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Democratic decentralisation & the politics of inclusion: Panchayat empowerment in Jharkhand's Tribal Area

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Abstract

This research paper explores the complex relationship between democratic decentralization and the lived experiences of Adivasi communities in Jharkhand, with a particular focus on Panchayat empowerment, tribal identity, and gendered participation. Through unstructured interviews across selected villages including areas where Panchayats have not yet been fully implemented the study captures the nuanced voices of local residents, traditional leaders, and women representatives whose realities often remain absent from formal policy narratives. By combining primary insights with an extensive review of scholarly literature, government reports, and journalistic accounts, the research reveals how constitutional promises such as PESA and PRI reforms continue to collide with ground level challenges of exclusion, weakened traditional governance, land conflicts, and persistent patriarchal norms.

The three analytical chapters illuminate both structural barriers and emerging possibilities: the resilience of tribal institutions, the tensions between states led development and sacred land rights, and the evolving leadership of tribal women in Panchayats. The concluding section argues that genuine decentralization in Jharkhand requires not only legal reforms but also social recognition, cultural sensitivity, and institutional trust building. Ultimately, the study positions grassroots participation as essential for strengthening inclusive democracy in India's Scheduled Areas.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj Institutions, democratic decentralization, tribal governance, gender inclusion, adivasi rights

1. Introduction

“When the right efforts are made, the right results follow. I believe that our tribal youths will make progress, and the nation will benefit from their potential”

~ Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi

Jharkhand's experience with democratic decentralization is deeply intertwined with its long and emotional journey toward recognition, dignity, and self-governance. When the state was created in 2000, it marked the culmination of decades of mobilization by Adivasi communities who felt economically exploited and culturally sidelined under the administrative structure of Bihar. The Chota Nagpur Plateau and Santhal Parganas home to groups such as the Munda, Santhal, and Oraon (Britannia, N.D.) have always had their own systems of customary laws, village decision making, and community resource management. Yet these systems survived largely in spite of, rather than in harmony with, state policies. Despite the region's rich mineral wealth, the benefits rarely reached the people who lived on the land, reinforcing a sense of internal colonialism. The demand for a separate state, symbolized by the call for “Jal, Jangal, Zameen”, was therefore not only political but deeply personal a movement to reclaim identity, protect ancestral resources, and ensure that governance reflected Adivasi worldviews. Understanding this historical context is essential to making sense of the tensions that emerged when Jharkhand attempted to integrate modern Panchayati Raj structures with long standing tribal forms of self-rule. In response to these realities, PESA (1996) sought to bridge the gap between constitutional governance and tribal traditions by giving Gram Sabhas genuine authority over local resources, cultural practices, and community level decision making (Government of India, 1996) ^[4].

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However, Jharkhand's implementation of PESA has been inconsistent, with many villages still lacking functional Panchayati Raj Institutions even decades after statehood. This institutional vacuum has left several communities without a reliable democratic platform, weakening the very spirit of decentralization the Act aimed to promote. A particularly important dimension of this challenge is the role of tribal women. While constitutional reservations have opened doors for them to enter political spaces, their participation often unfolds within layered social constraints. Many women leaders actively challenge patriarchal barriers, yet practices like 'Pradhan Pati,' where male family members informally take charge on their behalf, continue to undermine genuine representation. Their experiences highlight how gender, culture, and power intersect in everyday governance and how the success of decentralization in Jharkhand ultimately depends on whether these voices are authentically included rather than symbolically acknowledged.

This paper explores a comparative study of two villages situated in the district of Bokaro Steel City, Jharkhand. First is Kanphatta, which is a mixed population village comprising both tribal and non-tribal households. While having an interaction with some of the local people there, we found out that historically, the village was included under the Panchayat framework following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, enabling villagers to participate in Gram Sabha meetings and access basic welfare schemes, where some of them also mentioned their family members who were former Mukhiyas. However, field interactions revealed that the Panchayat system became dysfunctional when the Bokaro Steel Plant initiated land acquisition in the region. Compensation was distributed to villagers, but the subsequent administrative decision resulted in the area's land being labelled as non-notified. However, after the distribution of the compensation to the villagers they continued to live on the land until there is any compulsion to leave the land. This has also resulted in conflict between the tribal and the non-tribal people, as the non-tribal residents do not want the establishment of the Panchayat because they fear that the government will favour the tribal people and they will lose the land they are residing on. Apparently, there is no common head in the village who takes decisions in any kind of problem in the village.

