

# **AN OBITUARY TO DR B D SHARMA: ONE WHO REDEFINED THE RIGHTS OF THE MARGINALISED**

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Dr. Brahma Dev Sharma (known to many of us as Dr Sahab), left passed away on December 6 2015 in Gwalior. He was not keeping well for some time and was being looked after by his son and daughter-in-law. Sharma was an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer who began his administrative career as the Collector of Bastar and retired as the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in 1991. For the next thirty years he remained as a mass leader of the Bharat Jan Andolan and influenced many other platforms particularly on the question of development and Adivasi issues. His entire life was committed to the development of Adivasis and had waged many battles, in and out of the government. He fought against the all forms of oppression, repression and suppression of Adivasis, poor and oppressed classes. Sharma played a key part in framing many of the laws that today exist to defend people's rights, including the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), the Forest Rights Act and numerous policy and executive measures on these issues. He never lost sight of his fundamental belief in the need for people to organise and to fight for a better and just society.

An excellent writer, Dr. Sharma, both in Hindi and English, publishing tens of books and booklets on resource rights, Adivasi issues, Dalits questions, agriculture and the unorganised sector. He focused particularly on two themes: breaking the web of poverty through people's power and democracy and the struggle for people to collectively control their resources and livelihoods. While he addressed the first one through organising (or supporting) people's political processes in the second he entered into the framing of policies and laws. He thus brought in the agenda of people's rights in democracy and on resources into the national agenda, which were otherwise controlled and believed to be for the benefit of large business houses, corporates, urban elites, contractors and other exploitative classes. He was critical on how agriculture has turned into argi-business, which in return systematically destroyed and grabbed the natural resources zones across India. His writings, on farmers being reduced to destitution, have turned to be main standpoint of planning commission for years.

Being in administration, Sharma always tried to uphold the spirit of the Constitution and thereby represented the fundamental truth of what the rulers never seem to realise. His life-long association with tribal affairs, beginning with the troublesome days in Bastar (1968) and had the privilege of being the last

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Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (1986-1991). He also served as the Vice Chancellor of NEHU, Central University and in numerous committees of Planning Commission and National Advisory Council.

In the early 1990s Sharma was troubled by the blown-up neoliberal economic arithmetic, where he foresaw the onset of the unbridled loot of natural resource zones over which the Adivasis inhabit. His outcry against Structural Adjustment Programme and the undue interference of International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and World Trade Organisation (WTO and formerly GATT) could be seen in most of his writings and urgency in framing preventive measure for Adivasi people. Bharat Jan Andolan was formed in this context, which gave the clarion call of *Mava Nate Mava Raj* (Our Rule in Our Land). He also formed the National Front on Tribal Self-rule, which raised the question of self-rule across the country. Parallel to these, he worked tirelessly primarily to draft Acts, policies and laws and later to implement them at the ground level. PESA was literally drafted by him, which turned out to be principle Act in Adivasi regions of India. He was the champion of Adivasi Self-rule and PESA provided the legitimate intervention space to Adivasis in order to organise, and take control of their life, means of livelihood and natural resources thereby become participants in the development process right from its beginning.

In 2010 he approached the President of India at a critical time when the entire country witnessed a virtual collapse of the Constitutional regime for the tribal people, who were being attacked and suppressed in a war like situation, demanding for peace. He believed that people do not accept injustice anymore and they will not remain silent. They would rise against all sorts of injustice, violence, atrocities, and killings. He believed that the Adivasis culture has the fundamental elements of building an egalitarian India. His concern for Adivasis and Constitution of India could be understood from the letter to the President where he wrote,

‘I am constrained to state at this critical phase of the history of tribal people that the Union Government is guilty of abdicating its Constitutional responsibility by allowing the situation to degenerate from that of stray revolts in 1960s to “warlike situation” at the moment. It has remained unconcerned with the simmering discontent from day one with the adoption of the Constitution. It has not issued a single direction to any State in 60 long years. You as head of the nation, at a critical time must ensure that the Union Government accepts unequivocally its Constitutional responsibility with due apologies for the decimated, shattered and disinherited tribal communities whose irretrievable loss – physical, economical and emotional – is an un-washable blot on the fair face of our nation that still stands by equity and justice.

May I invite your kind attention to some crucial aspects of virtual “warlike” situation *vis-à-vis* the tribal people in extensive parts of our country. No less than a person, one of your worthy predecessors, Shri K.R. Narayanan in his address to the nation on January 26, 2001 drew pointed attention to enlightened laws for protection of tribal lands and their affirmation in judicial verdicts, yet plagued by dilemmas of development that were not suitably addressed. He

poignantly observed, “*let it not be said by future generations that the Indian Republic has been built on the destruction of green earth and the innocent tribals who have been living there for centuries.*”

Amidst exceptions, there is cruel insensitivity and total lack of understanding, some honourable exceptions apart, about the tribal ethos amongst our ruling elite when they address the tribal as “poor” and talk about his joining the “mainstream” of national life. They hurt the simple people to the core who are super-sensitive about their “honour.” Let it be known that tribal is not poor. He is *Deprived and Disinherited in his own Domain*, his “DES”, ironically amidst the unbounded bounty of Mother Earth to her dearest children. They are the brightest jewels in the rich mosaic of great Indian civilization proud of its vivacious diversity.

That is not all. The tribal people are “the most democratic people on earth.” The founding fathers, therefore, especially bestowed them with a protective shield, the Fifth Schedule described as “Constitution within Constitution.” Yet these communities were virtually “criminalised” on the dot with the adoption of our Constitution. The colonial laws engulfed the hitherto excluded areas. They have no place for the “community” and its “customs and tradition,” the unwritten laws of their “Village Republics.” The Governors, endowed with limitless powers for removing any such dissonance, have remained unaware to date about the catastrophic impact of this lapse on their part on the life of the tribal people.’

He led many tireless battles and the legacy of these countless struggles reflected the vision of direct democratic governance based on his learning and gaining insights from India’s Adivasi (indigenous) population. This clarity of thought, philosophical understanding of Adivasism and the capacity to grasp and adapt it, is not found in most of the non-Adivasi intellectuals. Despite being threatened and beaten up by private henchmen, political party goons and police personnel, he never withdrew from any of the struggles. He remained a strong supporter of movements like anti-dam, anti-mining, anti-nuclear projects, anti-displacement, and took position in favour of the struggles for justice, equality, democracy and secular values. Dr. Sharma viewed the draconian laws as anti-national as it continued the British legacy of ‘*eminent domain*’ to suppress the democratic voices; and therefore thoroughly opposed such laws too. He intermediated between the Maoist and the Chhattisgarh government when the former abducted the Sukma Collector Alex Paul Menon in 2012.

With his death a great champion of human rights with extreme conviction, courage, ability and humbleness is lost for ever. Dr. Saheb – a teacher, guide, leader, comrade, an ardent fighter and a crisis manager of our times – is gone forever. With him an era combined with sharp intellectualism, grassroots camaraderie, administrative intervention, policy crafter, critical author and mutual solidarity comes to an end.