



Political Mobilization of the Kurmi Community in Contemporary West Bengal: Trends and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The political mobilization of the Kurmi community in contemporary West Bengal has emerged as a significant dimension of caste and community-based politics in the state. Historically recognized as an agrarian caste with deep rural roots, the Kurmis have gradually transformed from a primarily occupational group into a politically conscious community seeking representation, recognition and socio-economic advancement. Their mobilization has gained momentum, influenced both by state-level electoral dynamics and broader national caste politics. This article examines the trends and challenges associated with Kurmi mobilization, focusing on electoral participation, organizational networks and the assertion of identity through demands for Scheduled Tribe status. The study highlights the major trends like Kurmi community has increasingly aligned with various political parties, often playing a decisive role in constituencies where their demographic strength is substantial. And the assertion of identity through cultural revivalism and community-based organizations has deepened their visibility in political discourse. However, the mobilization process also faces challenges. The Kurmis remain internally diverse with divisions along lines of region, class, and political affiliation, which complicate the creation of a cohesive movement. Moreover, their struggle is often constrained by competing



caste claims, administrative hurdles, and the electoral strategies of dominant political parties. These challenges highlight the precarious balance between grassroots mobilization and mainstream political negotiation.

Introduction: The politics of contemporary West Bengal has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, shaped by shifting socio-economic structures, identity-based assertions and the rise of regional political movements. Among the numerous communities that actively participate in the state's democratic processes, the Kurmi community holds a distinctive place due to its historical presence, agrarian roots and growing demand for recognition in the socio-political sphere. Traditionally associated with agriculture and rural economy, the Kurmis have, over time, become a politically conscious group seeking greater inclusion and representation within state politics. Their mobilization is not only influenced by questions of caste identity and social justice but also by broader concerns such as economic development, access to resources and affirmative action policies.

In recent years, the Kurmi community has emerged as an important political actor, engaging with both mainstream parties and grassroots movements to voice its aspirations. This mobilization reflects broader trends of identity politics in India while also presenting unique challenges specific to West Bengal's political context. The dynamics of alliance-building, electoral bargaining and demands for Scheduled Tribe status have added new layers to their political journey. This study explores these trends and challenges, offering insights into the evolving role of the Kurmi community in the democratic landscape of West Bengal.

Historical Background: The Kurmi community, recognized as a prominent agrarian caste group in India, has a long history rooted in cultivation and peasant identity. In West Bengal, their presence is mainly concentrated in districts like Purulia, Bankura, Jhargram, and parts of Paschim Medinipur, forming a significant section of the rural population. Historically, Kurmis were identified with agriculture, landholding, and food production, which placed them as a productive caste in the traditional social order. Colonial records often referred to them as a hardworking peasant community, and their role in agricultural surplus made them socially and economically important at the local level.

During the colonial and post-independence periods, Kurmis began to articulate collective identities in response to marginalization within the caste hierarchy and limited political representation. They sought recognition within the Other Backward Classes (OBC) framework, drawing on their agrarian



contributions and socio-economic hardships. In West Bengal, the Kurmi Mahasabha and other organizations played important roles in mobilizing the community around demands for social justice, reservation benefits, and political visibility. These historical experiences of assertion and negotiation shaped the trajectory of their contemporary mobilization, linking traditional peasant identity with modern democratic politics.

Objective of the Study: The primary objective of this study is to critically examine the political mobilization of the Kurmi community in contemporary West Bengal, with special attention to its evolving trends and the challenges it encounters. The research aims to explore how socio-economic factors, historical legacies and identity politics have shaped the community's participation in the state's political landscape. It seeks to analyze the strategies adopted by the Kurmi community in aligning with or resisting dominant political forces, while also highlighting their aspirations for greater recognition, representation and policy benefits.

Another key objective is to the study endeavors to provide a nuanced understanding of the Kurmi community's position in contemporary West Bengal politics, identifying the socio-political opportunities available to them as well as the structural constraints that hinder their empowerment.

Methodology of the Study: The study on 'Political Mobilization of the Kurmi Community in Contemporary West Bengal: Trends and Challenges' adopts a qualitative research design complemented by selective quantitative data to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject. A mixed-method approach has been employed to analyze both historical patterns and contemporary dynamics of Kurmi political mobilization.

