

# Grassroots Democracy and Tribal Participation: A Study on Panchayati Raj Institutions in Koraput District, Odisha

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## ABSTRACT

Decentralised governance frameworks have played a crucial role in the improvement of grassroots democracy in India, especially with the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) intended to empower marginalized people. The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) played an important role in local government in Koraput, an Odisha state with a large tribal population. As a result, these institutions help ensure people's participation and give marginalized communities a voice. The purpose of this study is to find out how tribal communities are engaged in local governance in the Koraput district. The study utilizes both primary and secondary data sources and a descriptive and exploratory research design to analyse community involvement, traditional council influence and women's participation. Although Gram Sabha elections are held regularly, actual participation from villagers remains limited. At the same time traditional councils continue to hold significant influence over community decisions. The engagement of women is constrained by prevailing social and cultural barriers. Due to insufficient awareness, political interference and inadequate administrative support the PRIs provide paths for representation but are less effective than they should be. A key recommendation of the paper is to strengthen Gram Sabhas, increase support for women leaders, and coordinate traditional and formal institutions to improve grassroots democracy within tribal areas.

**Keywords:** Grassroots democracy, Tribal participation, Panchayati Raj, Tribal Governance, Koraput, Odisha.

## Introduction

Grassroots democracy empowers ordinary citizens to participate actively in local decision-making and governance in contemporary times. It is also known as Local democracy is types of democracy where the government system where decisions are made directly by the common citizens for engaging directly decision-making to transparency and responsiveness of the state governments. In the Historical prospective, Traditional self-governing village bodies once held both executive and judicial authority ensuring autonomy at the grassroots level. However, British interference in village structure and the introduction of the zamindari system for revenue collection upset this balance, ultimately leading to the collapse of the tribal Panchayati Raj system (Sarap, 2023). After pointed out in village swaraj Gandhi emphasize the grassroots democracy rests on the principle that freedom should begin at the grassroots level, where each village functions as a self-governing republic or panchayat with full power. In this sense

each village is envisioned as a self-sufficient unit, capable of managing its own affairs, solving internal problems, and contributing to the broader governance (Gandhi, 1962).

After the independence the Gram Panchayats function as grassroots democratic institute (Garada, 2023). Initially, the Community Development Programme was started and later, after the recommendations of the Balwant Ray Mehta Committee the Panchayati Raj system received legal support in various states. On 2 October 1959 on the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi the three-tier Panchayati Raj system was introduced for the first time in Rajasthan. Much later in 1992 the 73rd Constitutional Amendment made Panchayati Raj a part of the Indian Constitution through Articles 243 to 243-O under Part IX along with the Eleventh Schedule which listed 16 subjects (Kumar, 2022). The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee named after its chairman played a crucial role in the development of grassroots democracy in India. Based on its recommendations the government introduced a three-tier Panchayati Raj system in rural areas to strengthen people's participation in governance. By 1959 most states had enacted Panchayat Acts and by the mid-1960s the system had spread across the country including tribal-dominated areas like Odisha state of India. The three-tier structure included the Gram Panchayat at the village level, the Panchayat Samiti at the block level and the Zilla Parishad at the district level (Sarap, 2023).

The development of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Odisha began with the enactment of the Odisha Gram Panchayat Act, 1948. This was followed by the enactment of the Odisha Panchayat Samiti and District Council Act, 1959 which came into force in 1961 and introduced a three-tier PRI structure in the state. These legislature measures were later amended under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 which strengthened the PRIs as self-governing institutions to promote rural development and promote social justice (An Overview of Panchayati Raj Institutions, 2021). The growing need for grassroots development and the evolving aspirations of local leadership formed the basis for the initiation and eventual enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment which institutionalized Panchayati Raj institutions to strengthen democratic participation at the village level (Monditoka, 2010).

The Panchayat laws in Odisha were amended in line with the provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) 1996. Significantly, Odisha became the first state to hold Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) elections in 2002 under PESA, ensuring social justice and greater participation of Scheduled Tribe communities (Behuria, 2017). The Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act of 1996 emphasizes local governance beyond electoral participation, allowing communities to control local affairs and decision-making processes with the Gram Sabha as the cornerstone of democracy (Garada, 2023).

