



The Role of Kurmi Community Organizations in Grassroots Development and Local Governance in West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at how Kurmi community organisations support local administration and grassroots development in modern-day West Bengal. The study examines how caste-based community organisations serve as a bridge between society and the state, with a focus on the years 2014–2024. It examines the origins, composition, and goals of Kurmi organisations as well as how they interact with regional establishments like municipalities and panchayats. The study places these organisations in the larger context of decentralisation, participatory governance, and community-led development, emphasising how social identity and group mobilisation influence local political engagement and access to development resources. The study used a mixed-method approach, utilising focus groups, field interviews, and secondary sources such as government reports and media coverage. According to the findings, Kurmi community organisations are crucial in promoting political awareness, expanding representation in local governing systems, and making welfare programs easier to access. At the same time, the paper highlights issues such as reliance on political patronage, internal fragmentation, and scarce resources. Although Kurmi community organisations have made a beneficial



impact on grassroots development, the study comes to the conclusion that persistent participation in democratic governance processes, inclusive leadership, and institutional backing are necessary for their efficacy.

Introduction

Particularly since the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment acts of 1992 which came into force in 1993, grassroots development and local governance have emerged as crucial components of democratic decentralisation in India. These changes placed a strong emphasis on inclusive development, community involvement in decision-making and public participation. The Kurmi community is a prominent social group in West Bengal, having a high concentration in rural and semi-urban areas. Kurmi community organisations, including caste associations, social welfare organisations, and unofficial networks, have become more involved in local governance structures, such as municipal authorities and Panchayati Raj Institutions. Their involvement reflects a broader trend of caste-based collective action aimed at socio-economic upliftment, political representation, and access to development resources.

This study examines the role of Kurmi community organizations in promoting grassroots development and influencing local governance in contemporary West Bengal. It seeks to analyze how these organizations contribute to areas such as education, social welfare, livelihood support, and political participation, while also shaping local power dynamics. The research explores the interaction between Kurmi organizations and formal governance institutions, highlighting their role in articulating community demands, mobilizing resources, and facilitating state welfare delivery. At the same time, it critically assesses the challenges faced by these organizations, including internal fragmentation, limited institutional capacity, and political co-optation. By focusing on the Kurmi community, the study contributes to the broader discourse on caste, development, and decentralized governance in India. It aims to fill an existing gap in academic literature by providing an empirical understanding of how community organizations function as agents of development and political engagement at the grassroots level, thereby enhancing inclusive and participatory governance.

Historical Background

The Kurmi community has historically been one of the prominent agrarian communities in eastern India, including present-day West Bengal. Traditionally engaged in agriculture, land management, and rural production, the Kurmis played a significant role in the pre-colonial rural economy. During the colonial



period, British land revenue systems such as the Permanent Settlement disrupted traditional agrarian relations, affecting Kurmi peasants along with other cultivating castes. Despite economic challenges, the community gradually developed collective social consciousness through informal networks, kinship ties, and village-level cooperation. These early forms of collective organization laid the foundation for later community-based mobilization.

Kurmi community organisations started to formally arise in the post-independence era, especially after democratic decentralisation was implemented. Particularly following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, the growth of Panchayati Raj institutions opened up new avenues for local leadership and grassroots involvement. In order to address concerns like land rights, irrigation, education, and access to welfare programs, Kurmi social associations, caste-based forums, and cooperative groups have become more involved with local governance structures. In addition to serving as forums for social solidarity, these groups served as a bridge between the community and the government, promoting political consciousness and administrative involvement at the block and village levels.

Kurmi community organisations began to play a more significant role in local administration and grassroots development in 2014 when West Bengal's political landscape changed. These groups faced both opportunities and difficulties as a result of growing electoral rivalry, welfare-oriented governance, and identity-based political mobilisation. Kurmi associations gained prominence in promoting social recognition, development advantages, and representation in municipalities and Panchayats. They now actively participate in local decision-making processes, going beyond cultural preservation. Analysing how Kurmi community organisations currently support grassroots development and democratic government in modern West Bengal requires an understanding of this historical trajectory.

Objectives of the Study

This study's main goal is to investigate how Kurmi community organisations support local governance institutions and grassroots development. It aims to comprehend how these groups support political, social, and economic empowerment at the local level.

The study also aims to analyze the nature of interaction between Kurmi community organizations and local governance institutions such as Panchayats and municipalities. It focuses on their participation in decision-making processes and implementation of development initiatives.



Finally, the research intends to identify the challenges faced by Kurmi community organizations in achieving effective governance and inclusive development. It also seeks to assess their overall impact on community participation and democratic practices at the grassroots level.

Methodology of the Study

In order to investigate the function of Kurmi community organisations in local governance and grassroots development in West Bengal, this study uses a mixed-methods research methodology. Local development outcomes, community involvement, and institutional practices are recorded using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Primary data are collected through semi-structured interviews with leaders of Kurmi community organizations and Panchayat representatives, along with focus group discussions among community members. **Secondary data** include government reports, organizational records, census data, and relevant academic literature.

The study areas are selected purposively from districts with significant Kurmi population. Qualitative data are analyzed thematically, while quantitative data are examined using descriptive statistical methods to ensure validity and triangulation of findings.

