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Explained: Why are tribals of Rajasthan and Gujarat demanding a separate state of Bhil Pradesh?

The Bharatiya Tribal Party (BTP), a political party based in Gujarat, envisions Bhil Pradesh as a separate state carved out of 39 districts spread over four states: 16 in Gujarat, 10 in Rajasthan, seven in Madhya Pradesh, and six in Maharashtra.

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BTP Rajasthan president Dr Velaram Ghogra said that Bhil social reformer and spiritual leader Govind Guru first raised the demand for a separate state for tribals back in 1913 after the Mangarh massacre. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons/pradeep kumar chatte)

The demands for a “Bhil Pradesh”, a separate state for tribal people in western India, have of late begun to be raised again. What is the basis of the demand, and who is raising them?

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What is ‘Bhil Pradesh’?

The Bharatiya Tribal Party (BTP), a political party based in Gujarat, envisions Bhil Pradesh as a separate state carved out of 39 districts spread over four states: 16 in Gujarat, 10 in Rajasthan, seven in Madhya Pradesh, and six in Maharashtra.

BTP Rajasthan president Dr Velaram Ghogra said that Bhil social reformer and spiritual leader Govind Guru first raised the demand for a separate state for tribals back in 1913 after the Mangarh massacre. The massacre, which took place six years before Jallianwalla Bagh and is sometimes referred to as the “Adivasi Jallianwala”,



“Post-Independence, the demand for Bhil and Bhilwara was raised repeatedly,” Ghogra said. Over the decades, the demand was raised and amplified by, among others, the multi-term Congress MP from Dahod Somjibhai Damor; former Ratlam MP Dileep Singh Bhuria, also of the Congress; and the former CPI member of the Rajasthan Assembly, Meghraj Tawar.

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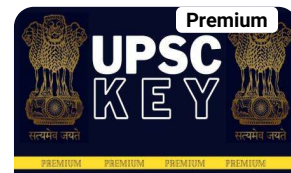
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But why do the tribals want a separate state of their own?

Ghogra said, “Earlier, the Dungarpur, Banswara, Udaipur region in Rajasthan and Gujarat, MP, etc. was part of a single entity. But post-Independence, the tribal majority regions were divided by the political parties, so that the tribals don’t organise and unite.”

According to Ghogra, over the decades, several Union governments brought various “laws, benefits, schemes, and committee reports” on tribals, but went slow on their execution and implementation.

“There were various measures such as the protection of tribal interests through the Fifth Schedule under Article 244(1) of the Constitution, but most of these were mere assurances by the ruling party, whether it was the Congress or the BJP,” he said.

Ghogra cited the example of The Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996. “The law was enacted in 1996. The Rajasthan government adopted the law in 1999, and came out with its Rules in 2011. But even



knowledge about the law.”

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Ghogra recalled that during the Congress Minister Ashok Gehlot had said, “Next time, the Congress will leave no stone unturned in fulfilling the demands of the tribals.” But it was always “the next time”, Ghogra said — “Seventy-five years have passed and it’s still the next time. Ever since Independence, parties haven’t seen tribals beyond vote bank politics.”

The nervousness of the Congress and BJP about the BTP can be gauged from the Rajasthan Zila Parishad election results in December 2020. The ZP members of the ruling Congress and Opposition BJP joined forces to defeat a Zila Pramukh candidate supported by the BTP at Dungarpur in Rajasthan; BTP-backed Independents had won 13 out of the 27 seats in the Dungarpur Zila Parishad, while the BJP and Congress had won 8 and 6 seats respectively.

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Is the demand for Bhil Pradesh gaining ground?

The creation of a separate Bhil Pradesh is one of the main objectives of the BTP, which was formed in 2017 in Gujarat. Ghogra said that he had been directly involved with the demand for over a decade. Meetings and gatherings are routinely held to mobilise tribals and spread awareness.

“Tribal youths have lost confidence in both the Congress and BJP,” Ghogra said. “With the spread of social media, you can read up and verify things for yourself now,” he said. “Seeing how we have fared in 75 years, there is no other way but to have our own separate Bhil Pradesh.”

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Ahead of the Rajya Sabha elections, the BTP’s immediate demand is that the Congress should send a tribal to the Upper House. “The last tribal from our region to be sent to the Rajya Sabha by Congress was decades ago: Dhuleshwar Meena,” Ghogra said.