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How democracy has failed India's adivasis

The process of injustice that began with the imperial forest department intensified under our forest departments. Forest laws dispossessed the adivasis from their habitats.

KEY FIRSTPOST PRINT EDITION

BY SHAMIM MEGHANI MODI
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The adivasi community has been fighting the state for more than 250 years for their right to live with dignity and honour. Independence and the democratic structures that it brought, too, have failed to end the oppression of these groups.

All they want is their traditional sources of livelihood and habitation to be preserved, something that the Indian state is constitutionally bound to do. Though it has interest in the resources they protect, the state sees the adivasis as the enemy, the biggest internal security threat.



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The process of injustice that began with the imperial forest department intensified under our forest departments. Forest laws dispossessed the adivasis from their habitats. They were criminalised, with the state being the biggest litigant against these marginalised and vulnerable section of the society. The protective provisions enshrined in the fifth and sixth schedules of the Constitution were reduced to showpieces and adivasis deprived of their land, water and forests in the name of development.

Communities that took pride in freedom and self-sufficiency were reduced to destitution, their survival difficult without the state feeding them. It did not come as a surprise to me when in 1990s an

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adivasi resident of Madhya Pradesh's Betul district told me, "We are called *aadhabaasi* (adivasi) because we are *aadha vasi*, which means half humans and you people are *pura vasi*, complete humans."

The most serious assault is on their dignity and freedom. We have betrayed the adivasi population by failing to protect its habitat from our greed, what we call development. In my more than two decades of working with adivasis, I have seen the utter failure of the so-called mainstream to understand the adivasi map of the world and their conceptualisation of development and democracy.

The gap in our understanding of their world and aspirations can be gauged from what Lada Sikaka, a Dongria Kondh adivasi leader from Odisha's Niyamgiri, said to an Indian Forest Service officer. "If you want our development then why don't you teach our children things that are relevant to us and important for our community and that, too, in our language," Lada said.

We have to listen. We have to develop our own emotional competencies to understand and comprehend their lives before declaring them backward. Dr BD Sharma, the last SC and ST commissioner, rightly said the adivasis were at a different stage of development, and not backward.

Jaipal Munda, one of the few adivasi members of the Constituent Assembly, said during a debate, "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 Jawaharlal 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".

But, the promise has not been kept. It's evident from Bhaiyalal's opinion of the poll process. A Korku adivasi from Harda in Madhya Pradesh, he says, "...we'll vote where we are told to by our maalik (master). ... they will come to know once the results are out and we will have to pay a heavy price for not voting as instructed... Every morning, we get buttermilk from their house, so our wishes mean little."

Democracy treats everyone equal, but does not make them equal. How can democracy work in an unequal world? After 72 years of democracy, we can see Munda's apprehension was correct and democracy has betrayed the adivasi population. For India to be a true democracy, we have to respect the adivasis' essence of freedom to live in synergy with their habitat. The colonial legacy we cling to has to be shunned for us to become a truly independent nation, capable of understanding, planning and implementing development as understood by the adivasi people.

(Shamim Meghani Modi is an adivasi rights activist and chairperson of the Centre for Law and Society at Tata Institute of Social Sciences)

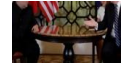
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