As a result, as the land is not notified to the Jharkhand Government, no Panchayat can legally be constituted in Kanphatta, leaving the village administratively isolated as most of the government schemes are not even implemented in the village. During conversations, many tribal residents expressed a deep sense of exclusion, explaining that without a Panchayat, routine developmental issues remain unresolved. Tribal families feel politically invisible despite being among the original inhabitants of the land. In contrast, several non-tribal households openly conveyed reluctance to revive the Panchayat, as they perceived Panchayat structures as disruptive to their existing influence in the village. This has resulted in persistent social tensions between tribal and non-tribal groups, creating an environment of mistrust and fragmented community relations.

Whereas Rani Pokhar presents a contrasting scenario. The village is fully integrated into the Panchayati Raj system, and during field visits it became clear that the Panchayat plays an active role in shaping the development landscape. Unlike Kanphatta, the residents here described the

Panchayat as a functional and accessible institution, enabling them to participate in Gram Sabha discussions and decision making related to local governance. Several state led developmental schemes including housing benefits, drinking water provisions, road construction, sanitation projects, and livelihood support have been implemented with the Panchayat's mediation. Various central and Jharkhand state government schemes support tribal women in areas like Rani Pokhar, focusing on financial assistance, skill development, health, and education (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, N.D.). Villagers shared that the sense of collective belonging has strengthened because people feel their voices matter. Women, in particular, reported increased confidence as the Panchayat structure allows them to engage in public spaces that were previously restricted.

1.2 Objective Questions

- What is the functioning of the Panchayats in Tribal areas of Jharkhand under democratic decentralisation?
- What the differences if we compare the governance patterns between a village with an established Panchayat system and one without a fully functional Panchayat.
- What are the main challenges that hinder the effective implementation of the PESA Act in Jharkhand's scheduled areas?
- Examine how inclusive Panchayat institutions are for Adivasi Communities especially women and marginalised communities?

2. Methodology

This research employs a descriptive and qualitative methodology which was chosen to capture the nuanced realities of democratic decentralisation and tribal participation in Jharkhand. A descriptive approach allows the study to illustrate existing governance conditions, community interactions, and everyday experiences without imposing rigid assumptions. The qualitative nature of the research aligns with the need to understand human perspectives, emotions, and social processes that numbers alone cannot express. Both primary and secondary data added to build a comprehensive understanding of the topic. The secondary data was drawn from academic journals, scholarly articles, policy documents, and reliable newspaper reports. These sources helped establish the conceptual and historical background of Panchayati Raj institutions and tribal governance. The primary data was collected through fieldwork in two villages, using unstructured interviews. This method was intentionally chosen due to the limited literacy levels in the selected areas and the need to create a comfortable environment where respondents could speak freely in their own words. Some interviews were conducted face to face during village visits, allowing direct observation of social settings, while others took place through telephonic conversations when in person interaction was not feasible. By harmonising descriptive insights and lived experiences, this methodology provides a grounded and human centred understanding of the research problems.

3. Literature Review

Rising participation and evolving agency among tribal communities

Adivasi participation in Panchayati Raj is best understood as a gradual unfolding of political confidence rather than a

sudden transformation. In many tribal regions, governance has long been rooted in customary systems, collective decision making, and community labour. When the state introduced Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the shift demanded far more than elections it required psychological acceptance, trust, and a sense of ownership. True participation happens when people no longer see governance as something imposed from above but as a process they can shape with their own hands, labour, and voices. This journey is deeply human: communities learn, adapt, hesitate, and eventually step forward when they feel their involvement makes a real difference.

Narayan's observations mirror this slow but meaningful evolution. In *Tribals and their Participation in Panchayati Raj: A Case Study of Ranchi* (Sachindra Narayan, 1981) 229], he notes that Adivasis did not merely adopt government programmes they worked alongside them. Their voluntary contributions in constructing roads, school buildings, and wells show a kind of participation that is both material and emotional. It reveals a belief that development is a shared responsibility, not an external charity. Narayan also highlights that while tribals initially refrained from contesting elections, they eventually occupied more than 50% of PRI positions. This shift is not just numerical it represents growing self-confidence, familiarity with state structures, and a widening sense of political citizenship.

