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Awareness and Participation of Tribals in Gram Sabha: An Empirical Study from Odisha

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Abstract-- This study analyses the role of Gram Sabha within a decentralised and pluralist democratic framework, focusing on tribal communities in Odisha. It explores socio-economic conditions, legal awareness, political consciousness and participation. The findings reveal moderate levels of awareness and participation, with education significantly influencing both. However, poverty, weak political environment and limited awareness constrain effective engagement. While Gram Sabhas facilitate participatory planning, their functioning remains inadequate. Tribal perceptions reflect low confidence in these institutions. Moreover, women's participation and recognition, particularly in the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, remain marginal, highlighting persistent gaps in inclusive grassroots governance.

Keywords-- Decentralized Governance, Tribal Development, Political Participation, Political Consciousness, Legal Awareness and Forest Rights Act of 2006

I. INTRODUCTION

Within the Framework of a decentralized and pluralist approach to democracy, the role of the Gram Sabha is pivotal for retaining the values of the democracy and development of the people. The first part of the chapter deals with the socio-economic condition of tribals and awareness of their socio-political environment. The second part of the chapter deals with the political consciousness of tribals and their participation in Gram Sabha. The third section of the chapter deals with the subjective perception of respondents regarding the utility of Gram Sabha with a reference to the implementation of the FRA Act¹.

Participation of tribal people in democratic institutions is essential for ensuring their socio-economic development. Consciousness of laws, political actors and issues is a precondition for effective participation in public affairs. It is more so in the case of rural local governance. Political awareness has proved to be a key medium in people's perception of information and orientation towards political issues. For example, if they have awareness regarding the Forest Rights Act, they will fail to be assertive in having access to individual and community rights over forests under the given law and influence decisions in Gram Sabha meetings².

The tribals since ages have been residing in nearby forest areas and resolving the disputes by themselves. The PESA Act steadied and solidified the institution of the Gram Sabha participation³. In our study, we have studied such communities of indigenous people who are habituated to community life. In contrast to this, other social groups have accepted the modernizing influences and been leading an atomistic life away from community life⁴.

II. DECENTRALIZED GOVERNANCE AND THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION

The functioning of Panchayats as a unit of decentralised governance in India has brought the formulation of decentralised development plans into the forefront and has become a key function of these institutions. Article 243(G) of the Indian Constitution has made Panchayats responsible for the preparation and implementation of plans for economic development and social justice in their jurisdiction. Under this provision, the Gram Sabhas have devolved powers for the formulation of plans and endorsement of such plans before sending these plans to the Gram Panchayats (GPs) for resource allocation and execution⁵. The District Planning Committees (DPCs) are institutionalised to prepare the integrated district development plans and budget for the implementation of development programmes for the districts. In the case of scheduled areas (areas defined under Article 244(I) of the Indian Constitution), the process of invention of decentralised development plans has been institutionalised in the context of institutionalisation of Panchayats in these areas. The enactment of the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA Act) in 1996 has also to some extent emphasised the role of the Panchayats and the Gram Sabhas in the formulation of decentralised development plans.

It is mentioned under the Act that 'the Gram Sabhas have mandatory executive functions and responsibilities to approve plans of the village Panchayat, identify beneficiaries for schemes for poverty alleviation and other programmes and issue certificates of the utilisation of funds by the Panchayats'.



The Act further spelled out the role of the Panchayats and the Gram Sabhas in matters of development through the management of natural resources and refereeing decisions in harmony with prevailing traditions and customs.

While formulating the plans for the village Panchayats, the Gram Sabhas should provide adequate emphasis on the available community resources as well as the customary laws, traditions, customs and cultural personality of the tribal people. In the case of the scheduled areas of Odisha, the process of formulation of decentralised development plans has also become institutionalised with the institutional arrangement and functioning of Panchayats in these areas⁶.

In the case of Odisha, predominantly in scheduled areas of the state, the course of origination of decentralised development plans has witnessed many changes with the institutional arrangement and functioning of Panchayats in these areas during the post-73rd Amendment Period and Post-PESA Act Period. The role of Panchayats in the planning and implementation of development programmes has been enhanced over the years⁷. The formulation of genuine and effective decentralised planning has been prioritised by the state government. The state government has also devolved power and authority to Panchayats for the formulation of decentralised development plans. The central government under the Fourteenth Finance Commission (FFC) award period has also issued guidelines for the formulation of the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GDP) in all GPs, including the GPs located in the scheduled areas⁸. However, in some cases, it is observed that the path of formulation of decentralised development plans has encountered many hurdles⁹.

The dilution of the decentralised planning process through indorsing departmental and sectoral plans and political interventions in the process of formulation of plans through Panchayats have become two common features in decentralised planning. Inadequate infrastructure and poor data management system at the Panchayat level and feeble management among the various tiers have also made this process more cumbersome in some cases. In approximate cases, the process has failed to create consensus among the various sections of people while developing long-term and short-term development plans through the GPs¹⁰.

Based on this, the research unravels the process of formulation of decentralised development plans in the scheduled areas of Odisha while examining the case of the Nuapada district located in these areas. In recent years, many studies have been conducted to explore the working of Panchayats and their role in formulating decentralised planning in various states, including Odisha¹¹. However, the case of exploring the formulation of decentralised planning in scheduled areas and the involvement of Panchayats in the formulation and implementation of decentralized planning has not attained much scholarly attention. It is on this basis, that this study has been undertaken by the researcher.

III. GRAM SABHA AND GOVERNANCE IN KOMNA BLOCK OF NUAPADA DISTRICT

The Komna block is one of the largest blocks in the district with 31 GPs. The area of the study focuses on the Komna and Poinr GPs of the block.

Table No. 5.1:
Gram Sabha Meeting of Komna and Poinr GPs of Komna Block, Nuapada

Panchayat	Villages	No. Gram Sabha in 2023	Tribal Participation/ voter	Male	Female	Others Non-Tribals/voter	Male	Female
Komna	Komna	1	54/273	30	24	115/3890	80	35
	Biswanathpur	1	33/120	18	15	12/72	9	3
	Bharuamunda	1	18/67	12	6	2/33	0	0
Poinr	Poinr	1	82/995	46	40	42/116	31	11
	Mahulbhata	1	66/353	46	20	64/388	40	24
	Anupgarh	1	52/132	32	20	0/0	0	0

Data Source: Voter List of Komna Block and Field Work by the Researcher



The above data represents the participation of both tribals and non-tribals in the gram Sabha which was conducted in April 2023 in the Komna GP and Poinr GP. It has been examined that in Anupgarh village, there is no voter of non-tribals and tribal participation is highest in the case of 52 out of 132 voters. Komna, Biswanathapur and Bharuamunda from the Komna GP constitute 3995 non-tribals and 460 tribals voters and the participation of the non-tribals voters was examined as higher than the tribals due to lack of information, awareness about the Gram Sabha and discussion for the policies for their right and livelihood. On the other hand, the villages i.e. Poinr, Mahulbhata Anupgarh from Poinr GP have been dominated by the Tribal people and their participation in the meeting of the Gram Sabha is higher than the non-tribal members. However, women's participation remains low compared to male tribals in the GP also.

The given table reveals that tribal participation in Komna village was only 19.78 %. In contrast to this non-tribal participation is only 2.96%. Anupgarh is an exclusively tribal village where participation in Gram Sabha was only 39.40%. In fact in the case of all villages it varies between 19 % to 39% so far as tribal participation is concerned.

IV. MEASURES OF POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND PARTICIPATION

Against this backdrop, we have tried to examine the political consciousness and political participation of tribals in the Komna Block of Nuapada district.

Index for measuring legal awareness of respondents

Therefore, initially, we wanted to know the legal awareness of respondents by asking about the following legislations:

1. Knowledge of the Constitution
2. Knowledge of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act
3. Knowledge of Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act 1996
4. Knowledge of the Gram Panchayat Act
5. Knowledge of Forest Rights Act, 2006
6. Two-child norm policy for contesting Panchayat elections
7. Knowledge of the provision of Reservation for SC and STs in Panchayats
8. Awareness about Reservations for women in rural local bodies

9. Awareness about the State Election Commission

We developed a scale to assess the level of awareness of respondents. Those who scored between 0 and 3 were placed in the 'low level of legal awareness' category. Those who scored between 4 to 6 were placed in the moderately aware category and those scoring between 7 to 9 were placed in the high legal awareness group.

We have also developed two scales to assess the level of political consciousness and political participation of tribal and non-tribal communities.

- a) A 21-point scale was constructed to measure the political consciousness of respondents. One point was awarded for every positive response and a 'zero' score was given for every negative answer. The respondents who scored between 0 and 7 points were regarded as having a low level of political consciousness, those who scored between 8 and 14 were placed in the 'moderately conscious' category and those securing between 15 and 21 points were placed in the 'highly conscious' category. The following indicators were identified.

