

A new 'freedom' awaits tribal groups

A three decades-old official order, issued for restricting targeted sterilisation of the primitive tribal groups (PTGs) in Chhattisgarh to check their dwindling numbers, appears all set for a re-look. This follows a Planning Commission directive to the State government to issue clarifications to ensure that desirous PTGs will not be denied sterilisation facilities.

“It appears that the order has been construed as a blanket restriction on the PTGs, thereby denying them the facility,” Planning Commission Secretary Sindhushree Khullar has written to the government, following a representation by health activists.

The order was issued on December 13, 1979 by the undivided Madhya Pradesh government during the time when targets were set to achieve population control. However, an exemption was made for 26 blocks, which had a high population of PTGs, now re-named Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), as the infant mortality rate was very high in the tribal areas and their numbers were fast decreasing. These groups are Behor, Pahari Korvas, Abhujmadias, Kamar and Baiga.

While the order said an exception should be made for tribal communities whose population was either stagnant or was decreasing and that they should have access to other contraceptives if they required, it was construed as a total ban on sterilisations for these groups and has been implemented as such since then.

The order, nevertheless, said if anyone insisted on undergoing sterilisation, he/she should be provided the services upon permission from the Block Development Officer.

“The State government shall take a call if we have evidence that the reason for which the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups are sought to be protected through the ban on irreversible interventions — namely decline in population — is no more valid,” Chhattisgarh Chief Secretary Sunil Kumar told *The Hindu*. “In any case, to the best of my knowledge there is no ban on practice of other methods like the use of contraceptives, if the PVTGs so choose to space births.”

Rights violation

However, Sulakshana Nandi of the Public Health Resource Network, which took up the issue as a violation of women’s reproductive rights, said studies showed that the fertility rates of these groups were the same and even higher than the rest of the population. But, their mortality rates were several times more than others.

“So, instead of trying to decrease the number of deaths in these communities, the government chose to make them have more children. So now the PTGs, along with dealing with the destruction of their traditional livelihoods, poverty and lack of access to services, have to struggle with large families which have been forced on them,” she explained.