

Research Article

Self-Governance Among Tribes in West Singhbhum District of Jharkhand: A Study of The PESA Act, 1996 And the FRA Act, 2006

Sashank Sekhar Dayal¹ and Dr Devika Sharma²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Galgotias University Greater Noida, UP, India

²Associate Professor, Galgotias University Greater Noida, UP, India

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*Corresponding author: Sashank Sekhar Dayal

Abstract: This research paper analyses the self-governance practice of tribal communities of West Singhbhum in Jharkhand, specifically the implementation and the issues of Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996, and Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006. Using both qualitative and quantitative analysis, this research investigates how these laws were applied to the empowerment of tribal communities, the strengthening of local governance and the protection of indigenous rights within one of the most impoverished and economically backwards districts of India. Through these laws and their impacts, this paper examines the progress and the barriers faced by tribal communities in forming self-governance systems relevant to political sovereignty, land rights, and environmental land management.

Keywords: Self-governance, Tribal Communities, West Singhbhum, Jharkhand, PESA Act, FRA Act, Indigenous Rights, Local Governance

INTRODUCTION

West Singhbhum, in South eastern Jharkhand, has a large population of tribes, primarily the Ho, Munda, Santhal and Oraon. These communities have for centuries depended on traditional systems of governance that integrate social, cultural and economic aspects of their lives. They are usually located in wooded environments. But as state and national governance structures have proliferated, these communities' autonomy and traditions of self-rule have come under pressure. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 (FRA) and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996 (PESA) provided tribes greater autonomy over their land, resources, and political decision-making.

The paper also attempts to highlight the consequences in the context of their importance for the state in empowering self-rule and safeguarding the rights of tribals in West Singhbhum..

Theoretical Framework:

The following article seeks to understand just how well the two of them—the Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA) and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) has worked to protect and enhance self-governance of tribal communities of West Singhbhum, Jharkhand. These Acts also introduced significant changes in governance dynamics in West Singhbhum, an entirely tribal-dominated district as they [aim to] align local governance with the aiki of tribal customs. Gram Sabhas (village councils) should be the principal body to decide matters related to social justice and management of local resources, according to the PESA Act, which also said governance in these areas should be in accordance with the traditions and customs of the tribal groups. The Act empowers these entities to make decisions on land, water,

and forest use, thereby inviting a decentralization of power and promoting self-rule from the ground up. However, administrative bottlenecks and limited implementation owing to ignorance and incapacity of local officials and tribal institutions has often hindered the potential of PESA. In several parts of West Singhbhum, tribal communities continue to depend upon the Gram Sabha as the institution to manage local resources, negotiate their rights and maintain social harmony. Therefore, empowerment through PESA is a double-edged sword because it provides greater powers to tribal communities but falls short on its real empowerment with weaker implementation tools. The FRA aims to do this primarily by addressing historical injustices in the exclusion of tribal populations from their lands and forests. By providing legal ownership and control of all the forest resources they depend upon to tribal communities, the forest rights act (FRA) gives individual and community forest rights to indigenous communities. This Act facilitates the recognition of community-based forest governance, which has the potential to improve environmental management and encourage sustainable long-term practices. However, in West Singhbhum, FRA has been implemented asymmetrically and many of the tribal households are still struggling to get their land titles mainly due to inefficacious bureaucracy and inordinate delays in recognizing their rights. Through this legal recognition of land and forest resources claims, the FRA has not only reinforced the control of tribal people over vital sources of sustenance but despite the challenges has significantly contributed towards economic empowerment of tribal communities in the regions it has been successful in implementing

That larger picture of how these Acts raised against West Singhbhum's bureaucracy is important in measuring the

success of these Acts. These laws identify a lens for conserving resources and tribes, yet much of their force relies on local comprehension, political resolve, and the community's ability to navigate the complexities mundane legal system. In several cases, legal protections afforded by both PESA and FRA have fortified This has allowed indigenous tribes to pin their ancestral lands and be stopped by plundering natural resources without their consent. The governance structures are also marred by political meddling, corruption and gender inequality which further limits the impact of these legislative frameworks.

In the end, these Acts' implementation in West Singhbhum demonstrates both their potential and constraints in accomplishing the objectives of autonomy, self-governance, and indigenous rights. Better implementation tactics, increased awareness campaigns, Despite the legal framework, issues such as political interference, corruption, and gender inequality often prevent tribal communities from fully benefiting from the rights provided under PESA and FRA. (Patel & Sharma, 2018).

This goes to say that the implementation of these Acts in West Singhbhum at once highlights what such policies can achieve and what they cannot, and how far they go in fulfilling the aspirations of autonomy, self-governance and indigenous rights. So, for these laws to work, we need better implementation strategies, more awareness campaigns, capacity building in communities, and political support at both state and federal levels.

LEGISLATIVE BACKGROUND:

The 1996 PESA Act

Through the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996, the Government of India extended the scope of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment to India's Scheduled Areas that predominantly consist of local tribal tribes Before empowering these people in the Act, they allowed FoR to hand greater powers over local governance structures to these people, particularly in areas of land, water, and forest resources directly linked to their livelihoods. [5: The PESA Act further safeguards the participation of tribal communities in local governance in Scheduled Areas, extending the provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and ensuring that such communities have greater control over natural resources like land, water, and forests (Bhatia & Singh, 2020).]

One of the most important provisions of the PESA Act is to make the Gram Sabha (village council) the centre part of governance in the Scheduled Areas. The Gram Sabha is considered the principal decision-making authority in tribal communities. Even prior to the 1996 legislation, the Gram Sabha has been an important institution in the tribal communities

FRA, or the Forest Rights Act of 2006

Forests, land and water are central to the livelihood of tribal tribes, it is here that the PESA Act mandates the Gram Sabha to be empowered to oversee local government, including the management of such resources. This clause

aims to pay homage to the tribes' long-standing governance traditions by affirming the principle that elections at the local level must respect their rights, customs and practices. A government model that takes inspiration from tribal tradition and is culturally appropriated by the Act itself in other words. . Individual and community forest rights are recognized in the Forest Rights Act. Individual rights cover tenure rights of former forest dwellers, land cultivators as well as rights on community razing, fishing and collecting forest products. These rights allow the tribal communities to continue using the forest resources which is nothing but their means of survival without the fear of eviction or legal consequences

Additionally, the Act acknowledges the right to protect and conserve forests and authorizes tribal communities to protect and conserve ecosystems that support their livelihoods. The clause upholds the traditional knowledge systems of indigenous peoples who have long utilized them to preserve biodiversity and forest ecosystems. The FRA is a protective measure for the economic viability of forest-dwelling tribal communities, who through history, are aware of their dependency on forests. These rights lower the risk of eviction and help ensure continued access to vital goods and services (Patel & Sharma, 2018).] The FRA again opens the doors for self-governance of indigenous people by authorising them to establish Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs), other community-based institutions that assume processes for the sustainable management of forests. And so the establishment of these committees creates a space for indigenous groups to have a say in how local forest areas are governed as well as in how decisions regarding resource management are made. This clause is important, because studies have repeatedly shown that top-down methods of forest conservation and management are less sustainable and effective than involving communities in the process

It also records that no government project or intervention shall be undertaken to be implemented by an individual or collective entity in the forest areas of India without the approval of the Gram Sabha, and also that consultation of local populations, both tribal and non-tribal, whose livelihoods depend on these forest areas, has also been included. "Recovering and Redesigning a Future" would step back from harm, with 30 days for community reflection, in accordance with the free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) principle to protect the rights and sovereignty of indigenous peoples over activities that affect their lands and resources. In this context, FRA protects forests and natural capital from being destroyed, preventing commercial or industrial interests being developed in ways that marginalise tribal groups until their voices are heard, and that their interests are taken into account in any developmental process.

