

ANALYSIS HISTORY

# The Advansi Imprint on the Constitution and the Republic's Amnesia

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Why do the hopes and aspirations of India's aboriginal peoples – the most marginalised and deprived – still remain a distant mirage? Has the Constitution failed India's aboriginals, or was the faith of their forefathers tragically misplaced?



Representational image: Members of tribal communities protest over forest rights and recognition of other basic rights, in Thane, Maharashtra, November 2025. Photo: PTI.

Like Shabari in the Ramayana – a forest-dweller who appears only fleetingly yet decisively alters the course of an epic – the role of Advansi communities in the making of the Indian Constitution has long been treated as marginal, even incidental. Shabari neither commanded armies nor authored grand pronouncements; she merely offered guidance rooted in lived wisdom, quietly steering

the protagonists towards a just and transformative alliance. In much the same way, Adivasis – though sparsely represented and rarely foregrounded in nationalist historiography – shaped India's constitutional imagination through their experience of land, community, and autonomy.

Their imprint survives not in rhetorical flourish but in the Constitution's deepest structures: its commitment to pluralism, the protection of customary lifeworlds, and the moral recognition that the Republic's path was charted not only in assembly halls but also from the forests at its margins.

If Shabari's quiet intervention unsettles the epic's hierarchy, Professor Nandini Sundar performs a similar corrective in constitutional history. In her evocatively titled essay *We Will Teach India Democracy: Indigenous Voices in Constitution Making* (2023), Sundar overturns the familiar portrayal of Adivasis as mere beneficiaries of constitutional benevolence and restores them as political educators of the Republic. Drawing upon petitions, mobilisations, and interventions by Adivasi leaders and communities during the late colonial and early constitutional moment, she demonstrates how ideas of collective decision-making, autonomy, and moral restraint on State power travelled upward – from forest societies to the constitutional text – rather than downward from elite assemblies.

Democracy, in this telling, was not a gift bestowed by the nation-state but a lesson insisted upon by those who had long practised it within their own lifeworlds. Like Shabari's guidance in the *Ramayana*, these interventions were easy to overlook; yet without them, India's constitutional democracy would have been thinner, more majoritarian, and far less humane.

'The most democratic people on the earth'  
Jaipal Singh Munda, a versatile genius and Marang Gomke (Supreme Leader) of the Adibasi Mahasabha who later became a prominent member of the Constituent Assembly, articulated this moral claim with striking clarity. In his presidential address to the

Sabha on 21 January 1939, he asserted: “The Adibasis are the ancient aristocracy of India [...] The Adibasis solved the problem of democracy, marriage laws, equality of the sexes, village government and simple living long ago. Their sense of private and public morality is very high. Although the Adibasis are very poor, their general intelligence is fairly high”.

The Mundas of Jharkhand, he reminded the nation, practised collective ownership of land – unlike the so-called advanced peoples. Jaipal Singh and his organisation aligned themselves firmly with the Indian National Congress and its goal of independence, but the Congress, in turn, remained largely lukewarm towards the Adivasi movement.

In the Constituent Assembly, Jaipal Singh represented what he called the “Never United and Scattered Adivasis” of India. It was he who single-handedly pressed for constitutional reservations for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Speaking on 19 December 1946, he declared with unmistakable force: “If there is any group of Indian people that has been shabbily treated it is my people. They have been disgracefully treated and neglected for the last 6000 years. The history of the Indus Valley civilisation, a child of which I am, shows quite clearly that it is the new comers – most of you here are intruders as far as I concerned – it is the new comers who have driven away my people from the Indus Valley to the jungle fastness. This Resolution is not going to teach Adibasis democracy. You cannot teach democracy to the tribal people; you have to learn democratic ways from them. They are the most democratic people on the earth [...] There is no question of caste in my society. We are all equal”.

He drew attention to the existence of historical tribal republics in India, citing Jawaharlal Nehru’s *The Discovery of India*. Jaipal Singh also consistently advocated women’s representation and gender equality, protesting the complete absence of tribal women from the Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights, Minorities, and Tribal and Excluded Areas constituted by the Assembly.

Voices from India's far east

Jaipal Singh was not alone. Five other tribal members – Dharanidhar Basumatary, Boniface Lakra, J.J.M. Nichols Roy, Devendranath Samanta, and Dambar Singh Gurung – sat in the Constituent Assembly. More significantly, constitutional debates travelled far beyond Delhi, permeating grassroots political life in the tribal regions of the Northeast.

By April 1947, the Garo Hills of present-day Meghalaya had become a hive of constitutional deliberation. An elected Garo Hills National Conference was convened at Tura, where delegates asserted Garo autonomy within the broader framework of Assam and India. Their five-page Proposed Constitution of the Garo Hills Union envisioned a participatory, consensus-based democracy. It proposed a three-tier federation guaranteeing maximum autonomy to the Garo Hills Union and recommended women's reservation as well as a collaborative executive structure, whereby the runner-up in the presidential election would serve as vice-president. The draft guaranteed freedom of religion and, remarkably for its time, even proposed the abolition of the death penalty.

Between 1946 and 1947, other tribal communities across the Northeast – including the Mizo and the Khasi – produced similar constitutional drafts rooted in consultation, autonomy, and restraint of power.

Yet official statistics leave little doubt that India's Adivasi communities today remain among the most impoverished and deprived sections of the population. Despite constitutional guarantees, Scheduled Tribes consistently lag behind national averages on core human-development indicators. Literacy among STs stands at around 59%, far below the national average of 73%. Nearly 41% of Adivasi children under five are stunted, and over 39% are underweight. Infant mortality among STs significantly exceeds the all-India figure, while anaemia afflicts more than two-thirds of Adivasi children and nearly 65% of women.

Poverty for Adivasis, therefore, is not merely a matter of low income. It manifests as chronic nutritional insecurity, educational exclusion, poor health outcomes, and fragile access to basic services. This structural deprivation is further exacerbated in conflict-affected tribal belts, where Maoist insurgency and counter-insurgency operations have turned everyday life into a zone of fear – disrupting schools and healthcare, hollowing out local governance, and rendering Adivasis collateral victims in a violent contest between the State and armed groups. The paradox is stark: communities that helped shape the Constitution’s most humane provisions continue to inhabit the margins of the Republic it founded.

“The whole history of my people is one of continuous exploitation and dispossession by the non-aboriginals of India punctuated by rebellions and disorder, and yet I take Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru at his word. I take you all at your word that now we are going to start a new chapter, a new chapter of Independent India where there is equality of opportunity, where no one would be neglected,” Jaipal Singh voiced this ebullient hope in his Constituent Assembly speech of December 19, 1946.

As the Republic now turns 77, it is time for sober introspection. Why do the hopes and aspirations of India’s aboriginal peoples – the most marginalised and deprived – still remain a distant mirage? Has the Constitution failed India’s aboriginals, or was the faith of their forefathers tragically misplaced?

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