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NEWS

Remembering scholar and activist Abhay Xaxa, whose death is an irreparable loss to Adivasi movements

SUSHMITA

<https://caravanmagazine.in/communities/remembering-abhay-xaxa-whose-death-is-a-loss-to-ativasi-movements>



Abhay Xaxa, a scholar and activist born in Chitkawine village of Jashpur district in northern Chhattisgarh, received a fellowship from the Ford Foundation, an American charitable organisation, to pursue a masters in social anthropology at University of Sussex in 2007. He was awarded a PhD from the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Sociology in 2018, where his dissertation focused on the land rights of Adivasi communities in Jharkhand. COURTESY OF FAMILY OF ABHAY XAXA

On the evening of 14 March, a wave of shock and grief gripped a vast number of people as social media was suddenly flooded with the news of the untimely demise of 43-year-old Abhay Xaxa—a scholar, activist, poet and lawyer, among other things. Xaxa belonged to Kurukh or Oraon tribe and was a native of Chhattisgarh. He was gone, much before his time. The loss was felt personally by many, especially those working on issues of rights of Adivasis, as the magnitude of it is immeasurable. Nicholas Barla, secretary of the Office of the Tribal Affairs under the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India was with Xaxa moments before he suffered what has been said to be a heart attack. He was accompanying Xaxa for his speaking engagements in West Bengal's Jalpaiguri. Barla sent across a message to many friends of Xaxa, informing them of his demise, saying, "We have lost one of the tribal gems of India."

The Victorian poet, Alfred Tennyson, in his classic poem “Ulysses,” wrote of the curiosity for knowledge and the unknown till the last moment of life. If there was a person who emulated this philosophy, it was Xaxa. He was one of the foremost intellectuals speaking succinctly on the issues of Adivasi self assertion, culture, identity as well as the economic hardships faced by the tribal communities in several parts of the country.

I started interacting with him about five years ago on various issues concerning Adivasis which included policies and laws impacting the community. I wanted to invite him to Mumbai for a discussion on land rights of Adivasis in Jharkhand. Hailing from the state, I have always felt that there is no visibility to the specific issues facing people from Jharkhand, especially Adivasis. The news that actually makes it to the media is that with sensational and voyeuristic headlines. However, the background and history of Adivasis’ tenurial rights over land is not understood well. Xaxa was the person to approach for that discussion. Since we first came into contact, we spoke on numerous occasions, mainly exchanging views and thoughts on several such issues.

In 2017, I had written an article about a reported (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/raipur/top-maoist-leader-papa-rao-escapes-his-aide-killed-in-bastar-encounter/articleshow/62088017.cms>) case of an encounter killing, in which activists had alleged (<https://www.sabrangindia.in/article/kosi-sori-podiyami-jogi-another-fake-encounter-chhattisgarh>) that the security forces in Chhattisgarh killed an Adivasi woman named Podiyami Jogi, alleging she was Kosi Sori—a close aide to Papa Rao, a top Maoist leader. Xaxa was deeply moved by this and encouraged me to keep writing. He was always helpful to anybody who was trying to highlight the discrimination faced by Adivasis. Xaxa was a catharsis for the grief that Adivasis have felt for centuries—being dispossessed from their lands, killed, encountered, sexually and physically abused.

We met for the last time in January 2019, when he had come to Mumbai for an event. He was dressed in a suit and a tie and told me, “You know, Sushmita, whenever people invite us Adivasis for any talks or seminars, they have an image in mind, may be with a bow and arrow, our traditional *nagadas*”—a traditional instrument. “I am breaking that image with my attire.” Indeed, he was breaking all the stigmas associated with Adivasis and forest-dwelling people, with poise and deep insights.

Xaxa was a born storyteller. He often compared (<https://www.facebook.com/biju.toppo.3/videos/1558979174268395/?t=212>) the history of the exploitation of Adivasis in India to the story of Troy and the Trojan horse. The Trojan horse, a huge structure built of wood, was the subterfuge used in the Trojan war by the Greeks to gain entry into the city of Troy after years of a siege whose end was nowhere in sight. In a video clip (<https://www.facebook.com/biju.toppo.3/videos/1558979174268395/?t=212>) the documentary film-maker Biju Toppo released shortly after Xaxa’s death, he elaborated on this. “The story of the Adivasi society is that of the Trojan horse, the horse being beautiful-looking papers, laws. But actually the real enemies of the Adivasi society are hidden behind those laws.” Xaxa was referring to how Adivasis have been systematically denied their rights by the outsiders who have displaced them and policy makers who have designed policy from perspectives that rarely target their issues. Moreover, Adivasis are perpetually kept busy with paperwork to even stake a claim to what has been theirs for centuries.

Born in Chitkawine village of Jashpur district in northern Chhattisgarh, Xaxa went on to formally study various subjects. Education remained a constant concern for him, right from his early school days, in which he saw many of his batchmates drop out of the school because of lack of means to get through college. He believed that education was an important step towards the emancipation of Adivasi communities.

His political activism started

([https://roundtableindia.co.in/~roundta3/index.php?](https://roundtableindia.co.in/~roundta3/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5909:we-have-to-write-our-own-stories-abhay-xaxa&catid=119&Itemid=132)

[option=com_content&view=article&id=5909:we-have-to-write-our-own-stories-abhay-xaxa&catid=119&Itemid=132](https://roundtableindia.co.in/~roundta3/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5909:we-have-to-write-our-own-stories-abhay-xaxa&catid=119&Itemid=132)) in his early days as a

graduate student of commerce in Kunkuri, a small town in

Chhattisgarh. In an interview given to *Roundtable India*—a website

dedicated to Ambedkarite thoughts—Xaxa described his experience of staying in a hostel which was “simmering with Adivasi consciousness.”

He mentioned that apart from students’ issues, he was also deeply concerned about “the economic exploitation of Adivasis by outsiders”

in the name of the money-lending exercises, in which poor Adivasi households would take small amounts of money from non-Adivasis

and businessmen, and be further exploited.

In the interview, Xaxa also criticised how the right-wing organisation

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh was operating through the Vanvasi

Kalyan Ashram, residential schools meant to draw Adivasis into the

Hindu fold. He recounted how, when he was in college, close to two

hundred RSS cadres reportedly lynched an Adivasi student as they

were organising against the infiltration of the RSS in that area. Xaxa

felt helpless, unable to ensure justice for the student. The killing

forced him and other students to search for ways to avoid such

incidents in future. During college, Xaxa also campaigned for an

Adivasi candidate in a panchayat election. He, along with others went

door to door to campaign for this candidate, leading ultimately to his

victory. But, subsequently this candidate joined hands with his

opponent who was a Baniya by caste. After this incident—perhaps

feeling betrayed—Xaxa thought of going back to his studies, which he

felt he had neglected for too long. He learnt only later that the

candidate they had supported was compelled to join the Baniya

opponent because he owed the latter a substantial amount of money.

Xaxa realised that education could be a way to come out of this

vicious cycle. After completing his Commerce degree, he joined a law

college at Jabalpur.

In 2007, he received a fellowship from the Ford Foundation, an American charitable organisation, to pursue a masters in social anthropology at University of Sussex. Xaxa recounted to RTI that, during the selection interview, looking at his law and commerce background, the interviewers asked him if he was still exploring the discipline. To this, Xaxa had an inspiring response. He said (https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5909%3Awe-have-to-write-our-own-stories-abhay-xaxa&catid=119&Itemid=132), “I told them whatever previous education I had, it was not a waste.” After finishing his Masters, Xaxa went on to pursue his MPhil and PhD from the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Sociology and was awarded a PhD in 2018. His PhD dissertation focused on the land rights of Adivasi communities in Jharkhand.