1. Knowledge of Gram Sabha
2. Knowledge of the composition of Gram Sabha
3. Knowledge of powers of Gram Sabha
4. Knowledge of matters discussed in the Gram Sabha meetings
5. Awareness about government functionaries who remain present during Gram Sabha meetings
6. Knowledge of President of Gram Sabha Meetings,
7. Constitutional tenure of Gram Panchayat
8. Knowledge of Prime Minister
9. Knowledge of Chief Minister
10. Knowledge local MLA
11. Knowledge of local MP
12. Knowledge of local Sarpanch and
13. Ward member of the ward you belong
14. Knowledge of tribal ward member
15. Knowledge of women ward members.
16. Social identity of Sarpanch, Panchayat Samiti member and Zilla Parishad member
17. Knowledge of the last panchayat election held
18. Awareness about the next Panchayat election



- 19. Awareness about the next General election
- 20. Knowledge about the ruling party in the state
- 21. Awareness about the ruling party at the centre

- 6. Participation in any other protest agitation for basic needs
- 7. Participating in the development of a plan for your village
- 8. Casting your vote in last Panchayat election
- 9. Raising issues relating to FRA
- 10. Campaigning in elections
- 11. Enrollment in any political party
- 12. Representative in Gram Panchayat

B) Index for measuring political participation of Tribals

a) A twelve-point scale was constructed to measure the level of political participation of respondents. One point was awarded for every positive response and a 'zero' score was given for every negative answer. The respondents who scored between 0 and 4 points were regarded as having a low level of political participation, those who scored between 5 and 8 points were placed in the 'medium level participation' category and those securing between 9 and 12 points were placed in the 'high level of participation' category. The following indicators were identified.

- 1. Attending Gram Sabha meetings
- 2. Speaking in the meeting
- 3. Attending the Palli Sabha meeting
- 4. Raising voice against injustice done to women
- 5. Participation in the implementation of development programmes by Panchayat

Socio-economic condition of tribals and their own social and political environment

The first hypothesis of our study is "There is a close relationship between socio-economic conditions of tribals and awareness of their social and political environment."

To examine this hypothesis we tried to relate the income level of respondents with their social identity, their level of education with their legal awareness and their social identity with their political environment. In addition assess their perception of Gram Sabha in terms of their social identity.

Table 5.2:
Income level of Respondents by their social identity

Income level	Tribal	Non-Tribals				Total
	ST I	SC II	SEBC III	GEN IV	Total II+III+IV	I+II+III+IV
Below one lakh	85	11	15	01	27	112
One lakh-two lakh	12	0	03	01	04	16
Two lakh-Three lakh	02	08	11	04	25	27
Three lakh and above	0	0	10	06	16	32
	134	19	39	12	70	204

As cited above, 88.8 percent of tribal respondents earn less than one lakh per year. In contrast to this, 57.89 Scheduled Castes and 58.50 percent of SCBCs are in the

lowest income category. No respondents from the Scheduled Caste category are in the higher income group.

Table 5.3:
Legal Awareness of Respondents by level of education of respondents

Level of Legal Awareness	Low	Medium	High
No formal Education	--	78.3	89.2
Upto 8 th Class	-	15.7	8.3
Upto 10 th Class	-	5.2	2.4
Higher Secondary	-	--	0
Graduation & Above	-	0.9	0

Table 5.2 gives us a very surprising result. It is evident from the table that education has no relation with the legal awareness of respondents. Respondents having no formal education have moderate or above levels of legal awareness. The reason may be that if an individual takes an interest in the public sphere, he or she may show a keen interest in knowing about the prevailing legislation.

V. THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT OF RESPONDENTS

Political scientists have found through their research that the political environment within the family may induce political behavior in social actors. To understand this we analyzed the political environment of respondents in terms of their social identity.

