

Bridging the Gap – Challenges and Prospects of Tribal Women’s Political Participation under PESA in Jharkhand

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Abstract

The participation of tribal women in local self-governance represents a critical dimension of democratic inclusiveness in India. Despite constitutional safeguards and legislative frameworks such as the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (Government of India, 1992) and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996, their political involvement in tribal-dominated regions like Jharkhand remains largely nominal. This study investigates the challenges and emerging prospects of tribal women’s participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) under the PESA framework, focusing on Ranchi district as a representative case. Using a mixed-method approach that integrates survey data, interviews, and secondary analysis, the research explores how gender, ethnicity, and institutional structures intersect to shape women’s agency in grassroots governance. Findings indicate that patriarchal norms, proxy representation, limited literacy, inadequate training, linguistic constraints, and weak policy implementation continue to restrict meaningful participation (Verma, 2016; Narayan, 1981). However, the study also identifies positive trends, including the growing influence of self-help groups, local awareness campaigns, and supportive community networks that are enabling tribal women to assert leadership roles (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Ambagudia & Xaxa, 2020). The paper argues that strengthening the operationalization of PESA through gender-sensitive reforms, localized training modules, and participatory monitoring mechanisms can transform symbolic representation into substantive empowerment. Ultimately, the effective political inclusion of tribal women is essential not only for gender equity but also for achieving sustainable and decentralized governance in India’s Scheduled Areas.

Keywords: tribal women, Panchayati Raj Institutions, PESA Act, political participation, gender equity, Jharkhand

1. Introduction

Jharkhand, a state carved out of Bihar in 2000, holds a distinctive position within India's democratic structure due to its large tribal population and status as a Fifth Schedule area. This constitutional classification recognizes the need to safeguard tribal identity, culture, and land rights through special administrative mechanisms. The state's governance framework is therefore guided not only by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, which institutionalized the Panchayati Raj system, but also by the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) a landmark legislation designed to protect tribal self-rule and decentralize power. PESA legally recognizes the Gram Sabha as the cornerstone of rural democracy, granting it authority over natural resource management, dispute resolution, and local development planning [1]. In principle, it was expected to harmonize traditional tribal governance systems, such as the Manki-Munda and Parha Panchayats, with the modern democratic framework. However, in practice, this integration has been uneven. The dual structure of governance comprising traditional male-dominated councils and elected Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has generated overlapping jurisdictions, administrative conflicts, and weakened accountability [2]. This clash between customary norms and constitutional provisions has limited the autonomy of Panchayats and hindered the participation of marginalized groups, particularly women. Within this context, tribal women's participation remains predominantly symbolic rather than substantive. Despite constitutional reservations ensuring 33% and later 50% of Panchayat seats for women, structural barriers such as patriarchal control, illiteracy, lack of training, and social taboos continue to restrict their political agency [3]. The gap between legislative intent and grassroots reality underscores the central problem: while laws have opened doors for tribal women in governance, their voices are still muted in decision-making. This study, therefore, examines the persistent challenges and emerging opportunities for enhancing the effective participation of tribal women under PESA in Jharkhand, particularly within the socio-political environment of Ranchi district [4].

Objective of the study

The study has been undertaken with the primary aim of examining the status, participation, and challenges faced by tribal women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) within Ranchi district

of Jharkhand. It seeks to assess the current socio-economic and political status of tribal women to understand their preparedness and capacity for participation in local self-governance. The research further aims to analyze the extent and nature of their involvement in PRIs, focusing on whether their representation leads to meaningful decision-making or remains largely symbolic. Another important objective is to identify the major obstacles hindering their effective participation, such as patriarchal dominance, proxy leadership, lack of education and training, weak institutional support, and poor infrastructure in rural areas. Finally, the study seeks to propose practical and policy-oriented reforms that can promote gender-inclusive governance, ensuring that tribal women are not only represented in Panchayati Raj Institutions but also empowered to exercise real authority and leadership in decision-making processes [5].