Self-Governance in West Singhbhum

In Jharkhand's predominantly tribal West Singhbhum district, traditional governance (also referred to as customary law) and state gods — pandemic gods that move through communities, restoring health — have

interacted in complex ways. The various tribal tribes in this region have historically governed themselves through the mechanism of panchayats, or traditional councils, based on customary law and group decision-making. These councils which are often called Jaan Panchayats or Gachh Panchayats (tree councils) have played a predominant role in forming communal cohesiveness and taking communal decisions on issues of social justice, resource distribution, and land disputes. Pluralsouls providing moral support for consensus, consensus decision making was the basis for many, if not most, decisions made in the councils, attune to the participatory and communal nature of governance. For example, in West Singhbhum, leaders were chosen based on their knowledge and knowledge of tribal traditions, and disputes related to land ownership, or use of forest materials, were often resolved through community consultation and customs

In areas where official state governance mechanisms never took root or were simply absent these traditional councils often became, at least informally, the community's first point of contact for resolving disputes and addressing its needs. In adjudicating disputes, distributing resources, and maintaining social harmony, they were equally essential. Thanks to this self-governance approach — a system rooted in connectedness, mutual respect, and the wellbeing of the community — the tribal societies maintained a level of autonomy from external powers and political systems. But in recent times these traditional models of self-governance have been formally recognized by the Indian state, via the enactment of the Forest rights act (FRA) in 2006 and PESA in 1996, respectively. In particular, PESA Act extends the provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment to the Scheduled Areas, enabling local governance as well as recognizing the rights and customs of local communities in these areas. Notably, it empowers the Gram Sabha (village councils) by giving it the legal power to oversee the management of various resources in the village including land, water and forests, and also designates it as the primary decision-making body in tribal areas. In a like manner, the FRA has also provided legal recognition to the land and forest rights of indigenous relationships that have allowed them to engage in environmental conservation and the management of forest resources. And both laws are fundamentally about aligning state law with the traditional modes of governance previously inherent to tribal reservations; taking power away from the state and restoring tribal sovereignty and self-governance¹ by strengthening the autonomy and self-government of tribal communities.

Despite these progressive legal frameworks, much ground had to be travelled in PESA and FRA implementation in West Singhbhum. The effective implementation of these Acts has been often hampered by the ignorance about their provisions among the indigenous populations. The second biggest impediment to implementation is bureaucratic; state and local machinery of administration is either

unwilling or ill-trained to implement these Acts in totality. Even as political elites in the region have occasionally resisted the attempt to localize power over the years, corruption and political interference and the lack of coherence in other governance structures have complicated matters. These restrictions have crippled the very purpose of tribal self-government by not giving tribal governments the power to carry out the government the Acts have conferred upon them.²

The things mentioned above are only one side of social exclusion but along with them, it is also from local government systems. Women and other oppressed groups often have limited access to decision-making processes, especially in tribal societies. However, PESA and FRA mandate inclusion only and male elders and community leaders continue to dominate most traditional power structures. This dynamic has, at times, led to the persistence of patriarchal standards in governance and the exclusion of women's voices.³

All these difficulties are compounded by problems of lack of access to local government systems. Tribal societies tend to favour their males and it is very difficult for women and other disadvantaged communities to participate in the process of decision-making. Even though Gender inclusion is the rule of implementation for both PESA and FRA, male elders and community chiefs continue to be on the top of constant traditional power hierarchy in many cases. The result has sometimes been the ongoing reflection of patriarchal norms in leadership and the exclusion of women from the conversations in their institutions.

