

PESA and Women's Participation in Tribal Governance of Chhattisgarh: Opportunities and Challenges

Ramakrushna Pradhan¹, Somnath Pal², Mili Mallick³

Dean of the School of Social Science, Professor and Head of the Department of Political Science
Research Associate of ICSSR Project^{2, 3}
Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya (A Central University), Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, India

ABSTRACT

Political participation of women is also a primary element of inclusive democracy in a society that has traditionally marginalized women on a gender basis and some or all socio-cultural hierarchies. The tribal women in India occupy a unique place in this discussion as they are sidelined not only due to their gender but also by the virtue of their socioeconomic factors and ethnicities. With the introduction of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) (PESA) Act of 1996, as an instrument of correction to provide the governance requirements of the tribal communities, is a critical framework, a combination of the indigenous practice of self-rule and the constitutional vision of a democratic decentralized government. PESA Act plays a central role in determining the role of tribal women participation in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the state of Chhattisgarh, which has a high population of tribal women. The opportunities and challenges confronting tribal women in this set up are questioned in this paper, which also attempts to explore the transformative possibilities and the inherent constraints of their involvement.

The study highlights that PESA has created formal spaces for women's representation in governance particularly through reservations that guarantee their presence in Panchayats. These measures have enabled tribal women to emerge as elected representatives, decision-makers, and custodians of their cultural heritage. Women leaders have increasingly articulated concerns related to health, education, water, livelihoods, and forest rights issues closely tied to their lived realities. Their participation has also contributed to the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems and the assertion of community autonomy, thereby enriching the democratic process with alternative perspectives rooted in sustainability and equity. Thus, the Act provides chances for both the strengthening of tribal identity within governing systems and gender inclusion.

Keywords: PESA, Tribal Women Participation, Gender Equality, Women Empowerment, Tribal Governance.

Address for correspondence : Prof. Ramakrushna Pradhan,

Professor and Head of the Dept. of Political Science, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya (A Central University), Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, India.

Email: rkpradhanjnu@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7328-3935>

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INTRODUCTION :

India is a country that is well known in terms of diversity not just in terms of language, religion and culture but also in terms of the social-structures that define Indian communities. The tribal communities are special among the rest of the social groups due to their peculiar customs, traditional practices and their indigenous systems of governance. Tribal communities have historically been called the "Adivasis" and have resided in the forests and hills of India as well as in rural areas that are remote. They were mostly independent in their lifestyles, cultural ways and conflict management, as they may be beyond the scope of the state apparatus. Although this relative isolation saved their social customs, it resulted in economic, political and social marginalization. The tribal societies were systematically excluded of mainstream economic developments, political decision making processes and social welfare thus leading to high levels of poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition and poor health (Xaxa, 2014).

Colonial period fixed the systemic injustices and British rulers often viewed tribal societies as objects of anthropological curiosity or objects in need of strict control in a bid to maintain civilization and law and order. The existing administrative paradigm was based on resource extraction and supervisory control as opposed to empowerment or socio-economic progress. After the independence, the infant Indian polity realized the natural weakness of tribal community and felt the need of integrating them into the paradigm of democracy and development but without sacrificing their cultural uniqueness. The constitutional protections, policy interventions and welfare programs were therefore established to protect the tribal rights, promote the socio-economic development and also meaningful engagement in the government (Government of India, 2010).

Since the writing of the Constitution, those who designed India realized the unique situations facing tribes. In the Scheduled and Tribal Areas covered by Part X of the Constitution, certain administrative and governance

arrangements were brought about by Article 244 especially in areas that are termed Scheduled Areas whereby the majority of the population is made up of the tribal people. These articles attempted to reconcile the global rules of equality and social justice alongside the respectful recognition of tribal practices, land tenure and native structures of government. The general aim was, therefore, not just to assimilate the tribal communities into the larger Indian governance, but also to give them a sense of self-management over the resources and affairs, which would guarantee their significant influence in the process of democracy.

