

Outlook Replug: The First People, Still Fighting

In December 2022, Outlook devoted a landmark cover issue to this very question—of Adivasi identity, faith and survival.

Outlook News Desk

Published at: 17 February 2026 7:11 am

Summary of this article

- *Adivasis find themselves navigating competing pressures—of integration and autonomy, representation and co-option, visibility and vulnerability.*
- *To understand Adivasi India today is to understand a people negotiating modernity on their own terms.*
- *It is to recognise that their struggle is not simply about inclusion within the nation, but about redefining the terms of that inclusion.*

In February this year, as thousands of Adivasis gathered in Assam's tea belt demanding recognition and dignity, their slogans echoed a struggle far older than the Indian republic itself. Across forests, hills and plantations—from Jharkhand's Sarna groves to the tea gardens of Upper Assam, from the red earth of Bastar to the sal forests of Junglemahal—India's Adivasis continue to fight not merely for welfare or representation, but for the right to remain who they are.

They call themselves the first people. Yet their place in modern India remains precarious.

In December 2022, Outlook devoted a landmark cover issue to this very question—of [Adivasi identity](#), faith and survival. The cover package documented a moment of churn: the demand for a separate

Sarna religious code, the anxieties over land alienation, and the growing resolve among Adivasi communities to defend their cultural and spiritual inheritance. It argued that what India was witnessing was not an isolated set of protests, but the emergence of a deeper consciousness—one rooted in history, memory and resistance. More than two years later, that moment has not passed. It has intensified.

For decades, the Adivasi question was framed in the language of development. Governments spoke of roads, schools, dams and welfare schemes. But beneath that vocabulary lay a quieter, deeper anxiety among Adivasi communities: the fear of erasure. Land acquisition did not just mean displacement; it meant severance from ancestors. Religious categorisation did not just mean enumeration; it meant absorption into identities that were not their own.

What has changed in recent years is not the nature of this struggle, but its clarity.

[Adivasis across India](#) are no longer articulating their demands solely in terms of economic deprivation. They are asserting a civilisational claim—to land, to memory, to belief systems that predate organised religion, and to ways of life built around ecological balance rather than extraction. The demand for a separate Sarna religious code, the resistance to mining in forest regions, the revival of indigenous festivals, and the political mobilisation around tribal identity all reflect the same impulse: a refusal to disappear quietly.

This assertion is unfolding at a moment when India itself is undergoing profound social and political transformation. Questions of identity, belonging and historical ownership have moved to the centre

of public life. In this churn, Adivasis find themselves navigating competing pressures—of integration and autonomy, representation and co-option, visibility and vulnerability.

Their experience presents a paradox. Constitutionally recognised and politically courted, Adivasis remain materially and culturally marginalised. Their votes matter, but their worldview is often misunderstood. Their lands are rich in minerals, but their communities remain among the poorest. Their cultures are celebrated in festivals and textbooks, yet their religious and intellectual traditions continue to struggle for formal recognition.

And yet, something irreversible is underway.

A new generation of Adivasi writers, activists, students and political leaders is reshaping the conversation. They are no longer content with being spoken for; they are speaking for themselves. Their assertion is visible in literature and law, in protest sites and electoral campaigns, in courtrooms and classrooms. What was once seen as a fragmented and localised struggle is beginning to assume the contours of a broader political and cultural movement.

This movement is not uniform. It contains contradictions, disagreements and competing visions of the future. Some seek integration with dignity; others demand autonomy and recognition of distinct identity. Some engage with electoral politics; others remain deeply sceptical of it. But across these differences runs a shared conviction—that survival requires assertion.

To [understand Adivasi India](#) today is to understand a people negotiating modernity on their own terms. It is to recognise that their struggle is not simply about inclusion within the nation, but about redefining the terms of that inclusion.

The story of India's Adivasis is often told as a story of loss. But it is equally a story of endurance.

Despite centuries of displacement, assimilation and neglect, Adivasi communities have preserved religions without scriptures, histories without written archives, and identities without institutional protection. Their survival itself is a form of resistance.

Today, that resistance is becoming more visible—and more political.

India is finally being forced to listen.