

Correcting historical injustices



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**THE PERPETUAL
ALIENATION,
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DISPOSSESSION OF
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CONTINUED
DESPITE
HALF-BAKED
PIECEMEAL
APPROACHES BY
VARIOUS REGIMES**

No more, at least, glaring pictures of leaders of India or international visitors dancing with or garlanding people of the most marginalised, alienated, dispossessed community in India - the tribals. By announcing its Presidential candidate from the tribal community, the BJP-led NDA has made an act of unshackling historical injustice inflicted to one of the least represented populace in India. Or, will this be just another symbolism or second biggest project of increasing base of Hindutva, as alleged by its staunch opponents when the incumbent President was picked by the ruling party?

Not a single representative of a tribal community has ever been in the front race to become the head of the State despite the Constitution allocating a special schedule (Schedule-V) for tribal community. Droupadi Murmu in all probability is likely to become the first tribal President of India.

While Murmu has emerged winner among 20 probable candidates of the NDA government, the speculation over selecting a candidate from the Muslim community was potentially high due to the prevailing domestic upheavals and their international ramifications. The Opposition failed three times to have a consensus candidate due to their differences, not ideologically, but in their own parochial strategies

aimed at the BJP-RSS. Fourth time, a consensus candidate emerged from the coalition of Opposition who was a former Finance and External Affairs Minister under BJP led NDA-I government. Not wasting much words and time to resurrect India's 'great Opposition' or its Presidential nomination, who has already started politicking before his official nomination filing, it's worthwhile to prospect probable mainstreaming of indigenous communities in governance of India.

The perpetual alienation, exploitation, dispossession of indigenous people during pre- and post-Independence India continued despite half-baked piecemeal approaches by various regimes. During the Constituent Assembly debate in framing the Constitution of India, Jaipal Singh Munda was the sole tribal representative. Known as 'Marang Gomke' (great leader in Mundari language in Jharkhand), Munda who also captained India to its first Olympic hockey gold, eloquently and convincingly ensured special safeguards for tribals and their recognition and Constitutional protection. Speaking for the first time in the Constituent Assembly 19 December, 1946, calling himself a 'Jungli', Munda called tribals 'the original people of India' and most democratic people on the Earth. Munda believed in the new chapter of Independent India where there

would be equality of opportunity, where no one would be neglected.

But Independent India has neglected many millions knowingly and unknowingly. In Chhattisgarh and Odisha, one would easily hear one of the oldest tribal struggles against the 1927 Indian Forest Act. There has been a constant and continuous animosity between the state forest departments and the indigenous communities across the country over access to natural resources for the livelihood of millions. It is not British-era law but Independent India's legislations related to conservation, protection and management of natural resources, developmental activities including mining, river valley projects and infrastructure projects that have deprived 8.6 per cent of India's population of their rights.

When the UPA government formulated and approved the Forest Rights Act (2006), it was the first ray of hope, meant to be compensating historical injustice, for millions of tribal people in recognising their rights to forest land. Implementation of the Act has been marred with all possible discrepancies, mostly deliberate. Frequent news of cancellation of applications of recognition rights and subsequent evictions still continue.

Murmu's nomination and probable winning as the 15th President of India may accelerate the unfin-

ished dream of Jaipal Singh Munda's Constituent Assembly statement of equality of opportunity of indigenous people in development of India. At least, formulation of any legislation in Parliament as well as in state Assemblies related to indigenous people and their lives and livelihoods must be in accordance with the meaningful participation of indigenous communities. Any developmental projects targeted in tribal areas may follow the salient features of FPIC (Free Prior Informed Consent). Indigenous people's knowledge is key to addressing multiple environmental threats the world is facing - climate catastrophe, vanishing species and water scarcity. Under the leadership of Murmu, India may be able to share the knowledge of sustainable way of living of indigenous people with the world. India would like to lead in addressing challenges of indigenous peoples across the world.

Can Murmu, if elected as the head of State, delivering her Constitutional duty - neither a rubber stamp nor representing a deep BJP-RSS project - ensure equal participation of indigenous communities in the decision making process of Naya Bharat? That's real and natural justice for indigenous people.

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