Thus, Narayan's findings reflect a larger truth: tribal engagement strengthens when systems respect community rhythms, build trust, and allow people to see themselves as active architects of their own future.

Decentralisation and the Representations Status

The introduction of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 granted constitutional status to the local self-governments in India through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and made it mandatory that at least one third (was later increased) of the seats to women and also gave reservation for the Scheduled castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in proportion to their population. This was basically done to strengthen grassroots democracy by giving constitutional status to local bodies, enhanced participation of marginalized communities, especially women, SCs, and STs, institutionalised decentralized planning and community based governance and created legal mechanisms for accountability, transparency, and local development. But this amendment clearly will not automatically offer empowerment or substantive participation. For instance, review by *Sachchidanand Prasad & Abhijit Mitra & Bhupesh Gopal Chintamani & Gitanjali Shrivastava & Kshitij Naikade & Atmaram Shelke, in Decentralisation at the Grassroots: Status of Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas of Jharkhand, 2023* argues that there are several reasons due to which this is happening. One of which is that there is lack of adequate knowledge about the existing laws and reforms that's are made and also that the Gram sabhas are not conducted regularly. Only a few of the Gram sabhas were involved in the discussions related to collection of MFPs like Mahuwa, Tendu leaves, Saal leaves and several others. MFPs are mostly collected for domestic consumption only and thus no commercialization has taken place. Also, even though the tribals have the liberty to sell their products to anyone or above the minimum support price, but are not able to do so due to intangible restrains like poverty, lack of awareness

about both the market and the value of the product. These gaps call for a governance approach to tackle the situation involving the voices of all the stakeholders and an amicable negotiation instrument should be introduced addressing the interests of the Centre, State and Tribal population.

Role of the traditional governance structure in the grassroots level

The weakening of traditional governance structures among the Santal communities reflects a profound shift in how authority, decision making, and cultural identity are negotiated in contemporary Jharkhand. As highlighted in *Devaluation of Traditional Self Governance among Santal and Its Impact on Their Lives* (Sharma, Shree & Minz, 2023) ^[37], the incomplete integration of the Traditional Sarna Gram (TSG) system with the state led Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) under the Jharkhand Panchayat Raj Act (JPRA 2001) has created overlapping jurisdictions that undermine customary leadership. The growing dominance of the Mukhiya and local Tekhedaar over the Manjhi and Gram Sabha has not only disrupted traditional authority but also reshaped the socio economic landscape in Santal villages, leading to declining forest based livelihoods and increasing youth migration (Sharma, Shree & Minz, 2023) ^[37]. Development schemes often controlled by outsiders or Dikushave further diluted community autonomy, reducing Gram Sabha participation to symbolic signatures rather than democratic deliberation. The erosion of TSG authority has also contributed to poor implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA 2006), weakening community ownership of land and forest resources. Yet, the recent draft rules introduced by the Government of Jharkhand to strengthen PESA offer a possibility for restoring Gram Sabha authority and re empowering Santal cultural and governance institutions (Sharma, Shree & Minz, 2023) ^[37].

Changing role of the tribal women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions

Tribal women in Jharkhand's Panchayati Raj Institutions face layered barriers that shape their journey from mere representation to genuine leadership. At the core, their decision making power is restricted by three interlinked challenges: Socio cultural norms, limited institutional support, and the persistence of proxy leadership. These issues reveal a gap between constitutional intent and ground realities. While reservations have increased numerical representation, the deeper question remains are tribal women allowed to lead, or only to appear as leaders? Socio cultural obstacles, particularly patriarchal attitudes and low literacy, continue to silence women in public forums. Heavy domestic work and gendered expectations limit their ability to attend meetings, let alone influence decisions. Institutional shortcomings such as lack of training, weak administrative support, and poor infrastructure further marginalize them. In many villages, male relatives still make decisions on behalf of elected women, reducing them to symbolic holders of power. Yet, change is slowly unfolding: women are beginning to question power dynamics, negotiate budgets, and participate actively through self-help groups and peer networks. This shift shows that empowerment must be multidimensional legal, economic, social, and psychological to be sustainable. According to *From Representation to Leadership: Enhancing the Decision Making Role of Tribal Women in*

