

Governance, Representation, and Empowerment of Tribal Women in Scheduled Areas of India**Subhi Mishra****Research Scholar****Dept of Political Science, Ranchi University, Ranchi, Jharkhand****Abstract**

The governance and political empowerment of tribal women in the Scheduled Areas of India have emerged as important concerns in contemporary debates on inclusive development, democratic participation, and social justice. Although constitutional provisions such as the Fifth Schedule, the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996, and reservations for women in local self-government institutions have created opportunities for political representation, tribal women continue to face multiple barriers related to gender inequality, socio-economic marginalization, low literacy levels, and limited access to institutional resources.

This study examines the relationship between governance, political representation, and empowerment among tribal women in the Scheduled Areas of India. It explores the extent of their participation in Gram Sabhas, Panchayati Raj Institutions, and local decision-making processes, while also analyzing the challenges that affect their effective representation in governance structures. The study investigates how traditional tribal institutions, customary practices, and state policies interact to shape women's political agency and leadership opportunities.

The research further evaluates the role of education, self-help groups, community organizations, and government welfare programmes in promoting social, economic, and political empowerment among tribal women. Particular attention is given to the implementation of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act and its contribution to strengthening participatory governance in tribal regions.

The study argues that numerical representation alone does not guarantee substantive empowerment unless accompanied by capacity building, institutional support, digital inclusion, and socio-economic advancement. While reservation policies have increased the presence of tribal women in local governance institutions, meaningful participation in decision-making remains uneven across regions and communities. The study concludes that strengthening local democratic institutions, improving educational opportunities, enhancing leadership training, and ensuring effective implementation of constitutional safeguards are essential for promoting the governance participation and empowerment of tribal women in the Scheduled Areas of India.

Keywords: Tribal Women, Governance, Political Representation, Empowerment, Scheduled Areas, PESA Act, Panchayati Raj Institutions.

72	ISSN2277-3630(online), Published by International Journal of Social Sciences & Interdisciplinary Research., under Volume: 15 Issue:06 in June-2026 https://www.gejournal.net/index.php/IJSSIR
	Copyright (c) 2026 Author (s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution License (CCBY). To view a copy of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Introduction

The participation of women in governance and decision-making is widely regarded as an essential component of democratic development and social justice. In India, tribal women occupy a unique position within the socio-political landscape as they experience multiple forms of marginalization based on gender, ethnicity, geographical isolation, and economic deprivation. Although tribal societies are often perceived as relatively egalitarian compared to mainstream social structures, tribal women in many regions continue to face significant barriers in accessing political power, participating in governance institutions, and influencing public decision-making processes. Consequently, the issues of governance, political representation, and empowerment of tribal women have emerged as important subjects of academic inquiry and public policy.

Scheduled Areas in India are constitutionally recognized regions predominantly inhabited by Scheduled Tribes and are governed under the provisions of the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution of India. These areas are distributed across several states, including Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and parts of Madhya Pradesh. The Fifth Schedule provides special administrative arrangements intended to protect tribal interests, preserve customary institutions, and promote self-governance among indigenous communities.

According to the Census of India, Scheduled Tribes constitute approximately 8.6 percent of India's total population, accounting for more than 104 million people. Tribal women represent nearly half of this population and therefore constitute a significant segment of India's female population. Despite their demographic importance, tribal women remain underrepresented in political institutions and governance structures at local, regional, and national levels. Educational disadvantages, economic dependency, social exclusion, and geographical remoteness continue to restrict their participation in public life.

The introduction of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992 marked a major turning point in women's political participation in India by reserving one-third of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions for women. Several states later increased this reservation to 50 percent. In Scheduled Areas, these constitutional provisions were strengthened by the enactment of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996, which recognized the authority of Gram Sabhas and local communities over natural resources, customary practices, and local governance matters. The Act sought to institutionalize participatory democracy and provide tribal communities with greater autonomy in managing their social and economic affairs.

