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NCST

chairperson Antar Singh Arya

From issues faced by forest dwellers in tiger reserves to challenges in Manipur and Ladakh, the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST), which has a mandate to safeguard the rights and welfare of the ST community in India, has its hands full as it evaluates the implementation of key government schemes for a community that accounts for 8.6% of India's population.

In an interview with Nikhil Ghanekar, NCST chairperson Antar Singh Arya, speaks about a range of issues including how the forest department does “injustice” to tribal communities.

Edited excerpts:

Could you tell us about the NCST mandate and work done during your tenure?

Our commission reviews the work of the Union government departments, state governments and district administrations. Prior to review, we consult social, political and religious organisations and seek feedback on ground realities of problems faced by tribal communities, and status of implementation of schemes. We provide policy recommendations if necessary.

Every few months, we can also submit updates to the President. However, the annual reports we send to the President are important as they are tabled in Parliament and contain information on our recommendations and policy advice.

Ladakh saw huge protests recently... In 2019, NCST had recommended including Ladakh under the sixth schedule of the Constitution. What do you have to say about their demands?

The recommendation was made before I became chairperson so I cannot say much on that. In 2019, Ladakh was made a Union Territory. Our member Asha Lakra had reviewed the issues on ground in Leh and Kargil a few months ago. I feel if the tribal people there come to the commission and present their views, we can consider them.

On the issue of the big infrastructure project in Great Nicobar, the tribal council had withdrawn NOC for denotification of tribal reserve, and recently they also flagged non-settlement of forest rights. Has the NCST received any representation on this?

We have not received any representation on this issue. We urge everywhere that wherever there are difficulties faced by tribals and there are representations, we will consider them seriously and advise the government, if that is necessary.

Last year, the NCST had taken cognizance of issues faced by tribals and forest dwellers in tiger reserves, and sought explanations from the National Tiger Conservation Authority. This is a recurring issue, what do you have to say?

The commission's aim is to see to it that tribals are not harmed in any way. And especially that tribals should receive the full benefit of the rehabilitation policy. Wherever there are any irregularities, the commission not only takes cognizance but also sends an investigation team. Without following due procedure on rehabilitation and relocation, people cannot be displaced from tiger reserves; but the forest department does injustice. Even we agree that most difficulties faced by the tribals are due to the forest department. Regarding explanations given by them (National Tiger Conservation Authority and forest departments), we will not be satisfied till we independently verify such matters on the ground.

Recently, the commission had held hearings on the issue of Adivasis who fled or migrated from Chhattisgarh to undivided Andhra Pradesh years ago due to violence in the region. How is the NCST addressing this issue?

There has been a tour of Chhattisgarh twice: Kanker, Durg, Bilaspur and Raipur... I believe there's a fairly peaceful atmosphere. I felt that the people who had joined the ranks (of Maoists) are surrendering, and are joining the mainstream. I believe this (Maoism) will end soon.

Some people had migrated due to problems between Maoists and Salwa Judum. Especially people from the Gond community who had migrated to Telangana and Andhra; they are facing a problem. They are not getting the recognition of Scheduled Tribes, that is one of the main issues. I am visiting these states next month. It is very important to examine this issue on ground.

Does the commission have plans to visit Manipur soon, or review issues concerning the state?

Our previous (NCST) secretary went to Manipur, and the Manipur secretary is here. We take feedback from both. In [Delhi](#), we have several officials from Manipur, both serving and retired. We have taken feedback from them as well. Kuki-Zo representatives have said that in our belt, there is a necessity for health infrastructure and an airport. We have talked to (Defence Minister) [Rajnath Singh](#) about this issue, so that they benefit from it.