Panchayati Raj Institutions of Jharkhand (Pandey & Kumari, 2024), field data from Ranchi illustrates this dual reality. Women's voices are gaining gradual recognition, but patriarchal structures, proxy decision making, and inadequate institutional support still limit their autonomy. The study also highlights encouraging trends: SHGs and training programmes have enabled many tribal women to speak confidently, monitor village projects, and mobilize communities. This evolution reinforces that genuine leadership can emerge only when structural barriers diminish and institutional legitimacy expands.

Although democratic decentralization in India has been widely studied, there remains a significant gap in understanding how decentralization actually operates within the unique socio cultural and political landscape of Jharkhand's tribal regions. Existing literature often focuses on structural provisions of PESA and the Panchayati Raj system, yet there is limited empirical research on villages where Panchayats are either non-existent, non-functional, or partially implemented. These spaces remain largely invisible in academic discourse despite representing some of the most vulnerable and politically complex communities. Moreover, the interaction between traditional institutions such as the Manjhi Pargana system and formal Panchayat bodies has not been adequately examined, especially in terms of power struggles, cultural legitimacy, and governance outcomes.

Another critical gap concerns the lived experiences and agency of tribal women within Panchayats. While studies acknowledge the challenges of patriarchy and proxy leadership, few incorporate on ground qualitative voices that reveal how gender, land rights, and local politics intersect in everyday governance. Additionally, there is limited research documenting how land conflicts, state led development, and corporate intervention reshape grassroots democracy in Scheduled Areas. This study addresses these gaps by combining unstructured interviews, literature review, and village level observations to offer a more grounded, humanised understanding of decentralization in Jharkhand's tribal context.

Decentralization in the tribal landscape a window into Jharkhand's village

Decentralization in tribal areas must be understood not merely as administrative devolution, but as the recognition and respect of indigenous systems of self-governance, customary laws, and community level decision making. For tribal regions such as those in Jharkhand, decentralization ideally means empowering the village assembly or traditional councils to manage land, forests, water and other community resources and to take decisions about resource use, development projects or outside interventions.

The enactment of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) was intended to institutionalize such autonomy by giving constitutional backing to traditional governance in scheduled areas. In theory, this legal political decentralization empowers tribal communities allowing them to protect their culture, safeguard natural resources, and make decisions for their own development.

Yet the promise of decentralization under PESA has often been undermined in practice by weak implementation, bureaucratic interference, and lack of political will. Many tribal communities especially in remote areas remain unaware of their rights under PESA; local institutions like gram sabhas and traditional village councils often lack

resources or administrative support to assert those rights effectively (Gupta, 2019) ^[36]. Several analysts note that even decades after the law, the intended devolution of power over land and resources remains incomplete in many districts of Jharkhand (Singh, 2020) ^[30].

For instance, the situation in West Singhbhum district offers a stark illustration of this gap between law and practice. Local tribal communities there have resisted attempts by the state government to allocate land considered sacred and communally held to corporate industrial projects without obtaining their consent (Das, 2024) ^[25]. Villagers protested in masses, alleging that no consultations had taken place with traditional village councils before the land was earmarked for industrial use (Das, 2024) ^[25]. The proposed land included a hillock considered sacred by the local Adivasi community and also served as grazing land, burial ground, and source of forest produce and livelihood (Das, 2024) ^[25].

In October 2024, thousands of Adivasis from West Singhbhum gathered at the panchayat level to block the main highway, defying administrative orders, demanding that their ancestral and sacred land not be handed over to corporate interests (Das, 2024) ^[25]. This mobilisation underscored how deeply their identity, livelihood and religious practices are tied to the land. This episode demonstrates that decentralization in tribal Jharkhand isn't just a formal legal provision; it is fundamentally about recognizing community consent, safeguarding customary rights, and ensuring that development does not come at the cost of cultural identity and communal autonomy.

