In recent months, many Adivasi villages in Jharkhand have put up giant plaques declaring their gram sabha as the only sovereign authority and banning ‘outsiders’ from their area. Amarnath Tewary reports on a political movement that is gathering steam across the State’s tribal belt.

It is high noon at the government middle school in the heart of Maoist-affected Arki block in Jharkhand’s Khunti district. Over 100 Adivasi villagers have gathered in the school’s playground with bows and arrows and slingshots, called ‘Gulel’ in the local language.

They raise slogans, make proclamations. “We are the Bharat Sarkar (the Indian government). We do not recognise the Central or State governments or the President, Prime Minister or Governor. Our gram sabha is the real constitutional body. We will not allow anyone to enter our areas without our permission. We will not be exploited anymore,” they say in unison. The youth seem more agitated. “We are the real inhabitants of this country — jal, jungle, jameen (water, forest and land) is ours and no one can take them away from us,” they say. “And Pathalgadi (the stone plaques and signboards) are all about this.”

PESA carved in stone

Tribals make up 26% of Jharkhand’s population. Over the past year, in nearly 200 villages spread across four districts in the State — namely Khunti, Gumla, Simdega and West Singhbhum — huge stone plaques, known locally as Pathalgadi, have come
up at the entry points of tribal hamlets. The plaques, measuring 15 ft by 4 ft and painted green, have messages carved on them. These include excerpts from the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) as well as warnings to outsiders, prohibiting them from entering the village.

“Pathalgadi are basically a way to demarcate our territories and tell outsiders (government officials) that the law of the land does not apply here. It is a movement of the tribal people that will gradually engulf all the 32,620 villages of Jharkhand,” say the young leaders of the movement, Balram Samad, John Junas Tiru, Shantimoy Hembrom, and Ranjit Soy, all in their twenties.

In Munda tribal custom, placement of a huge stone marks the death of a person. The Pathalgadi movement draws on this tradition of honouring the community’s ancestors. Activists say that the movement derives inspiration from the provisions of the PESA. The leaders of the movement decided to carve the key provisions of the PESA as messages on huge stones in order to enlighten Adivasi people about this law, which empowered a village as an administrative unit.

This is a sample of the plaque carvings: “A village shall ordinarily consist of a habitation or a group of habitations or a hamlet or a group of hamlets comprising a community and managing its affairs in accordance with traditions and customs; every village shall have a gram sabha consisting of persons whose names are included in the electoral rolls for the panchayat at the village level and every gram sabha shall be competent to safeguard and preserve the traditions and customs of the people, their cultural identity, community resources, and the customary mode of dispute resolution.”

“We had started Pathalgadi by engraving these PESA provisions in all the villages of Jharkhand to increase awareness among the tribal people about their rights. But today, the meaning of Pathalgadi appears to have changed,” says Bandi Oraon, a nonagenarian who had started the movement under the banner of the Bharat Jan Andolan. A former IPS officer and MLA from Sisai constituency of Gumla district, Oraon was also a member of the Bhuria Committee constituted to frame the PESA.
Outsiders unwelcome

In the Pathalgadi areas, a stranger entering the village arouses suspicion. Arki block in Khunti district is one of the 18 Maoist-affected districts of Jharkhand. Khunti, the birthplace of the tribal freedom fighter and folk hero Birsa Munda, is also where the Pathalgadi movement is strongest. The police and paramilitary forces are reluctant to enter the villages and local journalists keep away. Every outsider is quickly intercepted and interrogated.

The main gate of Khunti police station at the district headquarters is locked by 7 p.m. The office of the Superintendent of Police wears a deserted look even at five in the evening. We enter Kochang village with the help of locals.

In police records, Kochang is part of the Left Wing Extremist (LWE) corridor. It was here that the biggest Pathalgadi ceremony was held on February 25 this year. Thousands of Adivasis from nearby villages, armed with bows and arrows remodelled as wooden rifles and AK-47s, took part. Despite receiving information about it, the local police and paramilitary personnel stayed away.

On the face of it, the village looks like any other in the area, a mass of mud and thatched houses nestling between hills and green fields. At the entrance, a Pathalgadi with a fresh coat of green paint declares the village a ‘prohibited zone’ for outsiders. Among other things, the plaque states: “Adivasis have the right over the land they live in. Adivasis are the owners of natural resources. Voter IDs and Aadhaar cards are anti-Adivasi documents.”