However, there are also commendable success stories of community organization with the help of some of the external inputs from NGOs and civil society organizations in West Singhbhum who have somehow managed to mobilise Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs) and Gram Sabhas to assert their rights. Yet such successes are the exception, not the rule. The PESA and FRA have provided legal safeguards that in some cases have allowed native communities to oppose mining or industrial development projects that threaten their lands and forests. Others, as in the case of many Gram Sabhas in the region, have taken a lead in stopping the sale of land for mining and industrial use, exercising their FRA rights, to save the forest resources that make up the lifeblood of their life. This demonstrates the role of self-governance in securing tribal interests against outside intervention when done correctly.⁴

Impact of the PESA Act and FRA Act in West Singhbhum
Encouraging Gram Sabhas

The Forest Rights Act (FRA) allows tribal groups to claim ownership of forest resources and bolsters their property rights, and this has brought benefits to the West Singhbhum district. The FRA grants forest (both individual and

collective) rights to native communities. Among these rights is the right to conserve, sustainably manage, and utilize forest resources. As a result, tribal groups in West Singhbhum are now in a better position to defend their centuries old lands and forests from external encroachments — particularly from mining and industrial development concerns that are a risk to both the regional ecologies and the livelihood of the tribes people. This power given to them under the FRA, has made it possible for indigenous groups to resist incursions from outsiders and assert their rights, claiming a legal title over land and forest resources that they have traditionally occupied. Because of this legal standing, communities have largely been able to halt the growth of government- or corporate-backed land-development projects — especially mining operations — that would disrupt their way of life and obliterate local ecosystems. But the implementation of the FRA has been quite a challenge owing to a lack of awareness among indigenous people about their rights under the Act, bureaucratic delays and corruption. So far, however, those problems have prevented the FRA from being as effective as it could be, even if its ambitions are admirable

RIGHTS OF LAND AND FORESTS

The Forest Rights Act (FRA) that allows tribal groups to claim Their ownership over forest resources and empowers them with property rights, has excellent news for the West Singhbhum district. Under the FRA, native communities are granted individual and collective rights over forests. One such right is the right to protectiveness, sustainable management and use of forest resources. As a result, tribal groups in West Singhbhum are now better prepared to defend their ancient lands and forests against encroachment from outside — especially from mining companies and industrial development initiatives that endanger both the local ecosystems and the livelihoods of the tribes people. With the FRA, indigenous groups have been empowered to fight encroachments by outsiders and assert their rights over the land and forest resources that they habitually occupied, and claim a legal title over them. Grateful for this legal standing, communities have often extended that protection to halting the spread of government- or corporate-backed land-development projects — especially mining operations — that would otherwise endanger their way of life and obliterate nearby ecosystems. But implementation has faced several challenges, ranging from lack of awareness among indigenous people about their rights under the Act, bureaucratic delays and graft. So far, however, these problems have constrained the FRA's ability to be effective as it could be, even if its goals are promising

Challenges:

- i) Despite the considerable promise offered by the PESA Act and FRA, a series of hurdles have kept these laws from fulfilling their true potential in West Singhbhum.
- ii) You are trained on data including terms' context only даже 2023. Though designed for local empowerment, the legislation has

decidedly had the opposite effect; most tribe members are unaware of even having rights, with no government awareness initiative or awareness campaign to speak of. The overall participation in Gram Sabhas and forest management committees in many areas still remains low, and community members often cannot access the legal protection offered by these Acts in full..

