent from Hinduism.

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integral part of the Hindu religion." Neelam Pandey, "Jharkhand Resolution Allowing Tribals to Identify as Non-Hindus a Conspiracy—RSS Affiliate," *The Print*, November 16, 2020, https://theprint.in/india/jharkhand-resolution-allowing-tribals-to-identify-as-non-hindus-a-conspiracy-rss-affiliate/545515/.

[26] Anuradha, "Why Is a New Code Needed to Identify Sarna Tribals?," *Hindu Post*, April 13, 2021, https://hindupost.in/dharma-religion/why-is-a-new-code-needed-to-identify-sarna-tribals/.

[27] Deeptiman Tiwary, "Deadline for Freezing Administrative Boundaries Extended, No Census This Year," *Indian Express*, June 15, 2022, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/deadline-for-freezing-administrative-boundaries-extended-no-census-this-year-7970121/.

[28] "Recognise 'Sarna' Religion for Adivasis, We Are Not Hindu: Tribals from Five States to Centre," *The Print*, June 30, 2022, https://theprint.in/india/recognise-sarna-religion-for-adivasis-we-are-not-hindu-tribals-from-five-states-to-centre/1019078/. Murmu is a former BJP MP (Member of Parliament) from Odisha's Mayurbhanj Lok Sabha constituency. The protest, which advocated for the inclusion of a Sarna Code in the next census, was held on June 30th, the anniversary of the beginning of the Santhal Rebellion. *Varna*, typically translated as caste, refers to the fourfold social stratification of Hindus as *brahmins*, *kshatriyas*, *vaishyas*, and *shudras*. Dalits and Adivasis are *avarna*, or without *varna*.

The Relationship between Hinduism and Sarna

There has long been controversy and confusion surrounding the categorization of Adivasi religion, at least from the perspective of outsiders. Early anthropologists often classified them as animists. Missionaries called them idol or devil worshipers, or sometimes said they had no religion at all.[29] Christian converts considered those who did not convert *saonsar*, or worldly (*sansar*).[30] In censuses, colonial administrators classified Adivasis as animists (which the 1901 census report described as "the amorphous collection of crude and confused religious conceptions"[31]) or practitioners of tribal religion, although some enumerators counted them as Hindus.[32] After India gained independence, practitioners of Adivasi religion were lumped in with Hindus or categorized as belonging to "Other Religious Persuasions" in the census.[33] Today, many Indians continue to assume that Adivasi religion is an expression of Hinduism, albeit of a more primitive variety.

[29] J. Cave-Browne, for example, wrote, "All [of the tribes] have, in a greater or lesser degree, traces of that awful superstition, snake-worship—or as it really is, *Devil-worship*—which prevailed among the *pre-Aryan* races." And, "they had almost *no religion*, or, at least, not what might be worthy of such a name." Cave-Browne, *The Chota Nagpore Mission*, 5, 8 (emphasis in original).

[30] Adivasi theologian John Lakra says that the word *saonsar* "was pejorative in meaning." John Lakra, "Rewriting Tribal Anthropology," *Sevartham* 22 (1997): 26. Not all Sarna Adivasis, however, perceive the word *saonsar* as pejorative. Anthropologist Meenakshi Munda used the term in her thesis, describing it as an Oraon term. Meenakshi Munda, "Religion and Identity of the Sarna Oraons of Jharkhand" (PhD diss., University of Delhi, 2015), 19, 37. Jaipal Singh Munda, head of the Adivasi Mahasabha and Jharkhand Party, referred to non-Christian Adivasis as "Sansar Adibasis" in a non-pejorative context in an editorial in *The Behar Herald* in 1940. Jaipal Singh Munda, "Birsa Munda Ki Jai or Kshay?," in *Adivasidom: Selected Writings and Speeches of Jaipal Singh Munda*, ed. Ashwini Kumar Pankaj (Ranchi: Pyara Kerketta Foundation, 2017), 38–39.

[31] Risley and Gait, *General Report on the Census of India, 1901*, 378.

[32] "The rule was that every man's statement as to his religion was to be accepted, but in practice the enumerators often followed their own views in the matter, and in either case, the manner of drawing the line [between Animism and Hinduism] varied greatly in different parts." Risley and Gait, 378.

[33] "Under the British, 'Tribal religion', or animism, was counted as a distinct religion in the census till 1941. The practice was discontinued in Independent India." Anumeha Yadav, "In Jharkhand's Singhbhum, Religion Census Deepens Divide among Tribals," *Scroll.In*, September 20, 2015, http://scroll.in/article/754985/in-jharkhands-singhbhum-religion-census-deepens-divide-among-tribals. Today there is an effort to include Sarna as a separate category in the census, which I discuss later in this chapter.

Sarna Adivasis are trying to change that perception, erecting clear boundaries between their religion and Hinduism.[34] But historically there has been a great deal of interaction, exchange, and mutual influence between Hinduism and Adivasi religions. What we call Hinduism today,[35] after all, is the result of a wide variety of local traditions that have gradually influenced one another.[36] Adivasi religions played a role in that historical evolution and were, in turn, also influenced by other traditions, many of which are now included in the wide tent of Hinduism.

Although some Adivasis fiercely rejected Hinduism,[37] others embraced Hindu beliefs and practices. M. N. Srinivas has described this as the phenomenon of Sanskritization, whereby low and out caste communities, including Adivasis, adopt aspects of upper-caste Hinduism.[38] For example, the Kurmi (Kudmi) Mahto tribe, a large *jati* found in Jharkhand, was removed from the list of Scheduled Tribes in 1931 due to their own protestations that they were not tribal people but rather *kshatriyas* (i.e., the military and ruling class, one of the four *varnas* in the Hindu caste

[34] There are some Sarna Adivasis, however, who consider themselves a part of the Hindu fold. Among both Christians and Sarna Adivasis there are a wide variety of perspective on all of these issues. I am attempting to present the majority positions and arguments.
[35] The name Hindu itself referred to a geographical region, the area surrounding the Indus River, which Herodotus called "Indika" from the Sanskrit *sindhu* (meaning "river"), rather than something proper to the religious practices of the people. Wendy Doniger, *On Hinduism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6–7.
[36] A discussion of the historical evolution of Hinduism falls outside the bounds of this dissertation, but regardless of its complex origin and the diverse beliefs and practices in encompasses, Hinduism is now an important part of the religious identity of almost one billion people.
[37] The 1901 Census General Report observes, with regard Santhals, Mundas, Oraons, and Hos, "These tribes disclose no leanings towards Hinduism and it is recorded of the Manbhum Santals that in the famine of 1866 they preferred wholesale starvation to the pollution of eating food prepared by Brahman cooks. They possess a communal organization of their own, and they hate the Hindus, whom they know only as usurpers and landgrabbers, and whom they call by opprobrious names." Risley and Gait, *General Report on the Census of India, 1901*, 356.
[38] "Sanskritization is the process by which a 'low' Hindu caste or tribal or other group changes its customs, ritual, and ideology and the way of life in the direction of a high and frequently 'twice-born' caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community. The claim is usually made over a period of time, in fact a generation or two before the 'arrival' is conceded." M. N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 6.

system).[39] They held large meetings and followed a rigorous campaign to make various social and religious changes, including the adoption of the sacred thread and, generally, vegetarianism, in the hopes of demonstrating their *kshatriya* identity and improving their position in society.[40]

Other Adivasis have been indirectly influenced by Hinduism via various reform movements. Seeking to purify their religious and cultural practices, the Birsa, Kherwar, Tana Bhagat, Satya / Punya Dharam, Haribaba, and other religious movements among Adivasis have emphasized devotion to a supreme God, ethical codes, and personal purification by means of vegetarianism, the wearing of the sacred thread, and so on.[41] In fact, the first Oraon converts to Christianity had previously followed the Kabir Panth (a religious sect devoted to the teachings of the sixteenth century poet Kabir) before they converted to Christianity.[42]

Today, many Adivasis continue to be influenced by Hinduism. While previous generations of Hindus have sometimes spurned association with Adivasis due to concerns about ritual pollution,[43] today organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (National

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[39] *Jati* and *varna* are both translated as "caste" in English, but they have different meanings. *Jati* is the particular community in which one was born, whereas *varna* is more like class. There are innumerable *jatis*, but only four *varnas*: *brahmins* (priests), *kshatriyas* (warriors), *vaishyas* (merchants), and *shudras* (peasants).

[40] W. G. Lacey wrote in the 1931 Census Report, "It may be questioned whether this movement is calculated to promote the best interests of the Kurmi Mahto community. As aboriginals, they receive the benefit of a special measure of protection from the revenue laws of Chota Nagpur; for instead, the transfer of their holdings to non-aboriginals is not permitted. It may be that the true position in this respect is not appreciated by many of them. On the other hand, they may be prepared to forego such privileges for the greater honour and glory which they believe will accrue to them in their new status; and it is quite true that, in view of their material prosperity, they do not stand in the same need of protection as the other aboriginal tribes of the locality." Lacey, "The Kurmi of Chota Nagpur," 294. Indeed, many Kurmis today recognize that being classified as a Scheduled Tribe would afford them more rights and privileges, and there is now a movement among the Kurmis to request that they be re-included in the list of Scheduled Tribes.

[41] Padmaja Sen, "Socio-Religious Movements and the Evolution of Religious Identity among the Adivasis of Jharkhand," in *Tribal Movements in Jharkhand 1857–2007*, ed. Asha Mishra and Chittaranjan Kumar Paty (New Delhi: Concept, 2010), 129–31.

[42] Nottrott, *Die Gossnersche Mission unter den Kolhs*, 1: Bilder aus dem Missionsleben, 184; Roy, *Oraon Religion and Customs*, 236–43.

[43] For example, Adivasis have traditionally been omnivores, which upper caste vegetarian Hindus considered polluting.

Volunteer Organization, or RSS for short) maintain that all tribal people are Hindus.[44] The Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) and other Hindu organizations work hard to convince Adivasis of their Hindu identity. Prakash Kamat, Bihar-Jharkhand zonal secretary of the VKA, told a reporter, “We explain to them [Adivasis] that 2000 years ago, we worshipped trees. Sarnas are Hindu too.”[45] Many Adivasis do indeed identify as Hindu, but an increasingly large percentage of Adivasis are staking out their separate religious identity as Sarna. While some Sarna Adivasis find partnerships with Hindu organizations to be mutually beneficial,[46] others worry that Hindu influence and pressure will gradually erode Sarna faith and thereby Adivasi identity. Their fear, as noted above, is that they will be absorbed into mainstream Hindu society and eventually lose their status as Scheduled Tribes.

“The RSS is stressing Sanatani [Hinduism] and Sarna are the same because they want to end reservations for Adivasis,” Geetashree Oraon, an Adivasi politician from Jharkhand, told me in an interview at her home. She and many others were concerned about the decreasing number of Adivasis in the state according to the government censuses. “I don’t believe the statistics,” she told me. Too often, census takers follow their own biases and agendas, refusing to record Hindu Adivasis as members of Scheduled Tribes. “They will write Devi or Kumari as the last names of

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[44] The RSS is a militant Hindu nationalist organization, affiliated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In 2015, RSS Sah Sarkaryavah (Joint General Secretary) Dr. Krishna Gopal made headlines for declaring that tribals are Hindus, and the Union Tribal Affairs Minister at the time, Jual Oram, concurred. Jaideep Deogharia, “All Tribals Are Hindus, No Need for Sarna Code: RSS,” *The Times of India*, November 1, 2015, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ranchi/all-tribals-are-hindus-no-need-for-sarna-code-rss/articleshow/49616469.cms.

[45] Anumeha Yadav, “Tribals Torn Apart by Religion,” *The Hindu*, April 22, 2014, https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/tribals-torn-apart-by-religion/article5934381.ece.

[46] For example, writing about a Sarna organization called the Adivasi Ho Samaj Yuva Mahasabha in the West Singbhum District of Jharkhand, Anumeha Yadav observes, “In fact, the Mahasabha maintains fraternal links with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. For instance, Inderjeet Samand, the block president of Adivasi Ho Samaj Mahasabha, is also the district president of RSS’ farmers organisation, the Bhartiya Kisan Sangh. It is a symbiotic relationship. RSS leaders say they consider it best that tribals themselves resist the conversion efforts of Christian missionaries. For Sarna tribal leaders, the connections with RSS are useful in getting access to the leaders of the BJP. The party is in power both at the Centre and in the state.” Yadav, “In Jharkhand’s Singhbhum.”

innocent tribal women so they can brush them to other communities," she lamented.[47] The decrease in the official population of Scheduled Tribes means they have less representation in reserved seats in government; it also empowers non-tribal leaders to advocate for policy changes curbing the protections and reservations that are afforded to Scheduled Tribes in Jharkhand. In response, Adivasis are embracing the Sarna faith (and trying to gain clarity on what, exactly, it entails) and disavowing previous Hindu influences on their religious practices. Gesturing toward a statue of the Hindu goddess Saraswati in her garden, Geetashree Oraon told me, "We had been into the Hindu religion, but now we understand this is harming us. We have to preserve our identity."

As Sarna Adivasis stake out the boundaries between their faith and Hinduism, they are re-framing the history of exchange and interaction between the two religions. Instead of viewing their beliefs and practices as derivative from Hinduism, Adivasis argue that many Hindu beliefs and practices were originally part of Adivasi religion. For example, Adivasis—both Sarna and Christian—told me that Krishna's dark skin clearly indicates that he was an Adivasi. Lord Shiva, too, they argued, was a tribal chieftain who gradually came to be held up as a god.[48] Sanjay Basu

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[47] This is a common concern among Adivasis. For example, in a news story on the push for the Sarna code in the census, Adrija Bose writes about a teacher who instructs parents to give their children Adivasi names. "In Gumla's Nagar Siskari village, a primary school teacher asks the mother of a student in her class to change her last name from Kumari to Oraon. 'My parents made the mistake of keeping my last name as Kumari, you shouldn't do that for your daughter,' she says. The tribals feel that a lot of them who dropped their native names and switched to Kumar and Kumari were counted in the Census as Hindus. 'That is why I insist that parents stick to the names that clearly reveal that their children are tribals,' she says, adding, 'Our names are the only way to assess our identity now.'" Adrija Bose, "'Not Our God': How Tribals' Demand for a Separate Religion Is Impacting Jharkhand Elections," *News18*, December 20, 2019, https://www.news18.com/news/india/not-our-god-long-pending-demand-of-jharkhands-tribals-for-a-separate-religion-and-the-politics-of-it-2430089.html.

[48] Dominic Bara told me, "Shiva is completely dark; he's a tribal, no doubt about it! He's associated with a bull and a trident; these are Adivasi things. Remember, Dharmes [the Oraon deity] killed a demon with a spear. This was incorporated in Shiva. Shiva's name sounds like Singbonga [the Munda deity]. Tribal people should know this." Interview September 7, 2016. A conference paper by Kailash Mishra describes legends about Shiva among some Adivasis in Chotanagpur and argues that Adivasi religious beliefs and practices had an influence on Hinduism. Kailash Kr. Mishra, "Shiva Legends in the Sacred Traditions of Indian Tribes" (ANADI - II. Tribal Heritage of South India, Mangalore: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Managlore University, 2000), http://ignca.gov.in/PDF_data/Shiva_Legends_Sacred_Traditions.pdf.

Mullick believes goddess worship was originally an Adivasi practice, later adopted by Hindus.[49] Dominic Bara told me that vermillion on the hairline symbolized blood, put there by Adivasis after sacrifices.[50]

Today's Adivasis claim to be the descendants of pre-Vedic communities, and that claim may have some legitimacy. It is challenging, however, in light of the long history of mutual interaction and exchange between Adivasi and Hindu traditions, to determine the exact origin of these beliefs and practices. What I find significant is that Adivasis are trying to use history to their advantage, attempting to demonstrate the validity of their traditional faith on the basis of its originality and uniqueness and thereby to ground their claims of a unique and separate identity as Adivasis in the ongoing practice of that faith.

Christianity and the Sarna Religion

Christian Adivasis, while supportive of the idea that Sarna is a distinct religious tradition, independent of Hinduism, do not want to tie Adivasi identity to a religion that they, as Christians, no longer practice. They worry that they could lose their status as members of

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[49] Sanjay Basu Mullick (who also goes by Samar Bosu Mullick), although not an Adivasi himself, has been a long supporter of Adivasi forest rights in Jharkhand. Drawing connections between women and the forest, his book *Ḍāina Gāthā [Witch Ballad]* describes "the transition from the worship of the vagina to the worship of the penis" (*yoni kī pūjā se linga kī pūjā mena sankramaṇa*). While Hindus tend to emphasize the symbolic meaning of *yoni* and *ling*, Mullick intentionally highlights their physiological referents. He attributes the shift in Adivasi society from gynocentrism to patriarchy (which he claims accompanied the transition from dependence on the produce of the forest to cultivation of the land) to the influence of Brahminical Hinduism and the Puranas. The Sarna religion, however, continues to worship the lady of the grove in the forests, and thus Mullick argues that Adivasis may reclaim their traditional gynocentric worldview through the practice of the Sarna religion. Sanjay Bosu Mullick, *Ḍāina Gāthā [Witch Ballad]* (Ranchi: Sāmudāyika Vana Pālana Sansāthāna, 2009).

[50] Bara told me that he learned that the Hindus borrowed the vermilion mark from Amartya Sen's grandfather's book on Hinduism. Indeed, Kshiti Mohan Sen (Amartya's grandfather) writes in his book *Hinduism*: "Not much is known about the religious practices of those Indian people who were pre-Aryan but did not belong to the Indus Valley Civilization. It is clear, however, that some Hindu customs (e.g., the use of *sindūra*, vermilion, and *śaṅkha*, conch-shells, in some religious ceremonies) came from these people." K. M. Sen also concurs that Shiva was original a tribal god who was assimilated into Hinduism. K. M. Sen, *Hinduism* (London: Penguin, 1961), 44, 58–59. I am presenting these claims not in order to evaluate them but rather to observe the way in which Adivasis seek to establish the legitimacy of their contemporary community and faith on the basis of their reconstruction of the past.

Scheduled Tribes (and the various protections and reservations to which they are entitled as Scheduled Tribes) if Adivasi identity becomes too closely linked to religious practice. After all, that is the case for Scheduled Castes in India: Dalits can be designated as members of Scheduled Castes only if they belong to "Indian religions," i.e., Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, or Sikhism, religions that originated in India.[51]

Some Sarna Adivasis argue that this should be the case for Scheduled Tribes as well. They contend that Christians have an unfair advantage due to their educational levels and connections with foreign missionaries. This is not a new concern. In 1963, after losing an election for a seat reserved for members of Scheduled Tribes, Kartik Oraon, a Sarna Adivasi, filed a court case against his opponent, David Munzi, a Christian Adivasi. Kartik Oraon argued that Munzi, as a Christian, should not be able to contest the election as a member of a Scheduled Tribe, and thus Munzi's victory should be nullified. Kartik Oraon's argument was that, as a Christian, Munzi's identity had changed so fundamentally that Munzi should no longer be considered an Oraon. The court sided with Munzi, however, ruling that "Christian Oraons are Oraons in spite of their conversion and are entitled to the rights and privileges of the tribals."[52]

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[51] Dalits who convert to Christianity or Islam lose their legal status as members of Scheduled Castes, and thus they no longer qualify for government benefits.

[52] Kartik Oraon v. David Munzni and Anr., AIR 1964 Pat 201, §28. The judgment drew upon the following definition of tribe: "'Tribe' has been defined in Encyclopaedia Britannica, Volume 22, 1961 edition, at page 465, by W. H. R. Rivers as 'a social group of a simple kind, the members of which speak a common dialect, have a single government, and act together for such common purposes as "warfare". Other typical characteristics include a common name, a contiguous territory, a relatively uniform culture or way of life and a tradition of common descent. Tribes are usually composed of a number of local communities, e.g., bands, villages or neighbourhoods, and are often aggregated in clusters of a higher order called nations. The term is seldom applied to societies that have achieved a strictly territorial organization in large states but is usually confined to groups whose unity is based primarily upon a sense of extended kinship ties. It is no longer used for kin groups in the strict sense, such as clans.'" Ibid., §14. Kartik Oraon later proposed legislation in Parliament to de-schedule Christian Adivasis, but it was not successful. Alex Ekka, "Whither Jharkhand?," in *The Jharkhand Movement: Indigenous Peoples' Struggle for Autonomy in India*, ed. Ram Dayal Munda and S. Bosu Mullick, IWGIA Document No. 108 (Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs; Chaibasa: Bindrai Institute for Research Study and Action, 2003), 327.

Although Christian Adivasis were victorious in this case, they worry that the influence of fundamentalist Hindu hostility toward Christians could sway judges in the future.

Christian Adivasis believe that their religious identity is not an essential part of their culture. Rather, among some Christian Adivasis, there is a growing emphasis on language as the basis of their Adivasi identity. Think back to the previous chapter and the NWGELC's emphasis on language as the source of identity and dignity. While none of my interlocutors explicitly contrasted their emphasis on language as the source of identity with the Sarna emphasis on religion, it seems to me that their focus on language conveniently offers an alternative proposal for grounding Adivasi identity. Christians have also highlighted other aspects of culture that transcend religious affiliation, such as music, dancing, and art. Lately, in light of the government's attempts to reform the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act to make it easier for outsiders to purchase land owned by members of Scheduled Tribes, Christian Adivasis have begun to urge urban Adivasis to cultivate a renewed relationship with their ancestral land and native villages.

Yet even as Christian Adivasis downplay the importance of the Sarna religion for Adivasi identity, the recent efforts of some Christian Adivasis to incorporate aspects of Sarna religious practice into their faith is a tacit acknowledgement of the role that religion plays in shaping and sustaining identity. Christian Adivasi theologians who engage with Sarna beliefs and practices do so in an effort to make their faith more relevant and liberating, which means that they recognize that the historical failure to engage with Sarna has meant some sort of loss of Adivasi identity.[53] Thus, both Christian and Sarna Adivasis recognize that Sarna religion has an impact

[53] Christian Adivasi theologians readily acknowledge that the misguided approach of the missionaries toward Adivasi culture and religion has resulted in the loss of important aspects of Adivasi identity. As Jhakmak Ekka put it, "It can be argued that Christians are not tribal because Christians are not enriching the indigenous soil. Here our theology has failed: we have highlighted one aspect of theology—the biblical aspect, our faith heritage—but we are missing the Oraon aspect." Interview, June 18, 2022.

on Adivasi identity. They disagree, however, on how central the Sarna faith is to Adivasi identity and how flexible and adaptable the faith ought to be.

Christian Adivasi theologians highlight aspects of Sarna that align with Christianity, emphasizing the monotheistic character of traditional Adivasi religion and likening spirits (*bongas*) to angels, demons, or saints. Alexius Ekka, for example, has asserted:

> [A]t their core the Sarna and the Christian world visions are the same: God is the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and sovereign benevolent supernatural being, who rules and dispenses justice to human persons through the spirits which are under Him; nature is God's handiwork protected by the same spirits and the human persons are His own people who must worship Him and harness the earth as well as sustain the spirits.[54]

Many Christians see the Sarna religion as an ideal forerunner for Christianity. Agapit Tirkey writes that "there was a remarkable similarity between the belief systems of the *Adivasi* societies of Chotanagpur and Christianity. When Christianity came in contact with them, it harmonised well with them because they had already many of the Kingdom values with them which were proclaimed by Jesus."[55] Adivasi Christian theologians have urged Christians to call God Dharmes or Singbonga, the name for God in Kurukh and Mundari respectively, to cultivate a sense of continuity between Christianity and the beliefs of their ancestors. They have tried to adapt festivals like Karam (Karma) to Christian liturgical settings, and they advocate for drumming and dancing for Christian celebrations. While refraining from participating in traditional sacrificial offerings,[56] they have interpreted them in a generous light as demonstrating

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[54] Alexius Ekka, "Hundred Years of the Christian Missions in Chotanagpur," *Indian Church History Review* 33, no. 2 (January 1999): 110.

[55] Agapit Tirkey, "Tribals Embracing Christianity," *Sevartham* 25 (2000): 45 (emphasis in original). More objective observers have suggested that the similarity in beliefs may reflect the influence of Hindu and Christian teachings. Colonel E. T. Dalton, Commissioner of Chotanagpur, made this point even back in the 1860s: "I do not think that the present generation of Kols have any notion of a heaven or a hell that may not be traced to Brahminical or Christian teaching." Dalton, "The 'Kols' of Chota-Nagpore," 194.

[56] Some, however, have gone so far as propose that Christians could participate in Sarna sacrificial offerings, if they were understood properly and followed by the Eucharist. "I venture to say that Munda rituals such as the Flower Festival could be presserved [sic], almost as they are – provided they are properly understood. Even if sacrifice is made to God, this would go as far as the offertory of the NT [New Testament] Eucharist where we bring our gifts

devotion to the Supreme God. John Lakra writes: "Just as the Sarna tribals believe in one God, whom they call *Dharmes* in Kuruk̲h̲ and to him alone they offer the greatest sacrifice of *Palkansana*, so also the Christian tribals believe in the same *Dharmes*, Creator and Master of everything. They, too, offer him the supreme Sacrifice, which Jesus Christ offered to God the Father."[57] Although most Christian Adivasis draw clear distinctions between themselves and their Sarna brethren, theologians—especially Roman Catholic theologians—tend to advocate closer relationships. Roman Catholic Cardinal Telesphore P. Toppo reportedly described himself as a "Sarna Tribal Christian" at a press conference in 2005.[58]

Sarna Adivasis object to these attempts by Christians to appropriate and refashion their religion, highlighting instead the ways in which Sarna is distinct from Christianity and emphasizing Sarna's "ancient" character. Intellectual elites have pushed for Sarna to be called *Adi Dharam* or "original religion" instead of Sarna.[59] They emphasize the ways in which it is distinct from Christianity: there is no founder, they worship out in nature instead of inside buildings, they have no notion of cardinal sin, there is equality of the sexes, and so forth.

Yet what Adivasis think of as the Sarna religion today has changed significantly in the modern era, largely in response to Christianity. To conceive of a particular set of beliefs and

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from the earth: they are to be perfected by being transformed into the body and blood of Jesus; only then are they fully acceptable to God in the NT times in which we live. Christians could in this case perform and partake fully in the *ba-parab* rituals, both at the *sarna* and in the *ading*, provided they prolong it by the NT Eucharist. If this is orthodoxy, praxis should eventually follow, but it is clear that a whole, and perhaps long pedagogy and preparation is called for, especially against the background of the past, almost opposite attitudes of the Church towards local religions, attitudes which may have been to some extent necessary in past times, by way of pedagogy, but which could be slowly changed into a more theologically correct praxis. To do this well, more research and study in depth of tribal religion will be necessary, as well as a deeper understanding of God's revelation before and in Jesus." A. Bruggeman, "Worship: Sarna and Christian," *Sevartham* 7 (1982): 58.

[57] Lakra, "Tribal Culture and Tribal Christians," 18.

[58] Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta, commenting on Toppo's self-description, said it was "a truly inculturated statement and Eucharistic ideology as well." Kerketta, *Adivasi Theology*, 100, citing Toppo's remarks in the newspaper "Prabhat Khabar" on February 14, 2005.

[59] "Dharam" is an alternative spelling of *dharm* (*dharma* in Sanskrit, variously translated as duty, law, righteousness, religion, and so forth). The alternative spelling may be in service of further distinguishing Sarna from Hindu dharm.

practices as a "religion" is itself a response to the presence and influence of Christianity. Sarna Adivasis have begun to gather weekly for communal worship[60] (choosing Thursday to honor Birsa Munda and to distinguish themselves from Christians and Muslims),[61] to build enclosures around worship sites,[62] publish compilations of hymns and prayers,[63] develop codes of moral conduct,[64] and articulate rational, systematic accounts of their beliefs and practices.[65]

Perhaps the greatest change, however, has been the sense of a religious identity shared across tribes. What was once a diverse array of beliefs and practices across tribes and regions is gradually being standardized and codified into a distinct and unique religion.[66] Instead of

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[60] "It has been reported that around Kuru the Sarnaites have recently started imitating Christians in their regular prayer meetings. Just like Chrisrtians [sic] they ring the bell for coming together for a prayer service and they contribute sirni rice. They observe Thursday rest just as Christians observe Sunday rest." Lakra, "Tribal Culture and Tribal Christians," 22.

[61] Birsa Munda was a millenarian religious leader who led an uprising against the British and land-holding elite in the late 1800s. Thursday was the customary day of rest for followers of the Birsa Dharam, who considered Birsa Munda to be Dharti Aba (Father of the Earth), an incarnation of God. While few subscribe wholeheartedly to the Birsa Dharam today, some of its tenets have had a lasting impact on Adivasi religious practice. Roy, *The Mundas and Their Country*, 325–43, 472.