However, putting PESA's promise into practice faces multiple legal and constitutional challenges. First, there is the difficulty of overlapping jurisdictions: state level industrial laws and land acquisition policies often override the protections envisioned under PESA, leading to ambiguities about which law prevails when land is marked for industrial projects (Rao, 2019) ^[32]. Second, there is a lack of clarity and uniformity about the definition of "traditional village council" or eligible "tribal areas," which often results in the state bypassing gram sabhas or tribal councils under the pretext of non-applicability of PESA provisions (Iyengar, 2021) ^[33]. Third, procedural weaknesses such as inadequate notification, poor dissemination of information to tribal communities, and absence of meaningful consultation, result in consent processes that are perfunctory or absent altogether (Verma, 2022) ^[34]. Consequently, even though the constitutional framework exists, in many cases tribal land rights remain vulnerable to state and corporate interests. In light of this, the case of West Singhbhum underscores the gulf between the constitutional ideal of decentralization and the harsh reality on the ground. If decentralization is to serve as more than a legal formality, it must involve genuine participation of tribal communities, respect for customary institutions, transparent processes, and institutional safeguards that honor community consent, especially before any land transfer, industrial allotment, or resource exploitation.

Differentiate paths to self-governance comparing Panchayat presence and absence in tribal Jharkhand

The decentralised governance framework in Jharkhand reveals a paradox: despite constitutional mandates, some villages still remain outside the functional Panchayat structure. Several studies highlight that the State's complex

land history, industrial acquisitions, and unsettled land classifications have disrupted the formation of Panchayats in specific pockets of Jharkhand. Researchers have previously noted that administrative confusions over “revenue villages,” “non-notified areas,” and “acquired industrial lands” have left certain settlements without elected local bodies, preventing the operationalisation of democratic decentralisation (Sundar, 2010) ^[28]. Further, scholars studying PESA implementation point out that the existence of ambiguous territorial jurisdictions often results in “governance vacuums” where Panchayats either cannot be formed or cease to function (George Mathew, 2012). These academic insights align with field realities observed in the present study, where certain villages despite being inhabited for decades remain outside the Panchayati Raj framework. This situation creates a layered form of exclusion in which constitutional rights exist on paper, but their enforcement is structurally obstructed.

Within this broader governance landscape, Kanphatta village represents a striking example of how administrative ambiguity can translate into long term political invisibility (*Appendix 1, Section 1.1*). Residents shared that although the village earlier fell under a Panchayat, the land acquisitions by Bokaro Steel Plant and subsequent reclassification of the area as “non-notified” resulted in the complete collapse of local governance structures. The testimonies captured in Appendix 1 reveal how this absence shapes everyday life: Respondent 1, hesitant yet sincere, admitted not knowing anything about PESA or Panchayats simply because neither exists meaningfully in his life. Respondent 2, concerned about schooling and roads, emphasised how inter community tensions between tribal and non-tribal groups further deter any initiative to revive the Panchayat. The most striking insight came from Respondent 3, who clearly articulated how women remain cut off from welfare schemes, leadership roles, and basic services an exclusion experienced not through law, but through the administrative erasure of their village. These field narratives establish that when a Panchayat does not exist, the State becomes an abstract, distant authority, producing a lived experience of governance that is fragile, uncertain, and deeply unequal.

In contrast, Rani Pokhar, a notified village with a functioning Panchayat, demonstrates how local governance structures despite their own imperfections create a sense of political rootedness and collective belonging (*Appendix 1, Section 1.2*). Respondent 1’s experience reflects how Panchayat meetings become a forum for dialogue and dispute resolution, allowing the community to negotiate conflict through institutional means rather than informal power structures. Respondent 2, a housewife, expressed pride in participating in meetings and accessing schemes like AMSY and SHGs, illustrating how the Panchayat becomes a gateway for women’s public empowerment. Even Respondent 3, who was openly critical of corruption and delays, acknowledged that the Panchayat provides a platform to demand action. These human voices reveal that while Panchayats may be slow, imperfect, or politically divided, their presence anchors communities to the democratic process. Governance is no longer invisible; it becomes a relational experience embedded in meetings, schemes, conflicts, negotiations, and everyday expectations from elected representatives.

