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Dormant Tribal Affairs Ministry turns pro-active

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Realising it was losing the turf war with the hyperactive Union Ministry of Environment and Forests on a subject that has become a top priority for the United Progressive Alliance government, the once comatose Tribal Affairs Ministry has, in recent weeks, suddenly begun to assert its rights over its responsibilities.

The first sign of this realisation was reflected in Tribal Affairs Minister Kantilal Bhuria shooting off letters in quick succession on August 26 and September 1 to all Chief Ministers — the first, directing them to ensure that tribals living in national parks/sanctuaries are not evicted till their rights are settled under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006, and the second asking them to implement the FRA speedily and effectively. And then on September 3, at Mr. Bhuria's initiative — according to a Ministry press release — the National Council for Tribal Welfare (NCTW), headed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, was constituted to deal with, in a more holistic manner, all issues relating to tribal welfare, now scattered over a range of Ministries.

The NCTW, the release says, will provide broad policy guidelines to improve the lives of tribals, review the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, Schedule-V and Schedule-VI of the Constitution and monitor the implementation of the Tribal Sub-Plan and programmes aimed at protecting vulnerable tribal groups. The proposed apex level body will have 18 members, including the Ministers for Tribal Affairs, Finance, Agriculture, Home Affairs, Health and Family Welfare, Environment and Forests, Human Resource Development, Rural Development, Woman and Child Development, Culture, Mines, Coal and Power, and the Deputy Chairperson of the Planning Commission, the Chief Ministers of Schedule V and Schedule VI States, two experts to be nominated by the Prime Minister for two years, and the Secretary, Tribal Affairs, as Member-Secretary. Its meetings will be linked with that of the National Development Council (NDC), so that all Chief Ministers can be present.

Outraged letter

Interestingly, all this activity comes in the wake of Mr. Bhuria sending an outraged letter to Minister of State for Environment and Forests Jairam Ramesh on August 3, complaining that the N.C. Saxena-headed Forest Rights Committee (set up at the initiative of the MOEF, though it was jointly constituted by the Environment and Tribal Affairs Ministries) was exceeding its brief.

“The Committee, during its visit to States, is not expected to suggest how the Act is to be implemented,” Mr. Bhuria wrote. “Nor is it expected to make references to the Ministry [Tribal Affairs] as to the instructions that the Ministry should communicate to the State governments regarding the implementation of the Forest Rights Act.”

Mr. Ramesh forwarded the letter to Dr. Saxena, who wrote back to him saying the committee had not “overstepped its limit” and, as evidence, cited the committee's terms of reference.

Indeed, since October 1999, when a separate Union Tribal Affairs Ministry was carved out of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment “to give more focussed attention to the development of the Scheduled Tribes,” a series of indifferent Ministers has ensured little real work, though on paper it remains “the nodal Ministry for overall policy, planning and coordination of programmes and schemes for the development of the Scheduled Tribes.”

But now, with the Environment Ministry playing a pro-active role in tribal welfare, and the Union government turning its attention to tribal welfare with a slew of initiatives located outside it, the Tribal Affairs Ministry has been getting even more obviously marginalised. The government's initiatives include the Integrated Action Plan (IAP) for Left-wing extremism-hit districts, being prepared by the Planning Commission, and a Committee of Secretaries led by Home Secretary G.K. Pillai to push for speedy implementation of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) of 1996, which was intended to delegate greater powers over land and resources to tribal communities, but which has remained a paper tiger.

In fact, at the recent NDC meeting held at July-end, the Prime Minister stressed that action against Maoists had to be supplemented with effective implementation of the FRA and the PESA. “Failure to implement these laws in letter and in spirit,” Dr. Singh said, “reduces the credibility of our commitment to bring development to these neglected regions.” Hopefully, now that it has got the message, the Tribal Affairs Ministry will do more than merely claim its turf.

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