

AN OUTREACH TO TRIBALS THAT CHECKS ALL THE BOXES

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of STs, SCs, and OBCs - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

In the Ayodhya *kanda* of the *Ramayana*, when Lord Rama is exiled from the kingdom of Ayodhya, and reaches the northern bank of the Ganga at Sringerapur, he is received by the king of the neighbouring kingdom of Nishadha, Guha. Rama treats the tribal leader, Guha, as his own conscience. Rama stays at Guha's place and the Nishadha king helps Rama cross the river the next day. In the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna's travels in the Northeast lead to his encounter with Ulupi, the princess of the Naga tribe, who he marries and has a son with, Iravan. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are replete with harmonious relationships between forest dwellers and the "city dwellers".

Despite a place for tribals in Indian culture and history, the enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 by the British government, branded the very 'descendants' of Guha as criminals. With its racist overtones and the stereotyping of tribes as uncivilised, this Act aimed to create a sense of fear against tribal communities. Various tribes across India resisted British rule vehemently and the law was aimed at dealing with these tribes with an iron fist. From Birsa Munda and Tanti Bhoi in the north and central parts, Komaram Bheem and Thalakkal Chandu in the south to the likes of Rani Gaidinliu in the northeast, tribal movements in different regions of the country waged spirited battles against the British colonial rule. A lot of their contributions today are either not known or not fully appreciated.

The aim of commemorating November 15, the birthday of Bhagwan Birsa Munda, as Janjatiya Gaurav Divas is to ensure that the freedom fighters from various tribal communities who fought for India's Independence get their rightful recognition. It will also ensure that the heritage, culture and the values of the 705 tribal communities (Scheduled Tribes) that constitute approximately 10% of our population is protected and is made accessible across the nation.

Since Independence, there have been efforts to improve the social, political and economic conditions of the tribal populations. Ensuring political representation by reserving electoral constituencies with large tribal populations was one such vehicle. However, representation at ministerial levels was still restricted to the odd figurehead Minister such as Tribal Affairs. The recent expansion of the Union Council of Ministers led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi saw the inclusion of eight Ministers belonging to the Scheduled Tribes representing the States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha and West Bengal. They represent the Gond, Santal, Miji, Munda, Tea Tribe, Kokana and Sonowal-Kachari communities. The Union Cabinet now has three Ministers who belong to various tribal communities. Contrast this with the period between 2004- 2014, when tribal community political representatives were considered mere figureheads. Under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, between 2004-2014, the Ministers from the tribal community were fewer and primarily restricted to the Tribal Affairs Ministry.

Apart from political representation, it is also important to ensure that tribal communities see economic progress and better human development indicators. This received renewed impetus in 1999, when former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee set up a separate Ministry for Tribal Affairs. Now, under Mr. Modi, imbalances in budgetary provisions are being addressed in mission mode. For the year 2021-2022, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs saw a budgetary allocation of 7,524.87 crore. This is nearly double the budgetary allocation made in the last UPA Budget of

2013-2014.

After close to 90 years, the Indian Forest Act of 1927 was amended in 2017 (The Indian Forest (Amendment) Act, 2017; <https://bit.ly/3wR8zSS>) so that bamboo is no longer classified as a tree. This has allowed for the economic value of bamboo to be leveraged to its fullest potential and also brought the Act in consonance with the Forest Rights Act of 2006. The biggest beneficiaries of this are the forest dwelling tribal communities who are now able to use such forest produce to make value-added utility products. The role of tribal marketing development corporations in building market linkages is further increasing incomes of tribal communities.

Sustainable development also needs to ensure that human development indicators (HDIs) in nutrition, health and education are being improved. The National Education Policy (NEP) acknowledges the additional focus required for tribal communities to address issues such as higher dropout rates.

The NEP, by ensuring that the medium of instruction until at least Class 5, will be the mother tongue or local language of the child has ensured that tribal languages are protected and are treated on a par with languages mentioned in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. The expansion of the Eklavya Model Residential Schools, from 90 new schools sanctioned in the UPA years to 472 new schools sanctioned since 2014, will ensure that tribal children will see better education outcomes. This coupled with health interventions in the form of primary health and wellness centres and nutrition programmes will see improved HDIs among tribal communities in the long run.

Bhagwan Birsa Munda was only 25 when he died in prison (1900). He fought bravely against the exploitative system of the British Raj and spearheaded a movement against the British colonial oppressive system. It is unfortunate that the contributions of several other tribal freedom fighters including those of tribal women freedom fighters such as Rani Gaidinlu, Jhano Murmu, Helen Lepcha and others have nearly been forgotten.

There are records of over 200 tribal freedom fighters across India who participated in about 85 instances of revolts and uprisings against colonial rule. To recognise this, 10 tribal freedom fighter museums are being set up in the States of Andhra Pradesh (Lambasingi), Chhattisgarh (Raipur), Goa (Ponda), Gujarat (Rajpipla), Jharkhand (Ranchi), Kerala (Kozhikode), Madhya Pradesh (Chhindwara), Manipur (Taminglong), Mizoram (Kelsey) and Telangana (Hyderabad) will showcase the contribution of tribal freedom fighters and are at different stages of construction and completion.

Commemorating November 15 every year will integrate various stakeholders and allow for a discussion on the achievements and contributions of tribal communities, their cultural heritage, and practices and traditions among the younger generation of Indians. As India celebrates its 75th year of Independence with 'Azadi ka Amrit Mahostav', this would be a thoughtful gift for our tribal community and a recall to Ram Rajya — where the likes of Guha are given due respect, their cultural diversity is respected, and their contributions celebrated.

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