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## **Cultural Identity and Community Assertion: The Kurmi Quest for Recognition in West Bengal**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Kurmi community of West Bengal, traditionally known for its agrarian roots and socio-economic contribution, has increasingly become a focal point in discussions of caste identity, recognition and political participation. This research explores the evolving process of cultural identity formation and community assertion among the Kurmis, focusing on their collective quest for recognition within the socio-political framework of the state. The study examines how cultural revival, community organization and identity-based mobilization have transformed the Kurmi movement from a localized demand into a broader struggle for dignity and inclusion. Using a qualitative research approach supported by field observations, interviews and analysis of secondary data, the paper investigates the role of the Kurmi Samaj and other associations in shaping narratives of heritage, history and belonging. It also analyzes how political actors engage with these movements to negotiate power and representation. The findings indicate that the Kurmi assertion embodies both a cultural renaissance and a strategic political movement aimed at achieving socio-economic advancement. The study highlights that the Kurmi community's pursuit of recognition reflects a deeper aspiration for equality, development and respect within a pluralistic social order. The research underscores the intersection of culture and politics as a vital

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dimension in understanding contemporary community movements in West Bengal.

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## **Introduction**

The question of identity and recognition has long shaped the socio-political landscape of India, where caste, community and culture intertwine to influence social mobility and political participation. Among the numerous agrarian communities of eastern India, the Kurmi community holds a distinct position for its historical association with agriculture, landholding and rural economy. In West Bengal, the Kurmis constitute a socially and economically significant group, yet their struggle for cultural recognition and political representation continues to evolve. Their demand for inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category has emerged as a focal point of mobilization, symbolizing not only a pursuit of constitutional benefits but also a larger quest for social dignity and historical acknowledgment.

The Kurmi community uses cultural identity as a crucial tool to reinterpret its position in the social hierarchy of the state. Establishing a communal consciousness based on shared history and belonging has become possible through the reassertion of old rituals, folk practices and community narratives. Reviving these cultural markers and connecting them to more general claims of political empowerment has been made possible in large part by groups like the Kurmi Samaj and other regional associations.

At the same time, this movement reflects the growing intersection of culture and politics in contemporary West Bengal. The articulation of identity is not limited to cultural pride but extends to active engagement in electoral processes, local governance and policy demands. This study, therefore, seeks to explore how the Kurmi community's cultural assertion functions as a vehicle for political recognition and developmental inclusion. By examining the interplay between culture, community and power, the paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of identity politics and the ongoing transformation of marginalized groups in regional contexts.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The study aims to explore how cultural identity shapes the social and political consciousness of the Kurmi community in West Bengal. It seeks to examine the various forms of community assertion, including the revival of traditional customs, festivals and rituals, as well as the role of organizations like the Kurmi Samaj in fostering collective awareness and advocating for recognition.



Further, the study investigates the Kurmi community's demand for Scheduled Tribe status, its engagement in local governance and political participation. It also assesses the challenges and prospects of the movement in achieving social justice, development and inclusive representation.

### **Methodology of the Study**

This study adopts a **mixed-method approach**, combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Kurmi community's cultural identity and assertion in West Bengal. The mixed-method approach allows the research to capture not only statistical patterns but also the nuanced socio-cultural perspectives that drive community mobilization.

**Primary data** were collected through structured interviews, and focus group discussions with Kurmi community members, leaders and representatives of organizations such as the Kurmi Samaj. This provided first-hand insights into cultural practices, perceptions of identity and the strategies employed for social and political recognition.

**Secondary data** were gathered from scholarly articles, government reports, census data, historical records, and media publications. This helped contextualize the community's claims, trace historical developments and corroborate findings from the primary data. Combining these sources ensures a holistic analysis of both the cultural and political dimensions of the Kurmi community's assertion.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The concepts of *cultural identity* and *community assertion* are central to understanding the socio-political dynamics of the Kurmi community's quest for recognition in West Bengal. Cultural identity refers to the sense of belonging and shared consciousness that individuals and groups derive from common traditions, values, language and historical experiences. It forms the foundation through which communities articulate their distinctiveness and negotiate their position within broader social hierarchies. For the Kurmi community, cultural identity is not merely about preserving customs or rituals, it is a form of resistance and self-definition that challenges the structures of exclusion and invisibility in mainstream society. When a group of people band together around this common identity to seek representation, rights, and acknowledgement, community assertion is born. It entails political and symbolic acts that convert social power into cultural belonging. This dynamic is reflected in the Kurmi community's mobilisation, which attempts to convert historical continuity and cultural pride into demands for developmental inclusion and Scheduled Tribe (ST) designation.