Organizations of Kurmi Community

Kurmi community organizations have played a significant role in promoting grassroots development and strengthening local governance in several regions of eastern India, particularly in West Bengal. These organizations emerged primarily as socio-cultural platforms aimed at preserving Kurmi identity, traditions, and collective interests. Over time, however, their role expanded beyond cultural preservation to include social reform, educational advancement, and political awareness. By mobilizing community members around shared concerns—such as land rights, social justice, and access to state welfare schemes—Kurmi organizations have become important actors at the grassroots level.

Kurmi community organisations actively participate in programs pertaining to economic empowerment, health, and education at the developmental level. In order to give members of the marginalised community access to institutional support, they plan information campaigns about government welfare programs, scholarships, and reservation regulations. Numerous organisations also support skill-development programs, cooperative activities, and self-help groups, especially for women and young people. Kurmi organisations work to improve socioeconomic conditions and lessen reliance on outside



middlemen. Because of their grassroots presence, they are more able to recognise local needs than formal institutions, which guarantees inclusive and focused development.

They participate in Panchayati Raj processes by supporting community representation, influencing local decision-making, and advocating for equitable resource distribution. Leaders emerging from these organizations often contest local elections or engage with elected representatives, enhancing political participation within the community. Consequently, Kurmi organizations not only strengthen democratic practices at the local level but also contribute to the broader process of participatory governance and decentralized development.

Impact of Local Governance in Kurmi Community

The Kurmi community has played a significant role in shaping grassroots development and local governance in various regions of eastern India, particularly in West Bengal. As a historically agrarian and socially mobilized community, Kurmis have increasingly organized themselves through community associations, cultural forums, and socio-political organizations to address local developmental concerns. These organizations act as intermediaries between the community and local governance institutions such as Panchayati Raj bodies, thereby enhancing participatory governance. By mobilizing community members around issues of land rights, agricultural welfare, education, and social justice, Kurmi organizations contribute to strengthening democratic practices at the local level.

Kurmi community organisations regularly participate in development projects pertaining to job programs, irrigation facilities, rural infrastructure, and welfare program access at the local level. These organisations support the efficient execution of government programs like MGNREGA, PM-KISAN, and rural housing initiatives by working together and exercising local leadership. By keeping an eye on service delivery and promoting equitable resource distribution, their participation improves accountability and transparency in local governance. Kurmi leaders elected to Panchayats are essential in many places when it comes to giving development requirements that directly impact marginalised agricultural household's top priority.

Furthermore, Kurmi community organizations contribute to social empowerment and political awareness within the community. They organize meetings, training programs, and awareness campaigns to educate members about their constitutional rights, reservation policies, and the functioning of local self-government institutions. This process of political socialization enhances the capacity of community members to participate effectively in decision-making processes. By promoting leadership among youth



and women, Kurmi organizations also challenge traditional power structures and encourage inclusive governance at the village level.

Kurmi community organisations' involvement in local administration is not without difficulties, though. Their efficacy may be limited by internal factionalism, resource limitations, and the sporadic politicisation of community platforms. Kurmi organisations continue to be essential to grassroots development in spite of these obstacles because they promote collective identity, bolster local democracy, and close the divide between the community and the state. All things considered, their contribution emphasises how crucial community-based organisations are to fostering responsive local governance and participatory development in modern rural India.

Challenges and Limitations

The study on the role of Kurmi community organizations in grassroots development and local governance faces several challenges. One major challenge is the limited availability of reliable and systematic data, as many community-based organizations function informally and lack proper documentation of their activities. Accessing accurate information through fieldwork is also constrained by time, financial resources, and the geographical dispersion of Kurmi-inhabited areas. In some cases, respondents were hesitant to share internal organizational details, which may have affected the depth of qualitative insights.

There are some restrictions on the study as well. Its focus on particular areas limits the findings' applicability to the whole Kurmi population in other states. Furthermore, because the majority of the research is qualitative in nature, it is challenging to quantify the long-term influence of community organisations on development outcomes. The capacity to establish clear causal relationships is further limited by political processes and evolving governance arrangements across time.

Conclusion

This study looked at how Kurmi community organisations in West Bengal support local administration and grassroots development. The results show that these groups serve as crucial go-betweens for the community and the state by encouraging group action, expressing local concerns, and facilitating access to public services and welfare programs. Kurmi organisations have improved representation at the local level, promoted participatory decision-making, and raised political awareness through their participation in Panchayati Raj institutions, community gatherings, and unofficial networks. Their efforts in areas like social welfare, livelihood projects, and education support show that community-based organisations can



be beneficial in tackling common developmental issues, especially in places where state outreach is still uneven or limited.

The study also identifies several structural limitations that restrict Kurmi community organisations' efficacy. Their autonomy and long-term developmental impact are frequently limited by internal leadership disputes, a lack of resources, and a reliance on political patronage. Furthermore, differences between districts and unequal participation in local governance organisations imply that their influence is not consistent. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, Kurmi community organisations continue to make a substantial overall contribution to local administration and grassroots development. Their developmental role can be improved by bolstering their institutional capabilities, guaranteeing more inclusivity, and encouraging open cooperation with local government entities. As a result, the study comes to the conclusion that Kurmi community organisations are more than just identity-based groups; they are also new players in local governance that have the potential to support more inclusive and participatory growth in modern-day West Bengal.

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