Madam President & Tribal Rights

Why in news?

In the 75th year of the country's Independence, Ms. Droupadi Murmu becomes the second woman and the first Adivasi to become the President of India. This is rich in symbolism for the rights of tribespeople.

What are her achievements?

- Born into a Santhal family in 1958, Murmu was the first girl in Uparbeda panchayat in Odisha's backward Mayurbhanj district, to go to college.
- She won an election to the Rairangpur Nagar Panchayat in 1997, and served as councillor.
- She was elected to two terms in the Odisha Assembly in 2000 and 2009.
- Murmu was sworn in as the first woman Governor of Jharkhand in 2015.
- In 2016, the state government passed amendments to two land laws (Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act and Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act) that would have ensured easy transfer of land for industrial use.
- After widespread protests by Adivasis who believed that the move would limit their rights over land, Murmu returned the Bills in 2017.
- The refusal to give her assent to controversial Bills passed by the government of the party to which she had herself belonged, won Murmu admiration and respect.

What is the symbolism?

- Ms. Murmu becomes the first member of a tribal community to become the President and occupy the Rashtrapati Bhavan.
- Her election to the highest office of the country comes 101 years after two tribes people were elected to the legislative bodies in colonial India.
- Ms. Murmu's election is a milestone in the journey of tribal empowerment, though she is by no means limited to her identity.

How did the tribal rights in the Constitution and elsewhere originate?

- Founding figures of the Republic were acutely cognisant of the disadvantageous position of the tribespeople and made special provisions such as the **Fifth and Sixth Schedules** of the Constitution.
- Jaipal Singh Munda, sportsman and tribal leader, was a prominent member of the Constituent Assembly who forcefully articulated the fears and hopes of tribespeople.
- In 2000, **Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh States were formed** to give more focused attention to the concentrated tribal population in these regions.
- **Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers** (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, was passed in 2006.

What is next?

- Tribespeople have high expectations from Ms. Murmu's rise to the top.
- But this could be realised only if the Union government backs up its symbolism with substance.
- This is the right moment to pay attention to the concerns that many tribal activists have been raising of
    1. A systematic erosion of protections accorded to tribals,
    2. Harassment and suppression by the police, and
    3. A general intolerance of the state towards tribal autonomy.
- Ms. Murmu has certainly become an inspiration for all disadvantaged sections of society - women, tribals and the poor in general.
- To make her election more meaningful, state policy too must bend towards justice and fairness to all.

Reference

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