Neelam Kerketta, a 30-year-old PhD scholar at JNU, came in contact with Xaxa during his time there. Talking about his work, Kerketta said, “He had a far sighted vision and a broad understanding of issues which was informed by his varied experiences and linkages to various national and international networks. This helped a lot in contextualising issues of tribal welfare and development. He had a philosophical understanding of issues that was inclusive and rare.”

Shedding light on how Xaxa was working towards making the community self-dependent, Kerketta noted, “In 2019, we travelled to a couple of states and organised seminars for Adivasi entrepreneurs as Xaxa pointed out that there was a need to develop entrepreneurial skills within the community, so that people are self-dependent and do not have to rely on other links to the market.”

Xaxa also drew from Dalit movements. He believed that while Dalits had many icons from the community who helped in showing a path forward or shaping intellectual discourses around its lived experiences, the same was lacking among Adivasis. He often mentioned Dilip Mandal, a prominent intellectual writing on Dalit

assertion and issues of marginalised communities, in our conversations, especially since Mandal too hails from Jharkhand. When I spoke to Mandal, he told me, “I would often see Abhay in Delhi as part of social movements and irrespective of the issue, he was always there. He was both a scholar and an activist.” He added, “Abhay articulated on issues such as budget, reservations, and faculty reservations in Delhi University. Last I saw him was at a protest on National Register for Citizens”—an official government record that aims to identify those individuals who qualify as Indian citizens.

In a people’s tribunal that took place in April 2018 in Delhi, Xaxa highlighted (<https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/scholarship-neglect-finger-at-govt/cid/1341879>) the fact that 57 lakh Dalit students were affected by the lack of scholarship funds. He drew from the study done by Dalit Adivasi Students Campaign, a campaign raising awareness around the serious obstacles to education faced by *Dalit* and *Adivasi students*—of which Xaxa himself was a part—in Nawada and Latehar districts of Bihar and Jharkhand respectively. The study had found (<https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/scholarship-neglect-finger-at-govt/cid/1341879>) that students in these regions were “forced to quit higher studies and take up work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.”

As part of the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, Xaxa set out (<https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2014/10/22/dalit-rights-are-human-rights-working-with-the-ncdhr/>) on a unique campaign linking budgetary allocations for schemes impacting Dalits and tribal groups to the actual expenditures by conducting a meticulous analysis into the patterns in which money was allocated as revealed in annual budget reports. “Abhay was crucial in distinguishing between the parameters for Dalit and Adivasi rights campaigns,” Rajesh Singh, the national coordinator of the NCDHR and a close associate of Xaxa, who worked with him between 2012 to 2017, told me. “Highlighting the crucial difference between both the struggles, Xaxa argued, while

the campaign for Dalit rights was about asking the state to implement favorable laws and policy measures, the campaign for Adivasi rights was about saving the resources that belonged to Adivasis from state appropriation.” According to Singh, Xaxa believed that unless we understand these differences, simply clubbing both the campaigns as one would not achieve anything. “He argued that the struggle for Adivasis was precisely this—to not become a part of the mainstream.”

Xaxa was especially instrumental in the analysis of the Tribal Sub Plan and its bearings on other laws impacting Adivasis. The TSP was a financial policy introduced in the Fifth Five Year Plan, implemented from 1974 to 1979, by the Congress government, aimed at targeted planning of financial allocations and expenditures with the specific objective of bridging the development gap that exists between Scheduled Tribes and the general population. Singh told me that Xaxa often said, “Don’t think that by allocating funds under the TSP, the state is giving something to Adivasis. In fact, it should allocate much more if we take into account the resources that are at stake.” In a 2019 article (<https://www.firstpost.com/india/adivasis-and-the-indian-state-successive-govts-distorted-tribal-sub-plan-policy-denied-community-fair-share-of-budgetary-reserves-7235461.html>) published in *Firstpost*, Xaxa demonstrated how the TSP could be utilised for the development of tribals and noted that governments have either not utilised it properly or used the funds allocated under the scheme to exploit Adivasis further.