We are stopped in our tracks by two young men on a motorcycle. They want to know our business in the area: “Don’t you know this is a prohibited zone for outsiders? Haven’t you read the instructions on the plaque? What if something were to happen and you land in serious trouble for violating our gram sabha law?” Our local contact answers them, probably to their satisfaction. The two men then escort us to the centre of Kochang village where a Pathalgadi meeting is scheduled to take place.

The village gram sabha head, Sukhram Munda, and his brother, Kali Munda, are busy. Though no one seems to pay any attention to us, it feels as though everyone is watching us. An hour later, we are given permission to move around in the area and see Pathalgadi in other villages too. We are to come back in the afternoon to attend the meeting in Kochang.

The message about our arrival seems to have been relayed to the neighbouring villages, for nowhere else are we asked about our business. Five villages near Kochang — Chalkad, Muchia, Tubil, Hardalama and Parasu — all had Pathalgadi ceremonies on the same day, on March 15, 2018.
‘Won’t participate in elections’

“It is 70 years since we got independence but our living conditions have not changed. If today the government wants to enter our area, they should come through the gram sabha. We are the original inhabitants of this country, others are dikus (foreigners). We shall not observe the August 15 or January 26 celebrations,” say the young leaders of the Pathalgadi movement, addressing the gathering one by one.

“Why should we allow outsiders to enter into our villages? When the peace is disturbed, the police come and brand us Naxals and beat us up for no reason. We won’t participate in elections either, as our system of gram sabha is based on selection, not election,” they continue, to sporadic applause from the gathered villagers.

If they do not honour the Indian Constitution, then what is their guiding force? Their young leader Balram Samad, clad in a faded pair of jeans and a T-shirt, takes out a spiral-bound photocopy of “Heaven’s Light Our Guide”, which is the motto of the Order of the Star of India, an order of chivalry of the British empire, founded by Queen Victoria in 1861. “This is our guiding force,” says Samad.

Seeing the young leaders talking to us, others in the gathering open up about Pathalgadi. “We follow Kunwar Keshri Sinh of the Sati-Pati cult from Gujarat’s Tapi district, who says that natural resources such as forest land and rivers were gifted to us by Queen Victoria before India got independence,” says Ranjit Soy. Sati represents mother, and Pati, father. “We have all descended from nature and we worship it. We don’t believe in the Indian Constitution, nor do we recognise government officials. They take salaries but act like they are our rulers. They have no credibility,” adds his friend Shantimoy Hembrom. The current leader of the Sati Pati cult is Kunwar Ravindra Sinh, son of Kunwar Keshri Sinh.

Some 40 km away, at Urburu village in Murhu block, villagers are busy fixing a thatched roof over a cement platform that serves as a school. It is their own school. The government school nearby wears a deserted look. Its walls have a message
painted on them: “We will not send our children to a government school until there is 100% guarantee that tribal people will get government jobs.” Another goes: “No job, no education, we will make our children Bir Birsa Munda”.

The trigger for Pathalgadi
So what is taught in the village school run by the tribals themselves? “We teach A for Adivasi, B for Bideshi, C for Chotanagpur,” says Sukran Munda and Samuel Purti, village youths who teach at the makeshift school. ‘C for Chotanagpur’ is a reference to the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (CNT) enacted by the British in 1908 in response to the Birsa Movement. It prohibits the transfer of tribal land to non-tribals and protects community ownership. So does the Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act (SPT). Ever since it came to power in December 2014, the BJP government led by Chief Minister Raghubar Das has been trying to amend these two laws that protect tribal tenancy rights. The immediate trigger for the Pathalgadi movement seems to be the amendments to the two Acts passed by the BJP government in November 2016, which enable the acquisition of tribal land for ‘development’. Though the State Assembly passed the amendments, there were vociferous protests by tribal communities, who saw it as an attempt to take over tribal land for the benefit of land sharks.
Under intense pressure from Opposition parties such as the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, the Congress, the Jharkhand Vikas Morcha and others, Jharkhand Governor Draupadi Murmu returned the Bills in May 2017, saying they should be reconsidered. Opposition leader Hemant Soren said that the BJP government wanted to acquire tribal land through these two amendment Bills for the benefit of corporate houses. In August 2017, the government announced that it was withdrawing both Bills.
Subsequently, the government came up with the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act 2013 (Jharkhand Amendment) Bill and got it passed in the last monsoon session of the State Assembly. The Bill is awaiting the assent of the Governor and the President. Opposition leaders have claimed that this Bill is even more dangerous than the earlier CNT, SPT amendment Bills in terms of undermining the land rights of tribal people.