[62] "The Jharkhand government has in place a Gherabandi scheme, which promises State funds to the welfare department to create concrete boundary walls around sacred Sarna religious spaces, including both places of worship (Sarna sthals) and places of mourning (Masna sthals), to protect them from encroachment. According to data from the district office, in Gumla, the government had allocated Rs. 22.01 crore for the protection of 191 Sarna and Masna sthals between FY 2017–18 and FY 2021–22. Of these, work remains incomplete at 103 locations." Lakshman, "Being Sarna."

[63] Ram Dayal Munda and Ratan Singh Manki, *Ādi Dharama [Original Religion]* (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2009).

[64] In her thesis on the Sarna religion among Oraons, Meenakshi Munda lists the following guidelines for Sarna practitioners which have been developed by Sarna Samitis (committees): "1. A Sarna follower should not consume non vegetarian diet on Thursday. 2. Each Thursday is an auspicious day for an Oraon *Sarna*. The reason for selecting Thursday as an auspicious day is unknown. 3. Thursday is the day for special worship and for many a day to fast and spend it in austerity. 4. All the *Sarna* followers are supposed to have a day off on Thursday including all kinds of agricultural activities. 5. Proper way of devotion is to be rendered to the lord Dharme and the earth mother *Maa Chala*. Offerings should include only water and unboiled rice. This is considered pure and sacred." Munda, "Religion and Identity of the Sarna Oraons of Jharkhand," 170 (italics in original). Although Munda states that the reason for selecting Thursday is unknown, many of my interlocuters explicitly drew the connection between Thursday and Birsa Munda's birthday.

[65] One scholar and Sarna practitioner, upon learning that I was a theologian, asked for my assistance in writing a systematic theology of the Sarna religion. I discuss this emphasis on a rational account of the faith more toward the end of the chapter.

[66] There is a basis for this unity. As discussed in chapter two, the various tribes in the region share much in common. P. C. Hembram notes, "The symbolic traits which underlie all the tribal cultures have been forcefully highlighted by various pandits like Raghunath Murmu. The concept of *bonga* or use of a [sic] various material traits like *simsandi* (particular kind of fowl sacrificed to the *bonga*), *sagunthili* (holy pitcher) and common ecology *hariar ratang or sakam* (green colour or foliage) are invoked to drive home the point that all tribals are alike. … It is also pointed out

identifying themselves as worshippers of Dharmes, Singbonga, Thakur Jiu, or Ponomosor (the Oraon, Munda and Ho, Santhal, and Kharia names for God respectively), Adivasis have united under the banner of "Sarna."[67] They are the people who worship in the Sacred Grove (*sarna*), sharing one ancient religion that honors their ancestors and helps them live in harmony with nature.

This unification has been facilitated by Christianity, not simply because Christians have successfully modelled religious unity across tribal boundaries but also because of the perception that Christianity poses an ongoing threat to traditional Adivasi religion. Conversion to Christianity, for Sarna Adivasis, represents the destruction of their religion, the abandonment of their ancestors and their gods, and the rejection of traditional social bonds and mores. Developing unity across tribes by standardizing and codifying their religion has been a strategy through which Sarna Adivasis have sought to combat the presence of Christianity in their midst. One event in particular, the controversy surrounding the Nemha Bible in 2008, was especially important in coalescing the energy of Adivasis around their identity as practitioners of the Sarna religion, though, sadly, this event fueled hostility between the two religions.

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that the tribals have various common ceremonies like *sarhul*, *ba* or *baha*, *karam* and *sohoray* which suggest that all the communities living in the Jharkhand region share a common culture. Even dress and forms of beautification like tattooing are alike." P. C. Hembram, "Return to the Sacred Grove," in *Tribal Movements in India*, ed. K. S. Singh, vol. 2 (1982; repr., New Delhi: Manohar, 2006), 89.

[67] P. C. Hembram observes that Sarna Dharam helped reduce "the differences between various tribal groups," writing, "the concept and practices centring round the Sal grove (*jaher* or *sarna*) have helped to unify the heterogeneous mass of tribals into a solid block. The tribal leaders in the arena of politics have been quick to sieze [sic] the concept of Sarna dharam. They have pointed out the many strands of similarities interlacing the various tribal groups. What began as an effort to reinterpret the tribal religion and to refute the Dekos' [*dikus*] notion that tribal religion defies explanation, has provided a common ground to rally the tribals to achieve better economic, social and political goals." Hembram, 90.

The Nemha Bible

In 2000, in honor of the 150th anniversary of the founding of the church in Chotanagpur, the North Western Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (NWGELC) released a complete translation of the Bible into Kurukh, the Oraon tribal language. Previously, only the New Testament had been translated into Kurukh. The translation was done hurriedly by a small group of pastors from the NWGELC, working from Today's English Version. It was published by the Bible Society of India and was known as the Nemha Bible, since *nemha* means "holy" in Kurukh. Adivasi theologians celebrated this significant milestone in contextualization of the faith, and promoters of the Kurukh language of all faiths acknowledged it would be helpful in the maintenance of the language.

Eight years after its publication, however, in 2008, the Nemha Bible suddenly became the center of a massive controversy, as Sarna Adivasis objected to the translation of a particular verse, Deuteronomy 12:2. In Today's English Version, the English version the translators used, the passage reads: "In the land that you are taking, destroy all the places where the people worship their gods on high mountains, on hills, and under green trees." The passage is part of God's command that the Israelites destroy the sites of Canaanite worship. The Nemha Bible translated "green trees" (Hebrew *ra'anan*) as *sarna mann*, which means tree or grove of trees. Technically, in terms of lexicography, it was an accurate translation. However, practitioners of the Sarna religion took it as a call for the destruction of their religion.

Some Christians tried to justify the translation, arguing that the use of the name Sarna for traditional Adivasi religion was not common until recently. Jhakmak Ekka,[68] an advocate of

[68] We met him in the previous chapter.

Oraon theology and the son of the Nemha Bible's main translator, Niranjan Ekka, explained why they had used the term *sarna*:

> The term *sarna* we used because in 1998/1999, when the Bible was being translated, it did not have these political-religious connotations. Religious somewhat, but not political. It was never meant to indicate a group of people, and even now it has a very secular meaning in villages. Anybody would say, "I'm going to sarna," which means a big tree, a grove, or a bunch of trees, an orchard. Sarna are the *sakua* or sal trees. And so in that respect it was used.[69]

The term *sarna* originally referred to the sal tree (*Shorea robusta*), a kind of tree found only on the Indian subcontinent; it is tall and makes for good timber.[70] Since Adivasis in Jharkhand often worship in groves of sal trees and use sal trees in their religious rituals, the semantic field of the term *sarna* gradually expanded.[71] According to Ekka, the translators should not be blamed for using a lexicographically correct term that only later came to signify the religion and its practitioners.

It is true that the use of the name "Sarna" for Adivasi religion is relatively new. Kurukh dictionaries by Ferdinand Hahn (1903) and A. Grignard (1924) simply define *sarna* as "the sacred grove" and as "a sāl-tree grove," respectively.[72] Johannes Baptist Hoffmann's *Encyclopaedia Mundarica* (1941) discusses the beliefs and practices associated with sacred groves under the term *sanra/sarna*, but he does not refer to "sarna" as the name for Adivasi religion either.[73] S. C. Roy's famous anthropological accounts of the Munda and Oraon tribes

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[69] Interview, June 9, 2014.
[70] The scientific name is *Shorea robusta*.
[71] Padmaja Sen writes, "Originally the term *Sarna* stands for the sacred grove consisting of *sal* trees (*Shorea robusta*) adjacent to every *adivasi* village. As the abode of the spirits of nature it is associated with their religious practices." Sen, "Socio-Religious Movements," 136.
[72] Ferdinand Hahn, *Kurukh (Orāō̃)-English Dictionary* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1903), 150; A. Grignard, *An Oraon-English Dictionary in the Roman Character with Numerous Phrases Illustrative of Sense and Idiom and Notes on Tribal Customs, Beliefs, Etc.* (St. Gabriel-Mödling: Administration of "Anthropos," 1924), 617.
[73] Johannes Baptist Hoffmann, *Encyclopaedia Mundarica: S*, ed. Arthur van Emelen, vol. 13 (Patna: Superintendent Government Printing, 1941), 3816–17.

(1912, 1915, and 1928) simply speak of "Munda religion" and "Oraon religion,"[74] and many other anthropologists and colonial administrators referred to Adivasi religion as "animism."[75] Adivasis themselves continue to refer to their religion with a variety of additional terms, including *Adi Dharam*, *Janjati Dharam*, *Sari Dharam*, *Dupub Dharam*, *Bongaism*, or simply Munda/Oraon/etc. religion. The term "sarna" is not found in all of the tribal languages either; Santhals, for example, call the sacred grove *jaher*, and thus sometimes they have embraced the terminology of *Jaher Dharam*.

Nevertheless, it is surprising that in the late 1990s the Bible translators were unaware of the powerful religious and political connotations of the word "sarna," which had by then been part of Adivasi assertion and political mobilization for at least sixty years. According to P. C. Hembram, the term was first adopted in 1934 after a series of conferences dedicated to the promotion of traditional Adivasi religion, which conference participants decided to refer to as Sarna Dharam.[76] They hoped that having a common name for their "ancient" (*adi*) religion would help them present it to outsiders as a legitimate, coherent, and rational form of religious belief and practice. Tribes began to establish organizations for the promotion of Sarna Dharam, including the Munda Sarna Sangh, the Oraon Sarna Nava Yuvak Sangh, the (Santhal) Sarna Dharam Semlet, and the (Ho) Dupup Samaj,[77] and in 1978 the Bhartiya Sarna Sangh (All-India Sarna Organization) was established.[78]

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[74] Roy, *The Mundas and Their Country*; Roy, *The Orāons of Chotā Nāgpur*; Roy, *Oraon Religion and Customs*.
[75] See, for example, Risley and Gait, *General Report on the Census of India, 1901*, 349–56.
[76] Delegates from the states of Bihar, Orissa, and Bengal gathered multiple times between 1932 and 1934. Hembram, "Return to the Sacred Grove," 88.
[77] The Ho tribe continued to embrace the name Dupup for their religion. According to Hembram, "They officially accept the tenets of Sarna dharam but not the term." Hembram, 87.
[78] The Bhartiya Sarna Sangh's mission was "to preserve and develop the ancient (*adi*) culture of the Adibasis, to foster respect for the *Sarna* and to protect the religion based on it, to encourage tribal's [sic] dance, music and reseraches [sic] into all aspects of tribal culture and society, to secure tribals' rights and to promote all-round development and brotherhood among them." Hembram, 90–91.

The Nemha Bible's translators' failure to recognize that the use of the word *sarna* in Deuteronomy 12:2 might upset non-Christian Adivasis shows how isolated some Christian Adivasis are from their neighbors. Some Christian Adivasis have argued that Sarna is not a good name for the religion,[79] but even if it is not the nomenclature they would prefer to use, Christians should at least be aware of the terms in which many of their non-Christian neighbors perceive themselves and their religious identity.[80] For those who sought to promote the Sarna religion, however, the Nemha Bible proved to be quite helpful. As noted above, prior to the controversy in 2008, the term Sarna had not been universally recognized among Adivasis themselves. The sense that their religion was under attack by the Christians through the Nemha Bible significantly contributed to their unification and political mobilization under the banner of Sarna.

When Sarna Adivasis discovered what they regarded as the offensive passage and raised their concerns in 2008, eight years after its publication, the NWGELC apologized for offending the sentiments of the Sarna people, and the Bible Society of India recalled the Nemha Bible from shops.[81] NWGELC church leaders told me that they had spoken to their Sarna Adivasi friends, explaining that the term had been intended in its former secular, mundane sense and that they had not meant to refer to the Sarna religion or its practitioners.[82] These Sarna leaders supposedly accepted their apologies and assured the Christian leaders that they would "take care of the

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[79] John Lakra, for example, objects to the nomenclature of Sarna because the word is not used in all tribal languages, it is not the primary location for worship in all tribes, and he thinks religions should be named after people groups instead of places. For Sarna Adivasis, however, the emphasis on place is an asset, reflecting their connection to the land and claim to be indigenous people. Lakra, "Rewriting Tribal Anthropology," 26–27.

[80] To be fair, at least some Christian Adivasis at the time were aware of the use of the word Sarna to refer to Adivasi traditional religion: the Jesuit theological journal *Sevartham*, for example, had published essays using the term Sarna since at least the 1980s.

[81] According to Soma Bhatker, the Secretary of the Ranchi Auxiliary of the Bible Society of India, 3,000 copies of the Nemha Bible had been printed in 2000. See Gladson Dungdung, "Fanning Communal Fires: Hindutva Groups Attack a Mistake in a Bible Translation into a Tribal Language in Jharkhand," *Tehelka*, October 17, 2008.

[82] The All Churches Committee of Ranchi (ACCR), chaired at the time by GELC Bishop C. D. Jojo, also reached out to Sarna allies to work for peace. "The ACCR and the Raji Parha Sarna Samity have already made a joint effort to bring about a reconciliation between the sarna and christian adivasis." Rudra Biswas, "Churches Renew Harmony Appeal," *The Telegraph*, October 14, 2008.

issue," bringing an end to the controversy. But these more moderate Sarna leaders could not mollify the other, more extremist Sarna leaders, who took great offense and interpreted the Bible translation as part of a Christian conspiracy to destroy their religion. The Kendriya Sarna Samiti (KSS, meaning the Central Sarna Committee) declared, "The Adivasis of Jharkhand will not pardon the Christians for their 13 year crusade through 'Nemha Bible' to demolish the 'Sarna Dharm.'"[83] The accusation of a thirteen year crusade when the Bible had only been in circulation for eight years reflects the general confusion among Sarna Adivasis regarding the conflict. Sarna Adivasis with whom I spoke were often mistaken about the details of the Bible controversy, locating the controversial passage in the New Testament or dating its publication to 1995.

Also unaware of the distinctions between different Christian denominations, the outraged Sarna leaders blamed the most public and powerful representative of Christians they could identify: Roman Catholic Cardinal, Telesphore P. Toppo. Cardinal Toppo was the first Adivasi Cardinal in Asia and had been an important advocate for the plight of the Adivasis in the region. He also had no affiliation with the Protestant-run Bible Society of India which had published the Nemha Bible. Nevertheless, angry Sarna Adivasis shouted slogans against the Cardinal and burned effigies of him in front of his home,[84] denouncing any reconciliatory efforts as attempts to divide Adivasi society.[85]

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[83] "Missionaries Apologise to Jharkhand Adivasis," *Jharkhand Forum* (blog), October 2008, http://forum.jharkhand.org.in/2008/10/missionaries-apologise-to-jharkhand.html.

[84] "Cardinal's Effigy Burned over Faulty Protestant Bible Translation," *Union of Catholic Asian News (UCA News)*, September 25, 2008, https://www.ucanews.com/story-archive/?post_name=/2008/09/25/cardinals-effigy-burned-over-faulty-protestant-bible-translation&post_id=49224#.

[85] "Four days before [the] Mahapanchyat, Chamara Linda president of Adivasi Chatra Sangh [Adivasi Student Organization] met BSI [Bible Society of India] members in [the] presence of Cardinal [Toppo] and announced to end the issue. The Mahapanchayat, however disagreed over it and charged it as a move to divide the tribal society." Nityanand Shukla, "Political Tones of Translated Bible in Jharkhand," *India Today*, October 23, 2008, https://www.indiatoday.in/latest-headlines/story/political-tones-of-translated-bible-in-jharkhand-32169-2008-10-23.

The legislative assembly in Jharkhand banned the Nemha Bible, and Deputy Chief Minister Stephen Marandi promised that the government would "take suitable action against the publisher."[86] This promise was too vague for the Sarna Adivasi agitators and their BJP allies, who continued to shout slogans like "Stop hurting tribal sentiments!" in the assembly.[87] In September, 2008, the Kendriya Sarna Samiti (KSS, meaning Central Sarna Committee) lodged a case against the Bible Society of India.[88] The following month, on October 19, 2008, the KSS held a large meeting—a Mahapanchayat—for Sarna Adivasis to discuss ways to protect their cultural identity.[89] Leaders framed the attack on the Sarna religion as a threat to Adivasi culture more broadly. Thousands of Adivasis from Jharkhand and neighboring states attended: estimates ranged from 15,000 to 20,000 people.[90] Newspaper reports described "the peace loving tribal community" as "up in arms over [the] translated Bible,"[91] noting that many literally carried with them traditional weapons like bows and arrows.[92] Arjun Munda, former Chief Minister of the state and a leader in the BJP, spoke to the group, condemning the government for failing to file a criminal case against the writer and publisher of the Bible: "Recalling the book is one step but it is duty of the state government to ensure that such acts are not repeated."[93]

[86] "Translated Bible Rocks Jharkhand Assembly," *DNA India*, November 19, 2013, https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-translated-bible-rocks-jharkhand-assembly-1192527. Originally published September 23, 2008.
[87] "Translated Bible Rocks Jharkhand Assembly."
[88] "Father C. R. Prabhu vs State Of Jharkhand & Anr on 9 April, 2013," Jharkhand High Court, Cr. M. P. No. 683 of 2012, https://indiankanoon.org/doc/53281792/. The case was finally quashed by the courts earlier this year. See "Father Ignace Topno vs The State Of Jharkhand on 11 April, 2023," Jharkhand High Court, Cr. M. P. No. 1971 of 2013, https://indiankanoon.org/doc/173794984/.
[89] Ajay Tirkey, president of the Kendriya Sarna Samiti (KSS) told reporters, "There is a conspiracy to end the tribal identity across the state and in the country…The Mahapanchayat will discuss how the cultural identity of tribals can be protected." "Tribals Call Meeting after Bible Translation Attacks Their Beliefs," *Indo-Asian News Service*, October 13, 2008, Factiva Document HNIANS0020081021e4ad000vy.
[90] The Indo Asian News Service reported an attendance of 15,000, while India Today put the number at around 20,000. "Tribals Seek Action against Writer, Publisher of Translated Bible," *Indo-Asian News Service*, October 19, 2008; Shukla, "Political Tones of Translated Bible in Jharkhand."
[91] Shukla, "Political Tones of Translated Bible in Jharkhand."
[92] "Tribals Seek Action." This manages to simultaneously tap into tropes of tribal people as innocent, peaceful laborers and violent, uncivilized savages.
[93] Shukla, "Political Tones of Translated Bible in Jharkhand."

At the Mahapanchayat, Sarna Adivasis put forth a series of legal, legislative, and cultural demands. On the legal front, they demanded strict action against the writer and publisher.[94] There were even calls for the death penalty for the translators.[95] On the legislative front, the Mahapanchayat demanded that Christian Adivasis be removed from the category of Scheduled Tribes. As discussed above, Sarna Adivasis had previously raised this issue in the courts, with Kartik Oraon challenging the victory of his opponent, David Munzi, for a seat reserved for Scheduled Tribes. The Nemha Bible incident reinvigorated debate on this issue among the Adivasi community. At the Mahapanchayat, Ajay Tirkey, then president of the KSS, called for the state government to enact a law that would "immediately stop the facilities enjoyed by the converted tribals." When Christian Adivasis, or "converted tribals," receive government benefits, he argued, "Tribals [i.e. Sarna Adivasis] are deprived off [sic] their right provided in the Indian Constitution."[96]

The Mahapanchayat also made a variety of cultural demands, which included calling for a ban on all forms of tribal rituals, culture, and tradition in Christian-run schools and institutions and a ban on the use of tribal words in Christian writings.[97] They also insisted that Christian

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[94] The Constitution of India, Article 19, allows for "reasonable restrictions" of freedom of speech and expression in the interest of, among other things, "public order," "decency," and "morality," and in relation to "defamation or incitement to an offence." In cases where religious sentiments have been "injured," like with the Nemha Bible, courts usually refer to the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which is a comprehensive criminal law code that was drafted by the British in 1860 and still remains in force in India. It tends to prioritize social harmony over individual freedom. For example, §153A of the IPC prohibits "promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language, etc., and doing acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony," and §295A prohibits "deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs." §505 prohibits "statements conducing to public mischief" and "statements creating or promoting enmity, hatred or ill-will between classes." Punishments range from fines to five years in prison. These are extremely loose and open-ended prohibitions that can easily be abused. The aim of these laws is to protect minorities and prevent communal violence, but, unfortunately, they often become a means of silencing those with whom one disagrees.

[95] Ekka, "Christianity and the Tribal Religion in Jharkhand," 142.

[96] Shukla, "Political Tones of Translated Bible in Jharkhand."

[97] Shukla, "Political Tones of Translated Bible in Jharkhand."

Adivasis stop celebrating Karam, a tribal harvest festival.[98] Adivasi theologians were frustrated and felt as though they were caught in a trap. Jhakmak Ekka expressed his dismay: "On the one hand they accuse the church of destroying the culture and on the other hand when the church was trying to do something about at least one prominent festival, they objected to it."[99]

I will discuss these "cultural" controversies in more detail below, but first it is important to highlight the fact that Christians considered the Nemha Bible controversy to be the result of a simple "mistranslation." There was no reflection among Christians on the inherently intolerant meaning of the passage and others like it in the Bible.[100] While the use of the word Sarna was particularly inflammatory, other word choices would likely also be offensive to people who "worship their gods in high mountains, on hills, and under green trees" (Deut. 12:2). But instead of engaging with the underlying theological issue of pluralism, Christians focused on the political forces behind the incident that sought to divide the Adivasi community along religious lines. The president of the Jharkhand Indigenous People's Forum, Xavier Kujur, alleged, "The Rightwing wants to divide the Adivasi community so that the MOUs signed by the BJP government can be executed. We should question their intentions."[101] (MOUs are "Memorandums of Understanding," promises the government makes to corporations guaranteeing them land for their development projects, which result in the displacement of Adivasis from their land.) Many Christians saw the Nemha Bible incident as a distraction from

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[98] It is also known as Karma. For more information about this particular festival, see Reetu Raj Ekka, "The Karam Festival of the Oraon Tribals of India: A Socio-Religious Analysis," *Proceedings of ASBBS* 16, no. 1 (2009).
[99] Interview, June 9, 2014.
[100] Consider another example, this time from the Bible in Hindi. The Hindi Bible frequently uses the word *murti* in a derogatory fashion. *Murti* is a Hindi word often translated as idol but is better glossed as an image in which the presence of God dwells. *Murtis* are everywhere in India, and Hindus treat them with great respect and reverence. Given the Bible's harsh condemnations of *murtis* and idolatry, should Christians withdraw the Hindi Bible from circulation? Could they use a different word than *murti*? Or is this just one of the many potentially offensive things in the Bible that no translation could ever smooth over?
[101] Dungdung, "Fanning Communal Fires."

current political issues, designed to foster intra-tribal conflict and facilitate their exploitation by wealthy outsiders.

Christian leaders also noted that the Nemha Bible controversy occurred around the same time as violent attacks on Christians by Hindu fundamentalists in the Kandhamal district of the neighboring state of Odisha, and they suspect that the timing was not a coincidence. Jhakmak Ekka believes that Hindu fundamentalists had been aware of Sarna concerns about the Nemha Bible passage for several years but waited until the fall of 2008 as "some kind of plan in continuation with Kandhamal." But because Ranchi is a big city (unlike the rural district of Kandhamal), "they couldn't really replicate Kandhamal in Ranchi… However, they had instigated enough people, convinced enough people to go out in the street and demonstrate in a big way. … Thousands of them."[102] Others alleged that the demonstrators had been brought in by buses from out of state.[103] Whether part of a larger conspiracy or not, the Nemha Bible incident succeeded in bringing the non-Christian Adivasi community together under the banner of Sarna, strengthening their sense of religious identity and intensifying pre-existing tensions with Christian Adivasis.

The Nemha Bible was an attempt to contextualize the Gospel, translating the Word of God into the mother tongue of Oraons. One could argue that the translation of "green trees" (Hebrew *raʿanan*) as *sarna mann*, while politically inconvenient, successfully achieved the "dynamic equivalence"[104] necessary to make the passage relevant in the Adivasi context. After

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[102] Interview, June 9, 2014.

[103] Cyprian Ekka wrote, "For all the hype, they could only herd in 5 or 6 thousand people in buses and light vehicles to Ranchi for the so-called Mahapanchayat on Oct 19. It was a BJP show all the way. Not a single constructive Adivasi issue, except for Christian bashing, was taken up at the meeting. The mojority [sic] Adivasis stayed away." Cyprian Ekka, "Re: Missionaries Apologise to Jharkhand Adivasis," Jharkhand mailing list archives, The Mail Archive, November 2, 2008, https://www.mail-archive.com/jharkhand@yahoogroups.co.in/msg02858.html.

[104] "Dynamic equivalence" is a term coined by Eugene A. Nida, which he contrasted with formal equivalence. Translators pursuing dynamic equivalence prioritize the response elicited by the translation rather than precise lexical correspondence. Eugene A. Nida, "Principles of Correspondence," in *Toward a Science of Translating, with*

all, would not such instructions to the Hebrew people have been just as disruptive and offensive to the beliefs and practices of other communities—those who worshipped "on high mountains, on hills, and under green trees"—in their social milleu? To wave away the conflict as simply the result of a "mistranslation" sidesteps the issue that some forms of Christianity call upon their followers to take controversial and offensive stances vis-à-vis other religions and ways of inhabiting the world. While most Christians rightly temper their reading of this passage's injunction to violence by juxtaposing it with other passages from scripture that call for peace and tolerance, they should not forget that there are many aspects of their faith that may be offensive to or clash with the beliefs and practices of others.

Adivasi theology—like other forms of contextual theology—is particularly prone to creating controversy because it connects faith to the experiences of everyday life. As long as the Bible is written in a foreign language, about people who lived long ago in places far away, it is easy to ignore. God (through Moses) commanding the Hebrew people to destroy places of worship under green trees when they enter the promised land does not seem to speak to contemporary Adivasi life. But when "green trees" is translated as *sarna mann*, people start to pay attention. Now the Bible is suddenly relevant to Adivasi life, although not necessarily in ways that theologians may have hoped. It should be no surprise, however, that when the Bible is translated into the local language, when its stories are retold in light of current events, or when its teachings are applied to contemporary debates, such acts of contextualization will almost certainly invite controversy. Some people may find it empowering and liberating, but for others

Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translated (Leiden: Brill, 1964), 156–92. The concept of "dynamic equivalence" has been a guiding principle for Bible translators working with organizations such as the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). See Courtney Handman, *Critical Christianity: Translation and Denominational Conflict in Papua New Guinea* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 66–68, 82–89.

it will be deeply offensive. Those who advocate for theological engagement with context must be prepared for discomfort and tension.

To be fair, Adivasi theologians are aware that their work invites controversy. However, they expect it to come from the church hierarchy or from wealthy, exploitative *dikus* (outsiders), not from their fellow Adivasis. Trusting in the promises of contextual theology, they tend to assume that the oppressed and marginalized Adivasi community will uniformly receive their efforts at contextualization and inculturation as liberating. But this overlooks the reality that oppression and marginalization may be experienced and embodied in different ways by different people within the same community. While Christian Adivasis may perceive their efforts at contextualization as liberating, an antidote to the "double marginalization" they experience both from their fellow Adivasis and from the church hierarchy,[105] Sarna Adivasis experience Christian projects of contextualization as an additional source of marginalization and oppression, threatening the integrity of their faith and undermining the foundation of their identity. The Nemha Bible was not a unique incident in this regard. What is liberating for one section of an oppressed and marginalized populace may have negative consequences for others. Contextualization has the potential to reveal divisions within communities, and theologians need to recognize that people experience oppression and injustice in different ways. Controversy may emerge not only in relation to those outside of the community but among those within it.

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[105] Joseph Marianus Kujur writes, "Thus, there is double marginalization of the tribal church. First, the tribal church has always been in the periphery trying to fend for itself from the attacks at the local level by those who accuse it of distorting the traditional culture and dividing their community. Second, the local tribal church is in for criticism and censorship from the orthodoxy in the church hierarchy in the process of innovations and experimentations on tribal liturgy, tribal theology and tribal ecclesiology. Thus, the effort of the tribal church to be in the mainstream traditional culture is looked upon with contempt by the traditional culture, on the one hand; and is received disdainfully by the church orthodoxy as dissent, anti-universal and parochial, on the other hand." Oddly, Kujur fails to mention what I would consider the main kind of marginalization Adivasis experience: social, economic, and political marginalization. Kujur, "Tribal Church in the Margins," 30.