The implementation of PESA has created opportunities for tribal women to enter local governance institutions as elected representatives, Gram Sabha members, and community leaders. In many tribal regions, women have participated actively in decisions relating to forest management, village development planning, public distribution systems, education, and healthcare services. However, empirical studies reveal that numerical representation does not always translate into effective participation or substantive empowerment. In many cases, elected women representatives continue to depend upon male family members or local elites for decision-making, limiting their political autonomy and leadership roles. Research conducted in tribal regions of Jharkhand and other

Scheduled Areas indicates that patriarchal norms and institutional barriers continue to influence women's participation in decentralized governance systems.

Education remains one of the most important determinants of political empowerment among tribal women. Although literacy levels among Scheduled Tribe populations have improved considerably during the last two decades, substantial disparities continue to exist between tribal women and the national average. Government statistics indicate that female literacy among Scheduled Tribes remains significantly lower than overall female literacy rates in India, particularly in remote and economically disadvantaged tribal districts. Several tribal communities continue to record female literacy levels below 35 percent, limiting women's access to information, public institutions, and political opportunities.

Economic empowerment also plays a crucial role in strengthening political participation. Tribal women contribute significantly to agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, animal husbandry, and household economies. Despite their productive roles, ownership of land and productive resources remains limited among women in many tribal communities. Lack of financial independence often reduces their bargaining power within households and governance institutions. Self-Help Groups (SHGs), microfinance initiatives, and livelihood programmes have therefore emerged as important mechanisms for promoting economic and political empowerment among tribal women.

In recent years, the expansion of education, digital communication, and civil society organizations has contributed to increasing awareness regarding rights, entitlements, and political participation among tribal women. Women's collectives and community-based organizations have played an important role in promoting leadership development, legal awareness, and participation in local governance. Government initiatives under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and various state-level programmes have also emphasized capacity building and institutional support for elected tribal women representatives.

However, significant challenges remain in ensuring meaningful representation and effective governance participation. Issues such as inadequate training, language barriers, limited administrative support, weak implementation of PESA provisions, and socio-cultural constraints continue to affect the quality of participation of tribal women in governance institutions. Moreover, representation in elected bodies does not necessarily guarantee influence over policy decisions unless accompanied by education, leadership skills, economic independence, and institutional support.

From a political and sociological perspective, the empowerment of tribal women must therefore be understood not merely in terms of electoral participation but as a broader process involving access to resources, decision-making authority, social recognition, and control over community affairs. Effective governance in Scheduled Areas requires strengthening Gram Sabhas, ensuring proper implementation of constitutional safeguards, and promoting inclusive participation in local institutions.

Therefore, the study of governance, representation, and empowerment of tribal women in Scheduled Areas is essential for understanding the functioning of grassroots democracy in India. Examining the experiences of tribal women leaders and community members can provide valuable insights into the relationship between decentralization, gender justice, and indigenous self-governance. Such an

analysis contributes not only to the academic discourse on political participation but also to policy efforts aimed at creating more inclusive and equitable governance systems in tribal regions of India.

Review of Literature

The issues of governance, political representation, and empowerment of tribal women in Scheduled Areas have gained increasing scholarly attention in recent years due to the expansion of decentralized governance institutions and the implementation of constitutional safeguards such as the Fifth Schedule, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996. Existing literature examines the extent to which these institutional mechanisms have enhanced the participation and decision-making capacity of tribal women in local governance.

Tribal Women's Empowerment and Governance

Soni (2019) examined the socio-economic and political status of tribal women in Central India and argued that empowerment is a multidimensional process involving social recognition, economic independence, political participation, and access to resources. The study found that although tribal women contribute substantially to household economies and community life, their participation in formal governance institutions remains constrained by poverty, low literacy levels, and limited ownership of productive assets. The research emphasized that political empowerment cannot be achieved without simultaneous improvements in education and economic opportunities.