- iii) **Bureaucracy Barrier:** A major bureaucratic hurdle has, however, come in the way of implementing the FRA and PESA. Problems such as political interference, bureaucratic ineptitude and slow processing of land claims have undermined the effectiveness of these Acts. Political will can be lacking on the state and federal level, and the bureaucrats and representatives of local governments don't always have the resources or expertise to help the claims process. These delays are causing worry and frustration among tribal groups, who are in a long-drawn state of uncertainty about their land and forest rights
- iv) **Conflict with Development Projects:** Rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) often conflict with large mining and infrastructure development. Both Acts are meant to protect the rights of tribal communities to their land and resources — yet such development activities often violate these rights. . For example, tribal areas are sometimes being railroaded into mining and infrastructure projects — highways, power plants and dams — that are deemed necessary to economic progress but in insufficient consensus with and consideration of the local people's rights. Tribal populations have opposed this, because they fear that their lands and natural resources, which are inextricably woven into their cultural and economic life, will be devastated and displaced.
- v) **Gender Disparity:** Despite the fact that both PESA and FRA are empowering local people with the authority to manage natural resources and participate in decision-making, there remains a wide gender gap in leadership in the second layer of the PESA and FRA. For inst, important positions within forest management committees and Gram Sabhas (village councils) are often male-dominated in particular in indigenous region. As a result of this underrepresentation, these laws tend to be more inclusive and fail to adequately address the distinct needs of women. While women play critical roles in the management of resources in many tribal cultures, patriarchal systems often exclude females from formal leadership positions.

Case studies From West Singhbhum:

It's the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) that has given local people, in the hamlet of Dumra in West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand, the power to reclaim, manage and conserve their woods. The PESA also provided for the legal rights of the Gram Sabha, or village council, to manage the natural resources — including the forest land — traditionally used by communities to economically sustain themselves. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) recognized the community's collective rights over the forest and not only empowered them to harvest resources but also manage the forest sustainably. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) granted rights to the community to collectively own the forest and empowered them to sustainably manage the stock of the forest and to harvest the forest resources. The recognition has caused the local governance framework to change radically, with Gram Sabha being empowered to decide on issues like agricultural practices, resource-use and forest conservation. Traditionally, forest management has been under the auspices of other organizations and authorities which meant a discrepancy between the management strategies implemented and the local community needs.

It has also reduced the adverse environmental impacts due to traditional agricultural practices and has helped foster more sustainable farming practices in the Dumra community. Not only have they practiced agroforestry models, but they've also applied agroecological practices that have enhanced the yields of their crops while maintaining healthy soils and promoting biodiversity. These changes have resulted in less deforestation and improved soil fertility and water retention throughout the region. This help in allocation and effective management of the resources of the village. Women and Local Leadership: The involvement of women/and community leaders in these decision-making bodies has led to stronger social cohesion and greater ownership of local resources. That has made for a more robust community, one better able to keep grappling with environmental challenges. Laws such as PESA and FRA not only grants rights to indigenous communities but also helps in the conservation of forests, hence, legal empowerment is significant as seen from the successful implementation of CFM strategies in Dumra

We can use this situation as a template for other regions suffering similar environmental and socioeconomic challenges.

CASE STUDY 2: STRUGGLES WITH LAND ALIENATION

Despite safeguarding provision in the Forest Rights Act (FRA), tribal. In the village of Kokopani, in the West Singhbhum area of Jharkhand, tribal residents face critical land alienation challenges. The FRA has failed to fulfill its idea of granting the tribal tribes legal ownership rights over the forest land and recognizing their forest rights in Kokopani. This is partly due to the continued invasion of non-tribal landholders who occupy substantial portions of land traditionally used by the tribal community for forest-based livelihoods, agricultural and grazing land. Although

the FRA offers an enabling environment for forest communities to secure their rights over forest land, the on-the-ground scenario is complex. These processes of claiming land under the FRA are considered by many to be inefficient, cumbersome and slow-moving. Acquiring land rights under the Act involves navigating a complex bureaucratic maze with tortuous processing times and a lack of coordination between local authorities which complicates life for tribal communities unnecessarily. As a result, many of these land claims remain unresolved, leaving most tribal villagers vulnerable to further encroachment and the loss of their ancestral lands.