In the same article, he argued (<https://www.firstpost.com/india/adivasis-and-the-indian-state-successive-govts-distorted-tribal-sub-plan-policy-denied-community-fair-share-of-budgetary-reserves-7235461.html>) that this could have been resolved by providing financial assistance for claimants under the Forest Rights Act—which remains insufficiently implemented, years after its promulgation—by supporting their legal expenses, facilitating collection of evidences and for providing data collection. However, the TSP funds were never allocated to aid FRA, Xaxa noted.

He added that the funds allocated under the TSP were used for purposes contrarian to the intended objective, like forcing tribal displacement from government projects or sites for extraction of minerals.

In 2017, the central government replaced (http://e-utthaan.gov.in/view_docs) the plan with Development Action Plan for Scheduled Tribe Component. This meant that the very foundation on which the TSP was based was removed and the regional focus of TSP and its inter-linkages to Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, was let go of. In a 2019 article (<https://www.firstpost.com/india/adivasis-and-the-indian-state-successive-govts-distorted-tribal-sub-plan-policy-denied-community-fair-share-of-budgetary-reserves-7235461.html>), Xaxa wrote, “Majority of the enlisted schemes for tribals have become general in nature due to new arrangements. It appears that the government’s commitment towards tribal development has magically disappeared without a trace.”

Mithilesh Kumar, the Jharkhand state co-ordinator of the NCDHR, told me that Xaxa was not only developing analysis of the economic issues, but also trying to find ways to make that accessible for Adivasis from remote areas. “If there’s one person who can be credited with building the understanding around TSP in Jharkhand circles, it was Xaxa. He would conduct several workshops, campaigns and budget analysis and take it to various places, even remote areas,” Kumar said.

Kumar recalled an innovative protest that took place in 2015. The protesters were opposing the removal of the consent clause in the law and to demand the reinstatement of a social-impact assessment when land is acquired for big projects. Sixty villagers from different villages in the Latehar district gathered outside the Barwadih block office and defecated on the copies of the proposed amendments. “In 2015, he played a crucial role in organising a 1000-people strong rally against the proposed amendments to the Land Acquisition Act. It was his idea

to organise a ‘poop protest,’ in line with the protest technique that Adivasis in Andaman and Nicobar islands had adopted against British,” Kumar said. “Fearing backlash against the local people, Xaxa only released the news [about the protest] once he was back to Delhi.”

“Xaxa was also active in bringing out a magazine ‘Jharkhand Budget Watch’ published quarterly in Hindi, that gave an insight into how the money meant for the development of scheduled areas was being spent,” Kumar added.

[🔗 \(https://caravanmagazine.in/communities/remembering-abhay-xaxa-whose-de-is-a-loss-to-ativasi-movements/attachment-15405\)](https://caravanmagazine.in/communities/remembering-abhay-xaxa-whose-de-is-a-loss-to-ativasi-movements/attachment-15405)



Abhay Xaxa speaks at a seminar on tribal entrepreneurship in Odisha's Rourkela last year. The event was part of a larger campaign initiated by Xaxa and his friends to spread awareness on tribal entrepreneurship across various states. NEELAM KERKETTA

A keen observer of intersections between laws, finance, and culture, Xaxa talked about the environmental issues going out of focus in the budget presented in a [2019 article](https://india.mongabay.com/2019/07/environmental-issues-zoom-out-of-focus-in-the-budget/)

[https://india.mongabay.com/2019/07/environmental-issues-zoom-out-of-focus-in-the-budget/?](https://india.mongabay.com/2019/07/environmental-issues-zoom-out-of-focus-in-the-budget/?utm_source=Mongabay+India&utm_campaign=a2efc09d9d-RSS_DailyUpdate_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email&utm_term=o_7953c9bb6c)

