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Category Mistake

The Sonbhadra massacre and the violence of misclassification



Family members of Adivasi victims killed in the Sonbhadra massacre grieving as nine dead bodies arrive in the village, in July 2019. VISHAL SRIVASTAV/EXPRESS ARCHIVES

AKASH POYAM

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On 17 July 2019, in Uttar Pradesh's Sonbhadra district, about three hundred men belonging to the Gujjar community—led by village headman Yagyadutt—murdered 11 people from the Gond tribe, including four women, and injured over thirty others. The gruesome massacre in broad daylight was connected to a dispute over land that Gonds had cultivated since before Independence. However, that

mattered little. As one villager told a reporter, “If you till the land, we till documents, they said.” Gujjars are a dominant land-owning caste and are classified as an Other Backward Class in Uttar Pradesh. They exemplify the kind of power dominant castes wield over Adivasi communities.

Violence against tribal communities, particularly over land, is not new. Ancient Brahminical texts have demonised them as *asura*, *rakshasa* or *danava*, and they have been subject to dominant-caste violence and displacement even before 1947. Yet the Sonbhadra massacre stood out for its scale. It was among the first instances in independent India where dominant-caste Hindus murdered such a large number of Adivasis. The massacre demonstrated that tribal communities are not exempt from systemic and ongoing caste violence. And a peculiar factor that contributes to their vulnerability is the issue of misclassification.

The Gonds killed in the massacre were landless and had been earlier classified as Scheduled Castes in Uttar Pradesh, which limited their access to the protections available to Scheduled Tribes under the constitution.

Sonbhadra was carved out of Mirzapur, which had earlier been part of the United Provinces. Portions of Mirzapur were listed as “Partially Excluded Areas” under the Government of India Act of 1935; after Independence, many such areas came under the Fifth Schedule of the constitution. A 1947 document titled “Report of the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas (Other than Assam) Sub-Committee” recommended safeguards for Mirzapur’s tribal population: an advisory committee of tribals, constitutional prohibitions on the transfer of tribal land to outsiders without official sanction, and a reserved seat in the Provincial Assembly. But since Gonds and others in the region were not categorised as a tribe, these protections never applied. The reserved Assembly seat, moreover, was created only in 2012, when Obra was declared an ST constituency.

ST status, therefore, would have affirmed their rights over forest land and produce, and perhaps allowed them a pathway to better political representation and made them eligible for central- and state-government welfare schemes on education, health, housing and so on. ST status would have also pushed the UP government to follow the sub-committee’s recommendations. Many Adivasi communities can be self-reliant and free from typical forms of dependency on upper-caste communities because of their spiritual connection with the forests they draw livelihoods from. The state’s flawed categorisation draws Adivasis into the snare of exploitation and violence from upper castes.

The problem lies in the state’s arbitrary treatment of Adivasi identity. Gonds are recognised as ST in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal and Odisha. But in Uttar Pradesh, they were classified as SC until 2002, when an amendment placed them in the ST category only in 13 districts, including Sonbhadra and Mirzapur. In 2022, it was extended to four more districts. In the rest of the state, they remain classified as SC. Numerous other tribal communities in the state face similar misclassification

as SC or OBC, continuing to wait for recognition as ST.

This flawed system does more than deny access to welfare schemes—it shapes the kind of violence communities face. Dalits often confront caste-based exclusion and the ghastly violence that accrues from the concept of untouchability; Adivasis are more often dispossessed through land grabs, displacement and cultural erasure. And for upper castes, these census distinctions and constitutional categories matter little—what matters is their ability to exercise control through violence.