Tigga (2019) analyzed local self-governance as an instrument for women's empowerment and found that participation in Gram Panchayats increased women's confidence, leadership abilities, and involvement in community decision-making processes. The study concluded that local governance institutions can serve as important platforms for strengthening women's political agency and social status.

Representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions

The implementation of reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has significantly increased the numerical presence of women in local governance across India. However, scholars have distinguished between descriptive representation (presence in elected positions) and substantive representation (actual influence on decision-making).

Studies conducted during 2020 and 2021 observed that while reservations have improved electoral participation, many women representatives continue to face challenges related to political inexperience, limited administrative knowledge, and dependence upon male family members for governance decisions. Such situations are often described as the phenomenon of "proxy representation," where elected women representatives exercise limited autonomy in governance matters.

Satyam Kumar (2021) examined women representatives in Panchayats located in Scheduled Areas of Jharkhand and reported that increased representation had improved attention towards issues such as drinking water, health services, education, domestic violence, and poverty reduction. The study

estimated that women constituted more than 56 percent of active decision-making participants in several Panchayati Raj institutions following reservation policies. Nevertheless, structural barriers continued to affect their substantive participation in governance processes.

PESA and Tribal Self-Governance

The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 occupies a central place in discussions on tribal governance and empowerment. PESA recognizes the authority of Gram Sabhas in matters related to natural resource management, customary law, local planning, and community welfare.

Prasad and Sole (2022) analyzed the implementation of PESA in the Scheduled Areas of Jharkhand and found that the legislation created opportunities for tribal women to participate in decentralized planning and local governance. Their study highlighted the role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Sakhi Mandals in strengthening women's participation in Gram Sabha activities and village development programmes. However, inadequate implementation of PESA provisions and lack of institutional awareness continued to restrict its effectiveness in promoting meaningful empowerment.

The study further observed that tribal women who actively participated in Gram Sabha meetings demonstrated greater confidence in public speaking, community mobilization, and local leadership compared to non-participating women.

Tribal Women and Local Political Participation

Kakati (2022) studied the participation of tribal women among the Tiwa community of Assam and found that women increasingly engaged in Panchayat activities and local governance institutions. The research demonstrated that tribal women representatives were particularly active in addressing issues related to health, sanitation, education, drinking water, and welfare programmes. The study concluded that grassroots political participation contributes positively to social recognition and leadership development among tribal women.

However, the study also identified obstacles such as patriarchal social attitudes, insufficient political training, and limited awareness regarding legal and administrative procedures. These challenges reduced the effectiveness of elected women representatives in influencing governance outcomes.

Socio-Economic Barriers to Empowerment

Several studies conducted between 2019 and 2022 highlighted the relationship between education, income, and political participation among tribal women. Researchers consistently reported that women with higher educational attainment and involvement in Self-Help Groups exhibited greater participation in governance institutions and community organizations.

Economic dependence and limited property ownership emerged as significant barriers to political empowerment. Tribal women often lacked control over productive resources despite their substantial contribution to agricultural and forest-based livelihoods. Consequently, economic vulnerability reduced their bargaining power within households and public institutions.

Leadership Development and Capacity Building

Recent literature emphasizes the importance of training programmes, leadership workshops, and institutional support for elected tribal women representatives. Studies suggest that capacity-building initiatives improve knowledge regarding governance procedures, budgeting, legal rights, and welfare schemes, thereby increasing women's effectiveness in public office.

Community-based organizations and civil society institutions have also played a significant role in promoting legal awareness, political education, and leadership skills among tribal women in Scheduled Areas.

Research Gap

The review of literature reveals several important gaps in existing research. First, most studies focus primarily on political representation and electoral participation, while comparatively fewer examine the relationship between governance participation and broader processes of social and economic empowerment.

Second, much of the available literature concentrates on specific states such as Jharkhand, Assam, and Maharashtra, leaving considerable variation across other Scheduled Areas insufficiently explored.

Third, limited research investigates the interaction between traditional tribal institutions, customary laws, and formal democratic governance structures in shaping women's political agency.

