



Tribal Governance in West Bengal: A Study of Santhal Community

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines tribal governance in West Bengal with the focus on the Santhal Community. In the tribal regions of West Bengal, particularly the Rarh and the Jangalmahal region (specially Bankura, Purulia, Jhargram, Birbhum etc.) local governance is characterized by unique governance and duality. On the one hand the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI), a product of 73rd constitutional amendments act representing democratic decentralization. On the other hand exists a centuries old Santal Tribals community's self governance mechanism named The Majhi Pargana System. In this paper explore the conflict and cooperation between these systems. It argues that while the PRI provides the institutional framework for local level governance and also development of rural areas. The Majhi Pargana System is based on social and cultural legitimacy. This study further examines the implications and non implications of the Panchayat Extension in Schedule Areas Act (PESA Act) 1996, in West Bengal and how the legal void shapes the grassroots local Tribal Governance. It also discusses key changes including weak policy implementation, lack of awareness and administrative constraints. The paper concludes that integration of traditional practices with modern governance mechanism is essential for effective tribal empowerment and sustainable development.

Introduction



If you go into a Santhal village the Rarh regions of Bankura ,Jhargram or Purulia you will notice how village administration will run. On paper the area is governed by the Panchayati Raj system, which was backed by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment act to bring government funds and development of rural areas. But in the daily lives of the people, the real authority often lies somewhere else with the Majhi Pargana system, the ancient , centuries old traditional Council led by the Majhi Haram (village headman). In these parts of West Bengal tribal peoples are living under two different forms of governance at the exact same time.

To understand why this dual system is important we just need to look at the numbers. According to the 2011 census, Scheduled Tribes (STs) make up about 5.8% of West Bengal's population. Among them santhals are the largest and most politically aware groups. In the regions of western district of the Jungle Mahal region , tribal communities often account for nearly 20% of the local population. For this communities government administration is not just about what is decided on Kolkata or New Delhi it is about how modern rules hit into their centuries old way of life.

The core issue is that the panchayat and Majhi Pargana think and work in completely different ways. The panchayat system is driven by political parties and elections and the village is often divided into different political camps. The Panchayat's main work is to development of the villages , bringing government schemes for roads , water and 100 days work (MNREGA) . On the other hand the Majhi Pargana system does not care about votes or party color; it works entirely based on consensus and unity. When a family dispute happens or multiple family disputes or disputes between two or more villages or when it is time to organise a cultural festivals like Baha, Sohrai, the elders or village Council sit together in the Kulhi Durub(Village Meeting) and take decisions. The Majhi (village headman) handles the village affairs like its culture its peace and social identity.

However there is a major legal hurdle in West Bengal. In the neighbours of tribal dominated states like Jharkhand or Odisha this traditional village council actually has legal power backed by the PESA act of 1996, law under government. In the case of West Bengal is not listed under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution ,the PESA act is not implemented here. This means that legally the Majhi Pargana system is invisible to the state. It has no legal power and survives purely on the deep social respect of the Santhal people. This lack of legal recognition often leads to silent tensions between the government and the villages especially when it comes to sensitive issues like forest rights, land issue or other customary law.



Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study is to understand how local governance actually works in Santhal tribal areas of West Bengal. In many villages, both traditional and modern systems are running together, so this study tries to look at that real situation from a ground-level perspective.

First, the study tries to understand the traditional Santhal governance system—how the Manjhi and village leaders manage village affairs and how decisions are taken.

Second, it looks at how the modern Panchayat system is working in these areas, especially the role in local decision-making.

Another important aim is to see how these two systems—traditional and Panchayat—work together in real life.

It also focuses on real situations in districts like Bankura, Purulia and Jhargram, to understand what is happening in practical life, not just in theory.

Finally, the study tries to identify the main problems in tribal governance and suggests how both traditional and modern systems can work better together for development.

Research Methodology

This study is based on a descriptive secondary data analysis to bridge historical policy with grassroots realities. To map the demographic scale and historical context, it draws upon authentic government records, prominently the **Census of India (2011)** and the **West Bengal District Gazetteers** for Purulia and Bankura. To analyze the legal frameworks, it evaluates policy briefs from the **Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA)** alongside the **West Bengal Panchayat Act (1973)**. By cross-referencing these official documents with peer-reviewed ethnographic journals, the research pieces together a realistic, evidence-based picture of how traditional tribal governance adapts within the modern state.