[utm_source=Mongabay+India&utm_campaign=a2efc09d9d-](https://india.mongabay.com/2019/07/environmental-issues-zoom-out-of-focus-in-the-budget/?utm_source=Mongabay+India&utm_campaign=a2efc09d9d-RSS_DailyUpdate_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email&utm_term=o_7953c9bb6c)

[RSS_DailyUpdate_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email&utm_term=o_7953c9bb6c](https://india.mongabay.com/2019/07/environmental-issues-zoom-out-of-focus-in-the-budget/?utm_source=Mongabay+India&utm_campaign=a2efc09d9d-RSS_DailyUpdate_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email&utm_term=o_7953c9bb6c)

[azefco9d9d-30964847](#)) published in *Mongabay*, a non-profit media outlet for conservation and environmental science news. “Every legislation needs to be backed up by a proper budget for it to be implemented properly. Similar is the case with the Forest Rights Act.” He added, “Before elections, a lot of promises were made to ensure the protection of the rights of the tribal communities but it is not reflected in the budget. In fact, the budget (speech) was completely silent on the issue of ensuring the rights of the tribal people.” In the same article, he pointed out that the National Commission for the Scheduled Tribes suffered from lack of funds, because of which the body could not follow up on cases pertaining to the safeguarding of rights of Adivasis as per the Constitution and their socio-economic development.

At a time when government’s assault on rights of the marginalised is undeniable, Xaxa was playing an important role. In February 2019, the Supreme Court, while hearing a batch of petitions filed in 2008 between Wildlife First and the Union of India challenging the constitutional validity of the FRA, ordered the eviction (<https://indiankanoon.org/doc/58553838/>) of millions of Adivasis and called them “encroachers” in its judgement. After protests across country, it put a stay on the order. The case is still being heard in the apex court. The attempt of the present government has been to dilute progressive legislations like the FRA. In a 2019 interview published in *India Spend*, (<https://www.indiaspend.com/all-political-parties-have-treated-ativasis-as-disposable-people/>) Xaxa highlighted that only few evictions taking place in Adivasi areas in the name of development were reported and hence the scale of the issue remained unknown. After the Supreme Court judgement, he tweeted (<https://twitter.com/abhayfxaxa/status/1099343193739452417?s=20>), “Will songs be sung when Adivasis be evicted from forests? Yes, songs of resistance will reverberate across the jungles. Read the SC judgement and listen to Gaon chodab nahi.” He was referring to a popular song of resistance inspired by a song by Odisha based Adivasi activist Bhagwan Majhi, the title of which translates to “we won’t

leave the village.”

Through his writings, Xaxa also challenged the exoticisation of tribal culture and dance. In an article in *Youth Ki Awaaz* this year he emphasised (<https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2020/03/adivasi-dance-the-culture-of-collectivism/>) that for Adivasis, walking was dancing and talking was singing. He explained that Adivasi dances were community oriented and not intended as a spectator performance.

Expressing his grief on Xaxa’s death, Mandal told me, “For Dalit-Adivasi scholars and intellectuals to attain glory, they have to die. Just like in the case of Rohith Vemula, Abhay is also being remembered after his death.” He added, “Two chief ministers tweeted mourning his death. When he was alive, neither of them paid attention to the issues he was talking about.”

“He left behind a lot of work that still needs to be done. Right now we don’t have anyone with his experience, knowledge and vigour. But we can’t sit back and lament. We have to take his ideas forward,” Kerketta, who is working with some other students now to come up with a booklet on Xaxa’s speeches, poems and thoughts, said.

Xaxa was keen on helping Adivasi leadership grow when it came to research and advocacy. Kerketta and Singh both mentioned that he was working with several groups and individuals to establish Indian Institute of Adivasi Studies, a campaign focusing on action-oriented research, led by Adivasis and working on issues concerning the communities across India.