Table 1:
Awareness of the Political Environment of Respondents by Social Identity

Questions	Tribal	Non-Tribals				Total
	ST I	SC II	SEBC III	GEN IV	Total II+III+IV	
Does your family have any political affiliation?	3.73	21.05	12.82	33.33	18.57	8.82
Political Positions held by any family member	4.47	15.78	10.25	25.00	14.28	7.84
Father's Membership in any Political party	0.74	5.26	2.56	8.33	4.28	1.96
Wife/Husband's membership in any political party	2.23	5.26	5.12	--	4.28	2.94
Participation in political campaigns	29.85	68.42	30.76	58.33	45.71	35.29
Membership in any SHG	33.58	26.31	10.25	33.33	18.57	28.43

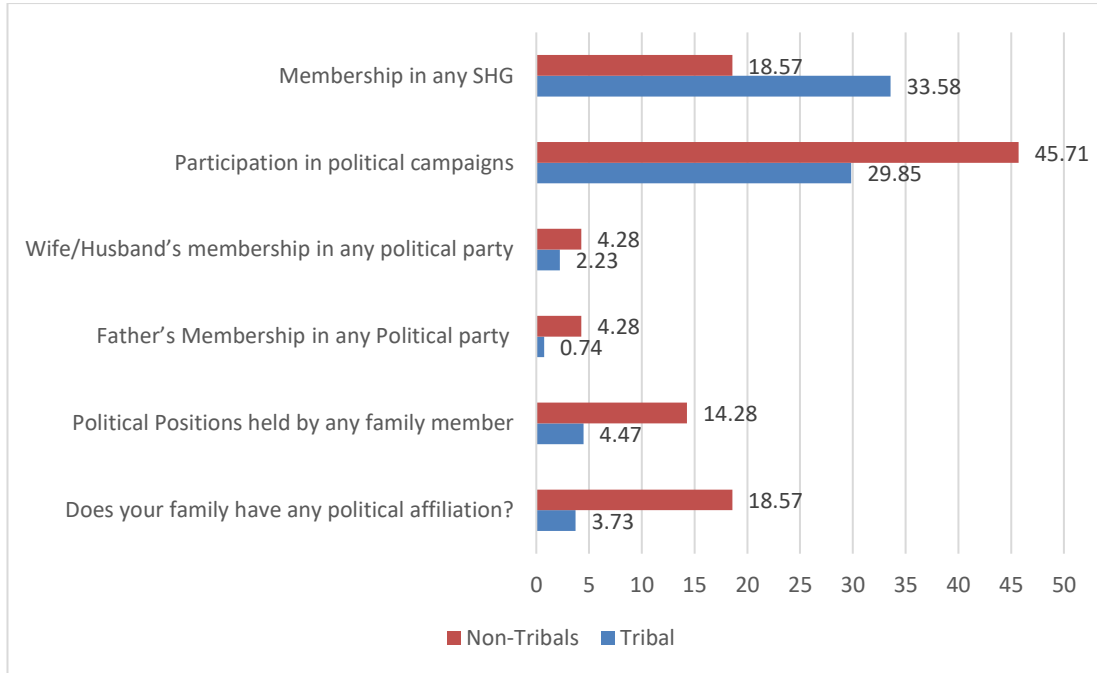


Fig.1: Awareness of the Political Environment of Respondents by Social Identity

In the given table and figure, we have only recorded the positive answers of respondents. We observed that only 3.37 percent of tribal have a family which is politically affiliated against 18.57 % of non-tribals. 4.47 % of our tribal respondents have family members as elected panchayat representatives against 14.28 % of non-tribals. It indicates that tribal have the reserved seats only.

In our research area, only 28.43 percent have become members of Self Help Groups. This indicates that a few of our sample has a politically charged social environment.

Lastly, we wanted to find out the relationship between the social identity of respondents and their perception of the effectiveness of Gram Sabha

**Table 1:
Perception of Respondents Regarding Effectiveness of Gram Sabha (in%)**

Effectiveness of Gram Sabha	Tribal I	Non-Tribals				Total I+II+III+IV
		SC II	SEBC III	GEN IV	Total II+III+IV	
To a great extent	1.49	5.26	7.69	--	5.71	2.94
To a small extent	70.14	84.21	66.66	91.66	75.71	72.05
Not at all	1.49	--	2.56	--	1.42	1.47
Can't say	26.86	10.52	23.07	8.33	17.14	23.52

We observed in the given table that 26.86 percent of tribals cannot form any opinion and 17.14 percent of non-tribals respondents cannot form any opinion regarding Gram Sabha, a vital grassroots institution.

The reasons may be two. Either they are ignorant of their political environment due to a lack of education, non-participation in political activities (table 5.1) and poverty or they do not take any interest in any political institutions.

70.14 percent of tribal and 75.71 percent of non-tribal respondents believe that Gram Sabha functions to a small extent. It may be inferred that they are aware of the existence of Gram Sabha but have no or very little knowledge about it.

Examining the hypotheses

After computing the level of political consciousness and political participation of respondents we have tried to test our hypotheses.