Comparing these two villages reveals a deeper insight into tribal self-governance: Decentralisation works not only through laws but through the territorial and administrative recognition of communities. Where Panchayats exist as in Rani Pokhar people develop the vocabulary of rights, expectations, and accountability. Where Panchayats are absent as in Kanphatta people internalise marginalisation as routine, losing access not only to schemes but also to the political imagination of participation. For tribal women, the contrast is even sharper. In Kanphatta, women rarely enter decision making spaces; in Rani Pokhar, they sit in meetings, access welfare programs, and hold positions of authority. These findings echo the concerns raised by scholars who argue that decentralisation in tribal regions often falters due to unresolved land politics and weak institutional translation of constitutional mandates (Bijoy, 2015) ^[24]. Ultimately, the field insights presented in *Appendix 1* show that decentralisation in Jharkhand is not a uniform reality but a fragmented experience shaped by land, law, and history where the presence or absence of a Panchayat determines not just governance, but dignity, voice, and the everyday experience of democracy.

Empowerment and exclusion position of tribal women in Jharkhand’s Panchayat System

For tribal women in Jharkhand, the Panchayat is not just a government structure it is often the only political space where their everyday struggles, responsibilities and dreams can find a voice. In many Adivasi communities, women carry the weight of the home, the forest, the fields and the family, yet their concerns rarely make it into formal decision making spaces. Decentralization, therefore, holds a promise that feels deeply personal: the possibility that a woman who has spent her life gathering sal leaves, carrying firewood or walking miles for water can now sit in the village meeting and say, “Hum bhi faisla lenge”, *we will also decide*. This shift, from being silent participants in community life to becoming decision makers, is at the heart of what empowerment in Panchayats can mean for tribal women.

Yet the path from representation to real empowerment is anything but straightforward. Many tribal women enter Panchayats with enthusiasm, only to find that meetings are held at times when they are cooking dinner, or discussions move too fast, or male elders speak on their behalf. A few even confess that the panchayat becomes another burden added to their already long list of responsibilities. And still, they show up, often with infants tied to their backs, learning slowly how to sign documents, ask questions, or speak in front of officials. Their journey is not just political; it is emotional, social and deeply transformative. But the reality is that for every confident tribal woman leader, there is another who is overshadowed by a husband, brother or village elder who insists, “Tum Kahan Samajh Paogi?” (*How will you understand this?*) This contradiction between the promise of the law and the lived experience of women creates the gap where exclusion silently grows.

On the ground, however, there are stories that remind us how powerful tribal women can be when systems actually support them. In Bokaro’s Kathal Tola, for instance, women who once had no assets of their own collectively decided to revive a barren patch of land. Their days began before sunrise finishing their household chores, then heading to the field with tools in hand. Over time, that dry land became a thriving mango orchard, earning the women steady income

and giving them something far more valuable: confidence. One woman told reporters that for the first time in her life she felt she “owned something that could not be taken away.” This change was not just economic. In village meetings earlier dominated by men these women started speaking up about irrigation, wages and fair access to government schemes (Times of India, 2025) ^[21]. Their voices carried a new firmness, built slowly through collective labour and shared struggle.

But alongside such inspiring stories are the harsh reminders of exclusion that still defines the experience of many tribal women leaders. A recent survey in Jharkhand found that despite women holding more than half of all panchayat positions, many sarpanches are almost invisible in real decisions. Their phones are answered by husbands, meetings continue without them, and in some cases, outspoken women face intimidation or even violence. One such case comes from Dumka’s Dudhani panchayat, where a tribal woman mukhiya was reportedly assaulted inside the panchayat office itself a stark illustration of how deeply patriarchal resistance can run (New Indian Express, 2023). These stories show that legal empowerment alone cannot dismantle generations of gendered power structures. Until social attitudes change and institutions actively protect women’s right to lead, empowerment will remain uneven a reality shining brightly in some villages and dimming painfully in others.