The center of this vision is the idea of decentralized governance where local self-governing units have been given the authority to make decisions that immediately touch on the local communities. A three-layered system of governance was designed through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (CA) Act of 1992, the Panchayati Raj system, which is composed of Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, and Zila Parishads, and the system was designed to strengthen participatory democracy at the grassroots level (Sisodia, 2002a). Decentralization process was planned as a means of transfer of power, responsibility and resources to the local communities so that they can take care of their developmental priorities. However, the inclusion of tribal people into this system posed some unique problems. The formal bureaucracy of the state does not always fit into tribal social structures that are usually guided by communal consensus and customary law. Without proper legal validation of these traditional practices, the tribal rule stood a chance of being sidelined by the Panchayati Raj system. The Prevention of Illegal Eviction from and Resettlement of People (PESA) Act offers the benefits of the Panchayati Raj system to the scheduled areas and recognizes and protects tribal traditions, resource management systems, and community decision-making systems. It highlights the importance of Gram Sabhas as the most important to the self-government, which allows them the power to control land, forest cover, and local developmental priorities. In such a way, PESA aims

to sense of balance the constitutional obligation to democratic decentralisation with tribal governmental actualities, thus establishing forums of participative decision-making which respect tribal identity and sovereignty (Xaxa, 2014).

An essential dimension of this process is the empowerment of tribal women. Globally, women's political participation is recognized as a cornerstone of inclusive governance, democracy, and sustainable development. Yet in many contexts, including tribal societies, women face compounded marginalization due to patriarchal norms, socio-economic disadvantages, and cultural restrictions. In India, tribal women historically participated in community life through informal decision-making forums but were often excluded from formal political spaces (Sharma, 2018). The introduction of reservations for women in PRIs under the 73rd Amendment, and their extension to 50% in states like Chhattisgarh has significantly enhanced opportunities for tribal women to assume leadership positions including roles as Sarpanchs and Panchayat members. These measures aim to transform gender representation from symbolic presence to meaningful participation, enabling women to influence policy, development priorities, and resource allocation.

Chhattisgarh carved out of Madhya Pradesh in 2000 offers a compelling case study in this context. With tribals constituting approximately 30.6% of its population (Census of India, 2011) the state represents a region where PESA can have a profound impact on grassroots democracy and gender inclusion. Tribal women in Chhattisgarh navigate a complex terrain of opportunity and constraint: while legal frameworks and institutional reforms provide platforms for leadership, socio-economic barriers, illiteracy, and entrenched patriarchal norms continue to limit their agency (Mehta, 2002). Nonetheless, this study indicate that when empowered tribal women prioritize critical community concerns such as health, education, drinking water, livelihoods, and forest rights issues closely aligned with the everyday realities of their communities (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004).

The significance of tribal women's participation extends beyond policy and development. Women serve as custodians of cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and ecological practices bridging the gap between modern governance and indigenous values. Their active engagement ensures that development initiatives are culturally sensitive, sustainable, and reflective of local needs. Moreover, the upliftment of tribal women is in line with international agreements like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-5), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which are all consistent in their demand for gender equality and women's participation in politics (United Nations, 1948; 1979; World Bank, 2012).

Despite the opportunities brought about by the policy there are still longstanding challenges. The continuity of proxy representation where male family members have control over the decision-making ability of women leaders as well as the socio-economic weaknesses, lack of knowledge in legal rights, and the incompetence of the institution have remained obstacles to the transformational capability of Panchayati Raj System Act (PESA). To cope with such challenges requires not just formidable legal protection, but also effective capacity building exercises, community sensitization and strict institutional accountability measures that will help to make certain that tribal women are indeed empowered to act as agents of agency within Panchayati Raj bodies (Buch, 2000; Kabeer, 1999).

Essentially, the involvement of tribal women in Panchayati Raj through the provisions of the PESA represents an embodiment of a legal empowerment, cultural conservation and socio-political change. This effort is a larger attempt by India to assimilate the marginalized groups into the democratic system without undermining their unique identity and heritage. The analysis of this dynamic provides useful answers to the general questions of gender equality, social justice, and the effectiveness of decentralized government in society of diverse cultures. This paper examines the

opportunities and challenges faced by tribal women in Chhattisgarh, exploring the intersection of law, policy, culture, and empowerment in the context of tribal governance under PESA.

