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ANALYSIS RIGHTS

Remembering Abhay Xaxa, a Fiercely Unapologetic Adivasi Scholar-Activist

A champion for Adivasi rights, Xaxa played an active part in anti-displacement movements in central India.



Abhay Xaxa. Photo: Facebook/Abhay Flavian Xaxa



Mahtab Alam



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My visit to Jantar Mantar on March 4 was a fleeting one. I was there to attend a protest meeting against the CAA, NRC and NPR. There, I saw Adivasi activist and scholar Abhay Xaxa delivering a speech and decided to click a picture of him with the intention of sending it across to him later on, as I had to rush for another meeting then.

I somehow didn't remember to send it to him, and by the time I was reminded of it, he was sadly no longer there to receive it. Ten days after I took that picture, and a day after his birthday, Xaxa passed away because of a heart attack. A native of the Jashpur district of northern Chhattisgarh, Xaxa had completed his PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) after receiving his masters in social anthropology from the University of Sussex, UK.



Abhay Xaxa speaking at Jantar Mantar during an anti-CAA, NRC and NPR rally. Photo: Mahtab Alam

In recent months, he had been very active in the anti-CAA, NRC and NPR campaign and was seen participating in protests related to it. And it was in this regard that he was at Jantar Mantar that day, speaking out at the protest meeting called by Ambedkarite organisations.

His research at JNU involved looking at Tribal Marginality and Laws related to Land in Jharkhand. In Xaxa's understanding, there is a deeply embedded relationship between the legal structures governing land laws and the marginality of the tribal communities. In his view, the relationship is dual in nature as these laws not only impact the marginal situation of tribal communities, but they also, in turn, get influenced through their marginality.

Further in his research, he went on to argue that the agency of tribal communities along with their capacity to negotiate has been undermined because of their marginal position in the broader social structure. Hence, there is a knowledge gap in the understanding of the ways in which legal systems, including law-making and implementation function in the tribal areas. Only by filling up this gap, he observed, would there be an alternative argument about the functions of legal structures vis a vis Adivasis of India.

Xaxa was an active part of anti-displacement movements in central India. In fact, I made his acquaintance during this period. In early 2015, when the Central government tried to legislate anti-people laws like the Land Acquisition Bill, Xaxa mobilised members of the tribal community and activists from Latehar district of Jharkhand to organise what came to be known as the “Poop Protest”.

On the March 18 that year, a number of Adivasis from Latehar lined up and crapped on copies of the proposed Bill. According to the protesters, this was to communicate their anger against the land grab being carried out in the Adivasi areas. When I **asked him in an interview** whether this was an ‘uncivil way to protest’, his answer was quite

direct and unapologetic. “If our poop protest is considered uncivil, then tell me what is civil in this country. Is displacing millions of Adivasis for satisfying corporate greed civil? Is killing thousands of unarmed Adivasis in the name of counter insurgency civil? Is trafficking lakhs of innocent Adivasi girls to cities and raping them civil? Blatantly cheating the Adivasis from the constitutional promises is civil?” he asked.

He went on to question the kind of civility that could be expected from a person who had been uprooted from his or her land, not once but twice in the name of national interest, and was now being threatened for the third time? Xaxa was of the view that if freedom fighters would have bothered to behave in a ‘civil’ manner during the Indian freedom struggle, the country would still have been a British colony.

“The poop protest is the most peaceful and democratic protest against a black law which threatens the core of their life — Jal, Jangal and Jameen, that is! In fact, the Poop protest is not a new form of agitation. Throughout history, whenever oppressed masses have dropped their shit as an arsenal, rulers have been shaken because it often marks the beginning of a social uprising,” he told me in the interview.

In the last few years, the Central government as well as the state of Jharkhand (during the BJP's rule) has tried to bring about **amendments in land laws** related to tribals such as the Chhota Nagpur Tenancy Act (CNT) and the Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act (SPT), which gave special rights to Adivasis.

Over the years, he extensively researched, wrote and campaigned on the issue related to the marginalisation of Adivasis and the Tribal Sub Plan (TSP). The TSP is a budgetary provision to bridge the gap between the Schedule Tribes (STs) and the general population with respect to all socio-economic development indicators in a time-bound manner. In the last few years, he extensively worked and wrote about the TSP and how it was unable to fulfil its desired goals.

According to Xaxa's research, despite clear guidelines, the TSP remained under-allocated for all the 45 years of its implementation. "More importantly, whatever allocations were done under the Tribal Sub Plan remained largely notional, which means they were confined to budget books, and the allocations didn't translate into actual outcomes. Other serious problems about the implementation of TSP was that in most of the years, there remained significant unspent amounts because of the huge disconnect between planning and implementation," he **wrote in a detailed article** last year.

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While he worked with non-Adivasi groups and civil society organisations closely, he was very clear that Adivasis had to write their own stories. He was critical of both academia as well as civil society organisations. In a [detailed interview in 2010](#), he said, “(A)ll the stories we hear (about Adivasis) are from Oxford graduates and ‘upper’ caste people. Those are not our stories. But nothing is too late; we have to write our own stories, about our issues, from our own perspectives. It is better late than never.”

Describing his future plans he said, “I will like to share, to put things in perspective. I have seen the articulation of the Dalit movement, their intellectuals, their activists, students groups. We need to articulate well. I find that the Dalit movement has Babasaheb Ambedkar, Jotiba Phule, who had penned down their thoughts, their struggles. These are now our Bibles and are giving future direction. On the other hand, we, Adivasis have our stories, which have not been documented. We had our leaders but they never wrote down Bibles for us to give directions to Adivasis.” It was no surprise that later he went on to work with the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), where he headed its National Campaign on Adivasi Rights.

He was young, energetic, creative and a committed scholar-activist. It was hardly a surprise to see tributes pouring in all over the social media timeline and over several WhatsApp groups as soon as news of his sudden demise spread. To express himself better, release his anger and perhaps to convey his point of view more directly and unapologetically, he took to poetry.

His **poem** from 2011 *I Am Not Your Data* is an apt commentary on the way civil society organisations treat Adivasis and what's wrong about it. In November 2017, he sent me a poem titled, *Beautifully Damaged People*. It didn't just explain the plight of Adivasis but also declared that the future was the Adivasis! The last stanza of his poem read:

“For if there is any hope of future for this world,
It is by the beautifully damaged people.
Who among the doom and gloom, smile and survive
In togetherness with nature,
The Adivasis!”

There is no doubt that the struggles of the Adivasis will go on uninterrupted. But with Xaxa gone, many have lost a true friend, a fine researcher, a passionate scholar, a committed activist, an able mentor and a budding actor.

Xaxa had worked in a yet to be completed feature film called *Sonchand*, which according to him was the first Adivasi community film project based on crowd-funding and community resources, challenging the Eklayva mythology relating to Adivasis.

With his demise, we have, above all, lost a much-needed critic, whose arguments, insights and criticism would have certainly helped us make this world a better place to live in.

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