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Intervention, Implementation, Outreach, NCST's New Normal

*With over three decades of hardcore grassroots experience working among the tribal community, Harsh Chouhan, the Chairperson of the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, is trying to ensure the Constitutional body serves its purpose like never before. Founder-Editor **M. MADHUSUDAN** caught up with him to know more about him and his work in an exclusive interaction*

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Some four decades ago he became a Mechanical Engineer and then went on to do his M. Tech in Systems and Management from IIT, Delhi. Later, he also attained a degree in journalism and mass communication. But a high-paying, regular job was never his ambition.

A Bhilala Scheduled Tribe, 63-year-old Chouhan hails from a political family with his father, late Bharat Singh Chouhan, being a three-time MP and a freedom fighter “who remained underground for 14 long years”. But again, just as routine jobs, politics too didn’t attract him and he preferred to serve the society, with the focus on tribals.

“I never wanted to do a routine job. I always wanted to work for the Scheduled Tribe community, to which I also belong,” Harsh Chouhan, Chairperson, National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) tells [The Indian Tribal](#).



Harsh Chouhan, NCST Chairperson

This led to his long association with the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, the not-for-profit working for the betterment of the tribal community and which he headed in Madhya Pradesh for around three decades. Jhabua, where the Bhil Scheduled Tribes community resides, became his karmbhoomi.

In 2009, a friend of his at the Centre for Technology Alternatives for Rural Areas (CTARA) in IIT, Bombay wanted him to give a presentation on his Jhabua project. Once over, as many as 22 students evinced interest in visiting Jhabua to get a first-hand experience of the Bhil community and the work done there.

“Since then, every year scores of students from eminent institutes like IITs, IIMs, NITs, and TISS visit Jhabua to meet the Bhil Adivasis there and experience the remarkable impact our NGO Shivganga Samagra Gramvikas Parishad (SSMGP) has had in terms of community empowerment, water conservation, social-entrepreneurship, vocational training, plantation, and livelihood generation,” he says.

“The 8-day programme entails one day of orientation and 7 days in village. In fact, 3 IIT pass-outs have now devoted themselves full

time to the project. I tell the students don't go there with a social reformer bent of mind but go there to understand the strengths of the tribals. The students are tomorrow's policy makers so they need to understand the community," Chouhan avers.



Contour Trenching In Full Flow

Then there is also a Halma Darshan Yatra programme, wherein on anointed days thousands of volunteers converge to undertake the difficult task of digging contour trenches for water conservation.

Crores of litres of water have been conserved over the years. This year, it was held for 4 days in February to give visitors/participants a "holistic opportunity to engage with the tribal community in Jhabua and explore how they are coming together to solve environmental crisis". The idea is to enable them to understand the campaign, participate in Halma and experience tribal lifestyle.

Halma is an age-old tribal practice of the whole village coming out to help one of its Bhil members in need.

As for Chouhan's appointment as the NCST Chairperson, it was a surprise since making a political figure the head has always been the usual norm.

Since taking over, Chouhan has sought to ensure that the Commission not only plays a very active role in protecting the interests of the Adivasi community by making certain unprecedented interventions but also furthers the tribal cause by treading on unchartered territories.

SAMPLE THESE:

- The Chief Justice of India recently announced that he has approved a proposal sent by the NCST to have 36 law graduates from the ST community to come and work at the Supreme Court as Fellows and get first hand experience of working of the apex court.
- The NCST has been on a big university outreach mode. It wrote to 104 Universities, including IITs, IIMs, and research institutes seeking to know the steps initiated by them to promote tribal studies, tribal rights and associated developments. The institutions have since held workshops like one on tribal freedom fighters that kept the students spellbound and elicited a "very positive response" from them.
- The NCST has also come out with a coffee-table book on 60 tribal freedom fighters, with many of them being unsung heroes.
- It conducted a two-day workshop in Delhi wherein 70 Vice-Chancellors, TRI (Tribal Research Institute) Directors and hundreds of anthropologists, sociologists and other researchers attended. President Droupadi Murmu, who hosted them, said such discussions on tribal research should serve as a starting point.