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MUMBAI THIRUVANANTHAPURAM KOLKATA HYDERABAD CHENNAI BANGALORE AIZAWL

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Ministry of Tribal Affairs

TRIBALS NEED TO BE EMPOWERED SAYS THE PRIME MINISTER

CONFERENCE ON IMPLEMENTATION OF FOREST RIGHTS ACT

SHRI BHURIA SUGGESTS HIGH-POWERED MECHANISM TO MONITOR TRIBAL PROGRAMMES

17:55 IST

The Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh has said that 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 Prime Minister said this while inaugurating 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 here today.

Speaking on the occasion, the Prime Minister emphasised that 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" the Prime Minister noted and added "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 very forests that have nurtured the existence of these communities for centuries."

Observing that 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 Prime Minister said that the alienation built over decades is now taking a dangerous turn in some parts of the country. "The systematic exploitation and social and economic abuse of our tribal communities can no longer be tolerated", the Prime Minister asserted and added, "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."

The Prime Minister said that 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" he observed.

Dr. Manmohan Singh said 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" he emphasised and added that the tribals must benefit from the projects for which they have been displaced.

Stating that the Scheduled Tribe and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act, 2006, has been rightly hailed as a landmark legislation, the Prime Minister said that he has written to all the Chief Ministers on two occasions urging them to speed up the process of distribution of title deeds under the Forest Rights Act to ensure that it could be completed in time. While some States have achieved remarkable progress in the distribution of titles, others are lagging behind, he said and noted with concern that in a few States, even the process of receiving claims is yet to commence. "This cannot be considered as an acceptable situation" the Prime Minister said.

Noting that the administrative machinery in some of our tribal areas is either very weak or virtually non-existent, the Prime Minister emphasised the importance of posting committed and competent officers in tribal areas and suggested that the States should consider offering incentives like hardship allowances, special housing and educational facilities or grants for officers who stay in tribal areas.

Speaking on the occasion, the Union Minister of Tribal Affairs, Shri Kanti Lal

Speaking on the occasion, the Union Minister of Tribal Affairs, Shri Ramu Lal Bhuria said that his Ministry is awaiting the Finance Ministry's nod on certain issues of the proposed National Tribal Policy which is in the final stages of formation and should be able to bring it before Cabinet for approval before the year end.

Shri Bhuria also dwelt upon the plight of tribal people and said that though there are various welfare schemes but the implementation is poor and inadequate. He pointed out that there is lack of education in the tribal areas and noted that private sector is also not making any investment in the field of education in these areas. Similarly, the Minister observed that the health facilities are also very poor in these areas and resultantly child mortality rate is quite high in tribal areas in comparison to the rest of the country.

Shri Bhuria also suggested the formation of an institutional arrangement at the national level which should be vested with special powers to formulate schemes and programmes for the welfare of the tribal people. This mechanism should be empowered to monitor all the schemes being run in the tribal areas.

The Minister also said that there is a need to amend the relevant laws and include timber in the minor forest product list to ensure that tribal people are engaged in the protection of forests and are also economically benefitted. In this context, he also added that pending cases against tribals for picking up minor forest produce should be withdrawn in a given time frame to ensure that tribals get their traditional rights over "Jal-Jungle-Zameen".

Expressing concern over displacement of tribals because of mining projects, Shri Bhuria Said that the displaced tribals should not only be provided employment in these projects but a part of royalty should also be set aside for the welfare programmes in those areas.

The text of the speech of Shri Bhuria (in Hindi) is available on the website of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. Link : <http://tribal.gov.in/index.asp>

The Minister of State of Tribal Affairs, Dr.Tushar A. Choudhary, in his valedictory address, reiterated the emphasis made by the Prime Minister that an endeavour must be made towards convergence of all the development and welfare programmes of the States and Centre together for the welfare and development of the intended beneficiaries.

Dr. Choudhary also mentioned that a Task Force set up by the Ministry of Rural Development to expose strategy for convergence of various programmes has identified forest dwellers with certificates of titles to be given priority for work on individual land, field demonstration of technologies for enhancing land productivity by Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR), Self-Help Group formation etc. and emphasised that if done then it would address the livelihood issues of such dwellers which is the objective of enactment of Forest Rights Act.

VBA/RS