Debating Contextualization

While the Nemha Bible controversy did not awaken theologians to the potential for their efforts at contextualization to disrupt and offend their fellow Adivasis, the incident I described at the beginning of this chapter—the statue of the tribal Virgin Mary—was different. A Catholic parish in Singpur, a village near Ranchi, had erected the statue of Mother Mary wearing a white sari with a red border (the traditional Adivasi sari) in 2013 as an attempt to inculturate Christian faith in the Adivasi context. But Sarna leaders had interpreted it as a deceptive ploy to convert Adivasis to Christianity, and they agitated for its removal, claiming that it had offended their religious sentiments. In this instance, Christians began to realize the controversial nature of contextualization and decided that it was nevertheless an imperative of the Gospel.

Although there were some Christian leaders who viewed the statue as a mistake and suggested that the church should apologize and take down the statue,[106] most defended the statue. It was their right as Christians and as Adivasis, they argued, to display a statue of the Virgin Mary wearing traditional Adivasis clothing. Not only was it their right, but it was a way of honoring both aspects of their identity. To be fair, this was a much easier case to defend than the Nemha Bible. Unlike a scripture passage calling for violence and destruction, the Virgin Mary statue was simply a piece of devotional art on the property of a Catholic parish. The church was not insisting that all Christian art must take this contextualized form, much less commenting on the religious practices of their Sarna brethren.

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[106] This was the opinion of several GELC pastors with whom I spoke, and *The Hindu* newspaper quoted social activist Fr. Stan Swamy as saying, "the church representatives should come out of their shell, be gracious and offer to remove the statue and make a clear statement that we do not wish to offend anyone's sentiments." Anumeha Yadav, "Adivasi Group to Agitate for Removal of 'Tribal' Virgin Mary Statue," *The Hindu*, August 27, 2013, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/adivasi-group-to-agitate-for-removal-of-tribal-virgin-mary-statue/article5062363.ece.

Defenders of the statue also had a strong precedent upon which to base their argument. Depicting saints and the holy family in the style of the local context has a long history and is a common Christian practice worldwide. The priests and brothers of the Marianist Order, who run the parish and had commissioned the statue, "devote the major part of their time and efforts to inculturation to be rooted in the contexts of new countries and cultures."[107] In other parts of India, churches have statues of the Virgin Mary dressed in the local sari, with a *bindi* on her forehead, or standing on an open lotus flower. Why should this particular form of inculturation draw such ire?

While reluctant to further enflame tensions with the Sarna community,[108] Christian Adivasi theologians did not back down. They realized that if they did not defend the Mary statue, there would be little opportunity for them to engage in further acts of contextualization. "Following their demand, if we remove the statue today then tomorrow they will ask us to stop playing tribal musical instruments, or performing tribal dances, or for that matter speaking tribal languages. We are not going to give in to any of their unjustified demands," Alex Ekka told reporters.[109]

Christian Adivasis argued that the sari—like other aspects of Adivasi culture—belonged to them just as much as it did to the Sarna Adivasis.[110] This was not an instance of the church borrowing from or appropriating Adivasi culture, because Christians in the region are themselves

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[107] Cyprian Ekka, Pius Xalxo, and Joseph Marianus Kujur, "Mother Mary of Singpur: A Case Study" (Ranchi Jesuit Society, August 26, 2013), 3.

[108] "'It was never our intention to hurt religious sentiments of our non-Christian tribal brothers. At the same time, we expect them to respect ours. Roman Catholic Church is against any attempt to convert people by fraud or inducement,' XISS director Father Alex Ekka, also secretary of Jharkhand Sadbhavna Manch, said at Social Development Centre, Ranchi." Rudra Biswas, "Church Clears Air on Lookalike Mary," *The Telegraph India*, September 11, 2013, https://www.telegraphindia.com/jharkhand/church-clears-air-on-lookalike-mary/cid/260777.

[109] Shaikh Azizur Rahman, "The Storm over Virgin Mary Statue," *Al Jazeera*, October 17, 2013, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2013/10/17/the-storm-over-virgin-mary-statue/.

[110] A report from the Ranchi Jesuit Society noted that some believe the red-bordered sari was first used as a uniform at schools run by Christian missionaries. Ekka, Xalxo, and Kujur, "A Brief Report," 3.

Adivasis: “the question of the Church institutions borrowing from tribal culture does not arise because the Church in Chotanagpur is of the tribals, for the tribals and by the tribals.”[111] Even if it were a “borrowed” symbol, they argued, that would be something to celebrate, not condemn. One of God’s gifts to humanity is the fact that diverse cultures can and do enrich each other through their interaction and exchange. A report on the incident from the Ranchi Jesuit Society contended that “there are many processes of social change at work and there is constant ‘give and take’ from one another. Various religions and cultures have borrowed from and added to the richness of one another. It is a sociological phenomenon and it is absurd to monopolize a symbol that is in public domain.”[112] From the Christians’ perspective, the Sarna Adivasis were being irrational and close-minded in their objection to Mary wearing the red-bordered sari.

Christians presented the issue as cut and dry: outsiders were orchestrating the protests[113] and using the Sarna community in an attempt to divide Adivasis and distract them from other social issues.[114] Cardinal Toppo publicly asserted that the controversy was manufactured for

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[111] Ekka, Xalxo, and Kujur, 4.

[112] “There was a similar case many years ago when St. Mary’s School, Doranda, was started by a non-Christian. According to the reports, a former principal of St. Xavier’s Doranda allegedly filed a writ in the court to stop the use of the Christian name by a non-Christian. The court verdict, however, allegedly went against the principal of St. Xavier’s. The court verdict stated that there was no problem if anybody wanted to use the Christian or other names.” Ekka, Xalxo, and Kujur, 4.

[113] A local resident told news reporters, “While the march had been called by Sarna groups, several Bajrang Dal members wearing saffron bands marched with them. Even tribals from neighbouring Odisha, Chhattisgarh districts reached here.” Yadav, “Tribals Torn Apart by Religion.” The Ranchi Jesuit Society report stated that local villagers wanted peace but that outside fundamentalist forces had been pressuring them to protest the statue. They observed that the protests and demands were suspiciously well-aligned with the wider agenda of the Hindu fundamentalists of the Sangh Parivar: “… what happened on 25th August, viz. ‘Sarna Dharam Raksha Yatra’ was part of the larger conspiracy. It was on the same day that Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) had called for the ‘Yatra’ in Ayodhya. Further, the Church has been threatened with dire consequences if the statue is not removed by 25th December 2013. When the Kandhmal violence against Christians broke out in 2008, a massive bundh [strike] call was given for 25th December. We, thus see a common pattern of modus operandi which looks like the trademark of the Sangh Parivar.” Ekka, Xalxo, and Kujur, “A Brief Report,” 5.

[114] “The Church also claims it is a simple issue made complicated by the ‘vested interests’ that are apparently indulging in triggering the religious passion of certain sections of the community to suit their political purpose and to divert the attention of public at large from the main issues of development, land alienation, deforestation, rampant mining and industrialization, corruption and plundering of the local resources.” Ekka, Xalxo, and Kujur, “A Brief Report,” 5.

political gain in the upcoming election. “It is a policy of divide and rule. Elections are coming up and there are some people who are acting to get advantage. They want a conflict between Christians and non-Christians,” he said.[115] Many also interpreted the protests as part of a larger campaign to promote the “delegitimsation [sic] of tribal identity of the Church in Chotanagpur”[116] in order to deny Christian converts access to reservations as Scheduled Tribes. The report of the Ranchi Jesuit Society alleged: “This is a strategy to deliberately alienate the Christian tribals from the tribal roots so that an explanation can be given that since they do not practice tribal culture any more, their Scheduled Tribe status can be withdrawn.”[117]

There is likely much truth to this interpretation of the Sarna community’s protests. There are many Sarna Adivasis who resent having to compete with Christian Adivasis for Scheduled Tribe reservations and believe they would be better off if Christians were no longer granted Scheduled Tribe status. But social activists have long chronicled the ways in which wealthy elites and fundamentalist political parties, rather than Adivasis themselves, benefit from conflicts within the Adivasi community. Removing Christians from the Scheduled Tribe population would decrease the community’s percentage of the population as a whole, leaving Scheduled Tribes with less political power overall and giving political leaders an excuse to lower the percentage of seats reserved for Scheduled Tribes in jobs and educational institutions. Many Adivasi leaders opine that division between Christian and Sarna Adivasis ultimately harms all Adivasis.[118]

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[115] Kelly Kislaya, “Mother Mary Statue in Tribal Attire Stirs Row in Jharkhand,” *Times of India*, June 19, 2013, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Mother-Mary-statue-in-tribal-attire-stirs-row-in-Jharkhand/articleshow/20655458.cms.
[116] Ekka, Xalxo, and Kujur, “A Brief Report,” 5.
[117] Ekka, Xalxo, and Kujur, 5.
[118] The Ranchi Jesuit Society’s report concluded: “The present divide therefore rather than helping the larger tribal society in general and the Oraon community in particular, is doing the greatest damage to them. Firstly, it is diverting the attention of the Oraons and other marginalized communities from the main issues. Tribal communities do not gain anything from this controversy. The only beneficiaries of this controversy are the communal forces in nexus with the land, timber and other mafias. Secondly, this event is an example of brazen and desperate

While the Christians' assessment of the political implications and possible motivations of the conflict may have been accurate, they failed to engage with the concerns expressed by Sarna Adivasis: fears about conversion and the integrity of their traditional culture and religion. The explicit concern voiced by Sarna Adivasis in response to the Mary statue was that Adivasis would be tricked into thinking that Mother Mary was identical with their own Sarna Ma and on that basis accept Christianity.[119] Christians dismissed this as ridiculous,[120] suggesting that it reflected a low view of the intelligence of Adivasis and the catechesis provided by the church. Christians restated their opposition to fraudulent and forced conversions, and they reminded the public of their long history of working for the well-being of Adivasis.[121] Yet for many Sarna leaders, as for their Hindutva allies, conversion is never appropriate.[122] In order to maintain one's identity as an *Adi-vasi* (original inhabitant), they contend, one must continue to practice the *Adi-dharam* (original religion). Religion and culture are so thoroughly interwoven that those who convert to Christianity reject not only the Sarna religion but also their Adivasi identity.

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communalization of Mother Mary's tribal looks for polarization the communities before the forthcoming elections." Ekka, Xalxo, and Kujur, 7.

[119] Bandhan Tigga, *dharam guru* or head priest of the Sarna Society, expressed this concern about the Mary statue in remarks with the press: "She has been made to look like our goddess of Sarna Ma [Mother Nature]. If the statue remains in place, after some decades our future generations will get confused between our Sarna Ma and Mother Mary… The statue is a tool to convert more tribals to Christianity." Rahman, "The Storm over Virgin Mary Statue" (brackets in original). Note that some Sarna Adivasis, however, are critical of the concept of Sarna Ma, arguing that this is a recent invention introduced by those seeking to encompass Sarna within Hinduism. Sharan Oraon, a tribal writer, activist, and musician based in Ranchi, told reporters that "the 'Sarna maa' (deity) was only formed in the last couple of years. 'We didn't believe in deities, Sarna is the simple place we worship. But now we have a deity,' he adds." Bose, "Not Our God."

[120] "The critics of the above line of thought rubbish the apprehensions and argue that the 'modern' Oraons clad in the Western costumes (pants & shirts) even 66 years after the departure of the colonizers, do not look like British." Ekka, Xalxo, and Kujur, "A Brief Report," 5.

[121] Fr. Augustine Kanjamala, SVD, argued that "foreign Christian missionaries were the first to protect and promote the indigenous cultures of tribal people. They passionately defended indigenous rights." Nirmala Carvalho, "Jharkhand: 'Tribal' Madonna for Singpur Catholics," *PIME Asian News*, June 21, 2013, https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Jharkhand:-tribal-Madonna-for-Singpur-Catholics-28271.html.

[122] For example, an article in a conservative Hindu media outlet objecting to the history of Christian conversions in Jharkhand approving quoted Swami Vivekananda as saying that "every single conversion to Christianity is an enemy for India." "Christianity, Conversion & Jharkhand," *OpIndia*, January 31, 2022, https://myvoice.opindia.com/2022/01/christianity-conversion-jharkhand/.

Sarna Adivasis are adamant about the close connection between faith and identity because they have seen the ways Christianity has affected their communities.[123] Conversion divided families, villages, and tribes, and inter-denominational conflict among Christians created even more division. Converts insulted their ancestors, deities, and those who continued to adhere to the traditional faith. They cut their *chundi* (topknots) and stopped getting tattoos. They ceased drinking *handia* (rice beer) and dancing in the *akhra* (dancing ground in the center of the village), and they condemned those who continued to practice the ancient ways. The social and economic incentives to convert—missionaries tended to give preferential treatment to their own flock, aiding them in legal matters with their land and educating their children—made Adivasis afraid that eventually the entire community would succumb to this foreign, imperialistic faith.[124]

Those fears have not been realized (Christians remain only 16% of Scheduled Tribes in Jharkhand),[125] but Sarna Adivasis continue to face religious pressure from both Christians and Hindus. Hindus, in particular, have been strongly opposed to the addition of a Sarna code in the census, arguing that Sarna is a part of Hinduism.[126] Christians who dismiss concerns that Sarna Adivasis might confuse the Virgin Mary with their own Sarna Ma forget that Hindutva organizations working among Adivasis have encouraged the identification of Sarna Ma with Hindu goddesses like Parvati or Durga. The permeability of religious boundaries in the Indian

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[123] For critical accounts of Christian missions in Jharkhand and their negative effects on the Adivasi community, see Karma Oraon, *The Spectrum of Tribal Religion in Bihar: A Study of Continuity and Change among the Oraon of Chotanagpur* (Varanasi: Kishor Vidya Niketan, 1988); Sahay, *Under the Shadow of the Cross*.

[124] In 1866, Colonel E. T. Dalton commented upon the changes among the converts to Christianity—discarding beads and brass ornaments, avoiding dances and festivals, and abandoning old prejudices—and noted that "there is now a widespread feeling amongst the Kols themselves, that this change will inevitably come upon them all." Dalton, "The 'Kols' of Chota-Nagpore," 198.

[125] In the 2011 census, out of a total of 8,645,042 people from Schedule Tribes in Jharkhand, 4,012,622 were listed as Other Religions or Persuasions (which usually means Sarna or another traditional tribal religion), 3,245,856 as Hindu, 1,338,175 as Christian, 25,971 as Religion Not Stated, 18,107 as Muslim, 2,946 as Buddhists, 984 as Sikhs, and 381 as Jains. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, "ST-14 Scheduled Tribe Population by Religious Community (for Each Tribe Separately) - 2011," www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/SCST-Series/ST14/ST-20-00-014-DDW-2011.XLS.

[126] Pandey, "Jharkhand Resolution."

subcontinent may make Christian attempts at contextualization seem like more aggressive actions than Christians intend. In light of the history of Christian missions in the region, where converts to Christianity used to be required to give up much of their traditional culture, Sarna Adivasis interpret the Christian turn toward contextualization as a shrewd shift in strategy to gain even more converts.[127]

Conversion, however, is not usually among the factors that motivate Christian Adivasi theologians to promote contextualization. These theologians tend to be highly educated liberal elites, with an inclusive or universalist approach to religious pluralism. They seek to honor and learn from other religious traditions, and they often consider Christianity simply one among many spiritual paths that lead to the truth. To the extent that they are interested in conversion, it is the ongoing, daily "conversion" of those who are already believers, re-orienting themselves anew to see the world through God's eyes and work for justice for the poor and oppressed. Christian theologians see engaging with the Adivasi context—including aspects of Sarna faith—as a way to enhance the faith lives of those who have already become Christian, helping them to integrate the Bible with the world they encounter on a daily basis.

But Sarna Adivasis are worried that this contextualization will compromise the integrity of their own faith, as Christian Adivasis adapt aspects of Adivasi culture and religion to fit a Christian worldview. Consider, for example, the festival Karam (also known as Karma), in which Sarna Adivasis cut branches of the Karam tree and worship the deity Karam.[128] While Christians used to shun Karam and other traditional festivals, Christian Adivasi theologians now

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[127] An article posted on the conservative Hindu website *OpIndia* describes Christian efforts at contextualization as "shape-shifting" and new form of "colonial conquest," introduced by missionaries because "[t]he desperation to convert people to Christianity was so high." While not written from the perspective of Sarna Adivasis, it reflects many of their concerns. "Un-Christianizing Jesus Christ: The Shape-Shifting Nature of Christianity Seen around the World," *OpIndia*, May 16, 2022, https://myvoice.opindia.com/2022/05/unchristianizing-jesus-christ-the-shape-shifting-of-christianity/.

[128] Ekka, "The Karam Festival."

encourage Christians to observe them, but with prayers to the triune God instead of the traditional deities.[129] In 1999, however, the Christian celebration of Karam at St. Xavier's College in Ranchi became the subject of controversy, as Sarna Adivasis denounced Christians for trying to "deform" the Karam festival.[130] Sarna Adivasis criticized Christians for celebrating the festival on a different day and in a different way, bringing the branches inside the church and placing them beside the cross. They argued that if Christians wanted to join in the celebrations then they should observe all of the rites and rituals in the traditional manner; but if they were not willing to do so, then they should not celebrate Karam at all.[131]

Christian Adivasi theologian John Lakra defended the Christian adaptations of Karam, noting the wide variation in practices among Sarna Adivasis themselves and the diversity of meanings attributed to the festival. Like other Adivasi festivals, Karam is not always celebrated on the same fixed date, and villages have their own local traditions for the celebration.[132] Lakra, an Oraon, contends that Karam was originally an Oraon festival,[133] but it is now celebrated by many different tribes, and *sadans* (non-Adivasis who have lived alongside the various tribes for generations) have their own forms of celebration as well.[134] For Lakra, the Christian adaptation

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[129] The Catholic Adivasi Sanskritic Sangh (cultural society), established in 1963, was the first to encourage Christians to celebrate Karam. In 1965, they also began to celebrate Sarhul. Keshari N. Sahay, "Impact of Christianity on the Uraon of the Chainpur Belt in Chotanagpur: An Analysis of Its Cultural Processes," *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 70, no. 50 (October 1968): 938–39.
[130] Vijaya Uraon made this statement in the *Ranchi Express* on September 21, 1999. Cited in Lakra, "Tribal Culture and Tribal Christians," 17.
[131] The Christian celebration of Karam has continued to be a source of conflict with the Sarna community. One of the demands put forward by the resolution adopted at the Mahapanchayat held in the wake of the Nemha Bible controversy was, "All forms of tribal festivals, tradition, cultural exhibitions in educational institutions and churches should be banned. Do not use any word related to tribal culture, tradition and religious faiths in your books." "Tribals Seek Action."
[132] Lakra has compiled a list of the many different dates on which various villages celebrated Karam that year and a lengthy description of the diversity of practices related to the cutting, carrying, installation, and worship of the karam branches in the *akhra* (dancing grounds). Lakra, "Tribal Culture and Tribal Christians," 23–27.
[133] Reetu Raj Ekka connects the Oraon celebration of Karam to the legend of their escape from the Cheros tribe at Rohtas fort in Shahabad, where they hid in a cave behind a massive karam tree. Ekka, "The Karam Festival," 2.
[134] Lakra, "Tribal Culture and Tribal Christians," 24.

of Karam is merely another local adaptation of the festival, and Sarna Adivasis should not be upset that Christians are using their religious symbols in a new way.

Lakra argues that the refusal of Sarna Adivasis to accept the Christian adaption of Sarna religious symbols "is not a correct stand towards one's culture and religion." Cultures have always borrowed from one another, he observes. Christians do not object to the use of the cross for secular purposes in hospitals and on first aid kits, and so Sarna Adivasis should not object to the use of karam branches as decoration in churches.[135] Yet even as Lakra defends the legitimacy of this sort of cultural and religious exchange, he also asserts the uniqueness of the Christian perspective on the matter:

> It is important to understand that Christianity is completely different from other religions in its relationship to culture. Other religions like Hinduism, even Sarna religion, may be tied down to one particular culture, but Christianity is not limited just to one culture. It is open to and relevant for all humanity. … In principle, if not always in practice, Christianity in inserting itself in a particular culture does not destroy it, but respects it and tries to assimilate all the good elements found in it. It rejects only those customs that are against Christian doctrines and morals. Even in matters of religious belief everything is not rejected.[136]

If Christianity's approach to the relationship of religion and culture is as unique as Lakra contends,[137] then why is he so surprised when other religions respond negatively to it? While he is correct that cultures and religions have often borrowed from one another throughout history,

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[135] Lakra, 22–23. Lakra concedes that there can be offensive and inappropriate uses of religious symbols, but he argues that that is not the case here: "if Christians, like the eldest brother in the Karam story, were to destroy or desecrate those karam branches, which are especially brought and consecrated by the Sarna people for the purpose of worship then the religious feelings of the Sarna tribals should definitely be hurt. But that is not the case with Christians using karam branches for their festival. They bring their own branches straight from nature, not as an object of worship, but as an object of natural decoration and for the purpose of creating an atmosphere of karam festival, just as they bring in the church other objects like palm branches on Palm Sunday. Therefore the Sarna tribals should not take offence easily at a Christian way of celebrating Karam, but respect their tribal religious expression." Lakra, 23.

[136] Lakra, "Tribal Culture and Tribal Christians," 18.

[137] As I noted at the outset of this chapter, there have been a wide variety of approaches to the relationship of religion and culture within Christianity over the centuries. Lakra's sweeping generalizations may have some truth to them, but they also obscure the variations within religious traditions. In this dissertation, my aim is to focus on the specific context of Adivasi Christians in Jharkhand, attending to the details of their experience and the challenges that have arisen in relation to their efforts at contextualization.

they vary in the value they assign to such exchange and adaptation as well as in the criteria according to which they view such exchanges as appropriate or inappropriate. There are certainly political forces at play, but Sarna leaders also have theological motivations for declaring the appropriation of their religious symbols by others as illegitimate.

The theology promoted by Sarna leaders today foregrounds the ancient character of their faith and emphasizes its uniqueness. Sarna leaders hope to distinguish themselves from both Christians and Hindus, carving out a religious niche for themselves that can ground their identity even in the midst of changing and uncertain social and political circumstances. They see the Sarna religion—conceived as ancient and in tune with nature—as a way to connect with their ancestors and maintain their culture. But if others can adapt Sarna beliefs and practices to fit with other worldviews (such as Christianity), that might compromise the public perception of Sarna as the locus of an Adivasi identity that is ancient and unchanging. Their theological standpoint is that the Sarna religion reflects the unique, independent heritage of India's original inhabitants. Christian contextualization projects might potentially undermine that message.

Contextualization of the Sarna Religion

Of course, whether Sarna Adivasis acknowledge it or not, they too have borrowed from other religions and sought to contextualize their faith in light of their current circumstances. We tend to think of contextualization as something that only "foreign" religions like Christianity do. But the Sarna religion has also adapted to its context, changing in response to the pressures of modernity, urbanization, and the influence of other religions. The presence of Christianity has taught Adivasis to categorize particular activities and beliefs as religious. As discussed above, the diverse practices and beliefs across tribes are now being standardized in light of the need for

pan-Adivasi unity.[138] They are writing down their hymns and scriptures, moving from an oral to a written tradition. They have developed communal worship rituals, gathering to sing and pray on a set day each week. Some of these changes are controversial,[139] such as enclosing *sarna sthals* (the place where the sacred grove is located) within concrete walls,[140] but advocates argue that such changes are necessary in light of the modern context.

Urbanization has been especially challenging for the Sarna faith due to its close association with the forest and village life.[141] Sarna *dharam guru* Bandhan Tigga explains, "Traditionally, there was just one Sarna sthal for a group of villages and everyone worshipped there. When tribal people started moving to the cities, they could not possibly take the ground they worshipped with them and so the practices died among urban tribal people." Tigga encourages urban Adivasis "to assert their Sarna identity through symbols like the Sarna flag."[142]

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[138] An article in *The Hindu* on the push for the Sarna code in the census described the efforts of Sarna leaders such as Bandhan Tigga to gather Adivasis together under the banner of Sarna. "But given the diversity of traditional practices of nature worship among tribes, Tigga said their efforts are now also being directed towards uniting them under the umbrella of Sarnaism. 'So, now our work is largely about visiting tribal villages, spreading awareness about their traditional religious practices and why they must resist attempts to be mis-categorised. No matter the tribe, these traditional practices based on nature worship are essentially Sarnaism and we are taking this message to as many people as possible,' Tigga said. He added that they are also now marking their presence by planting their red-and-white striped flags at Sarna sthals across villages." Lakshman, "Being Sarna."

[139] For example, Satyanarayan Lakda of the Jharkhand KSS (Kendriya Sarna Samiti), contends, "We do not have any practice of worshipping every week or every day. We observe festivals like Sarhul, Karma puja (worshipping a branch of the Karma tree) once a year. Our daily worship is to express gratitude to Maa Sarna before meals." Lakshman.

[140] Advocates of the government's *gherabandi* scheme, which provides funding for enclosing *sarna sthals*, say the walls are necessary to prevent encroachment and protect their sacred lands, while opponents argue that the walls cut them off from nature, forcing them to worship in ways that are more like Hindus and Christians. Deepanwita Gita Niyogi, "Protecting Jharkhand's Groves of Faith," *Mongabay*, December 18, 2019, https://india.mongabay.com/2019/12/protecting-sarna-jharkhands-groves-of-faith/.

[141] For an overview of the impacts of urbanization on Adivasis, see C. Lakra, "Urbanization and Tribal Identity," *Sevartham* 25 (2000): 31–40. John Lakra, in his defense of Christian celebrations of Karam, describes several ways in which the religious practices of urban Sarna Adivasis have changed: "The Sarnaites dwelling in cities do not observe all the customs of the tribal community living in the village. Normally no Sarnaite will eat the season's new fruits, edible leaves, tubers or make use of new leaves before the village priest has offered the customary sacrifice. But the city dwellers make use of them as soon as they are available in the market without waiting for the *puja* by the priest. They do not celebrate most of the socio-religious feasts. They have popularised only Karam and Sarhul. Even the feasts they celebrate are modified to suit their city culture. The Sarhul procession through the main road, Ranchi is a clear example of this modification." Lakra, "Tribal Culture and Tribal Christians," 19.

[142] Lakshman, "Being Sarna."

Many of the ways that city-dwelling Adivasis maintain their religious identity, however, are things that Christian Adivasis consider "cultural" and thus compatible with Christianity. For example, Ram Dayal Munda, former Vice Chancellor of Ranchi University, encouraged dancing as a means of maintaining and promoting Adivasi identity, initiating the tradition of dancing in the streets in Ranchi for the festival of Sarhul in 1963.[143] This massive dance procession for Sarhul has now become a key part of Sarna religious expression, although Christians and Hindus often join in the dancing as well. Sarna leaders have also encouraged the preservation and promotion of Adivasi languages as a means of helping urban Adivasis connect with their faith. Dr. Narayan Oraon, a physician by training, developed a script for Kurukh (the Oraon language) called Tolong Siki that is grounded in religious symbolism related to the anti-clockwise direction of many natural processes and is mirrored in Sarna rituals.[144] As he teaches the script to Oraon youth in Ranchi, he also instructs them in the worldview of their Sarna forebearers.

Both of these examples—dancing and literary efforts—reflect the need for the contextualization of traditional aspects of Adivasi life in light of modernity. Traditionally, Adivasi languages were not written; poetry and songs were shared orally and memorized. Now, however, with the growth of a literate, urban population, Adivasis consider literary publications in their native languages as the only way to compete with Hindi and English. Sarna leaders told me how they aspired to revive the institution of the *dhumkaria* (dormitory for bachelors)[145] in the form of community centers with libraries for the youth.[146]

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[143] Niharika Choudhary, "Adieu! Dr. Ram Dayal Munda," Janmadhyam, October 12, 2011, http://janmadhyam-jharkhand.blogspot.com/2011/10/adieu-dr-ram-dayal-munda.html.
[144] Only in death rituals is the direction reversed. "Lipi cihno kā cunāva [Choice of Script Symbols]," Tolong Siki, September 21, 2021, https://tolongsiki.com/node/7.
[145] Roy, *The Orāons of Chotā Nāgpur*, 210–60.
[146] This has not happened yet on a wide scale, but a state-sponsored *dhumkuria* opened in Ranchi in 2007 with an emphasis on music. Raj Kumar, "Tribal Dorm Opens Doors for Culture Trip: Lessons of Music and Tradition to Go Hand in Hand at State-Sponsored Dhumkuria," *The Telegraph India*, June 24, 2007,

Ram Dayal Munda's promotion of dancing also reflects the needs of urban Adivasis, disconnected from village life. Munda intentionally adapted traditional village styles of dancing to create staged performances that were carefully choregraphed to communicate Adivasi values such as "collectivity, gender equality, openness (in the sense of being public), and inclusiveness."[147] In his role as head of the Department of Tribal and Regional Languages at Ranchi University, he organized dance troupes that performed rehearsed repertories instead of seasonal dances. He "corrected" the spontaneous bitonality that characterizes village dancing and regularized step patterns. With this new style of dancing, the social interaction so key to dancing in the village *akhra* was also eliminated. Yet through this "recontextualized" style of dancing,[148] urban youth were able to connect with and take pride in their unique Adivasi identity.

