

Reaching Out to Tribals

The Prime Minister's recent admission of the democratic system of the country having failed to address the grievances of tribals is welcome, though belated. Dr Manmohan Singh has admitted to the "systematic failure in giving tribals a stake in modern economic processes that inexorably intrude into their living spaces" and said that the "alienation built over decades" is "now taking a dangerous turn in some parts of our country" - a pointer to the rapidly ramifying Naxalite movement. "Systematic exploitation and social and economic abuse of our tribal communities can no longer be tolerated... But the fact is that no sustained activity is possible under the shadow of the gun. Nor have those who claim to speak for the tribals offered an alternate economic or social path that is viable. The cult of violence will only bring greater misery to the common people. We have to counter this threat with determination," he added. The Prime Minister has also harped on the large number of cases registered against tribals that has given rise to "a good deal of harassment to those whose traditional rights were not recognized by earlier forest laws" and "the heavy hand of the criminal justice system" that "has become a source of harassment and exploitation".

Can one now hope for a new beginning, given that "it cannot be said that we have dealt sensitively and with concern with these (tribal-related) issues in the past?" Has the government the will to profit from experience? The government - both at the Centre and in States where tribals have been marginalized over the years and where they are at the mercy of either developed communities or an unjust system must first realize that tribal communities have their own existential patterns that provide stiff resistance to outside influences for the fear of losing their unique identities. This, indubitably, is a deterrent to the spread of development. However, there is always the scope to, what the Prime Minister has said, "address issues relating to creating sustainable livelihoods, preserving the traditional sense of community and helping the tribals cope with the trauma of dislocation (resulting from development project) and alienation". Let the existing laws be improved upon or new ones introduced and tribal-and-region-specific mechanism be put in place so as to provide meaningful compensation to the tribals displaced as a result of development processes. The march of modernism should embrace them in a wholesome manner, and they should be able to appreciate the happening of development and benefit from it foremost. Secondly, as the Prime Minister has rightly reminded the States afflicted with Naxal violence due primarily to the sense of alienation ' among the tribal population and the exploitation of this fact by Naxalites, it is high time "committed and competent officers" are posted in tribal areas, backed by "strong incentives", so that the process of reaching out to the neglected tribals is fashioned professionally and pragmatically. But however attractive be the incentives offered, will any competent officer be prepared to work in tribal areas infested with Naxalism sans security? It would be another matter, though, if they were to be forced to work in such areas and die at the hands of Naxalites in the name of a new counter-Naxal paradigm!

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