In fact, Adivasi resentment against the State government has been growing for some time, preceding even these two controversial amendments, as the government and private entities have been nibbling away at land that rightfully belonged to the tribals. Six years ago, a group of tribal protesters had blocked the Birsa Munda Airport, delaying flights. They were demanding compensation for tribal land that had been taken from them to build the airport.

**An ‘Adivasi Board’**

“What is the use of sending our children to a government school where there is only one teacher and no education at all?” fumes Joseph Purti, also known as ‘Professor’. “The children used to go there only for the mid-day meal. So we have decided to teach our children tribal history and culture by ourselves.”

Purti is one of the top leaders of the Pathalgadi movement, against whom police have lodged several cases. The charges against him range from creating hatred among people, to breach of peace, and obstructing public servants from carrying out their work. He says that, on the pattern of the Central Board of Secondary Education, the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education and the Jharkhand State Board, they have decided to form an “Adivasi Board” for tribal students, under which they will teach and conduct exams. The books and syllabus have been decided, he adds.

According to Purti, who says he is a Hindi lecturer in St Joseph’s college, Torpa, “the gram sabha will distribute certificates to students the way it issues caste, birth and death certificates. Nothing will happen without the permission of the gram sabha.”

He carries a polythene bag stuffed with a Hindi translation of the Indian Constitution, a photocopy of “Heaven’s Light our Guide”, and a copy of the movement’s 11-point charter of demands that was sent to everyone from the President to the Block Development Officer on January 16, 2018.

Some of the demands were: All the funds earmarked for the tribal sub-plan should be given to the gram sabhas for the development of tribal people; the government should stop sending tribal people to jail on the pretext that they are Naxals; amendments to the land acquisition bills should be scrapped; all police and paramilitary camps should be withdrawn from the Scheduled Areas. “Unless these demands are met, we shall not participate in any national ceremonies or elections
held at any level, nor will we accept the programmes run by the government in our areas,” says Purti.

The Jharkhand government, however, says that the Pathalgadi movement is nothing but a protective cover manufactured by Maoists and criminals involved in cultivating opium in remote tribal areas. “I would like to warn such elements to mend their ways and stop exploiting innocent tribals in the name of Pathalgadi. If they don’t pay heed, we will crush them,” the Chief Minister said recently.

Jharkhand Director-General of Police D.K. Pandey says the police have already arrested the main leader behind Pathalgadi, Vijay Kujur, on charges of creating social disharmony by inciting the tribal people to defy the Constitution. “FIRs have been lodged against several other leaders. We have already destroyed opium cultivation in about 23,000 acres of land this year,” he says. “To stop the Pathalgadi kind of social unrest, what is needed is developmental intervention. There should not be a political vacuum in those areas.”

But another senior official in his department, who belongs to the tribal community, says on condition of anonymity, “Unless the government involves the gram sabha in the development of tribal areas, movements like Pathalgadi will keep happening from time to time. How many of them will you crush?”

The local Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) leader, Sanjay Kumar Azad, argues that Pathalgadi is neither a social movement nor a law and order problem. “The opium cultivators and some anti-national elements are using innocent tribal people in remote areas as a protective shield. This includes some youths of the tribal community disenchanted with the Indian Constitution,” he says. “At the same time, the government’s failure to reach out to the remote tribal areas has also been responsible for creating the Pathalgadi situation.”

“Pathalgadi is not wrong as it is about claiming tribal rights. If people living in remote forest areas are not being listened to, what can they do?” asks Jharkhand’s noted tribal rights activist Dayamani Barla. “To avoid such conflicts, the government should always take the gram sabhas into confidence when it comes to development work in the tribal areas.”

Alarmed at the gradual spread of Pathalgadi in other villages of Jharkhand, the State government recently held a series of meetings with top officials. It has drawn up a comprehensive plan to develop the remote tribal areas of the State “in consultation with local bodies”.

For their part, tribal communities are gearing up for another round of Pathalgadi, somewhere in Khunti, on a scale not seen before. “Let them come and stop us,” says a young man on a bike, as he escorts us out of his village to the road that leads to Ranchi, the capital.