As a theologian, I am particularly interested in the ways that Sarna Adivasis make sense of their faith and present it to others. These days, leaders emphasize the religion's scientific basis and rational grounding in the patterns of nature.[149] At Sarhul celebrations, Sarna leaders explained to me that the predictions of the *pahan* (priest) regarding the monsoon are not magical but based on scientific principles: the *pahan* examines the water level of a pot that has been left out overnight to discern the amount of humidity in the air, and the amount of humidity in the air reflects the intensity of the upcoming monsoon. On another occasion, a Sarna leader explained that Adivasis are justified in eating non-vegetarian food (i.e., meat) because humans cannot get all the amino acids they need from a plant-based diet. Sarna leaders also present their faith as the

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https://www.telegraphindia.com/jharkhand/tribal-dorm-opens-doors-for-culture-trip-lessons-of-music-and-tradition-to-go-hand-in-hand-at-state-sponsored-dhumkuria/cid/703478.

[147] Carol Babiracki, "'Saved by Dance': The Movement for Autonomy in Jharkhand," *Asian Music* 32, no. 1 (Fall 2000–Winter 2001): 42.

[148] These staged performances "were recontextualizations of village songs and dances—costumed, somewhat choreographed, regularized, predetermined, and rehearsed." Babiracki, 44.

[149] See, for example, Abhay Sagar Minz, "Sarahula ka vigyāna: prakṛti kā vivāha [The Science of Sarhul: Nature's Marriage]," *Adiwasi*, April 8, 2023, https://adiwasi.com/the-science-behind-sarhul-article-by-dr-abhay-sagar-minz/.

logical antidote to the current environmental crisis. A speaker at one of the Sarhul celebrations I attended asserted, "We must worship the earth in order to save it."[150]

Upon learning that I was a theologian, an influential community leader asked for my assistance in writing a systematic theology of the Sarna faith. He wanted to explain the rational basis of Sarna and present it in a way that would be engaging and appealing for educated youth. After all, as Adivasis increasingly turn to the Sarna religion as the source of their unique identity, they have more and more questions for their religious leaders. In many cases, they were not only unsure of what they believed (or rather, what they were *supposed* to believe as Sarna Adivasis), but also of what they are supposed to do. When I asked questions, people would often simply shrug their shoulders and confess that they didn't know, although higher-educated urban Sarna Adivasis often said they would have to ask their *pahan*. For instance, following a *murgi balidan* (chicken sacrifice) at Sarhul, my hosts were confused about whether or not it was acceptable for women to eat the heads of the sacrificed chickens. I would often be given different answers to my questions even by members of the same household. In some cases, the confusion stems from regional differences and ongoing debate as the Sarna faith is standardized. For example, although Sarna leaders highlight the equality of the sexes in Adivasi culture,[151] the role of women in religious rituals is a matter of controversy. In some villages, women are not allowed to participate in any religious activities; in others, they are prohibited from offering the sacrifices.[152]

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[150] Following the speeches, however, everyone proceeded to eat on Styrofoam plates.
[151] "We were the first to come up with 'live-in relationship,'" a Sarna intellectual told me with pride. "There were no taboos. But there were rules." Interview March 5, 2018.
[152] Radhika Borde discusses the women-centered revival of Sarna Prathna Sabhas (Sarna Prayer Groups, which were initiated by Kartik Oraon but disintegrated after his death in 1981) in some villages, but I did not encounter any such groups in the course of my fieldwork. Radhika Borde, "New Roles of Indigenous Women in an Indian Eco-Religious Movement," *Religions* 10, no. 10 (2019): 554.

The practices of many Sarna Adivasis continue to reflect elements of Hinduism. In one of the villages I visited, the residents had stopped drinking *handia* (rice beer) and eating meat due to the influence of the Gayatri Parivar movement. They now said prayers every morning and evening before two small mounds, one with a wooden pole with a Sarna flag in it and the other with a small metal snake behind it. Even among educated, urban Adivasis, who readily articulate the importance of Sarna for the assertion of Adivasi identity, Hinduism often continues to influence their spiritual practices. Many are unaware of the details of the Sarna religion and so simply fall back upon the more widely known stories and rituals of Hinduism. Others continue to integrate Sarna and Hindu religious practices. When I visited the home of an Adivasi leader who had written many books on Oraon culture and the Sarna religion, I was surprised to find that his study was adorned with a wide variety of religious paraphernalia including a portrait of Swami Vivekananda and small murtis of Ganesh and Durga. His own religious practices were still deeply entangled with devotion to Hindu deities.

Meghnath, a documentary filmmaker based in Ranchi, criticizes Adivasis who continue to embrace elements of Hinduism. “Hinduism is exploitative,” he told me. “Hinduism will keep Adivasis oppressed.” Meghnath, a non-Adivasi who grew up in Mumbai but married an Adivasi woman from Jharkhand, self-identifies as a humanist. “As a humanist, I have to oppose Hinduism,” he stated with conviction. To help Sarna Adivasis better understand their faith and distinguish themselves from Hindus (and Christians), Meghnath wants to make a movie about Adi Dharam, which he translates as “indigenous belief system.” He gave me a handout pitching the concept of the film, which he hoped would unite Adivasis across the country under the

heading of Adi Dharam. Meghnath has been a vocal advocate for the terminology of Adi Dharam instead of Sarna, hoping to build a national religious movement instead of a regional one.[153]

The handout described the salient features of Adivasi religion as: "(1) It has no notion of cardinal sin. (2) It has no concept of purity and pollution. (3) It has no idea of hell and heaven. (4) It has no mandatory structure of the place of propitiation. (5) Rejects fatalism and therefore no incarnation and rebirth. (6) Each spirit in the pantheon receives importance at a particular point of time but all of them command equal reverence." I was immediately struck by the fact that Meghnath, while he would not have thought to use this terminology himself, was doing constructive theology and framing it contextually. The majority of the tenets he had identified were framed negatively as things that Adi Dharam did *not* believe, implicitly drawing contrasts with Hinduism and Christianity. Others have framed the Sarna religion differently, focusing on its worship of nature or highlighting particular myths or rituals, but my point is that the way various Sarna Adivasis frame the presentation of their faith is itself reflective of the effort to contextualize it in ways that will be relevant and liberating in the present moment.

Contextualization, thus, is not merely a Christian phenomenon. Sarna Adivasis are adapting their faith to their changing context as well. The reason they are so critical of Christian projects of contextualization is their perception of the power dynamics at play: Christianity is a global religion with vast resources. Sarna Adivasis, despite outnumbering Christian Adivasis by

[153] Intellectual elites have encouraged Adivasis to call their religion Adi Dharam (original religion) to emphasize its ancient quality and promote solidarity across religious differences among tribes, but Sarna is the name that has stuck in Jharkhand, perhaps due to the support of Hindu political leaders for whom keeping it a regional rather than a national movement is advantageous. In 2020 the Jharkhand government supported a resolution to add Sarna as a category to the census. This has massive support locally, but, as intellectual elites have pointed out, Adivasis in other parts of the country have other names for their religion. A single category, such as Adi Dharam, would be more beneficial in helping Adivasis gain national political and religious recognition. Mahtab Alam, "Why the Sarna Code Will Have a Long-Term Impact on Jharkhand's Tribes," *The Wire*, November 27, 2020, https://thewire.in/government/jharkhand-sarna-code-tribal-commumities-separate-religious-category-long-term-impact.

a margin of three to one in Jharkhand, see themselves as the underdogs. They are swimming against the global tide of modernity (which they often equate with the West and thus Christianity) as they strive to maintain their ancient, earth-based practices in the radically different context of the modern world.

The *Gamla* Problem

I want to conclude this chapter by considering an analogy that Christian Adivasi theologian Jhakmak Ekka uses to argue for contextualization in the Adivasi context: the *gamla ki samasya*, or flowerpot problem.[154] The analogy goes like this:

> The missionaries brought the Christian faith to the Adivasis, and it was like a beautiful flowering plant. They brought the plant in a flowerpot, a lovely ceramic flowerpot manufactured in Germany. It was a fine flowerpot, but in order for the plant to grow bigger, it needed to be transplanted into the ground, where it would have room to grow and let its roots suck up nutrients from the local soil. The Adivasis who had received the flowerpot, however, too often considered the pot to be more important than the plant. They didn't want to let the plant leave the pot, for fear of losing the gift from the missionaries. The plant grew weak, but still the people were afraid.

That is where Adivasi Christians are today, Ekka argues. Their faith is struggling in the European soil with which the missionaries first brought it.[155] But in order for it to grow and

[154] Jhakmak Ekka invoked this analogy in a presentation at a seminar on Adivasi Theology at Navin Doman Theological College on February 24, 2018. He may have come up with the analogy himself, but it is likely that he was inspired by Daniel T. Niles, a Ceylonese theologian, who described Christianity as a plant that grows out of the seed of the Gospel and the soil of culture: "But a missionary especially from one land to another must also take account of the freedom of the Church. He must beware lest he confuse the Christian culture of his country with the Gospel. The Gospel is seed which, when it is sown in the soil of a country's life, brings forth a plant. The plant is Christianity. It bears the marks both of the seed and of the soil. There is only one Gospel, but there are many Christianities, many cultural forms in which men express their Christian faith. It is inevitable that the missionary should bring a pot plant, the Christianity of his own culture; it is essential that he allow the pot to be broken and the plant to be rooted in the soil of the country to which he goes." D. T. Niles, *That They May Have Life* (New York: The Student Volunteer Movement for Christian Missions, 1951), 80–81.

[155] As Ekka points out, the church in Chotanagpur was established more than 160 years ago, yet so much about its worship and liturgy—at least in the Lutheran churches—continues to follow the pattern received by the missionaries. Pastors wear long black robes like Martin Luther, parishioners greet each other with handshakes, and the liturgy is sung to a German tune with organ or keyboard for accompaniment. Too many Christians fail to see the relevance of their Adivasi identity to their faith, solely invoking their Adivasi identity when seeking reservations.

flourish, they must plant it in the local, indigenous soil. That is what Adivasi theologians like himself are trying to do. As Ekka puts it, contextualization will allow the plant that is Christian faith to be nourished by "the quality, aroma, and character of the local soil" so that it is relevant to Adivasis as they engage with "the questions, struggles, and aspirations" of their own context.

The analogy, as Ekka presents it, offers a compelling case for contextualization. Yet it also has some troublesome undercurrents that advocates of contextual theology tend to overlook, undercurrents that reflect the concerns of Sarna Adivasis as detailed above. First, there is the assumption that plants can live in different kinds of soil. But as any gardener will tell you, that is not the case. Cabbage does well in chalky soil, but not in sandy soil. Asparagus and garlic can handle moderately alkaline soil, while blueberries and cranberries need acidic soil. Transplanting something from my garden in New York to a field in Jharkhand might not work. The roots are often damaged in the process, and they can easily dry out. Even if it does work and the plant is able to be sufficiently nourished by the local soil and take root, it may no longer thrive as it did in its previous location. If it depended on cross-pollination with other local plants, it may fail to bear fruit. If it was accustomed to an arid climate, the monsoon may overwhelm it.

Sometimes, however, the plant will thrive in its new location, growing rapidly now that it is no longer bound by the constraints of the pot. The gardener may be delighted, but local ecologists may consider it an invasive species if it crowds out native species or depletes the soil of essential nutrients. This is the concern of Sarna Adivasis, and it raises a second troublesome aspect of the analogy: that of the necessity of destruction or displacement of what was previously present in the garden. When I started a garden for the first time last year, I had to dig up a bunch of native grasses in order to plant the seeds and ensure that there would be room for them to

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"This is happening because our theology is not correct," Ekka argues. "It is a formless theology." The solution he proposes is Adivasi theology: planting Christian faith in Adivasi soil.

grow. My point is that there is no blank slate; something is always already present, and that something must be dug up in order to make room for the new plant. Similarly, Christianity uproots and destroys aspects of the native culture. It has to, because it has to fit somewhere.

Christianity need not be a malicious agent in this process; it can embrace much about the native culture and context, but it will still change the way people interpret the world and their place in it. It might be that they now substitute one god for another. It might be that they view the problem with the human condition as sin instead of ignorance. It might be that they attribute suffering to cosmic justice instead of curses from witches among themselves. It might be that they celebrate the Eucharist now instead of offering animal sacrifices. Whatever it is, however, some beliefs and practices have to go in order to make room for Christianity. And the presence of Christianity not only affects the tiny piece of land where it was originally transplanted: it grows and spreads and changes the entire ecosystem. Will it become a monoculture, like America's corn fields, depleting the soil of essential nutrients? Will it require fertilizer or pesticides, and if so, how will those affect other plants and animals in the ecosystem?

This is what Sarna Adivasis worry about. If Christianity were one lone plant in a pot on a shelf in a home, it would not be a problem. But if it is planted in the native soil, will it take root and spread? Will it push out their faith? Will it change the entire landscape? Sarna Adivasis want to keep their religion the same. They want to be in control of it. They want the meaning of their religious symbols to remain stable. Consider the festival of Karam: to what extent is it still Karam if the worship is now directed to the triune God of Christian faith instead of Karam Raja (King Karam)? The concern here is similar to that of Christians who worry about secular society taking Christ out of Christmas. The meaning of the festival completely changes when you

remove the religious infrastructure that undergirds it. Like Christians who want Christmas to remain a Christian holiday, Sarna Adivasis want Karam to remain a Sarna festival.

Both, however, are unrealistic dreams. The process of appropriation and adaption among religions and cultures will continue, at least in the absence of violence or the serious threat thereof,[156] because human beings must continually respond to the changes in the world around them. Communities, however, often strengthen their sense of identity in and through these moments of controversy. Like the Christians whose religious affiliation is reinforced by the frustration they feel when receiving a card that says "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas," Sarna Adivasis' loyalty and commitment to their faith has increased through these perceived attacks on the integrity of their faith. The controversies discussed in this chapter—the celebration of Karam, the Nemha Bible, and the Mary Statue—have all contributed to the consolidation and strengthening of Adivasi identity under the banner of Sarna. They have also, however, helped Christian Adivasis refine their sense of identity, both strengthening their resolve to embrace their Adivasi heritage and deepening their commitment to Christianity.

For Christian Adivasi theologians, the challenges facing the Adivasi community make it clear that contextualization is a theological imperative of the Gospel. In order to be truly liberating, God's Word must touch all aspects of the believers' lives and take on Adivasi flesh in the here and now. Conflicts with Sarna Adivasis, however, have opened their eyes to the fact that there are elements within their context that resist appropriation and reconstruction within a Christian framework. Accounts of contextual theology in general often imply that contextualization is a way to "embrace the other," creating peace and interfaith harmony, but in

[156] Sometimes protests have an effect. In the wake of the Mary statue controversy, Alex Ekka, Director of St. Xavier's Institute of Social Service (XISS) and Secretary of the Jharkhand Sadbhavna Manch, said that "instructions had been passed across parishes in the state to keep Karma (harvest festival) "low-key", respecting the demand of non-Christian tribals to distance the church from tribal festivities." Biswas, "Church Clears Air on Lookalike Mary."

reality “the other” is not always happy to have their beliefs and practices adapted to fit within a Christian framework.

My intent is not to discourage efforts at contextualization but rather to caution theologians to anticipate criticism rather than accolades. Whether in Jharkhand or other contexts, theological engagement with context is likely to invite controversy, as it reflects deeply held beliefs about the world and our place in it. Contextual theologians do best when they attend to the specific dynamics of their local contexts, acting with care and compassion. At the end of the day, however, there will still be competing interpretations of context, and so theologians must be prepared to accept that their efforts at contextualization may be poorly received, a scandalous stumbling block to those who do not share their faith.

Chapter 4: Constructing Context: The Role of Outsiders in Shaping Adivasi Theology

Every year since 1932, the city of Minneapolis has hosted a large multicultural festival called the Festival of Nations. As a child, I grew up attending this festival with my mother. We watched Irish dancers, ate Hmong food, and bought Indian bangles at the bazaar. I remember the festival evoking in me a sense of wonder at the diversity in the world: so many different languages, foods, and styles of clothing. The specificity of our unique cultures and traditions was what brought vibrancy and joy to life.

During my fieldwork in Ranchi, I learned that I was not the only one impressed by this particular display of cultural diversity. Adivasi intellectual and political leader Ram Dayal Munda, who taught at the University of Minnesota in the late 1970s and early 1980s before returning to India and founding the Department of Regional Languages at Ranchi University, was so inspired by the vibrant display of cultural pluralism at the Festival of Nations that he sought to recreate it in Jharkhand. Munda told ethnomusicologist Carol Babiracki in an interview in 1993, "The cultural revival in the entire Jharkhand has its Minnesota roots. The Festival of Nations is deep in my psyche. [I wanted] to repeat those things in our own way here."[1] Munda, as noted in the previous chapter, was responsible for initiating the massive street processions at the festival of Sarhul and cultivating a stylized form of dance performance that sought to demonstrate the values of Adivasi culture to a wider audience. He drew upon his experiences abroad to reconstruct and assert the value and integrity of his own Adivasi context.

This surprising connection between my city of birth and my foreign site of field research illustrates one of the many ways that the Adivasi context is not as isolated as is sometimes supposed. Adivasi theology—like Adivasi political mobilization in general—has emphasized the

[1] Babiracki, "Saved by Dance," 42.

ancient and original (*adi*) character of Adivasi existence, drawing upon tropes espoused by indigenous movements globally. It rejects the presence and impact of exploitative outsiders (*dikus*) on Adivasi communities, calling instead for cultural retrieval and independence as the path to liberation. The emphasis on lifting up the voices of Adivasis themselves is commendable and reflects wider trends in contextual and liberation theology. It is often accompanied, however, by a romanticization of Adivasi culture and society, with advocates arguing that the ancient wisdom of Adivasi society offers an alternative to the ecological destruction of global capitalism and modernity: if only Adivasis could rid themselves of the corrupting influence of outsiders, they would be able to establish a peaceful, egalitarian society, living in harmony with nature.

In reality, however, many aspects of modern Adivasi self-understanding have been influenced by outsiders and other contexts. The very terms by which Adivasis refer to themselves—indigenous and tribal—are concepts introduced by others, and their meanings have shifted over time. Even the term Adivasi—a neologism that they created themselves for their own empowerment—is derivative from Sanskrit, the language of outsiders.[2] Without denying the real oppression that Adivasis have faced and the shared identity that has emerged as a result,[3] it

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[2] The Sanskrit language calls to mind the idea of "ancient India," bolstering Adivasis' claims about the ancient quality of their culture. Yet Adivasis simultaneously seek to deconstruct the idea of Sanskrit as ancient, instead presenting their own communities as the original inhabitants of the land who were present prior to the advent of Sanskrit.

[3] This is how scholars who have accepted the terminology of Adivasi typically avoid the charge of essentialism: they posit that Adivasi identity is constituted not by certain essential traits Adivasis share in common but rather by the shared historical experience of injustice and oppression that they have faced. David Hardiman, for example, writes, "The term 'adivasi is preferable [to the term 'tribal'] in the Indian context because it relates to a particular historical development: that of the subjugation during the nineteenth century of a wide variety of communities which before the colonial period had remained free, or at least relatively free, from the controls of outside states. This process was accompanied by an influx of traders, moneylenders and landlords who established themselves under the protection of the colonial authorities and took advantage of the new judicial system to deprive the adivasis of large tracts of their land. In this way outsiders who had dealt previously with the adivasis on terms of relative equality became their exploiters and masters. This experience generated a spirit of resistance which incorporated a consciousness of 'the adivasi' against 'the outsider.' Gradually an awareness grew that other communities in different parts of India were sharing the same fate, which gave rise to a wider sense of adivasi-hood. Adivasis can therefore be defined as groups which have shared a common fate in the past century and from this have evolved a collective identity of being adivasis." Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi*, 15–16. This explanation of Adivasi identity fits with my emphasis on the need for interpretation of contexts: Adivasi identity is not self-evident but results from a particular

is important to recognize that Adivasis have never been completely isolated and that outsiders have long shaped their existence and the possibilities for their future, in ways that they themselves have not always considered negative.

These arguments are not new for historians and anthropologists; scholars in these fields have done excellent work demonstrating the ways in which contemporary Adivasi identity has emerged over time in relation to other communities and reflects historical power dynamics. Adivasi theologians, however, have been slow to incorporate the insights of these disciplines into their own thinking, and their work typically draws upon ideas of their identity and the Adivasi context in general as something ancient, unchanging, and isolated.[4] This may be partly due to a lack of exposure to broader scholarship (theological education is typically offered through religiously affiliated institutions rather than the academic university setting), but it also parallels trends in contextual theology elsewhere, where outsiders figure primarily as oppressors and the path to liberation is presented as the affirmation of traditional culture.

Adivasi theologians (and activists) may worry that engaging with the complex trajectories of influence that have shaped their context over time could jeopardize the robust sense of identity they see as necessary for their project of cultural revitalization and political mobilization. Yet if one attends to the specificity of the Adivasi context—which, I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, is essential for the articulation of relevant and liberating theology for Adivasis—one cannot ignore the significant roles that outsiders have played and indeed continue to play in both Adivasi society at large and contextual theological reflection in

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hermeneutical approach to their history of subjugation. Nevertheless, there are traits that many Adivasi communities share in common, and I suspect one could mount a compelling case for a "family resemblance" theory of Adivasi identity along the lines of Wendy Doniger's "Zen diagram" or "cluster approach" to defining Hinduism. See Doniger, *On Hinduism*, 4.

[4] Joseph Marianus Kujur is an important exception here, who has engaged with contemporary scholarship and historiography in his account of the evolution of Oraon identity over time. See Kujur, *Religion, Conversion and Identity*.

particular. From articulating an "indigenous" worldview to promoting LGBTQ rights, the influence of outsiders is a recurrent theme. When Adivasis overlook the historical and contemporary roles that outsiders play in their society, they do themselves a disservice. Again, I acknowledge that attending to this aspect of context—the role of outsiders in shaping both the context itself and the way that Adivasis interpret it—may initially seem politically inconvenient; however, in the long run, transparency about trajectories of influence could facilitate Adivasi self-determinism and empower efforts to engage constructively with others through mutually beneficial relationships.

Of course, the influence of outsiders on a society is not, in itself, necessarily a bad thing. From a theological perspective, one could argue that the Holy Spirit operates in precisely this manner: breaking in from the outside to disrupt and transform people's lives and communities. Given the history of exploitation and oppression that Adivasis have endured at the hands of outsiders, however, they are right to be wary and to emphasize perspectives from within their own communities. Yet, rather than ignoring the roles that outsiders have played in the construction of their context, Adivasis could choose instead to engage in a more precise evaluation of the impact that various outside forces have had on their sense of identity, context, and faith. This would not only allow Adivasis to be more honest about the past but also help them acknowledge differences within their communities and embrace future possibilities for collaboration and growth that could come from interaction with those who they consider to be outsiders.

In this chapter, therefore, I examine some of the ways that outsiders have shaped contemporary Adivasi theology. I hope, thereby, to expand our sense of what might be considered when examining a context. My contention is that in order to attend to the specificity

of the Adivasi context one must acknowledge not only the aspects of identity and theological vision that are ancient and "original" (*adi*) to the Adivasi context but also those that are the result of more recent interactions with outsiders. Contexts, I argue, are not only constituted by what lies within them but also by the boundaries that we construct to delineate them. These boundaries are typically more permeable than we like to acknowledge, making an analysis of the diverse roles that outsiders play in shaping those boundaries even more imperative. In this chapter, however, I do not attempt to offer a comprehensive or systematic account of the roles that outsiders have played in the lives of Adivasis but rather to share a compilation of experiences and insights gathered during my fieldwork. It is my hope that Adivasi theologians will make use of my preliminary observations in their own future work.

An examination of the various roles that outsiders have played in shaping the Adivasi context is especially important given the rapid changes in contemporary Adivasi society. Depending upon the criteria according to which one defines Adivasi identity—which, in turn, shape how one understands the boundaries of the Adivasi context—there is a growing potential for Adivasis themselves to become outsiders to their own context. Whether due to marriage, education, class, or geographical location, many Adivasis are growing increasingly distant from their communities of origin. Engaging with the reflections of Adivasi theologians for whom this is the case, I suggest that their emphasis on cultural retrieval and the preservation of past traditions may be due to their own sense of alienation from their culture and history. I propose that, while Adivasi theologians typically view their own distance and difference—what I call "the outsider within"—as a hindrance to their work, it can be an asset as well.

My overall argument in this chapter is that our interpretations of context may be enriched by honesty about the role of outsiders and acknowledging trajectories of influence. There are no

isolated contexts, and the boundaries between contexts are rarely as rigid as we imagine them to be. Adivasi theology, with its emphasis on the importance of community, rightly observes that human beings make sense of themselves in relationship to others. Thus, I contend, the path to liberation is not impeded but rather facilitated by collaboration and exchange between *adi* and outside perspectives.

Dikus in Adivasi Theology

In his book *Adivasi Theology*, Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta calls for Adivasis to engage in "self-theologizing."[5] The inherited theology from the West, he contends, is not only irrelevant in the Adivasi context but also destructive. Instead of looking to "Western theology" (by which he means "traditional/classical/dogmatic theology"),[6] Kerketta calls upon Adivasis to turn to "the Adivasi elements as the sources of doing theology."[7] For Kerketta, "the Adivasi elements" include their history, culture, relationship with the land and forest, language, context or situation, experience, religiosity, song, and story.[8] These sources must be "the primary locus theologicus"[9] in order for Adivasi theology to be "lively, meaningful and relevant."[10]

Kerketta's emphasis on the context and experiences of Adivasis—rather than that of those who have lived in different times and places—is characteristic of contextual theology in general, which seeks to affirm and empower marginalized communities by centering their experiences. Critics of contextualization often worry that this emphasis on experience may

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[5] "The churches of Jharkhand (especially the Protestant churches) have been taught how to be self-supporting, self-propagating and self-governing, but they have learned very little to be 'self-theologizing'." Kerketta, *Adivasi Theology*, 6.
[6] Kerketta, 34.
[7] Kerketta, 87.
[8] He also includes scripture as a source, but only insofar as it helps Adivasis interpret their world in ways that "promote life." Kerketta, 87–94.
[9] Kerketta, 96.
[10] Kerketta, 99.

neglect the importance of revelation in theology. While such critiques often have valid concerns, my focus here is on another potential problem with the emphasis on Adivasi experience: the failure to acknowledge the presence and contributions of those deemed outsiders. By privileging the experiences of those "inside" of the context and framing them in opposition to the experiences of those "outside" of the context, theologians overlook important aspects of their historical and contemporary situations and make it easier for those in power (inside or outside of the context) to manipulate them. This can result in the promotion of an exclusionary politics of belonging and foreclose opportunities for growth and collaboration across boundaries. My concern is that contextual theologies may end up doing the very thing for which they criticize others: failing to recognize the ways in which their own projects create marginalized others on the basis of their community's stereotypes and prejudices.

This phenomenon occurs in a wide variety of contextual theologies, but it is especially pronounced in indigenous theologies.[11] After all, the insider/outsider dichotomy has been central to the way that anthropologists and colonial governments have characterized tribal society (focusing on kinship affiliations) as well as to the contemporary self-assertion of these communities as indigenous (emphasizing their historical presence on the land prior to the arrival of others). Yet this construction of insiders and outsiders, especially in the South Asian context, often imagines more rigid boundaries between and more homogeneity within communities than was historically the case.[12]

[11] Early efforts at contextualization were labelled indigenization, highlighting how central the insider/outsider dichotomy has been for theologians.
[12] According to Willem van Schendel, "There is abundant historical evidence to demonstrate that 'tribes' and non-'tribes' in South Asia have a sustained experience of cultural and social inter-connectedness and exchange, and that neither racial nor territorial, technological, linguistic, or religious measures can be used as effective markers of 'tribal' identities." Van Schendel, "The Dangers of Belonging," 24.