5.5.1 Education and Political Consciousness

Our second hypothesis was “Education has a direct bearing on the political consciousness of tribals.”

Social scientists have argued that education is a vital instrument in bringing transformation to the level of political consciousness. It enhances the knowledge of citizens regarding political actors and issues and the Constitution of the country.

Table 5.5:
Level of Political Consciousness by level of education of tribal respondents (in%) N=134

Level of Education/ Level of Political Consciousness	Low	Medium	High
No formal Education	60.00	25.35	---
Upto 8 th Class	29.10	56.34	17.95
Upto 10 th Class	9.09	15.49	21.79
Higher Secondary	1.81	2.82	38.46
Graduation & Above	---	---	21.79
Total	29.96	34.80	38.24

In the given table we find that 60 percent of respondents having a low level of political consciousness are illiterates. 29.10 percent of respondents having a low level of political consciousness have education up to 8th class. However, all respondents having graduation level education have a high level of political consciousness. Thus, it is difficult to

assume a direct correlation between political consciousness and level of education, but a positive association between them cannot be denied.

Therefore, we decided to test the hypothesis by using the chi-square formula. Our null hypothesis was “Education has no direct bearing on political consciousness.”

Table 5.6:
Association between Political consciousness and level of education of Respondents

Null Hypotheses	Chi-Square Test	Critical Value	Level of Significance, α	Inference
Education has no direct bearing on the political consciousness of tribals.	121.19278	15.5073	0.05	Null Hypothesis Rejected

It is evident from the given table that our null hypothesis is rejected. Hence, our research hypothesis, “Education has a direct bearing on the political consciousness of tribals.” is accepted. The reason is education develops the capacity of respondents to perceive political issues and form opinions.

5.5.2 Political Participation of Respondents

If the political consciousness of the citizens is the input into the political system, their political participation is the output of the system. An enhanced consciousness in citizens regarding political issues and national legislation will motivate the political actors to take an active interest in public affairs. We tried to find out the level of political participation of respondents.

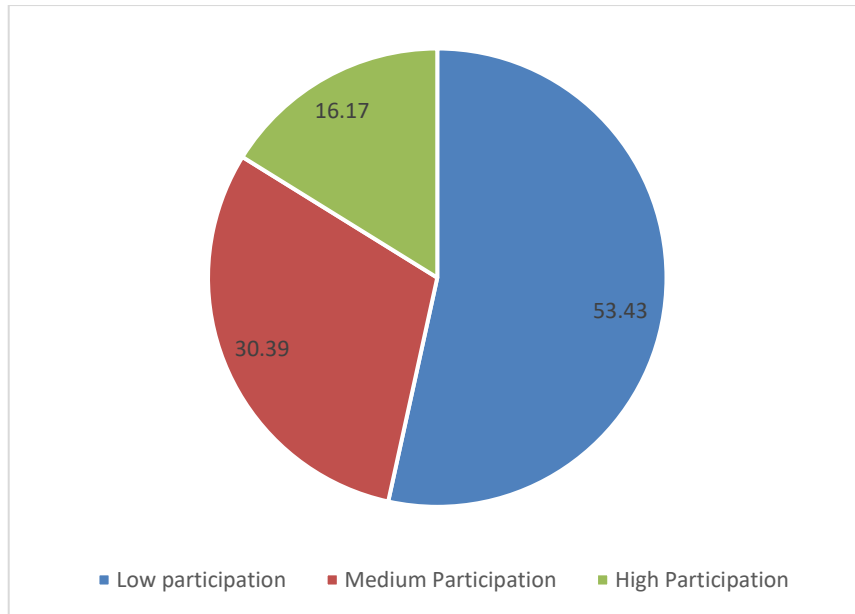


Fig 5.2: Level of Political Participation of Respondents

It is evident from Fig5.4 that 53.43 percent of our respondents have a low level of political participation. 30.39 percent of respondents have a medium level of political

participation and only 16.17 percent of respondents have a high level of political participation.