Traditional Governance of the Santhal Community

Long before the Indian Constitution was written the Santhal people had already perfected a system to keep their society peaceful and united. This is that it is not just a political body it is the soul of the village and the custodian of Santhal communities. The Majhi Pargana systems are discussed below:

1. The village unit (Atu): There are five pillars of the village unit. The *Majhi Haram* (Village Headman)



is the central figure of the village. But he isn't a "politician" in the modern sense. He is more like a father figure to the entire village, chosen through deep community trust. To help him run the daily affairs, he has a dedicated council. There is the *Paranik*, who acts as his right-hand man and deputy. Then there is the *Jog Majhi*, a very interesting role—he is basically the guardian of the youth, ensuring the younger generation stays on the right moral path and there is *Naike* the priest of the village. Finally, there is the *Godet*, the village messenger who calls everyone together when a meeting is needed.

2. The regional unit (Pargana): A group of 10 to 12 villages forms a Pir (regional sub body), headed by the Parganas .

3. The Judicial System: the strongest part of the system is the judicial system . Their highest judicial authority is called "*La Bir Sendra*" (the supreme hunt council). This is where the most serious crimes and social problems are finally decided. In this judicial system, people are not worried about losing their property or going to jail. Instead losing their social prestige and being expelled from the community.

What makes this traditional governance so beautiful is how it makes decisions. Unlike modern democracy, the Majhi Pargana system relies on consensus. Through the village council meeting (Kulhi Durub) every member of the community has a voice . The legitimacy of the Majhi is derived from as a spiritual and social mediator. It is governance by pure consensus.

Panchayati Raj System In Tribal Area

Now on the other side we have the modern machinery of the state: the Panchayati Raj system. To understand how it works in tribal areas ,we first need to look at what is generally. Back in 1992, the Indian government passed the 73rd constitutional amendment act to bring democracy out of the capital cities and right to the grassroots. They create three tier Panchayat system: the Gram Panchayat at the village level, the Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and the Zila Parishad at the district level. The whole idea was to develop rural areas.

But when you implement this modern system in the tribal areas of West Bengal – like Bankura, Purulia, Jhargram -things get very complicated. The Panchayat Raj functions administrative and infrastructural backbone of the village. If a village needed concrete road, drinking water or jobs under 100 days scheme (MNREGA), they cannot go to the traditional Majhi. They have to go to the elected Panchayat Pradhan. Panchayat controls the government money, the official stamps, and the direct line to the Block Development Officer (BDO).



Furthermore, West Bengal is in a unique situation. In states like Jharkhand or Odisha there is special laws for tribal governance called the PESA Act (1996), which modifies the panchayat system in the tribal areas it respects and listens to the traditional village councils. But West Bengal has not implemented the PESA Act. Because of this Panchayat system works here same for all like it does in non-tribal areas. It acts as a modern state driven force. It brings much needed concrete development, but it also brings highly competitive political culture that directly challenges the quiet, United ways of life that the tribal communities have .

The Interaction Between Traditional and Modern Governance

The co-existence of the ancient Majhi Pargana system and the modern Panchayati Raj defines the every day political reality of the Jangalmahal region. Rather than a simple displacement of tradition by modernity, this Interaction is core reality of every day life in the Jangalmahal region. It is a constant, delicate dance between friction and pragmatic synergy.

The primary friction comes from competing paradigm of authority: traditional moral legitimacy versus state-sanctioned political power. For instance, a newly elected Panchayat representative – younger and backed by a political party – wields control over government welfare schemes and developmental funds . However they may lack the deeply rooted social standing the Majhi Haram (village headman). When formal representatives attempt to execute major village decisions without consulting customary elders, tensions inevitably arise.

Elections are the biggest flashpoints of these two systems. During Panchayat polls, political parties push hard to win every vote. This often fractures the village unity. The Majhi desperately tries to keep the community united, but political money and the promise of government benefits often divide the youth from the elders. When a village is politically divided, even traditional festivals can become tense.