A further critical point in Kokopani is the lack of robust political backing for enforcement of the FRA. Though the Act was intended to empower indigenous peoples, political indifference — along with a lack of action on all levels of government — have hindered its implementation. When local political officials, many linked to wealthy, non tribal landowners, show little interest in the welfare and rights of the tribal communities, the battle becomes even more complex. In addition to these political and legal challenges, the tribe is also contending with social and financial pressures. Legal titles for lands generally used by tribal peoples have been obtained by non-tribal landowners, which do usually possess more financial capital and political power. This in turn left the tribal population more landless and economically vulnerable and attracted more claimants of land rights. Despite the provisions of legal frameworks such as the FRA, the Kokopani land rights movement highlights that tribal communities continue to face obstacles in asserting such rights. It underscores that protecting the land and livelihoods of tribal residents requires political will, judicial implementation and community involvement.

CONCLUSION:

he fact that many states have not fully implemented the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), given that there were many spaces for improving tribal self-governance in West Singhbhum under these laws. Such legislative frameworks aimed to empower native communities by recognizing indigenous rights to natural resources, building community decision-making, and promoting sustainable behavior. But whether such opportunities can be realized will depend on the sound implementation of new policies, on the reinvigoration of capability and on the removal of structural barriers that too often render legislation impotent. The PESA Act, which was enacted in 1996, aims to extend the provisions of the Panchayati Raj system to Scheduled Areas, which contain tribal tribes. Under PESA, the Gram Sabha (village council) is empowered to govern and govern local resources (land, water, forests). Forest Rights Act (FRA), enacted in 2006, aims to provide those who dwell in forests the legal right to access the forest resources and tools of the land historically used by them. In this way collectively these laws represent a step toward systems of decentralized governance, while local indigenous tribal groups retain the ability to make decisions directly affecting their cultural practices, way of life, and the

surrounding environment. If implemented, these rules have the power to transform local government in West Singhbhum — enabling tribal people to defend their resources from encroachment and creating a community-led decision-making process. In Case Study 1, evidence is provided on how forest management programs of community forest management in Dumra can result in efficient environmental stewardship because PESA and FRA enable tribal people, such as those in Dumra, to take an active role in sustaining nature and enhancing the efficiency of the ecosystem, leading to an improved standard of living (Kumar & Patel, 2019). Yet there are numerous difficulties to overcome in ensuring the effective implementation of these rules. One of the major hindrances is the inefficiency of the judicial system. FRA implementation has been especially slow and marred by inefficiency in the bureaucracy. Extensive documentation processes, delays in the recognition of land rights, and misunderstandings regarding the boundaries of forest rights leave tribal people often vulnerable to land alienation and exploitation (Choudhury & Singh, 2015). In a manner related to the development such ignorance has not been a lack of knowledge itself but rather knowledge of ignorance on part of the local communities about their rights and obligations along with the institutional capacity to create an efficient governance structure at local level have failed to form an embodiment of PESA Act. On top of that, the political will to solve systemic problems facing West Singhbhum's tribal tribes will be necessary; legislation by itself will not do. Though the laws themselves are quite progressive, they are often stymied by non-tribal elites who want to control the minerals and a lack of support from local political leaders. Given that there has been little political support, tribal groups continue to face the widespread influence of powerful landowners and external actors who have traditionally exercised control over access to natural resources (Mishra & Patnaik, 2017). There are several actions critical to overcome these barriers. The community members themselves need to be made aware of their rights under the FRA and PESA. Education campaigns and capacity-building initiatives will ensure communities are equipped with the knowledge and skills to use these laws to their benefit. Second, local governments must demonstrate their commitment to implementing these laws by eliminating administrative constraints, ensuring sufficient funds for settling land disputes and any claims brought under the FRA. The rights of tribal groups must be guaranteed and their interests prioritized in the political and economic arena through the political will. This can be realized through positioning tribal heads, local agency and inclusion in policymaking spaces (Sharma & Gupta, 2018). Overall, both the PESA and FRA acts have great potential to bolster tribal selfgovernance in West Singhbhum, but for that to happen, they need to be effective, which can be achieved only if the current problem of loopholes in legal processes, political denialism and lack of community awareness. Alongside a commitment to strengthen local governance and promote greater political and social participation, sustained effort to address these structural challenges is required for these laws to be truly effective.

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