4. Recommendation to enhance the working of Panchayat System in Jharkhand

The field experiences from Kanphatta and Rani Pokhar make it clear that democratic decentralization in Jharkhand is not just an institutional challenge it is a lived reality that shapes people’s everyday struggles, hopes, and aspirations. The voices of the villagers, whether expressing frustration over the absence of a functional Panchayat or pride in being able to participate in Gram Sabha meetings, reveal how deeply governance is tied to dignity and inclusion. Their stories highlight not only what is missing in the system but also what is possible when institutions truly work for the people. Therefore, the recommendations that follow are grounded in these lived experiences rather than abstract policy expectations. They aim to address the gap between constitutional promises and on ground realities, ensuring that decentralization becomes more than a legal framework it becomes a meaningful process that empowers communities, protects tribal identity, and strengthens democratic participation for all. Following are the main recommendations that I could draw from my research.

Strengthen the implementation of PESA through community centred governance

Effective decentralization in Jharkhand requires a stronger, clearer, and more accountable implementation of PESA, especially in areas where traditional institutions still hold social legitimacy. The state should prioritise training Gram Sabha members, clarify their legal powers, and ensure mandatory consent in matters related to land use, mining, and development projects. This must be complemented by culturally sensitive governance that respects traditional systems like the Manjhi Pargana structure. By creating platforms for dialogue between PRI representatives and traditional leaders, the state can build trust, reduce conflict,

and promote decision making rooted in community realities rather than bureaucratic directives.

Conduct dedicated, long term studies in villages without Panchayat structures

Villages lacking Panchayat systems require sustained research attention, as their unique governance gaps often remain invisible in broad policy assessments. A long term ethnographic or mixed method study should be undertaken to document local politics, power hierarchies, and hidden forms of exclusion. Since villagers often hesitate to speak openly due to fear, social pressures, or internal factionalism, extended field presence is essential for building trust and gaining authentic insights. Such research can help the government identify systemic reasons for Panchayat absence, design targeted interventions, and create a roadmap for gradually integrating these villages into formal democratic structures.

Enhance leadership capacities of tribal women through institutional support

Despite reservation policies, many tribal women struggle to exercise real authority within Panchayats due to patriarchy, low literacy, and limited exposure to administrative processes. The government and civil society organizations must collaborate to offer sustained leadership training, legal awareness workshops, and digital literacy programs designed specifically for elected tribal women. Strengthening self-help groups, peer mentoring circles, and village level women’s collectives can create alternative spaces where women develop confidence, discuss issues freely, and strategize solutions. Empowering women with knowledge and institutional backing will help shift them from symbolic representatives to influential decision makers in grassroots governance.

Improve accountability and transparency in development schemes through social audits

To ensure that schemes such as MNREGA, PDS, and social security programs genuinely serve Adivasi communities, Jharkhand must institutionalize regular, community led social audits. These audits should be facilitated by independent bodies, with active participation from youth, women, and traditional leaders. Transparent display of budgets, job cards, beneficiary lists, and grievance mechanisms must be mandated at the village level. Strengthening transparency can reduce the influence of middlemen, prevent elite capture by “Dikus,” and rebuild villagers’ trust in formal institutions. Over time, such accountability measures can ensure that decentralization translates into equitable and corruption free development outcomes.

5. Conclusion

This research project set out to understand how democratic decentralization unfolds within Jharkhand’s tribal landscape, focusing on the interplay between Panchayati Raj Institutions, traditional governance, land rights, and the lived experiences of Adivasi communities. Through unstructured interviews, field observations, and secondary literature, the study attempted to bridge the gap between constitutional ideals and everyday realities, revealing both the possibilities and constraints of grassroots empowerment. The findings highlight that while decentralization has

opened new spaces for participation, its impact remains uneven particularly in villages where Panchayats are absent or only partially functioning.

However, the project faced certain limitations that shaped the depth of the analysis. One significant challenge was the reluctance of many respondents to openly discuss the real problems within villages lacking Panchayat structures. Local politics, factional tensions, and a fear of misinterpretation often led villagers to withhold information or offer guarded responses. As a result, some insights may reflect only the surface of more complex social and political dynamics. These constraints underline the need for a more extensive, long term, and full-fledged study of such villages, conducted with sustained engagement and trust building to uncover the deeper layers of exclusion, conflict, and governance failures.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to the growing discourse on decentralization by foregrounding voices that are often marginalized, reinforcing the importance of culturally sensitive and community driven governance reforms in Jharkhand's Scheduled Areas.

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