But it is not all fighting. In fact, if you look closely at successful villages, you will see a brilliant, unwritten system of cooperation—a practical synergy. Smart Panchayat leaders quickly realize a very basic truth: they might have the government's money, but the Majhi Haram has the people's hearts. If a Panchayat Pradhan wants to build a new road that cuts through someone's farmland, or if they need villagers to actually show up for a government Gram Sabha meeting, they cannot just issue a formal notice. They have to go to the Majhi and also talk to the people of this village.



Furthermore, state actors often informally utilize traditional mechanisms to maintain local order and peace. Elected members frequently defer petty disputes to the Majhi rather than invoking formal police channels, acknowledging the customary system's capacity for swift, cost-effective, and restorative justice. Ultimately, the interaction between these dual frameworks is not a zero-sum conflict. The Santhal community pragmatically engages with the Panchayat for economic survival in the modern state, while steadfastly relying on the Majhi Pargana to safeguard its cultural soul. Verrier Elwin (1964) observed, traditional systems still have strong social influence.

Challenges of Tribal Government

Running in tribal village is harder than ever as both the traditional leaders and the modern administrators face several measure hurdles:

- **Weak implementation of laws:** Despite progressive legislation like PESA and FRA, implementation remains inconsistent.
- **Lack of awareness:** Many villagers are not aware their legal rights. Because of this lack of awareness, they constantly face the threat of losing their ancestral lands and forests to outsiders or big infrastructure projects.
- **The Missing Voice of Women:** A major flaw in the traditional Majhi Pargana system is that it is mainly male-dominated. Even today, Santhal women rarely have a seat or voice at the table during the Kulhi Durub (village meetings), meaning half the community is left out of traditional decision-making process.
- **Fading Traditions:** As the younger generation moves to cities for work or gets swept up in modern party politics, the ancient tribal councils are slowly losing their influence and respect.

To sum up this crisis, the renowned sociologist **Virginus Xaxa (2008)** made a very sharp observation: there is a massive disconnect between the state and the community. He noted that government policies often look fantastic on paper in air-conditioned offices, but they completely fail to match the actual, everyday reality of tribal life on the ground.

Suggestions



To bridge the gap between traditional governance and modern governance, here are a few practical steps moving forward:

Give the tribal governance legal voice: West Bengal needs to find a way to officially recognize the Majhi Pargana system, perhaps by adopting a framework similar to the PESA Act. Giving traditional councils a legal say in protecting their forests and land and culture.

Bring Women to the decision making process: Tradition should not mean exclusion. The Santhal community needs to actively encourage women to participate in the Kulhi Durub (village meetings). Blending the Panchayat's gender reservations with traditional respect will make the community stronger.

Educate and Empower the Youth: The government and local NGOs should run awareness camps in the Santhali language, teaching villagers—especially the youth—about their legal rights, the Forest Rights Act, and how to navigate Panchayat paperwork.

Conclusion

The local governance dynamic in the Jangalmahal region is not a simple displacement of tradition by modernity, but a testament to Santhal community resilience. The community engages in a continuous balancing act: relying on the **Panchayati Raj** for material infrastructure and economic survival, while turning to the customary **Majhi Pargana** system to preserve their cultural identity and social harmony.

Currently, this “dual governance” survives on an unwritten, practical synergy. However, because West Bengal lacks the legal framework of the PESA Act, the traditional system remains invisible in eyes of state. This legal void leaves the community deeply vulnerable to political exploitation and land alienation. Furthermore, these customary councils must also evolve internally, most notably by ensuring the active participation of women in traditional decision-making.

As sociologist Virginius Xaxa argues, state policies inevitably fail when they ignore the lived social realities of the people. True grassroots democracy requires more than just introducing electoral procedures. For meaningful, lasting development, the state must stop viewing institutions like the Majhi Pargana as obstacles and instead engage them as vital administrative partners. When the developmental capacity of the modern state aligns with traditional community wisdom, governance transforms from an imposed mandate into a genuine tool for empowerment.



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