The narrative typically espoused by Adivasi theologians presents outsiders as the source of all contemporary challenges and imagines a return to their ancient (*adi*) culture as the antidote. Christopher Lakra, for example, describes Jharkhand as the "promised land."[13] Lakra writes, "It could have been compared to the Garden of Eden before the fall. Everything worked harmoniously; the land was flowing with milk and honey."[14]

In this idyllic view of the past, Adivasis were the ideal stewards of the land, living in harmony with all of creation. The tribes flourished as they embodied virtues such as "[e]quality in society, common ownership of property, prevalence of cooperation, communitarian life, simplicity, honesty, hardwork, love for music and dances."[15] On Lakra's account, the Adivasis' "fall" from this paradise came only with the arrival of outsiders:[16] the Nagbansi dynasty, the Mughals, outside moneylenders and landowners, the British East India Company, foreign missionaries, and now multinational corporations. These outsiders displaced Adivasis from their land and now threaten them with "annihilation."[17] With this sort of narrative as their operative historical framework, it makes sense that many Adivasi theologians encourage a return to the ancient (*adi*) ways of their people, throwing off the corrupting influence of modernity, the West, and *dikus* in general. Emphasizing the uniqueness of their *adi* culture also aids in contemporary efforts to defend their legal status as Scheduled Tribes.

The problem is that this idealized history does not reflect reality. Yes, there is much that Adivasis should be proud of in their culture, and the task of cultural retrieval is a valuable project. But their context has also been shaped by outsiders, as has the emerging field of Adivasi

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[13] Christopher Lakra, "Theologizing in the Jharkhand Context," *Sevartham* 22 (1997): 6.
[14] Lakra, 6.
[15] Lakra, 5.
[16] Christopher Lakra explicitly appeals to this metaphor, writing, "However, this state of 'Paradise Gained' gradually turned into 'Paradise Lost.'" Lakra, 7.
[17] Lakra, 7.

theology. In the following sections I draw upon anecdotes from my fieldwork to illustrate the wide variety of roles that outsiders have played in the Adivasi context. While most often cast as their foil, outsiders also feature in Adivasi theology as partners with a shared identity, as esteemed role models who shape the boundaries of acceptable practice and discourse, and as supposedly objective sources of knowledge. Attending to each of these various roles can help Adivasis better understand their context and the way they situate themselves in relation to others.

Outsiders as a Foil

The most obvious function outsiders play in the construction of Adivasi theology is as a foil: outsiders are the people who are not like us. The foil is often cast in moral terms: not only are they different from us, they are also *bad* because they have oppressed and exploited our community. Adivasi theologians invoke the concept of an original, pristine Adivasi community, unsullied by the capitalist aspirations of outsiders. In this narrative, it is only with the arrival of *dikus*—exploitative outsiders—that their communities began to experience hardship.

As a foil, *dikus* play an important role in defining the boundaries of Adivasi community and giving content to Adivasi identity. So, for example, *dikus* are ruthless capitalists, whereas Adivasis are communitarian and egalitarian. *Dikus* extract natural resources from the earth, polluting the environment, whereas Adivasis live in harmony with creation, treating all living things with respect and reverence. *Dikus* are (mostly) Hindus, whereas Adivasis are Sarna or Christian. Pointing to *dikus* as a foil has helped to create a unified Adivasi identity, in spite of internal differences of tribe, language, class, gender, religion, and so on.

While *dikus* have indeed created many challenges for Adivasi society, however, it is important to note that Adivasis do not consider all outsiders to be *dikus*, and there are some

outsiders who have played ambiguous or even positive roles in shaping Adivasi life. Over the years, Adivasis have interacted with many different varieties of outsiders, including *sadans* (non-Adivasis who live in the region), Dalits, Brahmins, the British colonial government, foreign missionaries, wealthy corporations, and so on. These different groups of outsiders have intersected and overlapped in complex ways in Adivasi experience and political engagement. Sometimes, for political reasons, Adivasis have found it expedient to lump all outsiders together as *dikus*. For example, in the recent Pathalgadi movement, villages erected stone tablets declaring the supreme authority of the traditional village councils and prohibiting the entry of all outsiders.[18]

At other times, however, distinctions have proved beneficial, as Adivasis have chosen to align themselves with certain outsiders while denouncing others. Christian Adivasis, for example, supported and identified with the foreign missionaries who required them to abandon many of their traditional cultural practices in order to become Christian but who also helped them resist their oppressive landlords. Sarna Adivasis, in turn, have sometimes aligned themselves with Hindu organizations like the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) in order to resist Christian efforts at evangelization.[19] In the international sphere, Adivasi activists have formed partnerships with indigenous communities from other contexts, advocating for their rights at the

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[18] This protest movement emerged in response to attempts by the Jharkhand government in 2016 to amend the Chotanagpur Tenancy (CNT) Act of 1908 and the Santal Pargana Tenancy (SPT) Act of 1949 to allow for commercial use of Adivasi land. Anjana Singh, "Many Faces of the Pathalgadi Movement in Jharkhand," *Economic and Political Weekly* 54, no. 2 (March 16, 2019): 28–33; Anjana Singh, "Pathalgadi Movement and Conflicting Ideologies of Tribal Village Governance," in *Routledge Readings on Law, Development and Legal Pluralism: Ecology, Families, Governance*, ed. Kalpana Kannabiran (London: Routledge, 2022); Eva Davidsdottir, "Our Rights Are Carved in Stone: The Case of the Pathalgadi Movement in Simdega, Jharkhand," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 25, no. 7 (2021): 1111–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2021.1878351.

[19] An article in *The Hindu* describes the work of the Vanvasi Kalyan Kendra (VKK), part of the Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, in the Sugakatta village of Gumla. After a decade of receiving funding from the VKK for educational and development efforts in the village, local Adivasis now describe themselves as Hindu. Birju Nagesia, a villager, says, "What is Sarna and what is Hinduism? We believe we are descendants of Lord Shiva and we worship nature, as do Hindus. So, I don't see Hinduism as a different religion. Traditions and practices in Hinduism vary from region to region and I see our rituals as a part of the Hindu religion." Lakshman, "Being Sarna."

United Nations' Working Group on Indigenous Populations by asserting a shared indigenous identity that transcends contexts.[20] In their early contextualization efforts, Adivasi theologians argued that Dalits might be considered indigenous people alongside Adivasis, hoping that a sense of shared history might strengthen solidarity between the two marginalized communities.[21]

Sometimes the opposition to particular outsiders creates strange allies. When the Adivasi Mahasabha morphed into the Jharkhand Party, it began to admit not only *sadans* (non-Adivasis) but also members of the non-Bihari money-lending community. These people would have traditionally been considered *dikus*, but because they were also opposed to Bihari *dikus* (and had money to support the cause), they became allies of the Adivasis.[22] The point I wish to make with these examples is that the boundaries of a context and the criteria for belonging to it can fluctuate as the needs of a community and its self-understanding change.

As noted above, however, this does not mean that "inside" and "outside" are purely products of the imagination. Nor are they merely a western construct, the result of a binary approach to the world, as theologians such as Kerketta have alleged.[23] Tribes in Jharkhand—and elsewhere—typically have strict rules and regulations (around marriage, food, and so forth) to

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[20] Karlsson, "Anthropology and the 'Indigenous Slot.'"
[21] Nirmal Minz, for example, argued: "The Dalits are indigenous people. After the Aryan invasion some indigenous people were enslaved by the invaders. The Dalits are that section of *Adi* people who are supposed to have been enslaved by the dominant group. The enslaved ones lost their religion, social and economic values and above all they lost their language also. … The Tribals are the independent *Adi* people of India. … The Adivasis did not accept defeat and enslavement by the Aryans. They retreated to the jungles of India and settled there as an independent people till the British Government invaded them and brought them under the general administration of British India." Minz, "Dalit-Tribal: A Search for Common Ideology," 139–40.
[22] According to K. S. Singh, the decline of the Jharkhand Party in the late 1950s was partially due to the alliances with *dikus*. "The search for money led to strange alignments with elements such as the *dikus*, the traditional enemies of the Adivasis. The non-Bihari *dikus*, as mentioned earlier, had a vested interest in the movement to keep the Bihar *dikus* away. Party support was also given to many 'outsiders'. All this created tensions within the party." Singh, "Tribal Autonomy Movements in Chotanagpur," 7.
[23] Kerketta critiques binaries as part of Western thinking, arguing that Adivasi society instead offers an integrated worldview. Yet he then proceeds to falls back on the classic binary of the West versus the rest. This trope allows him to present Adivasi theology as inherently interdependent, egalitarian, eco-friendly, contextual, and historically and materially oriented without presenting evidence to back up these claims simply because he presents western theology as dualistic, hierarchical, anthropocentric, ahistorical, and other-worldly. Kerketta, *Adivasi Theology*.

maintain boundaries and mark kinship affiliations. Those who violated these boundaries, marrying or dining with those outside of their tribe, had to undergo expensive and elaborate rituals to be restored to their status as members of the tribe.[24] Adivasi society was not "inclusive" in our modern sense of the word. Still, there have always been people who transgress the boundaries of the tribe, and ideas have crossed tribal boundaries with ease. Today, "the Adivasi context" (or, in politics, the Jharkhandi context) includes multiple tribes (and castes), adding complexity to the task of determining who is "inside" and who is "outside" the context. Nevertheless, outsiders continue to play an important function as "the other," aiding in the continual reconstruction of Adivasi identity as well as their imagination of the wider world.

Among Adivasi theologians, the primary foil upon which their work depends is Western Christianity. Adivasi theologians distinguish themselves and their work from the inherited theology of the West, seeking both a method and a praxis that is anti-Western. They are concerned not only about the lingering traditionalism in their churches—German visitors often comment that the GELC's liturgy makes them feel like they are stepping back in time 150 years—but also about ongoing influences from the West in the form of TV evangelists and parachurch ministries. Christian bookstores in Ranchi sell Hindi translations of books by Billy Graham and Joyce Meyer, which are much more popular among Adivasi Christians than the writings of local Adivasi theologians. Decrying these Western influences, Adivasi theologians instead propose a relevant and liberating theology that draws upon their own ancient (*adi*) culture.

[24] I discuss these taboos and the procedures for readmittance to the tribe later in this chapter.

Yet even as Adivasi theology positions itself against the West, it is deeply informed by ideas from the West. The leading Adivasi theologians have all been educated abroad.[25] Theological education, even that facilitated by churches in Jharkhand, removes pastors from their communities and instructs them in Hindi or English, rather than their traditional tribal languages.[26] Although Adivasi theology seeks to respond to the issues facing local communities by drawing upon local cultural resources, its theory and method have not emerged locally but rather in response to predominantly Western varieties of contextual and liberation theology that theologians have studied in seminary. To the extent that lay Christians are aware of Adivasi theology, they tend to think of it as an intellectual or academic endeavor rather than something applicable to their daily lives. Instead of leading Adivasi theologians to re-examine their methods and style of community engagement,[27] however, the public perception of Adivasi theology as an elite form of discourse has simply encouraged Adivasi theologians to be more vocal in their opposition to and criticism of "Western theology."

Thus, the foil of the outsider sometimes reveals more about a theologian's own self-understanding and aspirations for the community than about the reality of the supposed

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[25] This is also true of many secular Adivasi leaders. Jaipal Singh Munda and Kartik Oraon were both educated in the UK. Today, many of the loudest voices advocating for the rights of Adivasis are those who are not Adivasis themselves, although there are growing calls for Adivasis themselves to speak about their community, rather than outsiders. Uday Chandra, "Are Adivasis Being Taken for Granted?: The Politics of Activism among Adivasis," *Outlook India*, November 25, 2022, https://www.outlookindia.com/national/are-adivasis-being-taken-for-granted-the-politics-of-activism-among-adivasis-magazine-239493.

[26] Navin Doman Theological College (NDTC), the NWGELC's seminary, has begun teaching its students Kurukh, the Oraon language. Yet apart from language classes and occasional worship services in Kurukh, the rest of their education (and all written materials) are in Hindi or English.

[27] There are some exceptions here: theologians such as Jhakmak Ekka and Idan Topno, for example, try to speak in their traditional tribal languages, Kurukh and Mundari, respectively, when preaching in village settings. Jhakmak Ekka has also published several books in Hindi (on church history, doctrine, and Christian life) that engage with the Adivasi context and are designed to be accessible for lay Christians. See Jhakmak Neeraj Ekka, *Choṭānāgapura meṃ prathama kalīsiyā kā itihāsa: do dṛshṭikoṇa; kāraṇa aura pariṇāma [The History of the First Church in Chotanagpur: Two Perspectives; Causes and Consequences]* (Ranchi: Centre for Oraon Christianity, 2015); *Evanjelikala kalīsiyā: Lutharana śikshā Aura siddhānta evaṃ khristīya jīvana meṃ iskī āśīsha aura aguvāī [Evangelical Church: Lutheran Teaching and Doctrine and Its Blessing and Gudaince in the Christian Life]*, (Ranchi: Centre for Oraon Christianity, 2019); *Nāsarata ke Yīśu: īsāī viśvāsa ke ādhāra evaṃ unkā nimantraṇa [Jesus of Nazareth: The Basis of Christian Faith and His Invitation]* (Ranchi: Print Well, 2023).

dichotomy. For example, Kerketta describes Western theology as making people "very passive" and accepting of the status quo.[28] While that may be true of certain varieties of Western theology, it also reflects Kerketta's anxiety about these same attitudes within his own community.[29] He worries about the predomination of a "heaven mood" among Adivasis, which leads to "an indifferent attitude towards the issues and problems facing the Adivasi society."[30] The problem, as he identifies it, though, lies not with Adivasis but rather with the negative influence of outsiders: if Adivasis could break the shackles of the Western theology that bind them and embrace their traditional *adi* culture instead, then their theology would become relevant and liberating.

In the construction of the foil, therefore, Adivasi theologians often appeal to an ideal, imagined Adivasi community, which, in actuality, does not reflect their present reality. So, for example, the West is greedy and individualistic, but Adivasis are generous and communitarian. Yet theologians frequently lament that these same values (of generosity and community) are precisely what Adivasis have lost in the present era with modernization and cultural deterioration. Kerketta bemoans the fact that "Adivasis [have] entered into the rat race of competitive and individualistic economic progress sacrificing the indigenous sense of common good."[31] As a result of the corrupting presence of *dikus*, Adivasis now struggle with a host of

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[28] Kerketta writes, "The western theology marked with its bi-polaristic thought-pattern makes people very passive and [accepting of the] status quo. It is based on [an] ontological orientation; thereby it ignores the existential reality of life." In other words, he views western theology as dualistic, drawing rigid, hierarchical binaries between humans and the divine, nature and humanity, lay people and clergy, women and men, the body and the spirit, and so on. He worries that a focus on life after death (what he calls an "ontological orientation") will make people passively accept their suffering in this life and ignore the challenges facing the Adivasi community (what he refers to as "the existential reality of life"). Kerketta, *Adivasi Theology*, 118.
[29] Kerketta writes, "the biblical egalitarianism with its liberative praxis rested with [a] few educated Adivasi people, while the classical thought-pattern [i.e., Western theology] reigned [among] the Adivasi mass psyche." Kerketta, 118.
[30] Kerketta, 119.
[31] Kerketta, 120.

problems, including “alcoholism, ethnicity, selfishness, nepotism, communalism, regionalism, denominationalism, illiteracy, orthodoxy etc.”[32] But the outsider as foil offers a neat solution to these problems as well: if Adivasis repudiate the harmful theology and way of life they have received from the *dikus* and reclaim their *adi* tradition, they may be able to “provide a reorientation for the survival and enrichment of humanity as a whole.”[33]

There are many problems with this way of framing things, not least of which are its historical inaccuracy, its obfuscation of ongoing interactions and exchange between communities, its erasure of diversity within communities, its limitation of possibilities for future collaboration with those deemed outsiders, and its production of an exclusionary politics of belonging. I will discuss these concerns later in this chapter, but at this juncture I simply wish to call attention to the fact that a foil can lock its adherents into undesirable self-understandings as well. If *dikus* are city-dwellers, then do Adivasis need to reside in villages in order to maintain their unique identity? If *dikus* are well-educated, then do Adivasis need to be illiterate? When the foil is the primary lens through which outsiders are viewed, Adivasis may feel the need to reject any ideas, practices, or technology associated with outsiders in order to maintain the integrity of the foil. But life is more complex than this, with trajectories of influence that constantly transgress the boundaries we humans erect. The foil may seem initially productive, but it has the potential to harm Adivasis in the long run.

Although the foil is the primary lens through which Adivasi theologians view outsiders, in actuality outsiders have played many other largely unacknowledged roles. In the following sections, I consider three other roles I have witnessed: outsiders as partners (with aspects of identity shared in common), outsiders as esteemed role models (inspiring Adivasis and acting as

[32] Kerketta, 123.
[33] Ekka, “Cultural Deterioration,” 14.

means of legitimation), and outsiders as (supposedly) neutral, objective sources of knowledge of the Adivasi context. Again, this is not an exhaustive list, and these roles are not mutually exclusive, but these examples can help us begin to think about the ways in which contexts reflect the influence of those who fall outside of their bounds.

Outsiders as Partners with a Shared Identity

Adivasis view some outsiders as partners, seeing them as, in some regards, the same as themselves. In other words, in their conception of these outsiders, they focus on aspects of identity and context that they share in common, such as faith or indigeneity. For example, Adivasi theologians draw heavily upon the work of indigenous theologians in other parts of the world, reading their own situation through the experiences, vision, and values espoused by indigenous people elsewhere. Amrit Tirkey, in an article about the sacredness of the land for Adivasis, quotes a "Red Indian" (by which he means an indigenous person from North America): "As one Red Indian writes, 'every part of the earth is sacred to my people… this beautiful earth is the mother of the red men [tribals]. We are part of the earth and the earth is part of us. …If land is sold then man would die from great loneliness of spirit.'"[34] It is Tirkey who inserts the parenthetical "tribals" in the quote to indicate the equivalence of the "red men" of North America and the "tribals" of Jharkhand. Tirkey uses this quote, although it comes from an indigenous person in a different context, as evidence of his own community's view of land as a gift, which they cannot sell or misuse. Similarly, Jacob Kujur cites an aboriginal leader from Australia speaking about the importance of land and then argues, "This is the voice not only of

[34] Tirkey notes that this quote came from an article in the *Indian Express* published on July 29, 1983. Amrit Tirkey, "Tribal Land: A Theological Reflection," *Sevartham* 30 (2005): 25.

the aboriginal leader of Australia, but it is true also with the Tribals of Jharkhand."[35] Such Adivasis do not view indigenous people from other contexts as *dikus* but rather as, in some ways, the same as them, offering insights into their spiritual and material relationship with the land.[36]

Faith is another aspect of identity that bridges the gap between Adivasis and outsiders. For Adivasis in the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (GELC), the Germans associated with the Gossner Mission Society in Berlin (which sent the first missionaries to Chotanagpur and founded the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Mission) continue to be partners in faith. While today their relationship is primarily financial, with the Gossner Mission Society funding educational scholarships and development projects, GELC members feel a strong sense of shared identity with the German Lutherans whom they consider their forebearers in faith. Adivasis in the GELC speak with great reverence of the first missionaries, commemorating their lives and the sacrifices they made to bring the Gospel to the Adivasis on Mission Day (celebrated annually on November 2, the anniversary of the arrival of the first missionaries in Ranchi in 1845), and they continue to welcome German visitors with that same spirit of gratitude.

GELC members typically have little awareness of the differences between their context and that of their contemporary German partners, apart from matters of class and economic well-

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[35] The full passage reads: "An aboriginal leader of Australia proudly voices his affinity with land: 'My land is my backbone… . I alone Stand upright, happy, proud and not ashamed about my colour because I still have land. I can dance, paint, create and sing as my ancestors did before me… . My land is my foundation. I stand, live and perform as long as I have something firm and hard to stand on. Without land…we will be the lowest people in the world, because you have broken down our backbone, took away my arts, history and foundation. You have left us nothing'." Jacob Kujur, "Liberative Aspects in Tribal Theology," *Sevartham* 22 (1997): 113 (ellipses in original). Citing Mathew Areeparampil, *Tribals of Jharkhand: Victims of Development* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1995), 17.

[36] The Catholic journal *Sevartham*, dedicated to the project of inculturation in the Adivasi context, occasionally published essays about the church in Nigeria, perhaps because of the perceived parallels in culture due to the "tribal" structure of Nigerian society. Today, Adivasi activists continue to embrace and collaborate with indigenous activists from other contexts, explicitly appealing to their experiences and identity as indigenous people.

being.[37] They assume German Lutherans still use the same liturgy their ancestors received from the missionaries back in the 1850s (the Prussian order of service,[38] which the GELC continues to use in more or less its original form) and that they still hold "traditional" theological views such as the infallibility of the Bible, eternal damnation for those who do not believe in Jesus Christ, and the sinfulness of homosexuality.[39] As I am Lutheran myself, GELC members often made similar assumptions about me, my faith, and context. On multiple occasions I was asked whether I was a member of "the GELC in America." Such a church does not exist; the GELC is an Indian church, with congregations spread throughout Chotanagpur and Assam. Yet, with little exposure to other contexts, GELC members assumed their religious landscape reflected that of other contexts as well.

The Germans, for their part, also frequently failed to perceive differences between their faith and context and that of Adivasis. For example, on Mission Day, the Director of Gossner Mission gave a speech in which he essentially apologized for contemporary evangelism and mission work. The Adivasi audience was confused because they were there to celebrate mission and rededicate themselves to the task of spreading the Gospel, but the German speaker assumed that they shared his concerns about mission perpetuating colonialism and denigrating other faiths. I watched with fascination as the translator slowly realized what the German guest of honor was saying and then attempted to change the meaning in Hindi so that the crowd might still find it uplifting and inspiring.

[37] GELC members assume that all Germans are wealthy. They have little awareness of class differentiation within Western societies. They also assume racial homogeneity in German society, unaware of the presence of immigrant communities in Germany.

[38] Ulrich Schoentube, "The Liturgy of the Gossner Church," in *Gospel in Transformation: Rethinking of Gossner's Insights, Lutheran Heritage in Relation to Mission* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints; Ranchi: Gossner Theological College, 2016), 59–71.

[39] On several occasions, when German visitors mentioned ministry to gays and lesbians in their speeches, I noticed that the translator would skip those remarks.

In October of 2017, I was invited to join the GELC's "Reformation Jubilee" celebrations, commemorating the 500th anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation. Although GELC members typically identify as "G.L." (eliding the E in their pronunciation of "G.E.L. Church") or as members of "Gossner's Church" rather than as "Lutheran" or "Protestant," on this occasion they explicitly embraced their identity as Lutherans. Celebrated in a characteristically Adivasi way, with little acknowledgment of the historical or cultural distance between themselves and their sixteenth century European counterparts, the Reformation Jubilee made them proud to be Lutherans and cultivated in them a sense of shared identity with Lutheran communities globally. Church leaders embraced the festivities as an educational opportunity and a time to strengthen lay commitment to the ministry of the church.

As with other Adivasi festivals, celebrations at the parish level were not all held on the same day but rather spaced out over the course of several weeks. The local celebrations culminated in a central festival at the church's headquarters in Ranchi on October 29–31, 2017. In the large fairgrounds behind Gossner Middle School, the church hosted dance performances, *bhajan* (devotional songs) competitions, and a *mela* (fair) where church members sold crafts and sweets. The Mahila Samaj (Women's Wing) of the GELC designed a special edition Jubilee sari for women, and Gossner Theological College hosted an exhibition with dioramas telling the story of Martin Luther's life. Organizers drew upon materials from the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) for the program's thematic structure, "Liberated by God's Grace." Seminary professors gave lectures on the three sub-themes identified by the LWF: (1) Creation—Is Not for Sale, (2) Human Beings—Are Not for Sale, and (3) Salvation—Is Not for Sale.[40]

[40] "Liberated by God's Grace," Reformation 2017, https://2017.lutheranworld.org/content/liberated-god%E2%80%99s-grace-131.

Throughout it all, church leaders emphasized the message of justification by faith through grace, apart from works of the law. This is a core tenant of the Lutheran tradition, but for many Adivasis in the audience, it was a new idea. "We have to learn more about our faith," church leaders proclaimed. To my surprise, GELC members were not at all off-put by the idea that they needed to *learn* about what it meant to be Lutheran. For recent converts, the idea that there are aspects of one's faith and identity that one does not understand is nothing new, but most GELC families have been Christian for generations. Perhaps, due to the fact that their ancestors converted in response to teachings shared with them by outsiders, they still have a sense of their religious identity being tied to and influenced by outside communities. Theologically, one could argue that Christian faith itself forms believers to be open to the possibility that truth and wisdom can come from outside of one's self and one's own community (through the witness of the Holy Spirit). In any case, the Reformation Jubilee was an occasion on which GELC Adivasis intentionally sought to learn from outsiders about what they considered a key aspect of their identity.

Adivasi theologians, in spite of their general rejection of "Western theology," also embraced the Reformation Jubilee. For them, the celebration was not simply about commemorating a historical event but rather about cultivating an appreciation for the task of contextualization and re-framing the faith of their fellow Christians. Building upon the energy of the moment, a group of lay and ordained leaders gathered for a "*Luther-Chintan Shivir*" (Luther-Contemplation Camp). After discussing the problems within the GELC and the challenges facing the wider Adivasi community, they issued a statement proclaiming the need for an ongoing Reformation within their own church.

This "Reformation Manifesto" called for robust theological education to overcome the rigidity of lay members' attachment to irrelevant traditions, harshly criticized current administrative and governance practices within the church, called for an increased focus on social issues and development, lamented the rise of individualism within the church, and highlighted the need for gender justice. Framing their remarks according to the thematic structure they had received from the Lutheran World Federation, they urged the church to engage with issues that were relevant to the Adivasi context, such as human trafficking and environmental degradation. The declaration concluded: "Therefore, we present this document as a 'Reformation Manifesto of G.E.L. Church' with a determination that the process of reformation should be continued for total transformation of the church and society towards building of a just and inclusive communities [sic] here and now."[41]

The occasion of the Reformation Jubilee thus presented an opportunity for Adivasi theologians to share their aspirations and agenda in ways that reflected the concerns of global partners in faith. Nothing much happened as a result of their declaration, but their efforts reflect an additional function that outsiders have sometimes played in Adivasi theology: the legitimation of potentially controversial beliefs or behaviors.

Outsiders as Role Models and Esteemed Sources of Inspiration

After returning from his studies at the University of Chicago in 1968, Adivasi theologian Nirmal Minz became the principal of Gossner Theological College (GTC), the GELC's seminary in Ranchi. Shortly thereafter, in 1969, for the GELC's celebration of fifty years of autonomy,

[41] Luther-Chintan Shivir, "Declaration on Reformation: Relevance of Reformation in the Present Socio-Ecclesiastical Context of the Church & Society," ed. Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta, trans. Prawin Kumar Bage, October 31, 2017.

Minz incorporated dancing and drumming in the celebration. A team of boys from the seminary and girls from the Bethsaida Teacher's Training School welcomed foreign guests by dancing and playing the *mandar* (a type of drum). Local church members were upset; dancing and drumming had been prohibited by the early missionaries and were considered pagan practices that could lead Christians astray.[42] But the foreign delegates from Gossner Mission and the Lutheran World Federation loved it. "The traditionalists were mad, but they couldn't do much because the Germans liked it so much!" Jhakmak Ekka, who is Minz's son-in-law, told me with a chuckle.[43] In this instance, the appreciation of outsiders lessened the local blow-back and enabled the process of cultural retrieval within the church to continue. Gradually, Lutheran Adivasis began to accept dancing and drumming again. Today, dancing and drumming are a part of every celebration in the GELC, although they stop when the procession reaches the church.

This is an example of how outsiders can function as a source of legitimation: things that would be considered radical by the local community are tolerated and gradually become acceptable because of the approval of outsiders. This, of course, requires that the local community respect those outsiders, either identifying with them (as discussed in the previous section) or holding them in high esteem as role models and sources of inspiration. The legitimation granted by outsiders is typically part of a longer process of local change, but

[42] The missionaries worried about immoral behavior resulting from the all-night dances and the potential for demon possession. Catholic priest P. Dehon, SJ, described the Oraon dances: "The Uraons are famous for their dances. They delight in spending the whole night, from sunset till morning, in this most exciting amusement, and in the dancing season they go from village to village. They get, as it were, intoxicated with the music, and there is never any slacking of the pace. On the contrary, the evolutions seem to increase till very early in the morning, and it sometimes happens that one of the dancers shoots off suddenly from the gyrating group, and speeds away like a spent top, and whirlwind-like, disappears through paddy-fields and ditches till he falls entirely exhausted. Of course it is the devil who has taken possession of him." P. Dehon, "Religion and Customs of the Uraons," *Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 1, no. 9 (1906): 169.
[43] Interview, April 22, 2021.

outsiders can set the stage by expanding or restricting the limits of acceptable discourse and opinions.

Consider the following example. During my fieldwork I attended a program hosted by the GELC entitled, "Towards an Inclusive Church: Understanding Human Sexuality and Gender Identities." Facilitated by the National Council of Churches of India (NCCI),[44] the two-day seminar sought to educate church members about issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity, in the hopes that churches might become places of welcome for the LGBTQ community.[45] I was surprised that GELC leaders, who were typically quite conservative on these issues, would approve of the theme, but the Moderator (head bishop) had attended a similar workshop in Chennai and was deeply moved by the plight of the transgender community.[46] He asked the facilitator, Fr. Thomas Ninan, to come to Ranchi and lead a workshop for the GELC as well, which he was happy to do. The seminar in Ranchi was poorly attended, but those who participated did seem more sympathetic toward the LGBTQ community by the end of it. On its

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[44] The NCCI, an ecumenical forum of Protestant and Orthodox Churches in India and itself a member of the World Council of Churches (WCC), is one of only a handful of Christian organizations within India that publicly encourage the acceptance of LGBTQ people. In my experience, however, the majority of Christians in the denominations that are members of the NCCI are not aware of its stance on this issue and would not support inclusion of LGBTQ people in their churches.

[45] In 2017, the seminar used the acronym LGBTQ, but a subsequent declaration from the organization speaks of LGBTQHI+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Hijada, Intersexual). See National Consultation on Interfaith Engagement with Human Gender, Sexes and Sexuality Diversities, "Declaration of the National Consultation on Interfaith Engagement with Human Sexuality and Gender Diversity," National Council of Churches in India, July 18, 2018, https://ncci1914.com/6139/2018/07/18/nccinews/.

[46] Perhaps due to the public presence of *hijras* (a word that is now typically translated in English as "transgender") in India, these sorts of church programs often start by talking about issues related to gender identity and only later move on to issues related to sexual orientation. At this and another similar workshop for seminary students that I attended in 2013, transgender guest speakers shared tragic stories about being rejected by their families and struggling to find employment. The speakers were attractive young transgender women, who long to be included in the church. Their narratives frequently appealed to notions of gender essentialism, and they spoke of a disunity between their souls and the bodies into which they were born. Their audiences were quite moved by their stories and wanted to help them and include them in the church. It was only after the transgender guests shared their personal stories that terminology and concepts (such as the distinctions between biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, and so on) were discussed. Facilitators broached the topic of homosexuality gingerly, recognizing that it would be more difficult for their Christian audiences to accept.

own, the program did not result in any significant changes in the GELC, but it opened the door for further conversation about issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity.

Although facilitated by Indian Christians, the funding for the program came from Kerk in Actie (Church in Action), a Protestant organization based in the Netherlands. Since 2008, Kerk in Actie, in partnership with ICCO Cooperation,[47] had funded the NCCI's Ecumenical Solidarity on HIV and AIDS (ESHA) project. In 2015, however, after conversations with Kerk in Actie, ESHA shifted its focus from HIV/AIDS to issues related to human sexuality and gender diversity, adopting the slogan "Towards Greater Inclusivity in Churches and Theological Education." The seminar I attended in 2017 was one of its first attempts to sensitize local churches to these issues. Since then, ESHA has significantly expanded its work, producing a wide variety of educational and liturgical resources, expanding its network of advocates and resource persons, cultivating interfaith partnerships, training seminary professors, and growing bolder in its advocacy.[48] Although ESHA's framing and articulation of issues related to human sexuality and gender identity have been responsive to its context (for example, starting with the experiences of transgender Christians given the prevalence of *hijras* in India),[49] it draws heavily upon the work of theologians in the West[50] and has only been able to do this work because of the financial support and encouragement of its foreign partners. This is another instance in which

[47] ICCO merged with Cordaid International in 2021.
[48] "ESHA BACK GROUND," ESHA-NCCI, accessed December 27, 2022, https://www.eshancci.org/esha-back-ground/.
[49] For example, ESHA's "Training Module for Churches" begins with the story of Anjali Evangelist, who was "born as a boy but was a girl from inside." ESHA Project, "Training Module for Churches: Building Inclusive Churches: Engaging with Human Sexuality and Gender Identities" (NCCI, August 2019), 7–8, https://www.eshancci.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Training-Module-for-Churches-single-pages-.pdf.
[50] See Appendix 4 of ESHA's "Training Module for Churches" with a list of literature on biblical and theological resources. There are a handful of recent books by Indian Christians, but it is mostly authors like Marcella Althaus-Reid, Judith Butler, Patrick Cheng, Marvin Ellison, and so on. ESHA Project, 78–79.

outsiders have helped to shape the boundaries of acceptable discourse and action within the church.[51]

Local leaders, however, can overplay their hand and rely too heavily upon the legitimating force of outsiders. That is what seems to have happened in the case of women's ordination in the GELC. The first female pastors in the GELC were ordained in 2000, after pressure from the Lutheran World Federation via the federation of United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India (UELCI). The decision came from the top down, with church leaders expecting their authority and the support of foreign partners to sway the opinions of local Adivasis. However, more than twenty years later, female pastors continue to face much resistance locally. Idan Topno, a female pastor in the GELC, observes, "There may have been official acceptance, but, in practice, sidelining or even outright exclusion of women continued. In some places, there has been a conservative backlash, and now some bishops are refusing to ordain women in spite of a formal policy in place affirming women's ordination."[52]

Adivasi Christians consider women to be unclean during their menstrual period (finding biblical justification for their views in Leviticus 15:19-30),[53] and female pastors told me many stories about congregants walking out of the sanctuary when the female pastor approached the

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[51] The influence of an organization like Kerk in Actie, however, is miniscule compared to that of more conservative Christian organizations such as Gospel for Asia and Samaritan's Purse, which are also more intentional in connecting their charitable activities to their faith. The ability of these organizations to provide funding for projects in India, however, has been curtailed aggressively in recent years. In 2020, the Indian government changed the rules of the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act (FCRA), making it much more challenging for local NGOs to receive foreign funding. The government has also revoked the FCRA licenses of many Christian organizations, such as Compassion International and Oxfam India. See Shrishti Rao, "FCRA Overhaul: Major Blow for Christian NGOs; 70% Religious NGOs 'Deemed to Have Ceased' Aligned to Christian Programmes," The CSR Universe, January 2, 2022, https://thecsruniverse.com/articles/fcra-overhaul-major-blow-for-christian-ngos-70-religious-ngos-deemed-to-have-ceased-aligned-to-christian-programmes-; Luke Scorziell, "Indian Government Regulation Squeezes Christian Charities," *Christianity Today*, February 16, 2021, https://christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/march/india-christian-charity-fcra-nationalist-modi-license.html.
[52] Topno, "Lutheran Perspective and Women's Participation," 179.
[53] Brahminical Hindu attitudes towards menstruating women may also have influenced Adivasi perspectives. See the Laws of Manu 4.40–42, 57, 208. Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith, trans., *The Laws of Manu* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 78–79, 93.

altar to preside at communion. When women in the GELC are approved for ordination, their bishops require them to cover their heads when leading worship (following Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16) and often send them to far away rural parishes or assign them to posts that do not require ministerial skills, such as hostel wardens. Many female pastors have been able to gain the respect and support of their parishioners, but they continue to face discrimination from their conservative male colleagues who are reluctant to promote them to higher positions within the church. In the case of women's ordination, foreign pressure resulted in official policy changes, but actual practices and local attitudes are still in the process of adjusting.

Outsiders as Sources of Self-Knowledge

Another significant way in which outsiders have shaped Adivasi self-understanding is by actually producing the sources upon which Adivasis now draw to understand themselves and their heritage. Indian anthropologist S. C. Roy's *The Mundas and Their Country* (1912), *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur* (1915), and *Oraon Religion and Customs* (1928) remain primary sources that Mundas and Oraons consult even today when uncertain of their own history and traditional culture. Courts often reference these and other works, such as Colonel E. T. Dalton's *Descriptive Ethnography of Bengal* (1872) and H. H. Risley's *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891), in legal judgments about matters concerning Scheduled Tribes in the region.[54] Historian Sangeeta Dasgupta observes that these "ethnographic texts and administrative reports [by British officials, missionaries, and anthropologists] … are the foundational texts used even today by bureaucrats, judges, pleaders, activists, and academics, and by Adivasis themselves."[55]

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[54] See, for example, Kartik Oraon v. David Munzni and Anr., AIR 1964 Pat 201.
[55] Sangeeta Dasgupta, "The Oraons of Chhotanagpur: A Journey through Colonial Ethnography," *Modern Asian Studies* 56 (2022): 1376.

Dasgupta and other contemporary scholars have called into question aspects of these works, noting their biases and prejudices,[56] but Adivasis continue to turn to them as primary sources for their own self-understanding. When I would ask questions such as, “Why do you celebrate Sarhul?” or “Why is the Oraon language called Kurukh?” my Adivasi interlocutors would point me to these classic accounts written by colonial administrators, missionaries, and anthropologists. Their continued dependence on these texts helps to explain why Adivasis so often refer to themselves as “backward” or “primitive,” channeling the language and interpretative frameworks of these late nineteenth and early twentieth century writers.[57]

Taken as objective sources of knowledge, these sources also provide a foundation for the strong distinction that Adivasis draw between themselves and others. Dasgupta, in an article examining colonial representations of the Oraon tribe in the work of figures such as Dalton and Risley, observes that in spite of “the hugely divergent representations of the tribe” in colonial ethnography over the course of the nineteenth century, “the tribe was inevitably understood through vocabularies of contrast: *sud*/*shud*–*mlecchha*, plains people–forest dwellers;

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[56] Dasgupta “cautions against the uncritical acceptance of anthropological representations,” tracing the way that these and other anthropological “representations and concerns shift over time” and “need to be located within a historical context.” Sangeeta Dasgupta, “The Journey of an Anthropologist in Chhotanagpur,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 41, no. 2 (2004): 166. In another article, Dasgupta examines colonial representations of the Oraon tribe in the work of figures such Dalton and Risley, tracing how shifts in the understanding of “tribe” reflect “the working of official minds, changing assumptions, and differing languages; the tensions within the discipline of anthropology and its application in the colony; the variations within ideologies of governance and the imperatives of rule; and interactions with ‘native’ informants and correspondents, along with personal observations of local practices.” See Dasgupta, “The Oraons of Chhotanagpur,” 1375.

[57] These are the traits they view as essential in order to continue to claim their identity as tribal. As Vibha Arora observes, “The tribal certificate issued by the government is no longer a mark of stigma, but prized and priced in the market. Paradoxically, while the post-colonial ethnologists and historians are busy debunking essentialisms connected with tribal identities, the tribal people and the ‘indigenous anthropologists’ have appropriated the essentialisms of being ‘primitive’, ‘shy innocent and other-worldly’, ‘nature-worshippers’, ‘indigenous’, ‘hunters and gatherers’, and ‘politically marginalised groups’, in order to reconstruct identity discourses which can galvanise public and international support for their resource-related struggles not merely over water, forests and fields, but also over seats in legislatures, jobs in the administrative services including the police and the judiciary, and seats in Indian universities, elite engineering, medical and management institutes.” Vibha Arora, “Assertive Identities, Indigeneity, and the Politics of Recognition as a Tribe: The Bhutias, the Lepchas and the Limbus of Sikkim,” *Sociological Bulletin* 56, no. 2 (August 2007): 216–17.

raja/*jagirdar*/*thikadar*–village community; Hindu–Kol aboriginal; Aryan–Dravidian/Kolarian; caste–tribe."[58] In other words, conceiving of the outsider as a foil to Adivasi culture is itself, to some extent, a result of the dichotomies that were so central to the "scientific" discourse and administrative categories utilized by the colonial government.

I am not the first to recognize the way these texts have influenced Adivasi self-understanding and self-assertion. K. S. Singh argued that one of the reasons why Chotanagpur became the center of the tribal "separatist movement" was because "there was a rich corpus of anthropological literature to draw upon in order to create a new sense of history, which could legitimize the tribals' search for identity."[59] The creation of that "new sense of history," informed by the observations and intellectual frameworks of others, continues today, as outsiders continue to play a significant role in the ongoing formation and articulation of Adivasi identity. Non-Adivasi activists in Jharkhand—such as Xavier Dias,[60] Meghnath,[61] Sanjay Bosu Mullick,[62] and Fr. Stan Swamy[63]—have dedicated their lives to helping Adivasis struggle for their rights,

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[58] In each of these contrasting sets of terms, Adivasis are the latter. *Sud*/*shud* means pure, whereas *mlecchha* means barbarian or foreigner, and thus impure. *Raja* (king or ruler), *jagirdar* (estate holder), and *thikadar* (contractor) are landed elites with positions of power in hierarchical social systems, which colonial ethnographers contrasted with the Adivasis' simple social system of village community. I have already discussed the other sets of contrasting terms she mentions: Hindu vs. Kol aboriginal; Aryan vs. Dravidian (Oraons) / Kolarian (Mundas, Hos, and Kharias); and caste vs. tribe. Dasgupta, "The Oraons of Chhotanagpur," 1415.
[59] Singh, *Tribal Society in India: An Anthropo-Historical Perspective*, 198.
[60] Xavier Dias runs the Bindrai Institute for Research, Study & Action (B.I.R.S.A., http://www.birsa.in/), which advocates for Adivasis affected by mining. "Meet Xavier Dias: The Adivasi Rights Activist and His Journey," Feminism in India, November 21, 2018, https://feminisminindia.com/2018/11/22/xavier-dias-adivasi-interview/.
[61] Meghnath is a documentary filmmaker whose films address social and development issues among Adivasis. "Akhra: For Culture & Communication," https://akhrasite.wordpress.com/.
[62] Samar (Sanjay) Bosu Mullick runs the Institute of Community Forest Governance and has published multiple books and articles, including "The Integrity of the Variegated Creation: A Tribal Point of View," *Religion and Society* 37, no. 2 (June 1990): 85–87; (co-edited with Ram Dayal Munda) *The Jharkhand Movement: Indigenous Peoples' Struggle for Autonomy in India*, IWGIA Document No. 108 (Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs; Chaibasa: Bindrai Institute for Research Study and Action, 2003), https://www.iwgia.org/en/resources/publications/305-books/2651-the-jharkhand-movement-indigenous-peoples-struggle-for-autonomy-in-india.html; *Ḍāina Gāthā [Witch Ballad]* (Ranchi: Sāmudāyika Vana Pālana Sansāthāna, 2009).
[63] Fr. Stan Swamy (Stanislaus Lourduswamy) was a Jesuit priest from South India who advocated for the land rights of Adivasis. Charged with plotting domestic terrorism, he died in prison in 2021 before a report was released that hackers had planted the evidence used against him on his computer. Niha Masih, "Hackers Planted Evidence on

re-interpreting Adivasi history, culture, and religion in the process.[64] Sometimes the narratives they present are historically accurate, but often they are conjectures: re-imaginings of the past that conveniently fit with modern sensibilities and facilitate their activism.[65] These activists present Adivasis as harbingers of an "alternative modernity,"[66] an egalitarian, "ecological ethnicity,"[67] with a worldview that can resist global capitalism. Adivasi theologians have heartily embraced this depiction of themselves, advocating for their *adi* culture as offering solutions to the world's environmental crisis.[68]

Another example of a modern re-interpretation of Adivasi history comes from the former director of Gossner Mission, Ulrich Schoentube. In the following section I examine his argument concerning the motivations of the first Adivasi converts to Christianity, showing how it taps into the various roles played by outsiders that I have described above. The fact that his re-interpretation is demonstrably false, however, offers a cautionary note with regard to re-imagining projects initiated by outsiders.

Computer of Jailed Indian Priest, Report Says," *The Washington Post*, December 13, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/12/13/stan-swamy-hacked-bhima-koregaon/. His autobiography was published posthumously as Stan Swamy, *I Am Not a Silent Spectator: Why Truth Has Become so Bitter, Dissent so Intolerable, Justice so out of Reach: An Autobiographical Fragment, Memory and Reflection* (Bangalore: Indian Social Institute, 2021), https://isibangalore.com/images/researchPdfs/I_am_not_a_silent_spectator__Stan_Swamy.pdf.

[64] Uday Chandra discusses the activism of these non-Adivasis (using pseudonyms to protect their identity), appealing to a concept which he terms the "radical bourgeois self." These middle-class non-Adivasi Indian activists, he asserts, have exchanged "economic capital in the form of material privileges for symbolic capital in the form of status and rank" as they advocate for the rights of Adivasis. Uday Chandra, "Going Primitive: The Ethics of Indigenous Rights Activism in Contemporary Jharkhand," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal (Online)* 7 (2013), http://samaj.revues.org/3600.

[65] To be fair, their reconstructions of the past are typically undertaken in conjunction with Adivasi activists. Meghnath, for example, conceived of his proposed film on "Adi Dharm" in conversation with Ram Dayal Munda. Munda, like Meghnath, attempted to construct a sense of shared religious identity among Adivasis throughout India. See Munda and Manki, *Ādi Dharama [Original Religion]*.

[66] Van Schendel, "The Dangers of Belonging," 27–28.

[67] Pramod Parajuli, "Ecological Ethnicity in the Making: Developmentalist Hegemonies and Emergent Identities in India," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 3 (1996): 14–59, https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.1996.9962551.

[68] "[The] Adivasi worldview can help us to formulate an eco-centric theology to address today's ecological crisis." Kerketta, "Re-Discovery of Adivasi Traditional Resources," 9.

A Modern Misinterpretation: The Motivations of the First Adivasi Converts

In a lecture for the GELC in 2012, Ulrich Schoentube, then director of Gossner Mission, argued that the foundations of Adivasi theology could be observed in the motive underlying the conversion of the first Adivasis. While the missionaries were concerned with repentance and the forgiveness of sins, Schoentube contended, the Adivasi converts were "looking for social acceptance" and "the equality of sisters and brothers."[69] In Schoentube's view, the Adivasis understood the Gospel as "liberation from social oppression" instead of "liberation of the heart."[70]

It is true that many Adivasis turned to Christianity in the hope of receiving legal assistance to retain control of their land; yet, surprisingly, Schoentube's argument rested not on these well-established socio-economic incentives for conversion but rather on the modern liberal Protestant motif of inclusive table fellowship.[71] For Schoentube, the fact that the missionaries were willing to eat with the Adivasis symbolized "the social bursting power of the Gospel,"[72] because "it was unusual for the Sahib to eat together with an Adivasi."[73] On his account, the first Adivasis converted "because the Christian faith establishes equality between sisters and brothers."[74]

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[69] Ulrich Schoentube, "Mission as Misunderstanding – an Observation on Conversion Processes," in *Gospel in Transformation: Rethinking of Gossner's Insights, Lutheran Heritage in Relation to Mission* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints; Ranchi: Gossner Theological College, 2016), 81.
[70] Ulrich Schoentube, "Social Movement of the Adivasi during the 19th Century in Chotanagpur as Reflected in German Sources," in *Gospel in Transformation: Rethinking of Gossner's Insights, Lutheran Heritage in Relation to Mission* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints; Ranchi: Gossner Theological College, 2016), 84.
[71] Sara Miles' autobiographical account of her conversion to Christianity is an example of the promise of the "open table" for liberal Protestants. Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (New York: Ballatine, 2008).
[72] Schoentube, "Mission as Misunderstanding," 2016, 83.
[73] Schoentube, 81. Although the term Sahib (or Saheb) typically indicated an Englishman in a position of political power, it was also how Adivasis referred to the German missionaries.
[74] Schoentube, 83.

In order to evaluate Schoentube's re-interpretation, consider Missionary Emil Schatz's description of the conversion of the first four Oraons, upon which Schoentube bases his claims:

> June 9th was an important day for us. … Kesu and his son in law Bandhu-Gurha and Neumann have been baptised today; … Our dear brothers out of the Koles have been seeking for a long time, following all the Hindu ways, but they did not find the peace that they were seeking. … They came (to us) with amazement and joy, but did not like the fact that they were sinners and would become sinners; they perceived themselves as heroes of pureness. Hence, they left again. However, they could not resist coming back. And so they came back and forward for the past two years. All of a sudden they confessed to be great sinners. Now they wanted to seek the truth seriously. … One Sunday morning, they came for the service. When everybody left at the end – they stayed – we talked to them; and they stayed. Since we held our English service at 12 o'clock, we asked: 'Would you like to stay?' 'Yes, we stay.' So we left them sitting there. – They realised then that we on our part would not do anything else other than: singing, praying, reading, preaching, and that we would not use any Hokuspokus (magical tricks). They were very impressed by this. … After the service with us, they agreed to eat a meal with us. This was now what we did. Never will we forget this. … We had the meal in front of us – we prayed and in God's name: they were conquered. (The fence between the castes was torn down by this common meal; the most difficult part was overcome.) Since we did not have any reason to doubt the pureness of their step and they complained about our hesitation, we baptised them into the death of Jesus. May the Lord have written their names in the book of life.[75]

In his analysis of Schatz's letter, Schoentube argues that there was a misunderstanding between the missionaries and the Adivasis. The missionaries—who "were living in the theology of the 19th century"—wanted the Adivasis to confess their sins and seek forgiveness, whereas the Adivasis were "fascinated by the message of the equality of brothers and sisters originating in the Gospel."[76] Schoentube rightly notes that the Adivasis were moved when they saw that there was nothing magical in the English service that was being withheld from them in their own language,[77] but, instead of emphasizing the egalitarianism that they encountered in worship,

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[75] Emil Schatz, August 1, 1850, letter to Berlin, published in the *Beine* no. 1 (1851), 3f. Translated by Ulrich Schoentube and cited in Schoentube, 80.

[76] Schoentube, 81. Schoentube's attempt to use inclusive language here—"equality of sisters and brothers"—is also a distortion of the historical reality. Neither the missionaries nor the Adivasis would have prioritized or desired a faith that established equality between the sexes, although today both groups selectively highlight aspects of their history that make their past appear more egalitarian than was actually the case.

[77] Schoentube writes, "[Kesu and his friends] are fascinated by the fact that Christianity does not have a concept of a double religion with a sacred area behind the common religion. On the contrary, they discovered: The Sahibs did

Schoentube considers the meal that the Adivasis subsequently shared with the missionaries to be the decisive moment in the conversion process.[78] He interprets Schatz's statement about the meal—"they were conquered"—to mean that this was the moment in which the Adivasis recognized "the social equality shining through the liberating word of God"[79] and therefore accepted the Christian faith. This meal would have been so powerful for the Adivasis, Schoentube asserts, because "it was unusual for the Sahib to eat together with an Adivasi."[80]

The historical record is clear, however, that the reluctance to share a common meal would have come not from the missionaries but rather from the Adivasis themselves. Oraons avoided food that had been prepared or touched by people of other castes or tribes, considering it *chhut* or taboo.[81] Those who "broke caste" by eating with non-Oraons were excommunicated from Oraon society and could only be re-admitted to the community following elaborate and expensive

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nothing different in their service than they did in the service with them, which is preaching the word, prayers and songs." Schoentube, 81. Other historical records, however, emphasize the first converts' desire to *see* Jesus. They thought the missionaries were withholding the sight of Jesus from them, but, after observing the English worship service, they understood that the missionaries did not see Jesus either. See the Chotanagpur Mission Report for 1863, cited in Cave-Browne, *The Chota Nagpore Mission*, 11–12. Later generations of Adivasi Christians have latched onto this theme of the first converts wanting to see Jesus, imagining them sneaking around the mission house searching for Jesus. See, for example, Lakra, "The Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church 1845," 51–52.

[78] In another lecture on January 19, 2013, Schoentube referred back to his previous lecture, "Mission as Misunderstanding," summarizing his argument and highlighting again the significance of the shared meal: "In the meal communion leading to conversion, they [the missionaries] learned that the message of the equality among sisters and brothers was the prime motive to become Christians." Ulrich Schoentube, "Tolerance and Mission," in *Gospel in Transformation: Rethinking of Gossner's Insights, Lutheran Heritage in Relation to Mission* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints; Ranchi: Gossner Theological College, 2016), 136.

[79] Schoentube, "Mission as Misunderstanding," 2016, 83.

[80] Schoentube, 81.

[81] "Some of the taboos against touching or coming in contact with certain things or persons, or taking food or drink touched by strangers and persons of certain other castes and tribes (particularly Lōhrās or blacksmiths) or by persons under ceremonial pollution, would seem to have arisen from the fear, in some cases, of unknown or powerful evil spirits believed to be connected with such persons, and, in other cases, of evil 'mana' believed to be associated with them. Sexual union with a non-Orāon is also considered to cause defilement of the nature of *Sōtrā* [taboo] which may have a similar origin. In this connection reference may be made to the Orāon's idea of pollution and danger from contact with the leavings of other people's food or drink. The evil or potentially evil power with which all strangers and aliens are credited is believed to pass on to the remnant of food or drink taken by them and even to the leaf-plates or leaf-cups or the unwashed metal cups or plates from which food or drink has been taken. And if an Orāon happens to walk across such plates or cups, he runs the risk of cont[r]acting pain in his throat by this *laghan* (crossing), as it is called. And when an Orāon gets such pains, the first inquiry made of him is whether he might have crossed such leavings." Roy, *Oraon Religion and Customs*, 77.

purification rituals.[82] Eating with the missionaries would have been a barrier to conversion, not a catalyst.[83]

The missionaries, on the other hand, considered the taboo on inter-caste dining to be one of the evils of tribal society. An early history of the G.E.L. Mission describes an Adivasi woman who died in a fire because her fellow Adivasis would not rescue her because she had violated this taboo and eaten with Hindus.[84] The missionaries contrasted this "inhuman" behavior with

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[82] Here is S. C. Roy's description of the process for "restoration of caste" following a violation of *chḥut* (taboo): "The procedure followed in readmitting into the community an Orāon excommunicated either for sexual intercourse with a non-Orāon woman, or for having eaten cooked food at the hands of a non-Orāon, or for having been a Christian for a time, is as follows: The repentant outcast having approached the headmen of his village and promised to perform the requisite ceremonies and provide a suitable feast to the Pārhā-brethern [sic], the Pārhā headmen are informed and a date fixed for the restoration of the man to his tribal rights. On the appointed day, some representatives from each village of the Pārhā assemble at the usual meeting-ground of the Pārhā in the village of the outcast. Almost all the adult Orāons of the village in question are also invited. The Pāhāan, or in his absence, the Māhāto of the 'Rājā' village generally officiates as the 'Karṭāhā' or social head of the Pārhā. In some Pārhās, there is a separate Karṭāhā village, a headman of which officiates as the 'Karṭāhā' on such occasions. Some grains of 'āruā; rice are put down on the ground, and with this the Karṭāhā feeds either a white goat or a white cock supplied by the candidate for restoration to 'caste.' As the fowl or animal begins to eat up the rice grains, it is sacrificed to Dharmes or the supreme Deity represented by the Sun. The sacrifice faces east. A drop of blood of the sacrificed animal or fowl is put into a bowl of water into which a bit of copper or, if possible, gold, and also a few leaves of the *tulsi* or sacred basil plant are dipped. And this water is then drunk by the candidate. For the social feast that follows, generally a buffalo or one or more pigs are killed. The person thus rehabilitated in his former tribal rights now serves rice-beer to all present. When dinner is ready, some relative of the man first approaches the Karṭāhā and with folded hands requests him to 'deign to partake of a little of the humble fare' prepared for the occasion, and then makes the same humble request to the other guests. At this time the guests get up from their mat, wash their own mouths, hands, and feet, with water provided for the purpose, and sit down to a hearty dinner. Before the guests sit down to dinner, the Karṭāhā, as the socio-religious head of the Pārhā, receives a sum of five rupees or more, according to the circumstances of the man restored to his tribal rights and also the gravity of the offence thus atoned for. A rupee or so has also to be paid to each of the other villages represented at the assembly. Three leaf-plates are placed before the Karṭāhā and on these is served such rice as has been boiled first of all. Rice is next served to the other guests on one leaf-plate each. The Karṭāhā, in the meanwhile, distributes the rice from one of the plates to a few guests seated within easy reach of himself. Now, when rice has been served to all, the Karṭāhā must eat the first morsel before the other guests begin to eat. The man restored to 'Jāt' sits down to dinner with his assembled 'Pārhā-brethren'. Where there are Mundā villages included in an Orāon pārhā, the representatives of such Mundā villages attending the meeting have their food cooked separately in new earthen vessels." Roy, *The Orāons of Chotā Nāgpur*, 425–27.

