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Recognising the role of tribal communities in Indian Independence



Week-long celebrations will begin to mark the memory of the great unsung tribal heroes who sacrificed their lives for the country; without them, the commemoration of 75 years of Independence this year would not be complete

The government has declared November 15 as Janajatiya Gaurav Divas, to honour the contribution of the tribal community to the nation. It also happens to be the birth anniversary of the great tribal leader, Birsa Munda, whose role in the freedom struggle changed the course of modern India's history. He mobilised the tribal community against the British, forcing them to introduce laws protecting the land rights of tribals. In his all-too-short life – he died in Ranchi jail at the age of 25 – he brought about seminal changes in the lives of tribals across the country.

Week-long celebrations will begin today to mark the memory of the great unsung tribal heroes who sacrificed their lives for the country; without them, the commemoration of 75 years of Independence this year would not be complete.

It was well before the freedom struggle of 1857 that the Janjatis and their leaders rose in revolt against the colonial forces. Across India, tribals ranging from the Santhals, Kol, Ho, Pahadia, Munda, Oraon, Chero, Lepcha, Bhutia, and the Bhuyan tribes in the east, the Khasi, Naga, Ahom, Meamaria, Abor, Nyishi, Jaintia, Garo, Mizo, Singhpo, Kuki and Lushai in the Northeast, the Padyagars, Kurichya, Beda, Gonds and Great Andamanese in the south, the Halba, Kol, Muriya, Koi in central India and the Dang Bhil, Mair, Naika, Koli, Mina and Dubla in the west, kept up sustained and ferocious attacks on the British.

India is unique in that it has more than 700 tribal communities. These communities have enriched the country's cultural heritage, through their exquisite art and craft.

They have played a leading role in the promotion, protection and conservation of the environment through their traditional practices; with their vast repository of traditional knowledge, they have been the torch-bearers of sustainable development. Recognising the importance of tribals and their role in nation-building, the Constitution made special provisions for the protection of tribal culture and the development of Scheduled Tribes.

The entire forest ecosystem, including water bodies, is the mainstay of the tribal economy. The British disrupted this and created a class of *zamindars* (landlords) and gave them rights over land in tribal territories. This reduced the tribals to mere tenants in their own lands. This exploitation fuelled the resentment which led to violent eruptions in the tribal revolutionary movements.

These movements threw up inspirational leaders. Among them were Tilka Majhi, Tikendrajit Singh, Veer Surendra Sai, Telanga Kharia, Veer Narayan Singh, Sidhu, Kanu Murmu, Rupchand Konwar and Laxman Naik.

One of the most charismatic was Birsa Munda, from the Munda community in present-day Jharkhand. He organised and led the tribal movement, giving a call for *Ulgulan* (revolt) to the tribals. The young Birsa also wanted to reform tribal society and urged it to shun superstition and witchcraft. Such was his charisma that tribal communities referred to him as "Bhagwan".

Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi has always acknowledged the invaluable contributions of the tribal communities to the freedom struggle. This is why, in his Independence Day Speech on August 15, 2016, he spoke of building dedicated museums in various parts of the country in memory of tribal freedom fighters. The ministry of tribal affairs is constructing these in collaboration with various state governments. The first museum to be completed is the Birsa Munda Freedom Fighter Museum at Ranchi which will be inaugurated by the PM on Monday.

We cannot also forget the contributions of tribal women to the freedom movement. The names Rani Gaidinliu, Phulo, Jhano Murmu, Helen Lepcha and Putali Maya Tamang, will live on our collective memory for generations to come.

During the coming week, we have planned a range of activities from tribal dance festivals, craft *melas*, painting competitions, felicitating tribal achievers, workshops, blood donation camps, and events to pay homage to the tribal freedom fighters. These are being organised across states and Union Territories as a mark of respect to these great sons and daughters of India. Their lives will continue to inspire Indians for all time to come.