Table 5.7:
 Level of political participation by level of education of tribal Respondents (in%) N=134

Level of Education/Level of Participation in Gram Sabha and other political activities	Low	Medium	High
No formal Education	90.19	5.89	3.92
Upto 8 th Class	60	34.28	5.72
Upto 10 th Class	42.42	39.39	18.19
Higher Secondary	12.12	51.51	36.37
Graduation & Above	17.64	29.41	29.41
Total	53.43	30.39	16.17

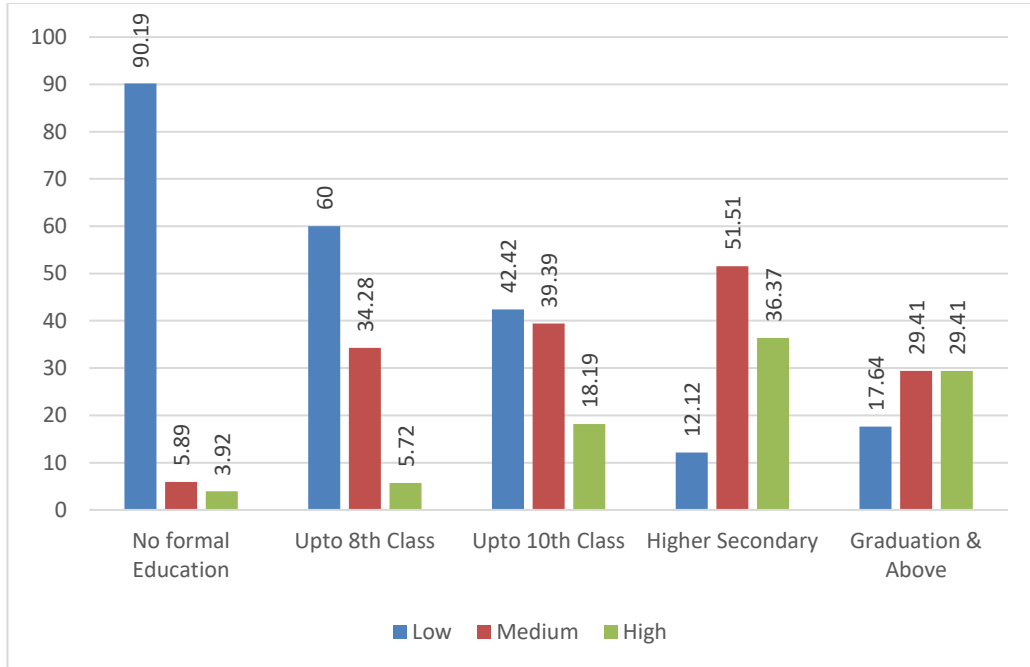


Fig.5.3: Level of political participation by level of education of tribal Respondents (in%) N=134

It is evident from the diagram that 90.15 percent of tribal respondents who are illiterate have low-level participation. A few respondents having education also have a low level of education. 17.64 percent of tribal respondents having graduation degrees have shown a low level of political participation.

Therefore, it is difficult to establish a causal relationship between education and political participation.

Therefore, we used the statistical formula of chi-square to find out the nature of the association between education and the participation of respondents in public activities.

Table 5.8:
Association between Political participation and level of Education of Respondents.

Null Hypotheses	Chi-Square Test	Critical Value	Level of Significance, α	Inference
Political participation is not influenced by the education of the tribals.	77.059945	15.5073	0.05	Null Hypothesis Rejected

In the table cited above, we have examined the research hypothesis by formulating a null hypothesis, “Political participation is not influenced by the education of the tribals.” We found after the chi-square test that the null hypothesis was rejected. Thus, the research hypothesis, “Political participation is influenced by education of the tribals is accepted.”

5.5.3 Association between Political Consciousness and Political Participation of Respondents

After finding out the level of political consciousness and political participation of respondents we tried to examine the association between political consciousness and political participation of respondents.

Table 5.9:
Political Consciousness and political participation of respondents

Political Participation/ Political Consciousness	Low level of Participation	Medium level of Participation	High Level of Participation
Low level of Political Consciousness	48.62	1.63	2.94
Moderate level of Political Consciousness	41.28	36.06	11.76
High level of Political Consciousness	10.09	62.29	85.29

It is observed from the given table that 48.62 percent of respondents having a low level of political participation also have a lower level of consciousness about political issues 63.38 percent of respondents having a moderate level of political consciousness also have a moderate level of political participation. 85.29 percent of respondents have a higher level of political participation also having a higher level of political consciousness. Though a few respondents having low levels of political consciousness also have

moderate and higher levels of political participation, there is a clear association between political consciousness and political participation.

To examine this, we formulated the third research hypothesis, “Political consciousness and political participation are positively interrelated.” We formulated the null hypothesis, “Political participation and political consciousness are not interrelated.” We used the chi-square formula to test the hypothesis.