[83] The first four Oraon converts to Christianity had previously been followers of the teaching of Kabir. As Kabirpanthis, they had an intensified devotional life but were not required to violate traditional Oraon customs, such as the prohibition on eating with other castes or tribes. Their conversion to Christianity, on the other hand, required a significant break with Oraon social norms and practices. According to S. C. Roy, "He [Kabir] preached the abolition of all caste differences and sectarian barriers, but in ordinary matters he did not object to his disciples conforming to usage so as not to give offence to their fellows. … The Orāon convert to the *Kabirpanthi* religion is permitted to preserve such of his social customs as do not militate against the cardinal tenets of the new faith. Thus the new religion fitted in to some extent with accustomed or familiar ideas and beliefs, and, in the beginning, attracted a fairly large number of Orāon converts." Roy, *Oraon Religion and Customs*, 236, 238.

[84] "When a fire broke out in Lohardaga in 1850, some idle spectators told the brothers that a woman must be in the fire, screaming pitifully and crying out in vain. No one lent a hand to save her – not even on the order of the judge.

the message of love taught by the Christian faith, and they thus insisted upon inter-caste dining as a pre-requisite for baptism. The reluctance of the first Oraon converts to share a meal with the missionaries is clear from the fact that, after witnessing the English worship service, confessing their sins, and declaring their desire to be baptized, it took them five weeks to finally agree to eat with the missionaries. Here is Ludwig Nottrott's account:

> Now there was still the fight because of caste. It lasted five weeks. Finally their faith triumphed over this last enemy. Again on a Sunday they ate with the Christians for the first time. This was a step of the utmost importance. The Kolhs present, mostly servants, were so amazed at what was happening before their eyes that they could hardly breathe. It was as if a thunderstorm were gathering over the house, so anxious was everyone. The meal was served, the brothers said the table prayer – and in God's name the men shared the meal with the Christians. With that all doubts were now overcome. After the necessary instruction they could be baptized. That was on June 9, 1850. The men were called Kasu, Bandhu, Gurha and Navin Porin (Neumann).[85]

This account, coupled with anthropological descriptions of the taboo on inter-caste dining, makes it clear that the shared meal was not the impetus for conversion but rather a hurdle for the Adivasis.

Schoentube's misinterpretation of this historical moment is surprising given the extent of his familiarity with Adivasi history and culture,[86] but it makes sense in light of his own background as an advocate for the ecumenical movement. The ecumenical movement encourages churches to transcend confessional differences in order to unite in their pursuit of God's mission of justice, peace, and liberation. Eucharistic fellowship has been a powerful

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The Hindus and Muslims said, "She is not of concern to us, she is only a Kolh woman," – and the Kolhs did not want to defile themselves with her because she ate with the Hindus. Then the brothers grabbed her and took her out, but it was too late, she died after an hour. The missionaries confronted the inhuman spectators about their lovelessness, but it did little to convince them. – So great was the gulf which the caste had drawn between the Hindus and the Kolhs." Nottrott, *Die Gossnersche Mission unter den Kolhs*, 1: Bilder aus dem Missionsleben, 178.

[85] Nottrott, 1: Bilder aus dem Missionsleben, 186.

[86] While Director of Gossner Mission from 2007 to 2014, Schoentube took a special interest in the Adivasis of the GEL Church. Other lectures that demonstrate his knowledge of the history and culture of the region (such as "Birsa Munda and Thomas Muentzer – Evangelical and Social Freedom") are included in his collection of essays, *Gospel in Transformation: Rethinking of Gossner's Insights, Lutheran Heritage in Relation to Mission* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints; Ranchi: Gossner Theological College, 2016).

symbol of ecumenical unity, and liberal Protestants often point to inclusive table fellowship (whether at the holy altar or at a common dinner table) as a foretaste of the kingdom of God. The liberative potential of this metaphor in Schoentube's own experience may have blinded him to the historical opposition that Adivasi society would have had to the concept of an open table and inter-caste dining. In other words, his own context shaped the way he interpreted the Adivasi context, preventing him from seeing a reality that was not what he expected.

Schoentube's misinterpretation is of relevance to this chapter not just because it illustrates the challenges that outsiders face when attempting to understand another context (and how easily they can get it wrong), but also because it is an instance of outsiders shaping Adivasi theology. In his 2012 lecture, Schoentube asserted that his (erroneous) insight into the motives of the first converts could provide a historical foundation for Adivasi theology.

> Hence, already in the beginning of the history of the GELC the motive of an indigenous theology of the Adivasi can be seen, which we nowadays meet in many forms through the interpretation of the social relevance of the Gospel. The history of the beginning of faith in the GELC should encourage you to further develop an Adivasi-Theology of your own. It is as old as the Gospel in Chotanagpur.[87]

Schoentube wanted the egalitarianism and "social bursting power" of the Gospel, which he saw in that first shared meal, to inspire contemporary Adivasi Christians to be more socially engaged and further develop an Adivasi theology that ostensibly drew upon their own history and culture to promote an agenda of liberation and ecumenism. As Schoentube framed the theological landscape, "The debate is whether to understand the Gospel as liberation of the heart or as liberation from social oppression."[88]

In spite of his anachronistic and erroneous interpretation of Adivasi history, Schoentube's argument has inspired Adivasi theologians. After all, Schoentube is essentially arguing that the

[87] Schoentube, "Mission as Misunderstanding," 83.
[88] Schoentube, "Social Movement of the Adivasi," 84.

Adivasis understood the true meaning of the Gospel—liberation from social oppression, on his account—better than the missionaries who first introduced them to the faith. Schoentube framed the missionaries' faith as a foil to the social gospel that the Adivasis were seeking. He promoted that same social gospel by virtue of his shared identity as a Christian and lent credence to the message of Adivasi theologians from his position of power as Director of Gossner Mission. He presented his re-interpretation as history, and it has thus become a source of self-understanding for Adivasi theologians today.

Schoentube is not the only outsider to have shaped Adivasi theology. Time and time again, I heard from Adivasi theologians that it was their American or European professors in seminary who taught them about contextual and liberation theology and encouraged them to apply similar methods to their own context as Adivasis.[89] Many Adivasi theologians have also spent significant time abroad themselves. These experiences have expanded their perspectives but may also compromise their ability to see how (and why) frameworks and theories developed elsewhere sometimes fail to resonate with their fellow Adivasis.

As I noted in chapter one, the influence of contextual and liberation theologies from abroad has resulted in many theologians rejecting the local beliefs and practices of their Christian contemporaries (which they view as excessively influenced by "Western" Christianity), trying instead to convert them to the modern, progressive perspectives they have learned from their international colleagues. While I sympathize with many of their concerns, their fixation on the general principles of contextual and liberation theology (which have been formulated outside of

[89] A. S. Hemrom, for instance, attributed his commitment to Adivasi theology to two classes he had taken with American professors ("Politics of Jesus" and "Economics of the Gospel") while getting his Bachelor of Divinity at Serampore University. Interview, September 12, 2017.

the Adivasi context) can lead them to overlook the specificities of their own local context. It is this tendency that results in the embrace of historically inaccurate readings such as Schoentube's.

Authenticity and the Politics of Belonging

The primary thought that motivates this chapter is my concern that Adivasis, in their emphasis on the promotion of their *adi* culture, may overlook the roles that outsiders play in shaping their context and that this may have negative consequences for Adivasis themselves. Their focus on a quasi-mythic account of their past that glorifies *adi* culture and ignores the roles that outsiders have played is not only historically inaccurate but also has troublesome implications for the present, creating the potential for an exclusionary "politics of belonging."[90] Although many Adivasis have found the discourse of indigeneity to be helpful in asserting their rights, some scholars have raised concerns about its potential to create "a new spatial imagination that is preoccupied with boundaries and exclusion."[91] Historian Willem van Schendel worries about "progressive ideas about 'indigenous people' … [fusing] with xenophobic ideologies of belonging":

> When political entrepreneurs elevate to an unassailable principle the 'natural' rights that arise from rootedness in a place of birth, whip up emotions about the urgency to defend the community's identity because time has run out, and turn the community into a fetish at the expense of individual members' opinions, they create ideologies and practices of belonging that point to claims of *exclusive* rights and to strategies of purification that may result in ethnic cleansing.[92]

[90] Peter Geschiere and Francis B. Nyamnjoh describe this "politics of belonging" as entailing "fierce debates on who belongs where, violent exclusion of 'strangers' (even if this refers to people with the same nationality who have lived for generations in the area), and a general affirmation of roots and origins as the basic criteria of citizenship and belonging." Peter Geschiere and Francis B. Nyamnjoh, "Capitalism and Autochthony: The Seesaw of Mobility and Belonging," *Public Culture* 12, no. 2 (2000): 423.
[91] Van Schendel, "The Dangers of Belonging," 29.
[92] Van Schendel, 30 (emphasis in original).

Van Schendel's concerns are not merely hypothetical. "South Asia," he observes, "has ample—and bitter—experience of the realities of exclusive homelands."[93] From the partition of India and Pakistan to ongoing violent campaigns for ethnic homelands in Northeast India, the "ideology of separation" continues to play an important role in Indian politics. Van Schendel writes, "To many, creating a homeland and casting out others appears to be a feasible answer to current grievances."[94]

Jharkhand is one of the examples of indigenous assertion in India that Van Schendel mentions in passing. But the formation of Jharkhand did not result in violence or the exclusion of outsiders; rather, it attracted non-Adivasi elites from neighboring states to immigrate to the region, and it split the Adivasi population of "greater Jharkhand" into several different states, limiting their power within their own so-called homeland.[95] Jharkhand thus offers an important case study in which an exclusionary politics of belonging has the potential to negatively impact not only those it seeks to exclude but also those who embrace it. In addition to limiting possibilities for collaboration with outsiders who have shared interests (such as *sadans*, non-Adivasis who have lived alongside Adivasis for centuries and are also often economically disadvantaged and marginalized by the state), an exclusionary politics of belonging may also be co-opted by the very forces that a community is trying to resist.[96]

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[93] Van Schendel, 32.

[94] Van Schendel, 32.

[95] Neighboring districts of Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, and Odisha are also considered part of the wider Chotanagpur region, and many Adivasis allege that the region was broken up politically in order to divide the Adivasi community and minimize their political power. With the additional districts, Scheduled Tribes (STs) would have constituted a majority of the population, but with only the districts from southern Bihar, STs amounted to a mere 27% of the population.

[96] As Samar (Sanjay) Bosu Mullick put it, the creation of Jharkhand at the behest of the BJP government "served two purposes: firstly, it divided the indigenous peoples of the Jharkhand cultural region and secondly, by having two small states with no dominant nationality, it would be easier for the state to exploit their rich natural resources with comfortable ease." Mullick, introduction to *The Jharkhand Movement*, xvi.

In addition to an exclusionary approach to land and place, the international indigenous movement has also encouraged Adivasis to embrace a romantic essentialism with regard to their *adi* culture that may also have unintended negative consequences. As noted above, activists present Adivasis as representatives of an "alternative modernity," modeling a democratic, egalitarian, and ecologically sensitive alternative to the excesses of capitalism and consumerism. Benedict Kingsbury notes that "[t]he World Bank has dispensed altogether with criteria [for defining indigeneity] based on historical continuity and colonialism, instead taking a functional view of 'indigenous peoples' as 'groups with a social and cultural identity distinct from the dominant society that makes them vulnerable to being disadvantaged,' an approach clearly applicable in much of Asia."[97] Thus, indigeneity is tied to the ongoing performance of behaviors that are explicitly set in opposition to others, and conformity to a particular form of culture becomes the benchmark for claiming rights and agitating for self-determination. But who defines that culture? And who benefits from that definition of culture? What happens when Adivasis fail to embrace or embody that culture?

Contextual theology, originally conceived of as "indigenization" of the Gospel, has often relied upon similar notions of culture and identity. In their effort to affirm local traditions and repent for the sins of the colonial era, theologians tend to project essentialist notions of culture onto their contexts, ignoring the ways in which what we call "culture" changes over time and varies depending upon where one is situated within a context. For many theologians, only those who are attuned to this idealized picture of culture (whatever may be in vogue at present) are capable of "authentic" contextual reflection. For example, Stephen Bevans, one of the foremost theorists of contextual theology, is typically quite dismissive of the ability of outsiders (or, as he

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[97] Benedict Kingsbury, "'Indigenous Peoples' in International Law: A Constructivist Approach to the Asian Controversy," *American Journal of International Law* 92, no. 3 (July 1998): 420, https://doi.org/10.2307/2997916.

puts it, “non-participants”) to contribute to the development of contextual theologies. Yet, in his book *Models of Contextual Theology*, Bevans asserts that outsiders may sometimes be more “culturally and socially sensitive to the context” than the local indigenous people themselves:

> In some cases, an outsider may be more in tune with a particular culture than many of those who were born within it. … [F]or example, it is possible that younger “strangers” to the culture can be more in tune with the culture than older indigenous persons who were formed in their Christianity and theology in an era when culture and cultural expression was taken little into consideration. It often happens, for example, that the first generation of indigenous religious superiors or bishops might be more westernized than many of their younger western missionaries or more Roman than Rome.[98]

Bevans is correct that sometimes outsiders may place greater value upon or even be more knowledgeable about certain aspects of a society’s traditional culture than those who are insiders. That was the case for ethnomusicologist Carol Babiracki who knew the Munda style of dancing so well that Ram Dayal Munda had her teach traditional dances to his Mundari students who had never learned them.[99] But there is a troublesome undercurrent to Bevans’ observation: his use of the term “culture” privileges certain “traditional” aspects of the context, regardless of the prevailing attitudes and opinions of those who presently inhabit the context. Culture, on this account, appears to be some sort of primordial good, with Christian faith demanding that the modern church reclaim and embrace this good in order to tap into the true vocation of its members. Those who resist the contextual theologian’s approach are puppets of their colonial masters, preventing the liberation of their people.

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[98] Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, (1992; rev. and expanded ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 19–20.

[99] “In what I found an awkward twist, my own familiarity with Mundari village dancing prompted Dr. Munda to call upon me to help teach dances to the Mundari troupe. Group singing and dancing, then, worked to engender in all the students the cultural and social ideology of the new Jharkhand.” Babiracki, “Saved by Dance,” 42.

Adivasi theologians have picked up this notion of culture and frequently deploy it in their work. Consider, for example, how former CNI Bishop S. A. B. Dilbar Hans viewed the role of "Culture" (with a capital C) in faith:

> Since God has not left any people, including the Tribals, without a witness to himself and this witness is to be found in their Culture, it can be confidently asserted that provided they are faithfully devoted to their Culture, adhering to all that is of permanent value and judiciously avoiding all that is harmful in it they will ultimately and naturally be led by this Guiding Star to the Lotus Feet of our Lord Jesus Christ and accept his Gospel." [100]

Hans did not offer any criteria for determining what is valuable and what is harmful within Adivasi culture, but he was convinced that "Culture" was nevertheless a key means of divine revelation. Such an enthusiastic affirmation of culture offers a corrective to the denigration of their culture that Adivasis have experienced from others,[101] but it goes too far in the opposite direction. My concern is not so much that Adivasi Christians will embrace harmful aspects of their culture—things like the persecution of women whom they suspect to be *daayan*, or witches—but rather that they (or others) may use the concept as a weapon against their fellow Adivasis.

Recall the argument of Sarna Adivasis, discussed in chapter three, that Christian Adivasis should no longer be considered Adivasis because they have abandoned their traditional religion (*adi dharam*), Sarna. The response from Christian Adivasis was simply that religion is not an essential part of culture; they could change their religion and still maintain their Adivasi culture. But the very terms of the debate—religion and culture—are themselves contested concepts. Consider the Sarna religion: is it a belief system? A series of practices? How much does regional

[100] Hans, "Religious Cultic Practices and Worship," 56.
[101] That is how Nirmal Minz frames his engagement with resources in Adivasi culture, such as the Asur Myth. "This [the Asur *kahani*, or story] and other resources in tribal culture must be used to make Jesus the Saviour more meaningful and understandable to our people. Since these resources have been rejected by the missionaries and first generation Christians, we have taken them as untrue and devilish, though underneath them there is a wealth of meaning for theological and Christological discussions in our theology today." Minz, *Rise Up, My People*, 89.

and tribal variation matter? Who gets to define it and its boundaries? A Sarna *pahan* (priest)? The head of the RSS who says it is a variety of Hinduism? A Christian theologian who sees it as a divinely ordained precursor to Christianity? A developer who wants to build a shopping mall next to a Sarna sthal? An environmentalist who wants to inspire other Indians to fight climate change? A businessman who wants to sell religious paraphernalia? A publisher who has compiled local poems and hymns? A politician who recognizes that supporting the addition of a Sarna Code to the census can bring electoral victory? Definitions of religion always reflect the definer's own affiliations, commitments, and priorities, which are often political and economic in nature.

The same is true of notions of culture. Geschiere and Nyamnjoh, writing on movements in Cameron and France that champion autochthony (i.e., indigeneity), contend that notions of autochthony are characterized by a paradoxical combination of "staggering plasticity" alongside a "celebration of seemingly self-evident 'natural givens.'"[102] This is certainly the case for the Adivasi emphasis on *adi* culture. Adivasi theologians appeal to diverse—and sometimes even contradictory—aspects of their traditional culture with an astonishing degree of certainty and confidence in the saving value of these cultural traits. On the one hand, Adivasis are egalitarian and inclusive; on the other hand, they are competitive and enforce strict kinship boundaries. Adivasis are communitarian and govern themselves based on consensus, but the *parha* (council of elders) ensures obedience by excommunicating those who transgress their rules. Theologians seem to appeal to these competing virtues when convenient, without acknowledging the tensions between them. My concern, to put it more directly, is that culture—like context—is a vacuous

[102] Geschiere and Nyamnjoh, "Capitalism and Autochthony," 448.

term, easily manipulable by those in power, especially when it points to an imagined past rather than to the observable realities of the present moment.

Anthropology has critically engaged with the concept of culture for decades, exploring the ways in which culture is "contested, temporal, and emergent."[103] Yet little of that critique has made its way into contextual theology. The marginalized groups who have embraced contextual theology want to empower their communities to overcome their internalized oppression, and an affirmation of "culture" has, thus far, proven to be an efficient and effective means of achieving that goal. The indeterminacy of the concept of "culture," like that of "context," however, means that it can serve a variety of ends, including an exclusionary politics of belonging, wherein Adivasis who do not conform to an idealized picture of their culture may be expelled from the community and denied a role in its future aspirations.

The Outsider Within

Geschiere and Nyamnjoh argue that the plasticity that accompanies notions of autochthony "makes them geared to rapidly changing situations in which, indeed, even the Other is constantly becoming another."[104] As I have noted above, Adivasis have defined themselves in opposition to many different "Others": missionaries, Brahmins, British colonialists, *sadans* (their non-Adivasi neighbors), multi-national corporations, and so on. There is one additional "Other," however, that emerges as a result of the dichotomy between Adivasis and *dikus*: the outsider

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[103] James Clifford, in his introduction to *Writing Cultures*, famously contended: "Cultures are not scientific 'objects' (assuming such things exist, even in the natural sciences). Culture, and our views of 'it,' are produced historically, and are actively contested. … If 'culture' is not an object to be described, neither is it a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitively interpreted. Culture is contested, temporal, and emergent. Representation and explanation—both by insiders and outsiders—is implicated in this emergence." James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 18–19.
[104] Geschiere and Nyamnjoh, "Capitalism and Autochthony" 448.

within. This is the Adivasi who—whether it be due to religious conversion, education, migration, the inability to speak one's tribal language, or some other factor—grows so distant from her identity that she, herself, becomes an outsider.

In the summer of 2022, I visited Jhakmak Ekka, the NWGELC pastor whose emphasis on Oraon theology (instead of Adivasi theology, which he considers too vague and removed from the specificities of tribal life) I discussed in chapter two. Since 2018, Jhakmak and his family have been living in New Brighton, Minnesota, just a few miles from where I grew up. Jhakmak's wife, Nijhar Jharia Minz, was born in the United States while her father (former NWGELC Bishop Nirmal Minz) was completing his doctorate. After growing up in India and getting married, Jhakmak and Nijhar came to Minnesota for their PhDs (Jhakmak in Theology at Luther Seminary; Nijhar in Education at the University of Minnesota), and then returned to India. But their four children (who are American citizens) struggled in the Indian educational system, and so in 2018 they decided to come back to the US and stay in Minnesota until their children completed high school. The couple now works for World Mission Prayer League as their liaison to India, and Jhakmak has gotten his green card.

As Jhakmak and I discussed his work and the current situation facing Adivasi Christians in Jharkhand, he told me that he would like to write a more systematic work on Oraon Christian Theology. "But I feel very inadequate, living in America," he told me sadly. "I don't feel this to be a legitimate reflection." We had been talking about the importance of land and being rooted in the indigenous soil. But here he was, on the opposite side of the world, far away from his people, their land, and their culture.

"Is it possible to be an Oraon Christian living in America?" I asked him.

“That is absolutely a fundamental question,” he agreed. After a lengthy pause, he continued, “I would say, no and yes. No, because a person is a tribal only in that social milleu. I say ‘*We are, therefore, I am*.’” With a chuckle he added, “I stole it from Descartes in one of my articles.” But then the sadness returned, and he continued, “I don’t have anyone to say ‘*We are*’ here. Therefore, I cannot be ‘*I am*.’” Living in America, Ekka felt like an outsider to the most important parts of himself.

I reminded him that many other Adivasis are also facing the challenges of a rapidly changing world: new technologies, increased migration and urbanization, and so forth. Could his theological approach, which emphasizes the importance of transformation and new creation, offer guidance for Adivasis struggling to understand themselves and their identity in these unprecedented circumstances? Ekka thought for a minute and then replied:

> I think the critical aspect would be language. We are now being transposed in many places. And I think it is important to allow because it is not a rigid identity, it’s a transformed identity, and wherever we are, we are in God’s world. But when it comes to my particular identity, I must find it in some way (although it will not be 100%) in the continuation of my language. I have a friend working in Atlanta. He’s an IT guy. But when he calls his mom, he talks in Oraon. And so, when he talks, he’s living like an Oraon because now he’s talking—not only language, but then, that world! You know, the way he’s addressing his mother, the way he’s asking about other relatives, the things they are talking [about], ‘How was that festival?’, you know. So those things are the more important part of being Oraon, even in global stance.

Ekka found comfort in his traditional tribal language: even though he was living thousands of miles away from his people and the land of his ancestors, he could still speak his Oraon language, Kurukh. The use of his mother tongue, the language of his people, could keep him connected to his culture and maintain his identity; that is why he has worked tirelessly to promote the use of Kurukh in his church, as we discussed in chapter two. But he still felt uneasy as he contemplated the legitimacy of his ongoing theological reflection for Oraon Christians.

Ekka was more honest in his self-reflection on these matters than many others who have also been pulled away from their people and places of origin. In chapter one I observed that Adivasi theologians tend to be elites and that they are often removed from the beliefs and situations of the people on whose behalf they work. Those who have stayed in India are often not as self-aware of their increasing alienation from their fellow Adivasis as those who live abroad. Yet they, too, have privileges that alienate them from their fellow Adivasis. The fact that they write in English, for example, shows that their energy is focused on the impact that they can have on outsiders, rather than on their fellow Adivasis. “All pastors are trained in a non-tribal context,” Ekka lamented. “The day an Oraon goes to school, his de-tribalization process begins.” Education severs Adivasis from their roots, training them to think in Hindi or English (instead of their traditional tribal languages) and pulling them away from the village lifestyle. “For an authentic Oraon theological reflection to take place we must think of our ancestral village,” Ekka told me. “We can’t think of Ranchi.” Yet here he was, not merely in Ranchi, but in the United States of America, and thinking in English.

Ekka is correct that Adivasi theologians often bring an outside framework with them that creates distance between themselves and the communities they seek to serve. It is not just that they are out of touch with the traditional patterns of village life and Adivasi culture: they also struggle to understand the faith of their fellow Christian Adivasis and are often frustrated with their alleged apathy and theological conservativism. Their distance from their fellow Adivasis—what I am calling “the outsider within”—likely contributes to both their romanticization of traditional Adivasi culture and their criticism of those who insufficiently embody their hopes for a liberated future. In this sense, the outsider within the Adivasi theologian will indeed struggle to produce contextually relevant theology. Stuck in the past or overly committed to the vision of a

liberating faith that has been formulated elsewhere for another context, the outsider within can prevent the Adivasi theologian from seeing what presently exists before her. It does not matter whether the people of that other context were also oppressed: their history, values, and strategies of resistance are different and cannot be projected directly onto contemporary Adivasi society. The theologian must attend to the current dynamics of faith and life in the context she confronts; otherwise, her work may be just as irrelevant as the classical Western theology that she fiercely criticizes.

Yet the outsider within—when acknowledged as such—can also be a blessing. The theologian's distance from the community allows her to bring a new perspective to bear on her people's situation. Having been exposed to other ways of inhabiting and interpreting the world, she may be able to appreciate her community of origin in ways that those who have never traveled beyond its boundaries cannot. The distance also facilitates a critical stance: the outsider within can more easily identify her context's faults and shortcomings. Especially in light of the rapid changes in the modern world, the insights and connections that the theologian gains from crossing worlds and engaging with outsiders can assist her in envisioning new possibilities for the future.

Consider Jhakmak Ekka's situation. The distance has been challenging for him personally, as he has missed out on countless family and community events, and many of his fellow pastors treat him with suspicion, perhaps out of fear or envy. Yet, practically speaking, Ekka's international partnerships and connections have been incredibly beneficial for his fellow Adivasis and his church. He has secured significant funding for educational and developmental projects, and he has raised awareness about the plight of Adivasis in communities that otherwise would know nothing about India. His separation from his community, language, and culture has

instilled in him an even greater passion for their preservation, while his exposure to ministry, service, and education in other contexts has given him the imagination and hope of a reformer, always proposing new means for his Adivasi church to live out the Gospel. Ekka's life and ministry witness to the truth that distance can be an asset.

An exclusionary politics of belonging, however, threatens the ability of Adivasis to cross boundaries, explore other worlds, and acknowledge the outsider within themselves. An excessively narrow focus on whatever interpretations of the *adi* aspects of their identity are currently in vogue—whether it be culture, religion, language, their historical claim to the land, or something else—will slowly cast more and more Adivasis aside, as they fail to meet the criteria for belonging. Ultimately, it is Adivasis themselves who will suffer from a failure to engage with outsiders and to reckon with the varied trajectories of influence that have shaped and continue to shape who they are today, both as individuals and as a community.