### **Problem of the Study**

Despite the 73rd Amendment and the constitutional mandate to create Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to strengthen grassroots democracy, tribal areas like Koraput district are struggling to ensure inclusive governance and effective participation. While it is hoped that PRIs will empower marginalized communities, it is not clear to what extent they will advance democratic norms in tribal areas. Socio-economic disparities, cultural barriers, lack of political awareness and structural gaps in organizational effectiveness make it difficult for tribals to participate in local governance. In addition, the potential to improve grassroots democracy and expand inclusion exists, but they have not been equally exploited. The extent of tribal participation in decision-making, the effectiveness of PRIs in tribal-dominated areas and the opportunities and challenges for achieving inclusive and participatory governance are important issues raised by this situation.

## Review of literature

**Biswal, M. (2020)** in the paper on “Political Participation of Women at Local Level in Odisha” In the study, the author highlights that the political process in Odisha remains largely dominated by men, despite democratic principles of equality. The lack of participation of women in policy formulation and decision-making reflects the incomplete implementation of gender equality in the constitution. The study examines women’s participation in the Panchayati Raj Institution of Western Odisha, using primary and secondary data from 72 women of Nuatihura Gram Panchayat. The research gap identified is the need for more support and incentives to increase women’s participation in local governance.

**Pradha, B. and Sethi, S.R. (2024)** in the paper on “Empowering Tribal women: A comprehensive exploration of their roles and participation in local government” in the article, the authors highlight that tribal women’s participation is lower than that of other sections of society due to various social, cultural, and economic barriers. The authors also emphasize the importance of women’s involvement in decision-making processes and their increased participation in political systems.

**Sarap, S. S. (2023)**, according to the article on “Tribal Women’s Participation in Grassroots Level Governance: An Anthropological Study of Sundargarh (Scheduled) District of Odisha. the author has been highlighting to sheds light on the role of tribal women in panchayats and their participation in grassroots governance in the scheduled areas of Sundargarh district. the study is based on primary data collected through the random sampling strategy which is analysed to understand the level and nature of participation of tribal women in panchayat activities. In the current study fills this gap by using both primary and secondary sources and mixed methods to capture the lived experience of tribal participation in Koraput.

**Sahoo, S. P. (2025)** in the study on " Significance of Panchayati raj institutions in agrarian governance: A study of Odisha. The role of officials in agricultural policy formulation, plan implementation and decision-making at the grassroots level is highlighted using secondary data. The study reveals that PRIs function largely as operational agencies under bureaucratic and political control, with weak infrastructure, lack of storage facilities, price volatility and dependence on other states for essential products. The paper emphasizes the need for crop diversification, better storage and (Sarap, 2023) market security. The gap in the research is that they focus only on agricultural governance, with little attention paid to grassroots participation in tribal areas.

**Garada, D. (2025)** in the study on “Functioning of Grassroots Democracy: Participation, Representation and Accountability in the Panchayats of 5th Scheduled Areas” The author focuses on two tribal-dominated village panchayats in Odisha and highlights how the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution was aimed at empowering marginalized groups and especially the Scheduled Tribes in a grassroots democracy. Using a qualitative approach the study reveals key challenges such as elite dominance, political interference, bureaucratic control and weak organizational capacity which hinder effective participation and empowerment. However, the study has some research gaps is the particularly the lack of quantitative analysis to validate and strengthen its findings.

## Objectives

The objectives is one of the most crucial things to start a research and overall direction for a good paper because without good research objective the total paper has been not well for the research paper. For the study the research has been taken Three primary objectives describe the study's purpose and guide its overall direction. This study addresses the research findings through three primary objectives.

a. To study the role of panchayat Raj institutions in promoting grassroots democracy in tribal regions of

Koraput district.

- b. To study the tribal participation in local governance in the Koraput district.
- c. To study the challenges and opportunities for inclusive governance in tribal areas.

### Research Questions

How do tribal communities in Koraput district experience and participate in Panchayati Raj Institutions as a form of grassroots democracy?