Methodology

The present study adopts a mixed-method approach combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques to examine the participation and challenges of tribal women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) under the PESA framework in Ranchi district, Jharkhand. The research is field-based and descriptive in nature, focusing on collecting firsthand data that accurately reflects the ground realities of tribal women's political engagement [6].

The area of study is Ranchi district, which comprises 18 administrative blocks and 305 Panchayats. For representative coverage, two Panchayats from each block were selected, resulting in a total of 36 Panchayats. The study employed a probability sampling technique for fair representation of diverse tribal communities. From these Panchayats, 100 elected women ward members were chosen randomly, and 36 Gram Pradhans (heads) were selected purposively for detailed interviews based on availability and willingness to participate [7].

Data collection was carried out using multiple tools and techniques. A structured questionnaire survey captured quantitative information on awareness, leadership experiences, and governance participation. In addition, in-depth video interviews and field observations provided qualitative insights into the lived experiences, barriers, and personal narratives of tribal women leaders [8].

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods (percentages, cross-tabulations) to identify trends and patterns, along with thematic analysis to interpret qualitative findings. This approach enabled the study to portray a comprehensive picture of both

measurable and experiential aspects of women's political participation. Overall, the methodology was designed to bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and field realities, ensuring a holistic and authentic representation of tribal women's engagement in local governance across Jharkhand [9].

Table 1. The study area, sampling, and data collection techniques:

Parameter	Description
Area of Study	Ranchi District, Jharkhand (18 administrative blocks and 305 Panchayats)
Research Approach	Descriptive and Analytical
Sampling Method	Probability Sampling (for Ward Members) and Purposive Sampling (for Gram Pradhans)
Sample Size	100 elected tribal women representatives (Ward Members) and 36 Gram Pradhans
Tools for Data Collection	Structured Questionnaire, Personal Interviews, and Documentary Analysis
Nature of Data	Primary (survey and interviews) and Secondary (official records, reports, and literature)
Data Analysis	Percentage method, cross-tabulation, and thematic analysis

This methodological framework allows the study to identify both statistical trends and personal narratives, offering a balanced understanding of how tribal women perceive their roles, challenges, and potential within the Panchayati Raj system [10].

Major Findings

The study reveals that while constitutional reservation under the 73rd Amendment and PESA Act has significantly increased the numerical representation of tribal women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, it has not yet translated into genuine empowerment or decision-making authority.

Most women representatives continue to face structural and socio-cultural barriers that restrict their effective participation [11].

A key finding is that educational gaps, lack of leadership training, and limited political awareness severely limit women's confidence and performance. Many elected tribal women are still dependent on male family members for administrative or financial decisions, resulting in proxy representation rather than autonomous leadership. Additionally, patriarchal control and social taboos discourage them from speaking in public forums or challenging male authority, thereby reducing the quality of their participation [12].

The research also finds that the functioning of Gram Sabhas remains weak and irregular across many Panchayats in Ranchi district. Meetings are either not conducted regularly or witness poor attendance, especially by women, due to inadequate awareness, mobility issues, and logistical challenges. The devolution of power and resources (3Fs functions, funds, and functionaries) is still incomplete, leading to limited administrative and financial autonomy at the grassroots level [13].

Despite these challenges, several positive developments have emerged. Awareness campaigns, NGO initiatives, and the growing influence of self-help groups have started to encourage active participation of women in governance. A new generation of young and educated tribal women leaders is beginning to emerge, demonstrating resilience, confidence, and community engagement. These positive trends indicate that with proper institutional support, gender-sensitive training, and enforcement of PESA provisions, the symbolic representation of tribal women can evolve into real and transformative empowerment in Jharkhand's local governance system [14].