Social governance of the local community gives access to the community's citizens to power and choice through which they become empowered (Blakely & Leigh, 2010). The term also means the most extensive delegation of competencies to the elected officials to perform so as to be a self-regulating unit with enough rights and jurisdiction.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CHHATTISGARH TRIBAL WOMEN IN PANCHAYATI RAJ:

In historical context the scheduled areas of Chhattisgarh especially women have played a vital role in community decision-making through traditional village councils though their participation was largely informal and guided by customary practices. Chhattisgarh tribal women started to be formally part of the local governance after the implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992), which was the inception of a three-tier Panchayati Raj system and had mandated the reservations for Scheduled Tribes (STs) and tribal women. The amendment reserved one-third of seats for women (including tribal women) in Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, and Zila Parishads. Later, Chhattisgarh enhanced this quota to 50% significantly increasing women's representation in grassroots democracy (Government of Chhattisgarh, 2010).

In Tribal domain of Chhattisgarh, the implementation of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) (PESA) Act, 1996 further strengthened tribal women's roles by recognizing Gram Sabhas as central to self-governance. PESA empowered tribal communities including women to manage resources, resolve disputes, and preserve cultural traditions (Xaxa, 2014). There was a movement then from mere participation to substantive involvement in decision-making. Despite challenges of illiteracy, patriarchal

structures, and limited awareness, many tribal women leaders have risen. The findings of this research have shown how Women Sarpanch of Tribal Areas, through their delivery political areas of improvement such as the supply of drinking water, basic Health needs, Education and Livelihoods demonstrate the potential of their Leadership Position (Mehta, 2002; Sharma, 2018).

The representation of Tribal Women has been connected to both the Continuation of pre-existence participatory practices established through the tradition and the Transformation of Tribal Women through the implementation of Constitutional Reforms in Chhattisgarh. The increased representation of women in Tribal Governance has resulted in the advancement of Gender Equity and has also contributed to promoting Grassroots Democracy across the Tribal areas of Chhattisgarh.

THE PESA FRAMEWORK: PROVISIONS FOR WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION:

The structure of PESA expects the participatory democracy in which the Gram Sabha is at the centre of the tribal governance. Part 4 gives Gram Sabhas the right to protect communal resources, adjudicate in a manner that follows customary law, and confer land acquisition functions to have direct implications to women whose means of livelihoods rely on such resources (Government of India, 1996). Most importantly, PESA already has implemented the gender reservations which are enshrined in the 73rd Amendment: that at least one-third of Panchayat seats should be reserved by women, and of that one-third by Scheduled Tribe women in particular, to guarantee proportional representation (Section/ 4(a)). This is also the case with leadership, including that of the Sarpanch, the chief of the village, which will thus create female agency in the spheres of resource management and social welfare.

In Chhattisgarh, the Chhattisgarh Panchayat Raj Adhiniyam, 1993, was amended post-PESA to incorporate these mandates, establishing State PESA Rules in 2016 to operationalize Gram Sabha powers

(Nusrat, 2023). Empirical data indicate modest gains: as of 2023, women constitute approximately 46% of elected PRI representatives nationwide, with Chhattisgarh reporting over 40,000 female Panchayat members, many from tribal backgrounds (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2024). These women influence policies on minor forest produce (MFP) collection vital for 76.5% of tribal households and maternal health, aligning with Sustainable Development Goals on gender equality (SDG 5) and reduced inequalities (SDG 10).

THE 73RD CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT ACT AND PESA: THE SCENARIO IN CHHATTISGARH:

The implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, and the panchayat raj acts enacted in various states of India, has brought to the forefront the importance of local level democratic processes. With this new experience, it is learned that the triumph of the new panchayat raj system is majorly dependent upon the agreement and commitment of the people, their leaders and officials regarding the role to be played by them in the new system. From the point of view of the context and theory, the new panchayat raj system is a design for self-governance (Sisodia, 2002a).

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 marked a watershed in Indian democracy by institutionalising Panchayati Raj as the third tier of governance. It mandated regular elections, reservation for marginalized groups, and devolution of powers to locally elected bodies. However, the amendment excluded Fifth Schedule areas regions predominantly inhabited by Scheduled Tribes to respect tribal customs and autonomy. The omission, in the context of understanding the dynamics of policy adjustment, was seemingly handled through the enactment of Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996 an act of legislation that sought to integrate indigenous self-governance structures into the general arrangement of democracy.