Adivasi communities were never part of the Hindu caste system. In Uttar Pradesh, it was the state's misclassification that left them doubly vulnerable. Despite its brutality, Sonbhadra has not entered Adivasi public memory in the way massacres such as Karamchedu or Laxmanpur Bathe have within the Dalit movement. This absence reflects a larger problem: the marginalisation of the caste question within Adivasi discourse, which has historically centred on land, forests, culture and language. Yet questions of land alienation, militarisation, displacement and violence are, in one way or another, always connected to the caste question. Indeed, Adivasi writers in Maharashtra in the 1980s—such as Waharu Sonwane, Bhujang Meshram and Usha Kiran Atram—drew inspiration from Dalit literature and thought and mounted trenchant anti-Brahminical critiques.

Recent incidents show violence against Adivasis is not confined to Uttar Pradesh. In 2021, in Chhattisgarh's Balrampur district, seven men from the Pando tribe, accused of stealing fish, were tied to a tree and beaten by OBC Yadavs. (Balrampur, part of the erstwhile Surguja district bordering Sonbhadra, has a predominantly Adivasi population.) In 2020, a Brahmin man in Madhya Pradesh's Sidhi district was filmed urinating on an Adivasi man. In 2018, A Madhu, a 30-year-old Adivasi man in Kerala, was lynched for allegedly stealing rice. Recognition as ST does not end violence, but it offers legal and constitutional safeguards that can help reduce vulnerability.

The history of Adivasis in Uttar Pradesh has been one of “annihilation” and “upsurge,” as AK Verma writes in the *Economic and Political Weekly*. The Presidential Order of 1950 identified only five tribes in the state, yet the UP government took 17 years to notify even those. As a result, the 1951 and 1961 censuses recorded that there were no STs in UP. Many other tribes were left out entirely, labelled as “Non-Scheduled Tribes” (a category the government did not officially recognise) and arbitrarily placed within the Hindu caste order. Among those excluded were the Gond, Dhuria, Kharwar, Kol, Mallah, Nayak, Raj Gond, Saharya, Baiga, Banjara and many other communities. If correctly identified, Verma estimates, “the ST population in UP may be close to that at the national level, 8.6%.”

Verma notes that the NSTs faced multiple discriminations. They were denied identity as tribes, with those placed in the SC category “made untouchables whereas they had not experienced untouchability in their tribal society,” while “tribes placed in OBC category lost all governmental patronage that might have

accrued to them as STs” (until the implementation of the Mandal Commission’s recommendations, in 1993). Verma points out another important cost of the identification of a few tribes in 2002–03: those who were moved from SC to ST status were entitled to only one-percent reservation in government jobs, while as SCs they were getting 21 percent. This shift created a disincentive for communities that got ST status. Had all tribal groups in UP been counted properly, they could have secured a larger share in education and employment under the ST category.

Meanwhile, districts such as Sonbhadra have borne the brunt of displacement and exploitation in the name of “development.” Its official website boasts of thermal power stations, aluminium plants and dam projects by massive conglomerates and public sector undertakings, but the human cost has been catastrophic. The Rihand Dam alone displaced 50,000 people in 108 villages in the 1960s. Many of those families were uprooted again by subsequent power plants, coal mines and industrial projects. As *India Today* reported in 1993, some were relocated four times in 30 years.

Across the border, in Chhattisgarh’s Surguja district, Gonds enjoy the protections of ST status and the Fifth Schedule: rights to forests, restrictions on land transfer, and the authority of gram sabhas over development projects. A massacre such as the one in Sonbhadra would be far harder to execute there. The contrast underscores how devastating UP’s misclassification has been.

As the union government prepares for a caste census, much hope is being pinned on the exercise. But unless misclassified tribal groups are restored to their rightful status, the census will only reproduce the injustices of the past. More importantly, Sonbhadra should have been a turning point—a moment for Adivasi movements across the country to demand justice and mount a strong anti-Brahminical critique. Instead, it has faded from the nation’s conscience.

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AKASH POYAM is a writer and researcher based in north Chhattisgarh. He is a former assistant editor at *The Caravan*.

Adivasi

Uttar Pradesh

Sonbhadra Massacre