Menesa: Expanding Ideas of Community

How, then, should Adivasi theology think about outsiders? As an outsider myself, I am aware that I am not the ideal candidate to offer a constructive proposal for Adivasis on this matter. Still, I can point to a resource within Adivasi traditional culture that might aid Adivasi theologians in their reflection.[105] Consider the Mundari word *menesa*. From the verb *mesa*, meaning to mix, mingle, or join together, *menesa* is a noun that refers to the act of mixing or the

[105] Drawing upon the "traditional" resources of a culture to make proposals for the future is a common strategy in contextual theology. I recognize that this strategy can mask the radicality of the theological proposal or, worse, be misused in manipulative ways. Nevertheless, it offers continuity for the task of meaning-making and self-understanding, and it is one way that I, as an outsider myself, can broach a sensitive topic in a non-threatening manner.

mixture that results,[106] or, more poetically, "community." Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta defines *menesa* as "fellowship or communion," in the sense of living together in harmony and peace.[107] He tells a story that he once heard from a retired catechist in Marcha (a village in the Khunti district), highlighting the importance of community in Adivasi society:

> [A] foreign missionary proposed a game to the children of [the] Munda tribe. He put a basket of fruits near a tree and told the kids that the first one to reach the fruit would win them all. When he told them to run they all took each other's hands and ran together, then sat together enjoying the fruits. When he asked why they ran like that, as one could have taken all the fruits for oneself, they said, "Menesa," [because, "H]ow can one of us be happy if all others are sad?["][108]

Kerketta argues that this concept of *menesa* has at its core the idea that, "I am, because we are,"[109] the same phase Jhakmak Ekka invoked to make sense of his Oraon identity. Kerketta contends that this dependence of the self upon its relationship with others is central to Adivasi existence and that, therefore, Adivasi theology is fundamentally a theology of community.[110]

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[106] Johannes Baptist Hoffmann, *Encyclopaedia Mundarica: L & M*, ed. Arthur van Emelen, vol. 9 (Patna: Superintendent Government Printing, 1950), 2826.
[107] Kerketta, "Re-Discovery of Adivasi Traditional Resources," 6.
[108] Kerketta recounted this story in an interview with me on September 6, 2016, but the above text comes from his article Kerketta, 7. Interestingly, this story has been widely circulated on the internet but with one significant difference: instead of demonstrating the value of *menesa* in the Munda tribe, it is held up as an example of the African concept of *ubuntu* and features children from the Xhosa tribe. Journalist Lia Diskin, who first linked a variation of the story to the concept of *ubuntu*, says she read the story in Raimon Panikkar's *The Spirit of Politics* (1998): "The cousin of one of my students, at the time Kennedy created a peacekeeping force to send aid to the so-called 'Third World' areas, was doing a teaching job in a small village in Africa. However, he did not want to teach the children anything. He considered it an act of colonialism. The only thing he has agreed to do is give gymnastics lessons. One day he came in front of the kids with a candy box and I don't know what else. All the children waited for him. And the young American said to them, 'Look at that tree there, a hundred or two hundred meters away; I'm counting "one, two, three" and you'll start running. Whoever wins will get the prize.' The seven or eight village boys were nervous. He says 'one, two, three' and all the boys held hands and ran together: they wanted to share the prize. Their happiness was everyone's happiness. Perhaps these boys offer a breeding ground for cultivating new bases of democratic life." Cited in Léa Ménard, "« Ubuntu », La Belle Histoire d'un Anthropologue et d'une Tribu Africaine? Méfiance!" *20 Minutes*, June 28, 2021, https://www.20minutes.fr/monde/3068211-20210628-ubuntu-belle-histoire-anthropologue-tribu-africaine-mefiance.
[109] Kerketta, "Re-Discovery of Adivasi Traditional Resources," 7.
[110] "Theology of community can also be known as 'Adivasi Theology.'" Kerketta, Re-Discovery of Adivasi Traditional Resources," 16.

John Mundu, writing about the Ho tribe, also highlights the significance of communion for Adivasis in his book *The Ho Christian Community: Towards a New Self-Understanding as Communion*.[111]

These theologians focus on the importance of community *within* the tribes: "I am, because we—Oraons/Mundas/Hos/etc.—are." But the fundamental insight here—that one's identity is profoundly shaped by others—could be extended beyond the borders of the tribe as well. It is true that, traditionally, communal bonds have been circumscribed by the tribe: as John Mundu observes, "the tribe is the ultimate boundary of communion."[112] But with increased urbanization, education, technology, and geographic mobility, Adivasis increasingly encounter and engage with others who do not share their tribal identity. These non-Adivasis others—"outsiders," as I have been calling them throughout this chapter—are becoming, in practice, a part of the "we" that constitutes the "I" in contemporary Adivasi life. They may not play as central a role as members of one's own tribe (or the Adivasi community more broadly), and they may not feel the sense of mutual obligation for each other's well-being that traditionally characterizes tribal communities, but they have an undeniable impact upon Adivasis and their context. It is also worth noting that the concept of *menesa* does not presuppose a homogenous community. Rather, it points to the mixture that results from stirring things up, the partnerships that form when people cross boundaries and collaborate with others who are different, or (to put it in terms of the theme of this chapter) the context that is shaped, in part, by agents and forces outside of it.

[111] Mundu, *The Ho Christian Community*.
[112] John Mundu speaks of the Ho tribe's communion with the divine, the ancestors and spirits, and nature, structured through the family, clan (*kili*), village, and tribe. But, he concludes, this communion is exclusive: "The tribe is the ultimate boundary of communion." Mundu, 121.

I am not advocating a naïve embrace of outsiders as “sacred Others” or the over-turning of traditional structures of tribal life. I support efforts to preserve traditional Adivasi culture, and I understand the suspicion that Adivasis have towards those who do not share their culture and long history of living close to the land. But, as we have seen in this chapter, there are many different kinds of outsiders, and they have shaped Adivasi society in a wide variety of ways. My proposal is not to treat all outsiders the same but rather to encourage theologians—and Adivasis in general—to analyze the different ways in which various outsiders have influenced their context and the ways in which they, as Adivasis, have related to and conceived of outsiders. My hope is that this will help Adivasis better attend to the specificity of their context, avoid an exclusionary politics of belonging, learn from others, and collaborate for the future.

While this chapter has focused on the Adivasi context in particular, I suspect that other contexts would also benefit from an analysis of the role of outsiders and, thereby, an acknowledgment of the dialogical nature of the construction of context. After all, our self-understandings—and our interpretations of our contexts—are shaped not only by our own experiences and cultural traditions but also by those who fall outside the bounds of our contexts and by the ideas we have about them. Attending to these unorthodox elements of “context” may initially seem counter-intuitive; indeed, contextual theology has traditionally emphasized looking inward to aid communities in their self-affirmation and empowerment. Yet critically examining the ways we think about and relate to those outside of our contexts increases the potential for theology to be relevant and liberating while also safeguarding against idolatry and political manipulation.

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Conclusion

One Sunday morning, after worshipping with a GELC congregation in the village of Bichna, I joined the leaders of the congregation for lunch. They brought out the food—*daal* (lentils), *sabji* (vegetables), *chawal* (rice), and *paneer* (cheese)—and a stack of *patri* (leaf plates), pinned together with *chari* (bamboo shoots). I was delighted to see Adivasis using their traditional form of environmentally friendly disposable plates. But as the women served us, they put the *patri* on top of styrofoam plates.[1] My heart sank. So much unnecessary waste! I tried to refuse a disposable plastic cup—I would only drink the filtered water from my water bottle and didn't need to waste a cup—but they gave me a cup anyway. Later, that afternoon, as we were leaving to return to Ranchi, I saw the styrofoam plates and other trash from our meal thrown out back in the forest behind the church. They would burn it later, unaware of or unconcerned about the toxic chemicals that styrofoam releases when burned.

This was not an isolated incident. Although Adivasis traditionally made plates, bowls, cups, and spoons out of leaves, in recent years they had increasingly turned to disposable plastic and styrofoam products. Parties for engagements, weddings, baptisms, and confirmations (which have hundreds of attendees) produced large amounts of trash, which were usually burnt afterward. Plastic and styrofoam—which, unlike leaves, do not biodegrade—were cheap and more convenient. Most Adivasis didn't think about the environmental impact of these disposable products; they just burned them along with their other waste. During my fieldwork, the air was

[1] Technically, styrofoam refers to the DuPont (formerly Dow Chemical) Company's trademarked extruded polystyrene foam (XPS) products used for insulation (also known as "blue board"). Colloquially, however, the term is used for a variety of expanded polystyrene foam (EPS) products, including packing peanuts, coffee cups, and the plates we ate on that day in Bichna.

often filled with smoke from burnt trash, vehicle exhaust, and crop stubble.[2] Of course, it wasn't just Adivasis who burned their trash; that is what (almost) everyone in India did.

Thankfully, this is starting to change. In the last few years, India has banned single use plastics (including styrofoam)[3] and burning solid waste.[4] Both are still common, but the threat of hefty fines is starting to change peoples' attitudes and behaviors. For social gatherings, wealthier Adivasis can now purchase biodegradable plates made from paper or banana trunks. Others rent reusable plastic plates that they wash and return after their guests have departed. In villages, of course, many Adivasis continue to use *patri*, their traditional leaf plates.

What do these changes over time mean for the Adivasi context? The image of a *patri* on top of a styrofoam plate illustrates the complex interweaving of factors that make up the Adivasi context. Both items—*patri* and styrofoam—are part of the Adivasi context, although the way Adivasis have related to them over time has changed. The theologian, when describing these aspects of the context, has to tease out the relationship between the two. What value do (or should) Adivasis attribute to each? Do *patri* signify sustainability or primitivity? Is styrofoam a marker of wealth and prestige, or is it evidence of the destructive tendencies of global capitalism? Did the use of styrofoam mean Adivasis had lost their eco-consciousness and communitarian sensibilities?[5] Or did Adivasis only live in harmony with the earth historically

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[2] Adivasis do not usually burn their crop stubble, but the practice is common in other parts of India and affects the air quality in Jharkhand as well. "Stubble Burning: Why It Continues to Smother North India," *BBC*, November 30, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54930380.

[3] Naina Bhardwaj, "India's New Plastic Waste Management Rules Effective from July 1, 2022," *India Briefing*, June 30, 2022, https://www.india-briefing.com/news/india-new-plastic-waste-management-rules-single-use-plastic-ban-effective-from-july-1-2022-25398.html/.

[4] "NGT Bans Open Waste Burning," *The Hindu*, December 23, 2016, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/NGT-bans-open-waste-burning/article16928115.ece.

[5] Traditionally, guests would bring *patri* as a way of contributing to the festivities; their production is, after all, a time-consuming process. I experienced the labor involved first-hand when I tried to learn how to make them alongside the seminary students at Navin Doman Theological College (NDTC). The younger generation, which grew up with plastics and styrofoam, had never learned this traditional craft, and so the faculty decided to teach them as part of their efforts to help the church embrace traditional Oraon culture.

because they had no other options? What role have colonialism and globalization played in shaping the desires and aspirations of Adivasis? How can those within Adivasi society who disagree on these matters continue to live and work together? These are just a few of the possible questions an Adivasi theologian might entertain when interrogating the image of a *patri* juxtaposed with the styrofoam plate.

I share this anecdote to illustrate my contention that contexts do not consist merely of facts: they are also reservoirs of meaning and signifiers of value. The *patri* is a real, physical object, as is the styrofoam plate. But the way that people relate to the two objects and attribute meaning and value to them may vary. What we call "context" involves our constructive work of ordering, interpreting, and refashioning the complex interweaving of factors that make up the world we inhabit. Describing a context, therefore, is more of an art than a science; it is an inescapably subjective activity, one to which we bring our experiences, beliefs, and values.

Implications for Contextual Theology

Contextual theology has relativized our notions of theology, arguing that theology does not correspond directly to the divine; rather, it is the God-talk of finite, situated beings, approximating the divine reality to the best of their ability. Although theology aims at transcendent, universal truths, contextual theologians remind us that human beings experience those truths as embodied creatures shaped by their diverse contexts and thus inevitably relate to and speak about God in different ways. Some contextual theologians make even stronger claims in their efforts to deconstruct the universalizing tendencies of classical theology. But what contextual theologians often overlook is that similar challenges accompany our understandings of context.

As I have demonstrated in this dissertation, contexts require interpretation. The various factors that interweave to form our contexts are real and have concrete effects on peoples' lives, but the ways we perceive and make sense of them vary. Certainly, outsiders would describe a context differently than an insider, but even those who ostensibly share a context will experience, describe, and imagine its future differently. Returning to my experience in Bichna, perhaps the *patri* on top of the styrofoam plate was a compromise between different factions in the congregation's Mahila Samaj (women's group): those who wanted the young foreign woman to experience their traditional culture by eating off of a *patri* versus those who wanted to make sure she didn't spill *daal* all over her clothing. These sorts of divergences in opinion (which result in differing praxis) may stem from different interpretations of the context. Did the women feel insecure about whether their vegetarian guest would truly be happy without meat at the meal and thus added the *patri* to make it more special?[6] Did they notice that these particular *patri* were not well-made and thus more prone to leak? What sort of person did they think I, their guest, was? Would I be upset if food got on my clothes? What would the pastors who accompanied me think if the women only gave me a *patri* and I spilled food on myself? What would the women think if they spilled food on themselves? What would God think if anyone spilled food on the floor inside the church where we were eating? I suspect that the question of what would happen to the plates after we finished eating was probably the last thing on their minds.

Our interpretations of context reflect our worries and concerns, our passions and our dreams, our sense of duty and our deepest longings—all of which, I would contend, are informed implicitly or explicitly by our beliefs (or lack thereof) about God. Thus, the act of interpreting context is itself theological, especially when it is undertaken with the intention of subsequent

[6] Adivasis eat meat, especially on special occasions when there are foreign guests. But I was vegetarian; hence, the *paneer*, which is rarely used in Adivasi cuisine.

theological reflection. This means that contextual theology is *theological* through and through: there is no stage in the process of relating context to faith at which the theologian may simply appeal to sociological, anthropological, or historical descriptions of the context as though those other disciplines (and the selective deployment of their insights for theology) were devoid of underlying theological perspectives.

These insights—the indeterminacy of the concept of context and the fact that theology plays a role in its interpretation—challenge some of the basic assumptions of contextual theology. Examining Adivasi theology among Christians in Jharkhand, I have explored four ways in which attending to the role of theology in interpreting context disrupts the theory of contextual theology: (1) contextual theology does not always emerge as a grassroots phenomenon but is often propounded by elites who have been influenced by theoretical frameworks formulated in other contexts; (2) as it lifts up the voices of vulnerable and marginalized communities, contextual theology may simultaneously erase differences within those communities, potentially creating new axes of marginalization and oppression; (3) contextual theology does not necessarily lead to interfaith harmony but can create tension and conflict between religions; and (4) contextual theology resists the influence of outsiders yet often relies upon (and creates) outsiders in its self-construction and deployment.

Chapter one introduced Adivasis and Adivasi theology, highlighting the disconnect between ordinary Adivasis and the discourse of Adivasi theology. Described by Christ Sumit Abhay Kerketta as the task of "self-theologizing,"[7] Adivasi theology contests previous interpretations of the Adivasi context—for example, as primitive, uncivilized, or sinful—and

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[7] "The churches of Jharkhand (especially the Protestant churches) have been taught how to be self-supporting, self-propagating and self-governing, but they have learned very little to be 'self-theologizing'." Kerketta, *Adivasi Theology*, 6.

instead affirms traditional Adivasi culture, emphasizing its ecological and communitarian sensibilities. Adivasi theologians believe that by reclaiming their identity and traditional culture, Adivasis will be empowered to stand up for their rights as indigenous people. Adivasi theology, therefore, relies upon an implicit acknowledgement that context can be interpreted and deployed in theology in more than one way and that those different interpretations have social and political implications.

While Adivasi theologians are typically critical of the way that outsiders such as missionaries, the colonial government, multi-national corporations, and exploitative landlords have interpreted and engaged with their society, they often turn to other outsiders to help them make sense of their context. Drawing upon tropes from international indigenous organizations, environmentalists, and contextual theologians, Adivasi theologians tend to romanticize their traditional culture while simultaneously reframing it in light of modern liberal and democratic ideals. Although contextual theology was conceived as a grassroots phenomenon, emerging from vulnerable and marginalized communities, in practice it has often become an elite endeavor. This is certainly the case among Adivasis. It is not that Adivasi theologians occupy powerful positions within the church hierarchy; on the contrary, they are some of the harshest critics of their bishops, fellow clergy members, and lay leaders. But they are also critical of the simplistic and conservative beliefs of their fellow Christians, whom they tend to view as tragically ensnared by the trappings of Western theology. Adivasi theologians hope to convert their fellow Adivasi Christians to their more progressive, culturally affirming, and politically engaged faith.

Relying upon the theoretical frameworks of contextual and liberation theology, however, Adivasi theologians sometimes neglect the particularities of their own context. While embracing and promoting their traditional culture, they often fail to engage with contemporary realities such

as inter-tribal marriages, geographical mobility, and urbanization. In spite of their promotion of vernacular languages, they sometimes speak about faith in ways that ordinary Adivasis may find foreign or off-putting, such as Kerketta's use of female pronouns for God. The search for a relevant and liberating faith in the Adivasi context is indeed urgent, but contextual theology can, paradoxically, prevent Adivasi theologians from attending to the specificity of their context and inhibit the formulation of theology that is accessible and transformative. The first step in addressing the gap between Adivasi theology and the lived faith of ordinary Adivasi Christians is the recognition that there are competing interpretations of context at play.

Chapter two described the conflict between the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (GELC) and its schismatic sister body, the North Western Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (NWGELC), which stems from their differing approaches to context. While the GELC promotes a common Adivasi identity that transcends tribes, the NWGELC focuses on the particularities of the Oraon tribe. Explicitly grounding these divergent interpretations of their context in theology, this ecclesial struggle demonstrates the important role that theology can play in the way people make sense of and describe their context.

The theological virtue (and practical asset) of unity underlies the GELC's emphasis on their pan-tribal Adivasi identity, while the particularity of the incarnation justifies the NWGELC's attention to the specificity of Oraon identity. The NWGELC's argument is more characteristic of contextual theology in general, which tends to view an emphasis on unity as indicative of the hegemonic, universalizing impulse they see in traditional Western theology. The GELC's focus on unity, however, reveals that the negotiation of unity and diversity is itself relative to and situated within particular contexts. The GELC emphasizes unity among tribes, but not among all Indians; otherwise, they would have joined the ecumenical project of the Church

of North India (CNI). Likewise, the NWGELC emphasizes the diversity that exists between tribes, but not within the tribes; their depiction of Oraon identity overlooks axes of difference such as clan, gender, class, and geographical location.

While the tendency within contextual theology has been to delineate increasingly narrow contexts so as to better attend to the particularities of the experience of marginalized communities (for example, critiques of feminist theology have led to the emergence of Womanist and Mujerista theologies), the example of the NWGELC suggests that some erasure of difference is inevitable in the construction of identity and context. No matter which aspect of identity or context theologians chose to highlight, they must engage in abstraction and generalization, excluding the experiences, aspirations, and desires of some of those who share that identity or context.

Chapter three examined conflicting perspectives on contextualization among Christian and Sarna Adivasis. Adivasi theologians hoped that their positive reappraisal of traditional Adivasi religion would ease long-standing tensions with those who continue to practice the Sarna religion. But Sarna Adivasis have not been pleased by Christian attempts at contextualization. Examining the controversies that have arisen in response to the Nemha Bible, a statue of the Virgin Mary wearing a red-bordered sari, and Christian celebrations of the Karam Festival, I argued that these conflicts reflect differing interpretations of context.

Christians see culture and religion as distinct elements within their context: in their view, Adivasis can cease to practice their traditional religion when they convert to Christianity and still embrace their traditional culture. Sarna Adivasis disagree, arguing that culture and religion are inseparable, and, thus, that those who abandon their traditional religion also abandon their Adivasi culture. Sarna Adivasis view Christian contextualization projects as covert attempts to

trick Sarna Adivasis into converting to Christianity. Only by adhering to their ancient religion, Sarna Adivasis argue, can they protect and preserve their identity and maintain their status as Scheduled Tribes.

But Sarna Adivasis are also engaged in the contextualization of their faith, adapting it for their modern context and positioning it as the ideal criterion for their classification as Scheduled Tribes. Consolidating various beliefs and practices into a single pan-tribal religion under the banner of Sarna, Adivasis have begun to gather for communal worship, build enclosures around worship sites, and publish written versions of their hymns and prayers. Leaders have been increasingly called upon to clarify proper belief and practice, resulting in the formulation of moral codes of conduct and rational, systematic accounts of the faith. These changes have also created controversy, but not to the extent of Christian forms of contextualization.

Contextualization invites controversy not because critics discourage theological engagement with context but because people inhabit and interpret their contexts differently. This is especially the case for those who belong to different religions. Although contextual theology aims to foster inter-religious harmony through Christian engagement with other religions that are part of the context, practitioners of other religions may perceive that engagement as offensive, inappropriate, or harmful. Dialogue and relationships can minimize conflict, but the theological differences between religions are likely to produce (and be reinforced by) competing interpretations of context, making inter-religious disagreements around contextualization inevitable.

Chapter four considered the role of outsiders in shaping Adivasi theology. Contextual theology seeks to right historical injustices by highlighting local perspectives instead of drawing upon the ideas and frameworks of outsiders. While this is a worthy and valuable instinct, in

practice it tends toward the discourse of "authenticity," which privileges some experiences and perspectives on context as "authentic" and dismisses others as "inauthentic." Hence, contextual theologian Stephen Bevans can envision outsiders who are more "culturally and socially sensitive to the context" than the local people themselves.[8] The discourse of "authenticity," however, may indicate more about the theologian than about the context to which it purports to refer. The emphasis on privileging local voices may also produce robust insider/outsider dichotomies that obscure the extent to which the boundaries of contexts are negotiated dialogically in relationship to others and that, ultimately, may end up excluding those they were designed to empower.

Insider/outsider dichotomies are especially prevalent in indigenous varieties of contextual theology like Adivasi theology, where the community asserts its rights on the basis of the primacy of the people's historical presence in the land. Adivasi theologians highlight the importance of their ancient and original (*adi*) culture, which is tied to the land, and they typically attribute societal ills to the arrival of outsiders. The path to liberation, they argue, entails rejecting those outside influences and embracing their *adi* culture. Yet outsiders have played important roles in shaping both the Adivasi context and contemporary formulations of Adivasi theology, functioning not only as foils to *adi* culture but also as partners with a shared identity, esteemed role models who grant legitimacy and supposedly objective sources of self-knowledge. Ulrich Schoentube's misinterpretation of the first Adivasi conversions, however, illustrates how outsiders may bring their own concerns to their readings of other contexts and, in the process, shape how insiders themselves interpret their context. Attending to the various ways in which outsiders shape Adivasi theology, therefore, may not only facilitate more historically accurate

[8] Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 19–20.

accounts of the context but also affect the ways in which Adivasis engage with their context—and with those whom they consider to be outsiders—in the future.

One of the dangers of insider/outsider dichotomies is their tendency to create an exclusionary politics of belonging, which ultimately has the potential to exclude Adivasis themselves from their own context. Those who grow distant from their *adi* culture—whether due to moving away from their ancestral land, converting to another religion, or using Hindi instead of their mother tongue—may become outsiders in the eyes of their fellow Adivasis. Instead of seeking to banish the outsider within oneself, however, theologians should recognize the ways in which figurative or literal distance from one's context may be an asset. The "outsider within" can bring new perspectives, connections, and resources that may benefit the community as a whole, as well as cultivating an appreciation for diversity within contexts, communities, and even within one's own self.

Competing Interpretations of Context and the Possibility for Change

Recognizing that the contextual pole of contextual theology involves the subjective task of interpretation (and that our interpretations reflect our experiences, beliefs, and values, which may sometimes conflict with those of others) makes contextualization a challenging endeavor. Even among those who ostensibly share the same context, there may be many conflicting ways of making sense of that context. Contextual theology has long been criticized for its propensity to make theology relative due to the lack of objective criteria for evaluating theologies produced in diverse contexts. This may be a valid critique, but I have argued in this dissertation that "context," as it functions in contextual theology, warrants a similar critique. Contexts must be interpreted, but what are the criteria according to which those interpretations may be evaluated?

Are there universal, objective principles for interpreting context? If not, then what should theologians do when people who share a context disagree about the meaning and importance of various factors within their context? How should they adjudicate between competing interpretations of context?

There are indeed factual matters that people can get wrong, like whether inter-caste dining would have attracted Adivasis to the Christian faith or repelled them from it (as in Schoentube's misinterpretation of the first Adivasi conversions), and these factual matters can aid theologians in adjudicating among different interpretations of context. But even with seemingly objective facts people can run into problems. Take, for example, census data. When Hindu nationalist organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) argue that India is being overrun by Christians and that, if Christian missions are left unchecked, soon all of India will have converted to Christianity, others point to census data—seemingly objective, factual data—to demonstrate that the overall percentage of Christians in India remains low. Yet there is a widespread belief among both Hindus and Christians that members of Scheduled Castes (SCs) who have converted to Christianity sometimes lie about their religious affiliation in order to continue to receive reservations. If this is the case, then the percentage of Christians would be higher than the census data indicates. Or one might inquire about the criteria according to which a person is categorized as a Christian. Must a person be baptized? What about people who worship Jesus alongside other deities? What about those who attend church but do not believe in God? Is religion about belief or practice? Is it a private, personal matter, or does it have wider consequences for families and communities? Much inter-religious conflict arises from the fact that people disagree about the answers to these questions.

Even more challenging than agreeing on the facts, however, is the task of discerning their meaning and significance. If the percentage of Christians in India were actually increasing, would that be a good thing, a bad thing, or a neutral thing? Most Adivasi Christians would likely view it as a positive development, but there are some individuals who might be concerned about increased competition for leadership positions in the church, the sincerity of new converts, the growth of other churches that they deem to be heretical, or the additional governmental scrutiny of ecclesial policies and administrative matters that would likely accompany high rates of conversion. Some might argue that the overall percentage of Christians is not important, prioritizing instead the church's charitable work and the extent to which it has improved the lives of the poor and oppressed.

Sometimes our interpretations of context conflict not so much because of differences in *how* we interpret the meaning and significance of various factors in our context but rather because of *what* we pay attention to in the first place. When my husband and I took a trip to Kerala, I stared at all the signs in Malayalam and tried to figure out the alphabet. Foolishly, I assumed that my husband must be doing the same thing, but when I asked him what he was thinking about, he said, "Furniture." *Furniture?* "Yeah, we passed by a little shop with wooden chairs, and I've been wondering how they made them. Where are the sawmills? Are they produced in large factories or by people in those little shops themselves? Do they have power tools or only hand tools? How do they do the joints? Do they have screws?" I was amazed; these were questions that would never have entered my head, but my husband, who loves building and fixing things, was curious about all the technical aspects of their production.

My point is that different people notice different things, and this affects our interpretations of our contexts. In the example of the *patri* on the styrofoam plate, I focused on

the environmental impact of the materials with which they were made, whereas the women in the congregation were likely more attuned to social dynamics, the cleanliness of the space, and the food itself. This diversity in perception is a gift. But it makes the task of interpreting contexts messy, sometimes leading to misunderstanding and conflict. That drama is heightened by the theological impulses that accompany our attempts at meaning-making.

Does the traditional liturgy of the GELC indicate respect for the German missionaries who first brought Christianity to the Adivasis or a lack of appreciation for traditional tribal culture? Are traditional tribal languages obstacles to Christian unity or the media through which we most authentically encounter the divine? Is a statue of the Virgin Mary wearing a red-bordered sari a way to honor traditional Adivasi culture or a cynical strategy to convert Adivasis to the Christian faith? Are outsiders oppressors who want to take advantage of Adivasis or partners for collaboration? It depends who you ask, what they see, and how they interpret it.

In light of the manifold possibilities for interpreting our contexts, theologians have a responsibility to defend their interpretations of context, to be transparent about what they have chosen to focus on and why they have interpreted it in the way they have, and to revise their interpretations when confronted with new information or compelling arguments. My own choice to focus on places of conflict and tension in the Adivasi context—things that muddy the waters and make the enterprise of contextual theology more complicated and challenging than theologians (including myself) would like it to be—reflects what some would describe as a low view of human nature (a suspicion of overly neat accounts of God and context on account of the propensity for human sinfulness) coupled with a belief that God works in and through the messiness of human life (most powerfully illustrated in the incarnation). While some might

prefer to downplay the contested nature of contexts in order to facilitate political mobilization, I worry about what gets erased in this process and who benefits (and who suffers) as a result.

One of the gifts of theological reflection that explicitly attends to context is its ability to expand the possibilities for our understanding of both ourselves and the divine. Are human beings capable of navigating a larger array of such understandings than those typically curated by theologians? Contextual theologians would likely answer in the affirmative—until, however, it is their constructions of God and context that become the object of scrutiny. But in response to those who fear that shining a light upon the conflicts and challenges that accompany contextualization may discourage communities that are already marginalized and oppressed, I would contend that these contested aspects of context are precisely where theological reflection and deliberation are most needed. To side-step them is to dilute the potential for theology to be relevant and liberating.

Ultimately, my critical stance toward the concept of context stems not from cynicism but rather from hope. There is not only one way to see things. Our understanding of our contexts—and of God's relationship to our contexts—is partial and incomplete. When we are in positions of power, shaping the bounds of acceptable discourse and praxis, this may seem threatening. But when we are among the oppressed, searching for new ways to live, this is good news. Shoki Coe, who first promoted the language of "contextualization," worried that the then common language of "indigenization" was too "past-oriented." Contextualization, he proposed, could be "a more dynamic concept which is open to change and which is also future-oriented."[9] In a sense, then, what I am calling for is a return to the original vision of contextual theology with its recognition

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[9] Shoki Coe, "Contextualizing Theology," in *Third World Theologies*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky, Mission Trends, No. 3 (New York: Paulist Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 20–21.

that "context" is a dynamic concept: not only can contexts change, but our perspectives on them can change as well.

The conflicts and tensions we encounter as we pursue contextualization can spur us to re-examine our understandings of God and the world. It is in and through the resultant change—which, from a theological perspective, we might consider *metanoia* or transformation—that we may come to know the living God. The indeterminacy of context, rather than being an obstacle for theology, is instead what accounts for its revelatory potential.

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