The 73rd Amendment Act: Structure and Implementation in Chhattisgarh

On the basis of the 73rd amendment to the Constitution, a three-level Panchayati Raj institution was instituted in the state system, including Gram Panchayats at village level, Janpad Panchayats at block level, and Zila Panchayats at the district level. Article 243D ensured Articles 243D explicitly required reserves of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women. The formation of the State Finance Commission and the State Election Commission was also aimed at making the state devolve fiscal and also to make the frequency holding of elections. In Chhattisgarh, the operations of the Panchayati Raj Institutions are active since 2000. The state has exhibited a strong dedication to increase the role of women such that by 50 percent reservation of women has been instated at all levels which exceeds the constitutional requirement of 33 percent in 2009 as per Government of Chhattisgarh. The electoral cycles have also strengthened the women representation and the upward trend has remained constant within the elected Panchayats. However, tribal areas governed under the Fifth Schedule required a distinct legal framework aligned with their socio-cultural norms hence the relevance of PESA.

The 73rd Amendment and PESA represent two complementary but distinct paradigms of local governance. In Chhattisgarh, while the 73rd Amendment has institutionalised democratic decentralisation across general areas, PESA offers a context-sensitive and tribal-centric governance model in Scheduled Areas. However, the full realisation of PESA's potential remains limited due to administrative reluctance, lack of awareness, and structural inequalities. A synergistic implementation of both the 73rd Amendment and PESA could make Chhattisgarh a model state for inclusive, tribal-centric, and gender-just grassroots governance in India.

TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY:

Tribal development aims to improve the socioeconomic and cultural well-being of communities

at various stages of development. Tribal people's social and economic development should be phased and time-bound with integrated programs tailored to their socio-economic situation. The objective is to get rid of the exploitation and support social justice and equality. Health, education, employment, transportation, and technical manpower are some of the programs that can help the tribal people to uplift their standard of living and enable them to come into the mainstream society.

In the social groups (tribal people) and the Tribal Sub-pan (TSP) is considered a lifeline for socioeconomic growth. With the goal of accelerating the socioeconomic development of Tribal people was initially presented in the Fifth Five Year Plan (Louis, 2008, p. 322).

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION:

Women's empowerment refers to the process of granting women who constitute nearly the world's population for equal rights and opportunities in social, political, and economic spheres. It ensures that women are treated with dignity, recognized as equal citizens, and included in decision-making processes that shape the welfare of both society and the nation. The role of empowerment does not limit to the frame of individual rights, but it is the domain of collective involvement in ruling; in a country where women have a direct voice, it can direct to the architecture of development programmes and influence the policy-making process.

At the international level, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) upholds the principle of equal participation, stating in Article 21 that "everyone has the right to take part in the government of their country, either directly or through freely elected representatives" (United Nations, 1948). This declaration emphasizes that true democratic governance is not possible without the active involvement of women. Likewise, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979, urges countries to remove obstacles that hinder women's participation in political and public spheres (United Nations, 1979).

At the global scale, the principle of equal participation is sturdy in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) that was ratified by the United Nations in 1948. Article 21 states that "all people reserve the right to participate in the government of their respective countries either personally or via the freely elected representatives". This assertion highlights the fact that true democratic governments cannot be practiced without women actively participating in the process thus putting gender representation at the centre of political legitimacy. In the same vein, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which was adopted in 1979 requires the signatory countries to remove every obstacle that hampers women participation in political life and public affairs. The Convention thus commits governments to establish a conducive environment whereby women would be able to play a significant role in developing the public policy and decision making in the country.

The implications of the involvement of women in politics are much far-reaching as far as democratic governance is concerned. I argue that when women sit in legislative houses, the policy agenda therein becomes more accommodative and sensitive to the masses like healthcare, education and social welfare (Phillips, 1995; Krook, 2009). The inclusion of women plays a key role in bringing to light gender specific issues that are otherwise difficult to detect during male dominated discussions. When considering the practice of developing countries, the empirical evidence indicates that women leaders in the local community always focus on the needs of the community particularly in areas such as drinking water, sanitation and education (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004).

Moreover, female empowerment is not only a human-rights issue, but also an economic one. The World Bank (2012) explains that gender equality increases productivity, better development results and stronger institution, thus Makes the case that political empowerment is an essential part of sustainable development. In this respect, political empowerment is

in perfect harmony with the Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG-5) that promotes gender equality and active involvement of women in leadership and decision-making in all tiers. Taking these principles into policy frameworks, we will be a step further towards achieving the larger goals of equitable and inclusive development.

POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF TRIBAL WOMEN:

Political empowerment is also a major aspect of women empowerment as far as it provides women with the ability to influence the process of decision making. However, an amalgamation of socioeconomic disadvantages still pushes women to the margins of the political arena despite the high levels of demographic representation. The percentage of women left without political sense and literacy is quite high hence limiting their willingness to participate actively in civic affairs. Consequently, the continuous renewal of the political process, which is based on democratic principles, will always be essential to promote the idea of gender equity in the government.

Tribal women in India face unique challenges in socio-economic and political participation. Panchayat play a crucial role in grassroots governance. Empowering in Panchayat has increased representation ensuring tribal women get elected or participate in capacity building programme and training. Tribal women are to lead effectively in Panchayat level addressing local needs focusing on issues like health, education, and livelihoods in tribal areas. Empowering tribal women in Panchayat can lead to more inclusive governance and development in tribal regions.

Tribal Women play a very important role in the Panchayat through participating the leadership of the empowering tribal development. The Indian Constitution provides several safeguards for Scheduled Tribes, including special measures in education and employment under Article 15(4), reservations in public services under Article 16(4), promotion of their economic and social development under Article 46, and provisions for self-

governance through legislative councils and the Panchayati Raj system in scheduled areas.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL SPHERE:

Women empowerment in social, economic, and political fields can be fomented by awareness raising, fair access to resources, and provision of equal opportunities. This is hence, a good leverage for equality, security, and development on an inclusive basis. Women as agents of economic development when empowered with education, skills, and decision power can transform markets through innovation, productivity growth, and overall uplift of society (Kabeer, 1999; World Bank, 2012). If their potentials are strengthened in all domains upliftment of society will be the upliftment of the person. In essence, empowerment denotes that persons and groups identify and make choices which they realize into actions of some consequence. The creation of both personal and collective resources, which accompanies the advancement of the equity in systems and institutions, will be the focus of the feminist theory (Sen, 1997).

Therefore, women empowerment is not an issue of participation but rather the development of an atmosphere where women express their voices in governance, formulation of policies and transformation of the society. The situation in the Indian context means that the process of women empowerment should be realized in a dual manner, with the inter and intra-gender support networks and the intervention of men, as well as the legal and constitutional changes. Article 14 of the Constitution of India provides the equality before the law, Article 15 forbids the discrimination based on sex, and Article 39 imposes the duty on the State to provide equal pay to equal work and equal opportunities in the work of the State. Also, policy tools like female reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act have helped hundreds of thousands of women to be involved in the decentralized decision-making (Buch, 2000). True empowerment is when women change their passive roles into active planners of the society (Sen, 1997). The

development process, therefore, ought to view itself as an extension of the freedom, the empowerment of women being an essential part of it (Sen, 1997). With this in mind, socio-economic and political inclusion of women as a promotion is thus an ethical obligation and a developmental requirement in India and the rest of the world.

GENDER EQUALITY AND TRIBAL WOMEN IN PANCHAYT RAJ SYSTEM:

It is not just the constitutional demand that gender equality in the governance process is a crucial social requirement, which supports inclusive development. The Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 (73rd Constitutional Amendment) was a watershed reform in India which institutionalised the Panchayati Raj Institutions, and required that one-third of the seats should be filled by women. This quota has been increased to fifty percent in several states such as Chhattisgarh thus giving tribal women a wider scope within which they can be actively involved in the grassroots decision-making process (Government of Chhattisgarh, 2010).

Inclusion of tribal women in Panchayats and Rural Institutions (PRIs) poses some challenges and opportunities. In the past, the patriarchy, poverty, and social exclusion have marginalized these women hence restricting their access to political processes (Xaxa, 2014). However, the constitutional rights and Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) 1996 has enabled them to express the grievances of the people and at the same time maintain the traditional and heritage of the tribes. According to empirical evidence, when tribal women are put in such positions as sarpanchs or members of a panchayat, they are more likely to concentrate on social welfare related issues, which depend on healthcare, education, drinking water and livelihood security, both denoting their lived reality and the interests of their communities (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Mehta, 2002).

The roles of tribal women in PRIs bolster gender equality as well as allow for cultural preservation. As

keepers of Indigenous cultures and traditions these women connect governance and heritage through the incorporation of traditional knowledge systems into planning and programming for developments. However, there continues to be the challenges of limited literacy; economic reliance; and continued practice of male relatives acting as “stand-ins” for women to fulfil their roles as leaders (Sharma, 2018). Despite these obstacles, the inclusion of tribal women within panchayati raj creates an opportunity for transforming gender justice and advancing democracy in India. Creating an environment that supports participation and provides the necessary capacity-building experiences to improve engagement will create an atmosphere in which India will be more closely aligned with substantive equality in governance.

OPPORTUNITIES:

The PESA was introduced in order to ensure tribal self-governance and align traditional systems of governance with the Panchayati Raj structure and constitution. Chhattisgarh is one state that has a total population comprised of over 30 percent Scheduled Tribes (Census of India, 2011), for which PESA is a major hope for women tribal participation in governing the state.

1. **Increased Political Representation:** With the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and state provisions to reserve 50% of PRI seats for women, PESA provides a space for women of tribal communities in Gram Sabhas/Panchayats (Government of Chhattisgarh, 2010).
2. **Strengthening Grassroots Democracy:** PESA acts to strengthen grassroots democracy by empowering Gram Sabhas in the management of resources, dispute settlement, and preservation of cultural traditions. In this way, it helps tribal women to influence decisions that affect their livelihoods and communities.
3. **Cultural and Heritage Preservation:** Tribal women, as custodians of rituals, crafts, and ecological knowledge use PESA's provisions to integrate

indigenous practices into local governance (Sharma, 2018).

4. **Development Priorities Reflecting Women's Needs:** Development Priorities Reflecting Women's Needs: Evidence suggests that women representatives in tribal panchayats have often given priority to drinking water, healthcare, and education, crucial elements for social development, as a number of authors, Chattopadhyay & Duflo (2004) point out.
5. **Agency and Leadership:** For many tribal women, PRI participation under PESA is the first opportunity to engage in formal decision-making, building confidence and leadership skills (Mehta, 2002).

The scope of opportunities generated by PESA goes far beyond representation in numbers. Tribal women in Chhattisgarh have, to some extent, used their offices in PRIs to take up issues directly related to their lives, such as health, potable water, sanitation, education, or means of livelihood. These developmental issues, it might be overlooked in male-chauvinistic governance systems, tend to see the light of day when women take an active role in governance. In addition, these tribal women carry in their wake their own traditional knowledge, culture, or values, which tend to enrich governance systems in terms of sustainability or community-oriented factors. In this way, PESA not only fosters inclusiveness in governance in terms of numbers, culture, or identity, it also helps to serve as custodians in democratic institutions.

CHALLENGES:

Yet, given these opportunities, tribal women in Chhattisgarh face numerous challenges that impede effective participation under PESA.

1. **Proxy Representation:** Most women sarpanchas are controlled by male relatives or elders in the community, which reduces their autonomy in decision-making (Buch, 2000).
2. **Low Awareness of PESA Provisions:** It is reported from studies that generally, the tribal women are not

aware of their constitutional rights and the strength that Gram Sabhas have bestowed upon them (Xaxa, 2014).

3. **Socio-Economic Barriers:** The incidence of poverty, illiteracy, and lack of training imposes an important constraint on the capability of women to participate fully in governance (Kabeer, 1999).
4. **Patriarchal and Cultural Constraints:** In many of the tribal communities, the patriarchal norms restrict women's public visibility and discourage them from actively participating in the discussions of Gram Sabha (Sharma, 2018).
5. **Institutional Weaknesses:** Poor implementation of PESA, bureaucratic interference, and a lack of administrative support have often eroded the autonomy of elected women leaders among the tribal's (Mehta, 2002).

CONCLUSION:

The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act is landmark legislation in India's attempt to reconcile modern democratic institutions with traditional governance systems for tribal communities. In a state like Chhattisgarh, where nearly one-third of the population consists of tribals, PESA has transformative potential for tribal women, whose voices have long been relegated to the periphery of both customary structures and state-led governance systems. An exploration of women's participation under PESA in Chhattisgarh not only opens a window to the evolving dynamics of grassroots democracy but also reflects the broader challenges of securing gender justice in deeply stratified social contexts.

One of the core accomplishments of PESA is that it has provided a formal setup for the involvement of tribal women in the governance of the locality through the formation of panchayati raj institutions (PRIs). The reservation of 50 percent seats for females within the Panchayati Raj framework of Chhattisgarh has provided unprecedented opportunities for the involvement of the tribals in the leadership position of the 'sarpanch, member,

and representative' of the local body, including the upper levels of the same, as the 'sarpanch, member, and representative'.

As it gave women exactly the same resources that could enable them to overcome the limitations of home-based jobs to take part in decision-making public activities, it is also a legal framework. It is because the law gives women their legitimate place in political spheres, which were dominated by men in the past. But simply because there are women representatives in Panchayats in tribal areas, these women are not empowered. This is very important to understand in making a distinction between symbolic representation and actual participation in order to judge its actual impact on women's empowerment through PESA.

In this milieu, this research endeavours to illustrate the presence of structural hurdles impacting the role of women in PESA. The issue of representation by proxy, where elected female leaders are influenced by their male relatives or elderly members of society, still persists. In such situations, women hold governing roles but lack actual autonomy diminishing their capacities to less than leadership positions becoming mere extensions of patriarchal power. Conversely, illiteracy rates, lack of awareness of the provisions of the constitution, and inadequate training are factors inhibiting the capacities of women to assert themselves during Panchayat sessions. With a lack of skills and knowledge, it becomes difficult for the female participants to completely comprehend their role in implementing the powers conferred on Gram Sabhas by PESA.

Socio economic factors also add to these difficulties. Poverty, lack of resources, and marginalization might restrain women from properly managing family and official responsibilities. For many tribal women, governance becomes an additional load rather than an opportune moment especially when there are no effective support structures to facilitate them. At the same time, deep-rooted patriarchal traditions in tribal cultures continue to curtail women's movement,

presence, and voice in public domains. These social obstacles accompanied by unsatisfactory implementation of PESA legislation tend to weaken Gram Sabhas and women's impact on decision-taking procedures.

Thus, the experience of PESA in Chhattisgarh is suggestive of a certain paradox. On the one hand, it has created opportunities for the empowerment of women and increased their presence and recognition in the domain of governance and its values. However, its impact and effect have been thwarted by certain structural and societal handicaps that have hindered the progress towards its aim of socio-political empowerment and have thus proved to be counterproductive to its objective.

However, the way ahead calls for a multi-dimensional strategy. First of all, capacity-building activities designed for tribal women must be strengthened in order to develop their literary knowledge, legal consciousness, and leadership capabilities. The capacity-building activities can educate tribal women about their rights under PESA so that they can exercise their authority in the Gram Sabha meetings. Second, the institutional framework of accountability must be strengthened in order to ensure the effective implementation of the provisions of the PESA Act, as the independence of the Gram Sabhas must not be jeopardized by outside interventions. Lastly, the community sensitization programs must be launched to resist the patriarchal tradition hindering the entry of tribal women in tribal administrations and inculcate an enabling environment for the acceptance of tribal women leaders in the society.

This conclusion shows that the road to empowerment is not an incident but a process continuously negotiated through legal frameworks, socio-cultural dynamics, and institutional practices for the tribal women under PESA in Chhattisgarh. The reservation of seats in Panchayats does not imply equality; for the politicians and bureaucrats, the yardstick for measuring empowerment will be the quantum of decentralization of decision-making powers, shaping development

priorities, and preserving the interest of their people in protecting cultural heritage. It fully endorses the capability approach propounded by Amartya Sen, which upholds expanding freedoms and real opportunities of individuals to lead lives they have reason to value. Empowerment of tribal women in Chhattisgarh under PESA should be understood in terms not only of political representation but also of expansion of capabilities to exercise agency, preserve identity, and pursue development.

Ultimately, it also enables the framework to achieve tribal women's participation towards improvement of governance and its efficacy lies in removing or not addressing systemic issues. Experience from Chhattisgarh reveals that although still miles away from achieving a transformation that converts participation into empowerment and presence into influence. The reality of gender equality and tribal governance shall be achieved when tribal women not only participate but also take forward decision-making channels with their voice determining the pulse of grassroots democracy. This shall not only deliver promises of equality and justice as guaranteed by its constitution but also help enhance its democratic culture by being inclusive and representative of its realities.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interests.

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