Table 5.10:
Association between political consciousness and political participation

Null Hypotheses	Chi-Square Test	Critical Value	Level of Significance, α	Inference
Political participation and political consciousness are not interrelated.	77.059945	15.5073	0.05	Null Hypothesis Rejected

After the hypothesis testing, we found that the null hypothesis stands rejected and the third research hypothesis, “Political participation and political consciousness are interrelated.” Is accepted. Thus, there is a positive association between political consciousness and political participation.

The subjective perception of respondents regarding democratic institutions orients them towards participation in political activities. Therefore, we wanted to analyse the subjective perception of the utility of Gram Sabha of our respondents.

Table 5.11:
Subjective Perception of respondents regarding the usefulness of Gram Sabha

Questions	Tribal	Non-Tribals				Total
	ST I	SC II	SEBC III	GEN IV	Total II+III+IV	I+II+III+IV
GS meetings are useful	35	17	21	11	49	84
GS plays a crucial role in tribal development	24	14	19	11	44	136
GS plays a crucial role in village development	28	17	22	11	50	156
GS plays a crucial role in women's development	28	16	18	9	43	149
Reservation has helped women to get freedom	50	16	29	12	57	168
Your voices are cared for by officials	29	07	15	11	33	62
Total	134	19	39	12	70	204

26.11 percent of tribal and 70 percent of non-tribal respondents feel that Gram Sabha is useful. 62.85 percent of non-tribal respondents and only 17.9 percent of tribal respondents feel that Gram Sabha plays a crucial role in the socio-economic development of tribals. This perception keeps them away from understanding the power of Gram Sabha. Only 21.64 percent of tribal respondents feel that officials have concern for them. This feeling has alienated them from the public institutions. 20.89 percent of tribal respondents feel that Gram Sabha is useful for women's development and village development whereas 48 percent of non-tribal respondents feel similarly. A type of apathy prevails over the tribal respondents. Proper training and strong leadership can bring some changes to them.

5.5.4 Participation of Tribals in Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha

The institutional arrangement and functioning of the decentralised self-governing institutions in recent years have witnessed a major shift in many post-colonial Third World countries. Their increasing contribution to promoting decentralised development plans and addressing the development issues of weaker sections of people has been observed in many cases. In the contemporary era of development, these rural self-governing democratic institutions at the local level have been playing a crucial

character in formulating decentralised development plans and implementing development programmes in rural areas¹². 3.92 percent of illiterate respondents, 5.72 percent of respondents having education up to the 8th class and 18.19 percent of respondents having education up to the 10th class have a higher level of participation in Gram Sabha meetings and Panchayat activities in our research. 46.57 percent of our respondents have medium and more than that level of participation in public activities. It may be concluded that the improved functioning of these democratic institutions has encouraged tribal people to participate in the process of formulation, execution and monitoring of the local development plans and budgets. It is argued that the decentralised independent institutions are in some places preparing plans and programmes¹³.

The countryside and degree of contribution of tribal people in the meetings held for planning through various grassroots institutions of Panchayats such as the Palli Sabhas (Village Assembly) and the Gram Sabhas show that 'in many cases, these people have participated at both levels such as at the level of Palli Sabhas (village or hamlet level) and the level of Gram Sabhas during the formulation of decentralised development plan. It is also observed that the political mobilisation of tribal people through Palli Sabhas and Gram Sabhas influences the degree of participation of these people in the planning processes¹⁴.



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It further shows that 39.7 percent of them have participated only at the Palli Sabhas, while 4.2 percent of them have participated at the Gram Sabhas for the same purpose. However, their participation at both levels at the Palli Sabhas and the Gram Sabhas is somewhat imposing (52.4%). The overall trend shows that only 52.4 percent of the tribal people are the actual participants and the participation of the outstanding people is moderately changeable because of innumerable reasons. Decentralised planning has become a key part of Panchayat, and it is held as per the schedule prepared by the Panchayats¹⁵.

This process has encouraged many people to participate in the planning process and suggest various works for the villages. On the issue of participation, some of the earlier research works also revealed that the mass mobilisation of rural people through Panchayats and Gram Sabhas has assumed buoyancy to articulate their needs and capacity to control the development process. However, in this case, it is observed that Panchayats and Gram Sabhas have encouraged participation, but it is still not fully operationalised due to various reasons. There are many factors such as (a) the distance of the Gram Sabha venue from the villages, (b) unsuitable time (normally in day time-between 10 am to 4 pm) for conducting meetings and (c) non-discussion of some important issues in the planning meetings have forced some people not to participate in this process, thus creating a gap in participation (FGD)¹⁶.