Primary data has been collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with community leaders, activists and ordinary members of the Kurmi community across selected districts of West Bengal such as Purulia, Bankura, and Paschim Medinipur, Jhararam where Kurmis hold a significant demographic presence.

Secondary data sources include government reports, census data, election commission records, party manifestos and scholarly articles that provide historical and contextual insights. Content analysis of newspapers, political speeches and social media narratives has also been undertaken to examine public discourse around the community's mobilization.



The collected data has been analysed thematically, focusing on trends, strategies and challenges. Triangulation has been applied to enhance validity and reliability, ensuring that findings reflect both grassroots perspectives and broader structural realities.

Trends: The political mobilization of the Kurmi community in contemporary West Bengal reveals multiple converging trends. A heightened caste-consciousness has prompted Kurmi organizations to press for greater identity recognition, access to state benefits and representation within elected bodies. Electoral strategizing is prominent Kurmi leaders negotiate tactical alliances with regional and national parties, resulting in shifting loyalties and coalition-making at local and district levels. Grassroots institutionalization has strengthened through local sabhas, youth wings and cooperative networks that translate social capital into political influence. Socioeconomic claims especially around land rights, agrarian support and access to government schemes shape mobilization narratives and broaden appeal beyond elite leadership. Cultural politics also feature prominently with festivals, commemorations and media deployed to reinforce group solidarity and visibility. Simultaneously, generational divides emerge younger Kurmi activists often prioritize employment and education, while older leaders emphasize traditional patronage networks. Constraints persist, including fragmentation within the community, competition with other OBC and marginalized groups, and limited penetration in urban constituencies. These dynamics produce a dual outcome: enhanced bargaining power at the local level and continuing challenges in converting social mobilization into sustained legislative influence. Policy advocacy increasingly targets land, education and employment.

Mobilizations of Kurmi Community: The Kurmi community of West Bengal historically a tiller and agrarian caste with deep roots in the Junglemahal and Chotanagpur-adjacent districts has in recent years shifted from localized social claims to more organized political mobilization focused on identity, rights, and recognition. Longstanding demands have crystallized around three intertwined goals: recognition as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) or a distinct Adivasi group in certain districts, official recognition of the Kurmali language, and stronger protection for customary land and panchayat rights. These demands have repeatedly produced visible collective actions such as “rail roko” blockades and mass protests across Purulia, Paschim Medinipur and neighbouring areas.

A key trend is the professionalization and cross-state coordination of Kurmi activism. Multiple outfits sometimes under banners like Adivasi Kurmi Samaj or allied local unions now mobilize through targeted tactics (rail/road blockades, mass sit-ins, delegations to the state secretariat) and use media pressure to nationalize what were once regional grievances. The Print and other outlets documented multi-day



blockades and organized “rail roko” actions that deliberately aimed to escalate the issue onto state and central agendas, indicating higher organizational capacity than sporadic local protests.

Political parties have responded strategically. The Kurmi vote is concentrated in around thirty assembly constituencies in southwest and west-central Bengal, making the community a potential swing bloc in tightly contested seats. Both state-level parties and national outfits have courted Kurmi leaders or sought to co-opt their demands, producing episodic alliances and accusations of political patronage. This dynamic has intensified politicization: community leaders frame ST-status demands not only as cultural justice but as leverage in electoral bargaining.

However, mobilization faces serious structural and tactical challenges. First, the community’s internal diversity differences in class, location (forest-fringe vs. plains) and degrees of cultural assimilation complicates the formation of a unified political front. Scholarly reviews and regional studies of the Kudmi/Kurmi in Junglemahal note fragmentation and competing local elites, which constrain sustained, coherent political organization.

Second, legal and constitutional hurdles make the primary demand ST recognition difficult. The process requires ethnographic evidence, state and central clearances and often encounters resistance from other tribal groups and administrative bodies wary of shifting reservation balances. Courts and administrations have also stepped in for instance, the Calcutta High Court has issued directions around public order in the face of planned blockades, adding a judicial dimension that both constrains and reframes protest tactics.

