

Grass-root democracy as a bulwark against Maoists

TH [thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/grass-root-democracy-as-a-bulwark-against-maoists/article67651194.ece](https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/grass-root-democracy-as-a-bulwark-against-maoists/article67651194.ece)

December 18, 2023

The dismal polling turnout in the Maoist-affected areas of Chhattisgarh is a pointer that democracy needs to be strengthened at the grassroots

December 19, 2023 12:49 am | Updated 01:01 am IST

[Shashank Ranjan](#)

Democracy has varied connotations for the tribal population inhabiting the regions with the ongoing Maoist insurgency' | Photo Credit: AP

The Assembly elections in Chhattisgarh are done and dusted. Equations in the context of tribal votes did matter immensely in the calculations of each political party, given the proportion of the tribal population in the State. As in the politics of Chhattisgarh, it is said that the party with which the tribal voter goes forms the government in the State as tribal voters have a 34% of the vote share in the State. Maoist insurgency in the country presently thrives in the tribal regions of Chhattisgarh, particularly in Bastar. Tribals form the main cadre base of the movement. Elections in these Maoist strongholds, that are Schedule Five areas, have always been affected by violence in the backdrop of boycott calls by the Maoists. And this year was no different.

Democracy in Maoist areas

To begin with, and as reported by the media, voter turnout in Maoist-affected areas such as Bijapur and Konta was as low as 3% to 4%. The dismal turnout could be inferred as the writing on the wall, subject to our inclination to acknowledge it. There were several issues that shaped the issues on which political parties contested. However, no single issue addressed the challenge of resolving the Maoist conundrum.

Democracy has varied connotations for the tribal population inhabiting the regions with the ongoing Maoist insurgency. If analysed from the Maoists' perspective of boycotts, it may be added that the insurgents who claim to fight the state for the cause of the people, force these very people to shun the most effective tool towards empowerment, i.e., by not participating in the democratic process. This calling out is essential so as to establish the sham — that 'Maoists are for the people's cause'.

In the present context, what the Maoists attempt to achieve by running their parallel government of 'jantana sarkar' as they call it, has no feet to stand on in the mid and long term. This aspect is more or less appreciated by the local tribal population, but perhaps the state has not been able to inspire them enough, for various reasons, real or otherwise. This

has discouraged mass participation in the democratic process. The said development is more glaring in the context of earlier trends wherein the local population often ignored boycott calls. Does the trend point to disillusionment on the part of the electorate?

As far as election issues vis-à-vis tribals were concerned, the most dominant one was that of religion-based conversions. The issue, it is felt, was a 'manufactured agenda' by political players as an alibi to divert attention from the basic issues.

With enhanced awareness leading to tribal assertions, tribals now aspire for the rights they are guaranteed vide the Constitution. Such awareness and assertions have clearly manifested themselves in the popular Pathalgadi movement by tribals in Jharkhand wherein tribals assert their rights, often by expressing resistance. These people are increasingly, and rightfully, aware of their entitlements, which they demand under the umbrella of dignity.

On PESA

Although a few of the political parties in the field came up with the issues concerning complete implementation of the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), modalities to execute the same were not brought out in a clear manner.

In spite of the PESA Act being passed in 1996, not one of the State governments concerned has implemented the same in the correct spirit, by issuing policy directives. The Act envisions the empowerment of gram sabhas as the sole authority to govern various aspects of the socio-economic lives of the tribal community in the respective jurisdiction. The intent behind the Act was to bring people at the grassroots level face to face with the government, and was aligned to the tribal way of life in historical and traditional terms. Various State governments have implemented this Act in a half-hearted manner to meet their ulterior motives. This gap has been exploited by the Maoists to foster their agenda and by having their writ run in their strongholds through 'jantana sarkar'.

The PESA Act, given its potential, could be commandeered as the greatest enabler to mainstream the tribal community by accommodating their aspirations. Its dogged implementation is highly do-able, in the mid and long run. This could render the Maoists, whose influence is receding, irrelevant.

Nurturing tribals

The Maoists have created a myth about themselves by pretending to be champions of the tribal cause, and the same needs to be called out in a credible manner by empowering democracy at the grassroots. Tribal leadership needs to be nurtured by acknowledging them and giving them a voice (it is now absent and has resulted in political absenteeism) where it matters. The resolution to the challenge posed by the Maoists is not only about security and development but is also about looking beyond, by enabling democracy at the

grassroots — something that recognises tribal aspirations and calls out the ulterior intentions of Maoists. Or, otherwise, we will continue paying short-term attention to the Maoist challenge only when they strike, at their sweet will.

Shashank Ranjan is a retired Infantry officer (colonel), and teaches at the O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat