

PIB



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MUMBAI THIRUVANANTHAPURAM KOLKATA HYDERABAD CHENNAI BANGALORE AIZAWL

Wednesday, November 04, 2009

Prime Minister's Office

PM ADDRESSES CHIEF MINISTERS' CONFERENCE ON IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FOREST RIGHTS ACT 2006

11:47 IST

The Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, inaugurated the Conference of Chief Ministers, State Ministers of Tribal Affairs, Social Welfare and Forest Departments on Implementation of the Forest Rights Act 2006 and tribal development and welfare programmes in New Delhi today.

Following is the text of the Prime Minister's address on the occasion:

"I am happy to inaugurate this important conference of Chief Ministers and State Ministers of Tribal Affairs, Social Welfare and Forest Departments. It was my desire to come to this conference much earlier but circumstances prevented and I could not make it. I thank my colleagues, Shri Kanti Lal Bhuria and Dr. Tushar A. Chaudhary for having convened this Conference on the rights and welfare of the Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers of our country.

The development of our tribal areas and improvement in the economic and social condition of our tribal populations is fundamentally linked to our concept of inclusive growth. We cannot have equitable growth without guaranteeing the legitimate rights of these eventually marginalized and isolated sections of our society. In a broader sense we need to empower our tribal communities with the means to determine their own destinies, their livelihood, their security and above all their dignity and self-respect as equal citizens of our country, as equal participants in the processes of social and economic development.

The Scheduled Tribe and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act, 2006, has been rightly hailed as a landmark legislation. It has provided for a legally enforceable way of guaranteeing rights to forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes and others who have lived in our forests for centuries, but whose contribution to their protection was not acknowledged or recognized earlier. It also lays down duties for conservation and protection of biodiversity, ecological balance and our precious wildlife resource.

Hon'ble President of India in her address to Parliament earlier this year laid down before us the task of completing the process of distribution of title deeds under the Forest Rights Act by 2009. I have written to all Chief Ministers on two occasions on this subject urging 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.

I would therefore urge all the Hon'ble Chief Ministers and their colleagues to spare no effort to ensure effective implementation of the Act and expeditious distribution of titles well within the given timeframe.

The distribution of titles is but an important and necessary first step. The Act recognizes the symbiotic relationship between the forest and the forest dweller. It attempts to deal holistically with the issue in terms not only of the recognition of rights but of livelihood opportunities and environmental protection and conservation. If implemented in its true spirit this Act will provide significant multipliers in the processes of economic development in some of our critical habitats.

Those whose lives are dependent on the forests should be made essential partners in the processes of natural resource planning, conservation and protection. It is in this context, I would like to emphasise the importance of implementing in letter and in spirit the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas known as PESA Act.

The livelihood concerns of the forest dwellers should be central to the development agenda in these areas. We have therefore to work on many fronts simultaneously. It is important to dovetail all development and welfare

simultaneously. It is important to dovetail all development and welfare programmes in tribal areas so that our strategy is coherent, all embracing and there is a coordinated approach involving all departments of the Government. Education and health need priority attention. It is equally important to pay adequate attention to improve agricultural productivity of tribal lands.

The lack of quality education and vocational opportunities for tribals need immediate attention. The infrastructure in the residential schools for tribal children and the hostels thereof is mostly inadequate. Scholarships are also given piecemeal and do not enable a student to complete his or her education in time. I would urge the Ministry to come forward with concrete proposals that address these concerns.

I believe the Skill Development Mission needs to take a special look at how we can enhance the skill development training in all tribal areas of our country. Resources will have to be found and it is indeed small recompense for the neglect of the past. We must change our ways of dealing with the tribal affairs.

There are a host of issues related to the losses suffered by tribals displaced as a result of acquisition of land for various purposes. It cannot be said that we have dealt sensitively and with concern with these issues in the past. It is not just the displacement and disorientation caused by separation from the land that is at issue. One can only imagine the psychological impact of seeing the cutting down of the vast very forests that have nurtured the existence of these communities for centuries.

It is clear that we need to reflect on how to improve the laws and mechanisms through which we provide compensation to displaced tribal persons. More could be done, more should be done. The tribals must benefit from the projects for which they have been displaced.

But resettlement and rehabilitation raise serious issues not just of monetary compensation. We have to address issues relating to creating sustainable livelihoods, preserving the traditional sense of community and helping the tribals cope with the trauma of dislocation and alienation.

The Mungekar Committee on Inter-Sectoral Issues relating to Tribal Development has made several important recommendations pertaining to standards of public administration and governance in Scheduled tribal areas. I would like the Ministry of Tribal Affairs to examine these recommendations with speed.

The administrative machinery in some of our tribal areas is either very weak or virtually non-existent. Creating the right infrastructure is a key issue. But I would like to emphasise the importance of posting committed and competent officers in tribal areas. The States should consider offering strong incentives like hardship allowances, special housing and educational facilities or grants for officers who stay in tribal areas. Perhaps we could draw upon the experience of administering the KBK programme over a fairly long period of time.

Over the years a large number of cases have been registered against the tribals, giving rise to good deal of harassment to those whose traditional rights were not recognized by earlier forest laws. The heavy hand of the criminal justice system has become a source of harassment and exploitation. Therefore, we need to take a more enlightened approach in line with current thinking on how to deal with such issues. I believe that the Government of Jharkhand has recently withdrawn over one lakh such cases. The Government of Madhya Pradesh had also done something similar in the past. I believe that States need to review such cases urgently and take similar action as appropriate. We need to make clearly a fresh start in this area.

I am happy that efforts are being made by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs towards evolving a consensus on a National Tribal Policy. The problems faced by our tribal communities are complex and they require sympathetic and systematic understanding. The policy should factor in the different nuances of tribal life as they exist in several parts of our great country. I would suggest that the Ministry of Tribal Affairs engage in wide public consultation so that the document that emerges after a meaningful debate on the many issues involved would be broadly acceptable to the people at large.

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. The systematic exploitation and social and economic abuse of our tribal communities can no longer be tolerated. But the fact is that no sustained activity is possible under the shadow of the gun. Nor have those who claim to speak for the tribals offered an alternate economic or social path that is viable. The cult of violence will only bring greater misery to the common people. 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.

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Therefore, I would like to conclude by saying that the discussions in this conference have great importance for the future of our country. The issues that you are going to examine can no longer be relegated to the margins of our policy debate. They have to be the very centre of our attention. The State should endeavour to give a healing touch to the tribal communities. Their integration into the development processes is highly important. But this should not become a means of exploitation or be at the cost of their unique identity and their culture.

With these words, I wish your deliberations all success, and I sincerely hope that they will result in concrete action programme towards the empowerment and well being of our tribal brothers and sisters.”

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