This study's theoretical framework is based on the theories of social mobilisation and identity politics. According to academics like Stuart Hall and Charles Taylor, identity politics highlights how marginalised groups fight to maintain their cultural uniqueness in the face of prevailing narratives. Similar to this, theories of social mobilisation, such those developed by Manuel Castells and Anthony Giddens, describe how networks of communication and common grievances lead to collective action. In this regard, the Kurmi movement serves as an example of how identity-based mobilisation serves as a political negotiating tactic as well as a cultural resurrection.

The relationship between culture, caste, and political recognition is crucial to this framework. In India, caste identities often overlap with cultural markers, influencing access to resources, social mobility, and political voice. The Kurmi community's assertion represents an attempt to reposition itself within this caste-based hierarchy by reinterpreting its cultural heritage as evidence of historical indigeneity and socio-political marginality.

### **Historical and Socio-political Context**

The Kurmi community has historically been recognized as a major agrarian group in eastern India, particularly in West Bengal, with deep roots in agriculture and rural livelihoods. During the colonial period, British administrators classified Kurmis primarily as cultivators, acknowledging their role in agrarian production but often ignoring their social and political aspirations. Colonial ethnographies and census records categorized them as an intermediate caste group—economically significant yet socially marginalized—laying the groundwork for later debates over social status and access to state resources.

The Kurmi community underwent profound changes in mindset in the years following independence, which was brought about by identity politics, land redistribution laws and more general socioeconomic reforms. Urban migration and education helped raise awareness of socioeconomic inequality, which in turn fuelled a need for political representation and respect. These shifts prompted the community to band together through caste-based and local associations, which played a crucial role in expressing calls for social fairness and the advantages of policies.

The Kurmi community's government classifications have continued to be controversial. Although they have historically been classified as members of West Bengal's Other Backward Classes (OBC) group, discussions regarding their inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category have heated up. Proponents contend that cultural uniqueness, socioeconomic backwardness, and historical marginalisation all support this kind of acknowledgement. This call for ST status is part of a calculated attempt to gain more social



legitimacy, political representation and access to government support programs. The Kurmi community's ongoing struggle for recognition illustrates how cultural identity, historical legacy and socio-political mobilization converge, highlighting the intricate interplay between caste, community assertion and state policies in contemporary West Bengal.

### **Forms of Cultural Assertion**

Cultural assertion among the Kurmi community in West Bengal manifests prominently through the revival and reinvigoration of traditional customs, rituals and festivals. These practices not only serve as a medium for preserving heritage but also act as a platform for collective identity formation. Rituals related to agriculture, seasonal celebrations and religious observances have been actively highlighted to reinforce the community's historical connection to land and cultivation, thereby underlining their socio-economic and cultural significance.

The Kurmi identity is greatly influenced by oral traditions, traditional dress, language, and folk songs. To ensure intergenerational transmission of memory and pride, historical narratives and heroic accounts of the community are passed down orally and through folk performances. The Kurmi identity is distinguished in West Bengal's diversified sociocultural landscape by the use of traditional attire and community meeting symbolism, which serve as outward signs of belonging.

Organizations like the **Kurmi Samaj** and other local associations have emerged as central actors in promoting cultural unity. They organize festivals, cultural fairs and awareness programs, fostering solidarity and collective participation. These organizations also serve as platforms to negotiate social and political recognition, linking cultural pride with developmental aspirations.

Additionally, the creation and propagation of cultural symbols and heritage narratives have become instrumental in identity politics. Monuments, commemorative events and publications celebrating Kurmi history and achievements act as tangible affirmations of the community's presence and contributions. Through these forms of cultural assertion, the Kurmi community not only preserves its traditions but strategically strengthens its claim for recognition and inclusion in the socio-political sphere of West Bengal.

### **Quest for Recognition and Inclusion**

The Kurmi community's quest for recognition in West Bengal is closely tied to its demand for inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category. This demand is grounded not only in cultural identity but also in



historical and socio-economic considerations. The community argues that, despite its significant contributions to agriculture and rural development, it has faced social and economic marginalization, limited access to education, employment opportunities and political representation. Inclusion in the ST category is seen as a pathway to address these structural inequalities, providing affirmative action benefits in education, government jobs, and social welfare schemes.