### Methodology

The aim of this study was to examine grassroots democracy and tribal participation in the Koraput district of Odisha using a descriptive and exploratory research design. The study sought to understand the lived realities of tribal communities and their role in local governance. The study area was purposively selected because of its large tribal population, socio-cultural diversity, the presence of traditional village councils, and its relevance to examining the interaction between traditional institutions and the constitutionally established Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

Primary data were collected through direct observation and participation in village council meetings and community decision-making processes. In addition, secondary data were obtained from government reports, Panchayat records, district gazetteers, the Census of India, and relevant books, academic journals, and other published literature.

### Area of the Study

Koraput district is located the southern part of Odisha, lying between 18°13' to 19°10' North latitude and 82°5' to 83°23' East longitude. The area is full of green valleys, dense forests, beautiful waterfalls and calm natural scenery. Geographically, the district is surrounded by Rayagada district in Odisha and Srikakulam (Andhra Pradesh) in the east, Malkangiri district (Odisha) and Bastar district (Chhattisgarh) in the west, Nabarangpur and Rayagada (Odisha) in the north, and Vizianagaram and Visakhapatnam (Andhra Pradesh) in the south. The district having a total area of 8,807 square kilometres of Koraput is the third largest district in Odisha (CENSUS, 2011). As per the 2011 census, the district has 14 tehsils or Panchayat Samitis, 226 Gram Panchayats and 2,028 Villages.

In tribal traditional village councils or a traditional and decentralized system of government the village leader takes the lead. Each village has a traditional leader to manage local issues. The villagers call him 'NAIKO' or "MUKHIA" and the villagers call him 'CHALLAN'. The existence scholar pointed out Koraput district traditional village councils led by the headman continue to have a strong influence in shaping the socio-cultural and political-economic life of the tribal community (Mohapatra, 2017). As mentioned by Dr.P. Debashis in an e-magazine article, The cultural centre of a tribal village is the village council which has various duties. It is headed by the village head who is usually selected on the basis of seniority, competence and record of dedication, love and affection towards the community. This leader is called the Naiko in many tribes. The Challan is appointed to assist the Naiko and is responsible for holding regular meetings (Patra, 2011).

### Discussion and Findings

#### 1. Tribal democracy systems

Tribal democratic systems refer to indigenous forms of self-governance practiced by tribal communities

based on customary laws, collective decision-making and community participation. These systems existed long before the introduction of modern state democracy and continue to function alongside formal institutions in many tribal areas of India. In the Koraput district, traditional governance systems are still actively practiced in villages under Kathopada and Gundal Gram Panchayat. In these villages, community members initially attempt to resolve disputes within the traditional institutional framework. The head of the village, known as the *Naik*, acts as the judicial authority and plays a central role in dispute resolution. When conflicts arise, villagers approach the Naik, who then instructs the *Challan* (village messenger) to inform concerned members about the meeting (Mohapatra, 2017). A village council or conference is subsequently convened to deliberate on the specific dispute. Decisions are taken collectively through participatory discussion, reflecting the democratic nature of the traditional system. In matters related to religious rituals and festivals, spiritual leadership is entrusted to the *Disari* (male priest) and the *Gurumai* (female priest). The Disari and Gurumai perform ceremonial duties and guide the community in worship practices, reinforcing the integration of governance, culture, and religion within tribal democracy.

## 2. Gender participations

Gender participation is essential for strengthening democracy. Without equal political participation of both men and women, governance becomes weak and unrepresentative. Democratic institutions function effectively only when all sections of society actively engage in decision-making processes. During observation and participation in grama Sabha in Koraput district, it was observed that women's participation in institutions such as the Gram Sabha, Palli Sabha, and other community decision-making bodies remains limited. Although women are formally recognized as members of these institutions, their active involvement in deliberation and leadership roles is minimal. Their limited presence in traditional and modern governance forums poses a significant challenge to inclusive governance and democratic deepening. Therefore, enhancing women's meaningful participation at the grassroots level is crucial for ensuring accountability, equity, and sustainable democratic development.