Third, opposition and stigma from mainstream political actors can blunt mobilization. Public controversies, polarizing rhetoric and mutual accusations between parties have at times cast Kurmi protests as politically engineered or disruptive, which dilutes sympathy among wider publics and complicates negotiations. Media framing of violent incidents or rail disruptions can shift the conversation from substantive grievances to law-and-order narratives, reducing the political bargaining power of the movement.

Looking ahead, effective Kurmi mobilization will likely require a two-track strategy: (1) strengthen internal institutions elected community councils, research-backed ethnographic dossiers and broader coalitions with other marginalized groups to present airtight claims for recognition and (2) diversify tactics beyond disruptive blockades to include legal petitions, targeted electoral engagement and policy advocacy that links ST/linguistic claims to clear development outcomes (education, land rights, language schooling). Success will depend on overcoming internal fragmentation, navigating constitutional



pathways and reframing the movement in development and justice terms rather than only as an electoral pressure point.

In sum, the Kurmi mobilization in contemporary West Bengal is significant both for its organizational maturation and for the political stakes it introduces in marginal districts. Its future influence will hinge on institutional consolidation, evidence-based claims and the ability to move from protest to durable policy wins within the constitutional framework.

Challenges: The political mobilization of the Kurmi community in contemporary West Bengal faces several significant challenges that restrict its ability to consolidate and translate social strength into sustained political power. One of the foremost challenges is the lack of unified leadership and organizational cohesion within the community. Despite a sizeable population concentrated in districts such as Purulia, Bankura, and Paschim Medinipur, the Kurmis often remain divided along local, factional or party lines, weakening their collective bargaining capacity. Another major challenge arises from their ambiguous social status. The long-standing demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) recognition has not been addressed, creating frustration and uncertainty while limiting their access to constitutional safeguards and political leverage. Furthermore, mainstream political parties tend to appropriate Kurmi support during elections but seldom prioritize their long-term developmental concerns, leading to a sense of marginalization and distrust. Socio-economic backwardness, particularly low educational attainment, lack of adequate representation in higher bureaucracy and limited access to state resources, also hinders effective political participation. Additionally, competition with other backward or marginalized groups for recognition, resources and political space often generates tensions that dilute Kurmi mobilization. Media visibility and intellectual advocacy for the community's rights also remain relatively weak compared to other organized groups, restricting the wider projection of their demands. In this context, while the Kurmi community shows potential for strong mobilization, the absence of a clear agenda, unified movement and consistent recognition from the state remain formidable challenges that they must overcome to secure political empowerment in West Bengal.

Suggestions: The need for increased organisational cohesion and leadership development is one important recommendation for bolstering the Kurmi community's political mobilisation in West Bengal. These days, internal conflicts and dispersed representation frequently undermine the community's demands, such as acknowledgement and advantages associated with reservations. The creation of more robust community-based organisations and leadership development programs may facilitate the better expression of group needs. Additionally, by promoting unity across districts such as Purulia, Bankura,



Jhargram and Paschim Medinipur, the Kurmis would be able to fortify their political power and engage in constructive negotiations with mainstream parties.

Prioritising socio-economic empowerment in addition to political mobilisation is another crucial recommendation. Only through education, skill development and community economic growth can political bargaining leverage be maintained. Providing Kurmi youth with vocational training programs, scholarships and educational awareness would increase their social mobility and build a more knowledgeable political base. Promoting women's involvement in civic and political endeavours may help broaden the mobilization's reach and introduce inclusivity into positions of leadership. Additionally, the Kurmis can emphasise their historical commitment to agriculture while calling for contemporary welfare and infrastructure advantages by connecting their agrarian concerns with broader developmental objectives.

Last but not least, maintaining community identity requires strategic interaction with mainstream political parties and state institutions. Kurmi organisations ought to form issue-based coalitions that tackle issues including welfare program execution, representation in local government and Scheduled Tribe status. They would become more visible in the state's political discourse if they engaged in constructive discussion with policymakers and organised nonviolent mass mobilisations. To support their demands, academic research, policy studies and documentation of Kurmi history and contributions should all be promoted. In addition to helping the Kurmi people, such multifaceted initiatives would strengthen West Bengal's democratic politics.

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