

Identity Under Pressure: Banjaras, State, and Religion

My present study revolves around the Banjaras (one of India's prominent Denotified/"ex-criminal" tribes) in context of how these communities negotiate with the state, organized religion, and majoritarian politics in contemporary South Asia. Situating within socio-cultural and political anthropology, it looks into, on one hand, demands for social justice and recognition (such as ST status, language recognition, and protections against atrocities), and on the other, political assertion and cultural resistance that resist the state's attempts to assimilate them through Hinduization and electoral mobilization. I want to question how Hindu majoritarian politics places the Banjaras within mainstream Hindu identity, despite their distinct culture not aligning with any organized religion. As engagement with the current state requires publicly declaring a religious identity to claim benefits, they are pushed toward more organized forms of religious identity, which they even contest in pockets. With the upcoming census, this becomes more urgent, placing such a non-homogeneous community in a tight space where maintaining indigenous syncreticity and asserting politically are constantly negotiated. I, being an insider to this community, draw on this position empirically, while methodologically I plan to combine ethnographic fieldwork.