## 3. Transparency of Decisions:

Transparency of decisions plays a crucial role at the grassroots level of tribal governance. In the villages of Koraput district, each village has a traditional leader known as the *Naiko* (Naik), who manages local issues. He is assisted by another functionary called the *Challan*, who communicates messages and informs villagers about meetings and discussions. Existing scholarship highlights that traditional village councils in Koraput, led by the headman, continue to exert strong influence over the socio-cultural and political-economic life of tribal communities (Mohapatra, 2017). During fieldwork, it was observed that decisions related to marriage disputes, inter-family conflicts, rituals, and festivals are discussed openly in village meetings. The Naiko, along with other respected elders and community members, participates in deliberations before arriving at a collective decision. This participatory process ensures transparency, as decisions are not taken individually or secretly but in the presence of the community. However, with the increasing role of modern governance institutions such as the Gram Panchayat, many dispute resolution mechanisms are now handled at the Panchayat level. As a result, the authority of traditional governance institutions has gradually declined in comparison to formal democratic structures.

## 4. Women Participation in Grassroots Democracy

Women's participation in the decision-making process and tribal governance in Koraput district remains limited. In many tribal communities, women are often excluded from traditional decision-making institutions and village assemblies. Even in formal local governance structures such as the Gram Sabha and Palli Sabha, the participation of women is relatively low (Pradha &, 2024). Sethi One of the major

reasons for this limited involvement is the lack of awareness among women regarding their rights and roles within the local governance system. Field observations in the study area further indicate that meetings of these institutions are not conducted regularly, which reduces community awareness about policies, rights, and development programmes. Consequently, women's active participation in grassroots governance continues to remain a significant challenge in the study area.

### **5. Lack of Awareness**

One of the major challenges to effective grassroots democracy in Koraput District is the limited level of awareness among tribal communities regarding their legal rights and governance institutions. Although the region has a significant tribal population in southern Odisha, many community members remain unaware of important legislations such as the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 and the Forest Rights Act, 2006. Due to this lack of awareness, tribal households often face various socio-economic and governance-related challenges in their daily lives. Field observations conducted during the study reveal that low literacy levels within tribal communities are one of the primary reasons for this limited awareness. Educated individuals in the villages tend to have some understanding of government policies and rights; however, this knowledge is not always effectively shared with the wider community. In some cases, educated persons may even take advantage of the limited awareness among villagers for personal benefit. Furthermore, the study also found that some local representatives, including village leaders, are themselves not fully informed about the provisions and implementation mechanisms of these policies. In certain situations, local political actors influence village leadership through financial or political incentives, which may further weaken the effective implementation of tribal rights and participatory governance.

### **6. Lack of Awareness**

Communication barriers constitute another significant challenge in the effective functioning of grassroots democracy in Koraput District of Odisha. The district is inhabited by diverse tribal communities who speak different indigenous languages and dialects, while most government communication and administrative procedures are conducted in Odia or other official languages. This linguistic gap often creates difficulties for tribal people in understanding government schemes, policies, and administrative processes related to local governance. During Field observations the study indicate that many villagers find it difficult to clearly understand official information shared in meetings such as Gram Sabha or Palli Sabha. As a result, their participation in discussions and decision-making processes remains limited. In addition to language barriers, the remote geographical location of many tribal villages also affects the flow of information between government institutions and local communities. Poor communication infrastructure and limited access to media further restrict the dissemination of information about important legislations such as the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 and other welfare programmes. Consequently, communication barriers reduce the effectiveness of participatory governance and limit the ability of tribal communities to actively engage in local decision-making processes.

### **Conclusion**

The study concludes that Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have strengthened the institutional framework of grassroots democracy in the Koraput district of Odisha by providing constitutional space for the political participation of tribal communities. However, the effectiveness of these institutions remains constrained by several socio-economic, cultural, and administrative challenges. The findings reveal that traditional tribal governance institutions, particularly the village councils headed by the Naiko and assisted by the

Challan, continue to play an influential role in resolving disputes and regulating community affairs. These customary institutions coexist with the formal Panchayati Raj system and continue to enjoy greater legitimacy among many tribal communities.

The study further finds that although Gram Sabha and Panchayat institutions offer opportunities for democratic participation, meaningful involvement of tribal people, particularly women, remains limited. Low levels of awareness regarding constitutional rights, inadequate knowledge of legislations such as the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996 and the Forest Rights Act, 2006, communication barriers, and irregular village meetings restrict effective participation in local governance. Political interference, weak administrative support, and inadequate coordination between traditional and formal institutions further reduce the effectiveness of participatory governance. Therefore, strengthening grassroots democracy in tribal areas requires not only constitutional provisions but also greater awareness, institutional capacity, and active community participation.