In conversations with me, he had said that writing did not come naturally to Adivasis, as they are oral communities, and that one must create an enabling atmosphere for people who come from these regions. He often engaged with people writing about and working on the rights of Adivasis to ensure that the views that they represented were in the interest of community. He was a prolific intellectual

articulating complex issues with ease. Xaxa believed that a more just world is possible, which motivated him to research, write, speak and campaign on issues of the tribal people's rights and multiple marginalities; budget; and identity-based discrimination.

In an article published in September 2019 about *Madait*—the Adivasi spirit of volunteerism and cooperation—Xaxa wrote, “Adivasi people still feel a sense of satisfaction, self-esteem, wellbeing, and personal growth in the values of cooperation and volunteering.” He added, “Mainstream society can learn a lot from these unique practices of collective efforts, sustainable living and living a ‘fine social life’ with volunteering and cooperation.”

Xaxa had nuanced takes on the questions of identity and did not see identity as a monolithic concept. While answering a question in the Roundtable interview on his experience of “identity crisis” faced by Adivasi students in educational spaces, Xaxa had observed that the “question of identity is something for me and will mean something else for them, my friends. I only know that if they had resources, they would have been more prosperous.” He articulated a plethora of issues in a poignant unpublished poem he had shared with me, titled *Anti-National Adivasi*:

When a river resists the dam,

Destroying thousands of life and public property,

You don't call the river as anti-national,

When the polluted air of the cities

pumps cancer, tuberculosis and asthma in your lungs,

You don't label the air as anti-development,

When the fury of fire in the forest
Kills millions of life systems brutally,
You don't name the forests as anti-human,

When the herd of wild elephants
Trample the crops and terrify human habitations,
You do not brand them as naxalites,

Then why is it that,
When Adivasi resist any attack on their life,
Are called anti-national and "*desh-drohi*"?

If they oppose your development terrorism,
Are viewed as anti-development?

Peacefully trying to assert their human rights
Through *Pathalgadi* and PESA,
Adivasi branded as Naxalites?

And trying to speak freely their minds,
Defending their language, land and culture,

Are labeled as Barbarians?

Why?

Just asking a simple question!

Jacinta Kerketta, a Jharkhand-based poet and writer who has been writing on the issues of dispossession and displacement of Adivasis, said she met Xaxa in 2019, in Goa. The two were attending a program on depicting land issues through various media like art, writing and poetry. “He highlighted that when Adivasis write, it is such an arduous process to establish oneself,” Jacinta said. “Sometimes the writings don’t get published for months. One needs contacts in important places. In these circumstances how does one even go ahead telling their stories?”

Jacinta argued that people like Xaxa have to live two lives: a public life, where they work for others and the private life which is rife with struggles, especially concerning financial security. “We need people from our community to consolidate the works of people like Xaxa. We need to write about him, so that it can be an inspiration for the future generations to come.” Jacinta added, “He is not gone, he lives with us and writing about him and his thoughts will make sure that he lives on among us and keeps inspiring us.”

Xaxa believed that Adivasis should tell their own stories. He believed in forging solidarity across political and ideological hues—having a lived experience rooted in stark material and economic contradictions. Xaxa believed that this struggle cannot be fought alone, that people from all sections of society need to come together to challenge oppression by the state and by the structures of our society. A real tribute to him would be to take forward the work that he left behind, as nothing would have pleased him more than to see

the progress of Adivasi communities and the articulation of their concerns in the mainstream media.

SUSHMITA (/AUTHOR/28419) is a researcher, journalist and a multimedia artist. She works on issues related to the rights of indigenous people, environment, climate change, violence against women, governance and more. She is part of an ongoing assessment on the impact of COVID-19 on Adivasis and forest communities.

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Neetisha Khalkho
[12 Mar, 2023](#)

we miss you da. लड़ने को भी कोई साथ नहीं मिलता अभी तो ?

vani xaxa
[28 Jun, 2020](#)

Nicholas was not there with him when Abhay died. Sr. Lalita lakra, bishop Vincent aind, and a chowkidar of a tea garden were present when he died, as it was informed to us.....why so many different stories about how he died, am surprised.

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