Discussion

The study's findings highlight that the participation of tribal women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) is deeply influenced by structural and socio-cultural impediments that continue to limit their effective involvement in local governance. Despite the reservation policy ensuring women's representation, social hierarchies, patriarchal norms, and traditional customs often prevent them from exercising real authority. Many women representatives face restrictions in mobility, limited educational exposure, and dependence on male family members for decision-making. These barriers create a gap between formal political inclusion and actual

empowerment, reducing women's participation to a symbolic presence rather than a transformative role in village administration [15].

A significant factor identified in the study is the complex interaction between traditional tribal governance systems such as Manki-Munda and Parha Panchayats and the modern democratic framework of PRIs. While traditional systems hold social legitimacy within the tribal community, they are predominantly male-dominated, leaving little space for women's participation. On the other hand, PRIs provide a legal framework for inclusion but often lack integration with tribal customs and social structures. This duality of governance leads to confusion over authority and responsibilities, weakening the execution of PESA's objectives [16].

The discussion further emphasizes the policy and practical implications required for the effective implementation of the PESA Act in Jharkhand. Strengthening institutional mechanisms through capacity-building programs, leadership training, awareness campaigns, and translation of governance documents into local tribal languages can empower women to engage confidently in public affairs [17]. The state must also ensure regular functioning of Gram Sabhas, financial transparency, and community monitoring, enabling women to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. By bridging the gap between traditional governance and democratic institutions, and by promoting gender-sensitive reforms, PESA can evolve into a truly inclusive framework that transforms tribal women from passive participants into active leaders of local self-governance [18].

Recommendations

Based on the findings and analysis from the study, several focused recommendations have been derived to enhance the political participation and empowerment of tribal women in Jharkhand's Panchayati Raj Institutions under the PESA framework [19].

Firstly, there is a need to strengthen awareness and leadership training programs for elected women representatives. Regular and compulsory capacity-building workshops should be organized in local tribal languages such as Mundari, Kurukh, and Sadri to ensure accessibility and understanding. These training programs must emphasize legal rights, budgeting processes, and social audit mechanisms, enabling women to take active and informed roles in governance.

Secondly, Gram Sabha meetings should be regularized and mandated to have a minimum one-third women's quorum for any decision to be considered valid. This will ensure that tribal women's voices are not sidelined and that they participate meaningfully in deliberations and decision-making [20].

Thirdly, governance structures must incorporate tribal customs and local socio-cultural practices within the framework of Panchayati Raj to maintain community acceptance while promoting inclusivity. Integrating traditional governance systems with formal Panchayat mechanisms will help build trust and relevance among tribal populations [21]. Finally, robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms should be promoted through periodic social audits led by women's collectives and self-help groups (SHGs). These audits will help track the use of development funds and ensure transparency in implementation. Establishing block-level women's resource centers can further provide technical and institutional support to tribal women representatives, bridging the gap between policy and practice [22].

Conclusion

The overall analysis of the study reveals a paradox in the political participation of tribal women in the Panchayati Raj system of Ranchi district, Jharkhand. On one hand, there has been a significant increase in the numerical representation of women due to constitutional amendments and reservation policies under the 73rd Amendment and PESA Act (1996). On the other hand, their substantive participation and empowerment remain limited by cultural, educational, and institutional barriers. Deep-rooted patriarchal values, lack of training, linguistic constraints, and dependency on male family members continue to undermine women's autonomy in decision-making.

However, the findings also point toward gradual transformation within tribal society. The active involvement of self-help groups (SHGs), NGOs, and educated younger women is fostering a slow but steady cultural shift, enabling more tribal women to participate confidently in local governance. For these positive trends to evolve into lasting empowerment, policy efforts must go beyond mere reservation. They must focus on training, awareness, linguistic inclusion, and structural reforms that integrate tribal customs within the democratic framework of PESA.

In conclusion, achieving genuine political empowerment of tribal women requires bridging the gap between legal frameworks and lived realities. When PESA is implemented in its true spirit

ensuring participation, accountability, and cultural sensitivity it can transform tribal women from passive representatives into active architects of rural democracy in Jharkhand and beyond.

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