

Give tribals their due: PM

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PRIME Minister Manmohan Singh on Wednesday admitted there had been a ‘systemic failure’ in giving tribals a stake in modern economic processes and emphasized that equitable growth was not possible without guaranteeing legitimate rights to these marginalized and isolated sections of society.

In a hard-hitting speech, Singh warned that the alienation of tribals was taking a dangerous turn. “Social and economic abuse of our tribal communities can no longer be tolerated”, he told a conference of chief ministers and State ministers of tribal affairs.

“There has been a systemic failure in giving the tribals a stake in the modern economic processes that inexorably intrude into their living spaces. The alienation built over decades is now taking a dangerous turn in some parts of our country,” Singh said.

Also warning the Maoists, he said no development is possible under the shadow of the gun. “We have to counter this threat with determination. While violence cannot be tolerated, the tribals must be the primary beneficiaries of the development process. We have to win the battle for their hearts and their mouths.”

Singh’s comments came as forest dwellers of Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat gathered in the capital to protest the non-implementation of the Forest Rights Act and the repression unleashed by authorities in their States. He lamented that several States were lagging in the distribution of title deeds under the Forest Rights Act, 2006 and urged them to speed up the process so that it could be completed in time.

“While some States have achieved remarkable progress in the distribution of titles, others are lagging behind. In a few States, even the process of receiving claims is yet to commence. This cannot be considered as an acceptable situation,” he said. The distribution of titles, he said, was an important and necessary first step that recognizes the symbiotic relationship between the forest and the forest dweller.

“It is not just the displacement and disorientation caused by separation from the land that is the issue. One can only imagine the psychological impact of seeing the cutting down of the vast forests that have nurtured the existence of these communities for centuries”, he said.

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