5.5.5 Participation of Tribal People in the Planning Process:

The issue of promoting the participation of various categories of people, particularly promoting the participation of tribal people in the planning process, presents various dimensions that are neither universal nor uniform in nature. During our field visit, we found that 59.7 percent of the total respondents have described their contribution to the planning process¹⁷.

The process of formulation of decentralised development plans in the districts can be termed as the outcome of the institutional arrangement and functioning of Panchayats in these areas during the post-73rd Constitutional Amendment era.

The institutional arrangement reveals that the Panchayats (GPs) and the Gram Sabhas are directly involved in the planning process. The Gram Sabhas have been playing a catalytic role in this process. They play a key role in identifying beneficiaries for various development programmes and preparing and approving the GP-level plan and budget¹⁸.

5.6 Decentralised Planning and Discussion on Tribal Development Issues:

A crucial constituent of this study was to scrutinize whether the socio-economic development issues of the tribal people have received adequate attention in the planning process and whether those issues are discussed and included in these plans or not. Considering it, an effort has been made to emphasize this issue, while gathering data from the households and villages¹⁹. Against this, many respondents observed (62.6%) that the issues (development issues) of tribal people were discussed in the planning meetings, though they were not sure about the inclusion of these issues in plan documents²⁰. They are not quite sure about further action taken by GPs to resolve those issues through the implementation of various projects and schemes²¹. It shows that a majority of tribal people (59.0%) are unaware of the planning of the ITDAs and the involvement of Panchayats in this process. It further reveals that 17.6 percent of them are aware of the involvement of Panchayats (Palli Sabhas/Gram Sabhas), while 23.3 percent are aware that the plans are being formulated by ITDAs, and there is no involvement of Panchayats on this issue²². Being a part of scheduled areas and despite the presence of Panchayats in the districts, no sincere efforts have been made in terms of convergence between Panchayats and ITDAs in the districts. In most cases, there is no instance of preparation of plans for the ITDAs through the Gram Sabhas²³.

On the question regarding what are the issues discussed in the planning meetings, it reveals that many respondents, in particular, the tribal people have observed the discussion of a range of issues in these meetings²⁴. The responses to various issues by our respondents are given below:



Table 5.12.
Issues discussed in Gram Sabha Meetings

Sl. No.	Issues	% of responses
1	Inclusion of more tribal people in various schemes and programmes	63.9
2.	Inclusion of tribal people under food security programmes	60.7
3.	Improving drinking water supply to household	32.1
3.	Strengthening livelihoods of tribals	27.6
4.	Strengthening the livelihoods of tribals with the help of FRA	18.7
5.	Strengthening assistance for agriculture production	18.7
6.	Improving Road Connectivity	29.7
7.	Inclusion of tribal in MGNREGS	30.7
8	Provision of sufficient healthcare	6.8
9.	Protection of Tribal land	10.6
10.	Improvement in educational facilities	11.2

It is evident from the given table that the inclusion of the names of tribals in the beneficiary list to avail of state benefits is of utmost importance to the respondents. Improving communication by road is also vital for them. The other essential issues like health, education and protection of tribal land from alienation have also been discussed in some cases.

It has been realized by many tribal people of the villages that they have every right to avail more benefits from the development programmes being implemented by the Panchayats, and it is to be able to become possible through actively joining in planning and raising demand for their inclusion in the development programmes. This realization has motivated them to participate in planning and raising issues affecting them. This situation has made the planning process participatory and inclusive despite various lacunae associated with this process. However, the basic issues of governance of tribal areas and issues of livelihoods and natural resources of tribal people have attained less attention in the process of discussion (FGD). The issues raised and discussed in the planning meetings are more or less confined within the purview of schemes and programmes of the central government and state government being implemented by Panchayats in the villages²⁵.

VI. CONCLUSION

The tribals have a moderate level of political consciousness and political participation. They are yet to develop a strong faith in the efficacy of Gram Sabha. Their poor economic condition keeps them engaged in managing their livelihood needs. However, the role of the Gram Sabha and the women's empowerment among the tribal women remains a myth, particularly in western Odisha. One of the most pressing issues under IFR claims pertains to those filed by women. Their claim has been rejected at the Gram Sabha level, but no reasons have been cited for the rejections. Moreover, definite major issues for women have come up lately, including the non-availability of proper segregated data for widows, single women, and joint titles. The role of women in institutional set-ups, forest management and convergence is not recognised. Not a single circular or policy has ever been passed with special provisions for women and their empowerment through the FRA.



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