The Kurmi assertion is further supported by socioeconomic grounds. In comparison to other acknowledged ST groups, surveys and community accounts show differences in literacy, income, landholding patterns and access to developmental resources. These metrics show structural inequalities that impede upward mobility in the community. The Kurmis frame their demand as an issue of social justice and identity by tying cultural assertion to socio-economic data.

The government has responded to this need in a variety of ways, frequently reflecting administrative scrutiny and political calculations. Evaluations of historical disadvantage, demographic information and their ramifications for resource allocation have all been discussed in policy discussions. In order to maintain the issue's political prominence, public protests, community mobilisations and advocacy through groups like the Kurmi Samaj have become essential tools.

The movement's impact extends beyond the Kurmi community itself. It has influenced inter-community relations by prompting dialogue and negotiation with other backward and tribal groups and has affected regional politics by reshaping electoral strategies and policy priorities. Overall, the Kurmi quest for recognition illustrates the intersection of cultural identity, social justice and political participation in contemporary West Bengal.

### **Challenges and Contradictions**

The process of cultural assertion within the Kurmi community faces significant internal challenges. Despite sharing a common identity, divisions exist along lines of sub-caste, economic status, and regional differences, which often fragment collective mobilization. These internal disparities sometimes weaken unified demands for recognition and limit the community's ability to negotiate effectively with political institutions. Additionally, differing priorities between elders focused on cultural preservation and youth inclined toward economic and educational advancement create tensions in defining the movement's goals and strategies. Such internal divergences highlight the complexity of sustaining a cohesive community identity while simultaneously pursuing broader socio-political objectives.



The Kurmi community's pursuit of recognition is made more difficult by outside factors. Instead of really pursuing developmental or recognition agendas, political actors and parties have frequently engaged with the community selectively, taking advantage of identity declarations to further their electoral goals. Furthermore, it might be difficult for community leaders to strike a balance between the preservation of cultural history and contemporary development goals including infrastructure, work and educational opportunities. Another layer of contestation is added by opposition from other social groupings that view Kurmi aspirations as threatening or competitive. These inconsistencies show how the Kurmi community must carefully balance politics, culture and development in order to be recognised and gain genuine empowerment.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Cultural identity has emerged as a crucial tool of empowerment for the Kurmi community in West Bengal. By reviving traditional practices, festivals, folk songs and oral histories, the community reinforces a shared sense of belonging and collective pride. This cultural assertion not only strengthens internal cohesion but also positions the Kurmis as a distinct socio-political group capable of articulating their needs and demands. Through the active role of organizations such as the Kurmi Samaj, cultural revival has become a platform for raising awareness about historical marginalization and advocating for recognition. In this way, cultural identity functions as both a symbol of dignity and a practical mechanism for negotiating power within the broader societal framework.

Identity assertion and socioeconomic marginality are intimately related. Due to their limited access to political representation, education and wealth, the Kurmis have turned to culture as a means of gaining social and political power. Cultural mobilisation has eventually resulted in real political clout, allowing the community to bargain for advantages like development plans, reservations and electoral assistance. This change exemplifies how identity movements may create political power and close socioeconomic divides. Furthermore, the Kurmi experience draws attention to wider ramifications for West Bengal's caste politics and regional development, demonstrating how cultural assertion can change social hierarchies, impact policy priorities, and promote inclusive governance by integrating historically under-represented groups into the political and developmental mainstream.

### **Conclusion**

The study of the Kurmi community in West Bengal highlights the centrality of cultural identity in shaping social and political assertion. The findings indicate that the Kurmi movement is not merely a



quest for legal recognition, such as Scheduled Tribe status but also a broader effort to reclaim historical dignity, preserve cultural heritage and establish collective visibility within the socio-political landscape. Through the revival of traditional practices, festivals, and narratives, the community has actively constructed a sense of shared identity that reinforces solidarity and empowers its members to negotiate their position in local and regional politics.

The Kurmi movement is a prime example of how marginalised groups in India use identity and cultural assertion as a means of achieving social justice. The community has drawn attention to systemic injustices and promoted fair participation in governance, resource distribution and development projects by tying cultural revival to political mobilisation.

Looking ahead, the prospects for the Kurmi community depend on inclusive policies that acknowledge both cultural heritage and socio-economic needs. Strengthening access to education, employment and political representation, alongside fostering inter-community dialogue, can enhance social cohesion and sustainable development. The Kurmi case underscores the significance of integrating cultural identity with policy frameworks to achieve meaningful empowerment and ensure that community assertion translates into tangible social and developmental outcomes.

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