

Gothra Mahasabha manifesto calls for reforms in forest governance

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THE HINDU BUREAU

A joint forum of Adivasi organisations led by the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (AGMS) is set to release a comprehensive manifesto aimed at addressing long-standing socio-economic and political issues faced by tribal communities across Kerala. The document, titled Adivasi Vikasana Manifesto-2026, is being prepared jointly by the AGMS and Adivasi Manifesto Drafting Committee and will be released after the new State government assumes office in May.

According to M. Geethanandan, State coordinator of AGMS, the draft has been finalised and places strong emphasis on land rights, forest governance, education, employment, and, significantly, political representation. The manifesto underscores that ensuring political rights and meaningful participation in governance structures is central to improving the living conditions of Adivasi communities, particularly the most marginalised groups.

The document calls for sweeping reforms in forest governance, arguing that existing laws retain colonial characteristics that exclude indigenous communities. It proposes revising these frameworks to incorporate ecological perspectives and traditional knowledge systems of Adivasis, while also demanding full implementation of the Forest Rights Act. The manifesto alleges that the spirit of the Act has been diluted over the years and calls for the withdrawal of policies that undermine community forest rights.

Land rights and self-governance form a core component of the proposals. The forum has demanded that Adivasi regions be declared Scheduled Areas in the State. It also calls for restoration of alienated tribal land, prevention of encroachments in areas such as Attappady, and protection of settlements, including Aralam Farm.

Significantly, the manifesto places political rights at the forefront, arguing that structural exclusion from decision-making bodies has perpetuated inequality. It seeks reservation for Scheduled Tribes in Lok Sabha constituencies and inclusion within women's reservation frameworks.

Further, the document advocates the establishment of dedicated institutional mechanisms, including a separate Scheduled Tribe Commission and a tribal development corporation, to safeguard rights and monitor policy implementation. It also recommends appointing Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST) representatives in Ministers' personal staff and setting up welfare cells in ST-reserved constituencies such as Wayanad.

Beyond governance, the manifesto outlines measures in education, employment, housing, and economic development, including targeted funding mechanisms, improved access to education, and job creation initiatives. However, the overarching thrust remains the assertion that without securing political representation and decision-making power, other developmental measures would have limited impact.

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