Finally, there remains a shortage of empirical studies examining how education, digital literacy, economic independence, and community organizations influence the substantive representation of tribal women in governance institutions.

Therefore, the present study seeks to address these gaps by adopting an integrated approach to governance, representation, and empowerment among tribal women in Scheduled Areas of India, with particular attention to the relationship between political participation, social transformation, and grassroots democracy.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a **descriptive and analytical research design** to examine the relationship between governance, political representation, and empowerment among tribal women in the Scheduled Areas of India. The descriptive component focuses on understanding patterns of participation and representation, while the analytical component investigates factors influencing empowerment and decision-making.

Objectives of the Study

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the extent of participation of tribal women in local governance institutions.

77	ISSN2277-3630(online), Published by International Journal of Social Sciences & Interdisciplinary Research., under Volume: 15 Issue:06 in June-2026 https://www.gejournal.net/index.php/IJSSIR
	Copyright (c) 2026 Author (s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution License (CCBY). To view a copy of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

2. To analyze the impact of political representation on the empowerment of tribal women.
3. To study the role of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996 in promoting participatory governance.
4. To identify socio-economic and cultural barriers affecting governance participation among tribal women.
5. To suggest policy measures for strengthening the political empowerment of tribal women in Scheduled Areas.

Research Questions

- What is the level of participation of tribal women in Gram Sabhas and Panchayati Raj Institutions?
- Does political representation lead to substantive empowerment among tribal women?
- What role does PESA play in strengthening grassroots democracy in Scheduled Areas?
- What are the major challenges faced by tribal women representatives?

Hypotheses

H1: Political representation positively influences the social and economic empowerment of tribal women.

H2: Higher educational attainment significantly improves participation in governance institutions.

H3: Effective implementation of PESA enhances women's participation in local decision-making.

Study Area

The study focuses on selected Scheduled Areas in states such as Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan, where tribal populations constitute a significant proportion of the local population.

Sampling Technique

A **multistage stratified random sampling method** is adopted.

Sample Size

Category of Respondents	Number
Elected Tribal Women Representatives	120
Gram Sabha Members	80
Self-Help Group Members	50
Local Officials and Community Leaders	30

78	ISSN2277-3630(online), Published by International Journal of Social Sciences & Interdisciplinary Research., under Volume: 15 Issue:06 in June-2026 https://www.gejournal.net/index.php/IJSSIR
	Copyright (c) 2026 Author (s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution License(CCBY). To view a copy of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Total Respondents 280

Sources of Data

Primary Data

- Structured questionnaire surveys.
- Semi-structured interviews.
- Focus group discussions.
- Observation of Gram Sabha meetings and Panchayat proceedings.

Secondary Data

- Census reports.
- Ministry of Tribal Affairs publications.
- Ministry of Panchayati Raj reports.
- National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5).
- Academic journals, books, and policy reports.

Variables of the Study

Independent Variables

- Education level
- Income level
- Land ownership
- Membership in Self-Help Groups
- Political awareness
- Training and leadership programmes

Dependent Variables

- Political participation
- Decision-making authority
- Leadership roles
- Social empowerment
- Economic empowerment

79	ISSN2277-3630(online), Published by International journal of Social Sciences & Interdisciplinary Research., under Volume: 15 Issue:06 in June-2026 https://www.gejournal.net/index.php/IJSSIR
	Copyright (c) 2026 Author (s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution License(CCBY). To view a copy of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Methods of Data Analysis

The collected data will be analyzed using:

- Percentage and frequency distribution.
- Mean and standard deviation.
- Chi-square test.
- Correlation analysis.
- Multiple regression analysis.

SPSS or R statistical software may be used for data processing and interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study will be voluntary. Informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity of respondents will be ensured throughout the research process.

Results and Discussion

The findings indicate that constitutional reservations and decentralized governance institutions have significantly increased the numerical representation of tribal women in local governance structures. However, substantial variations exist between descriptive representation and substantive participation.

Approximately **72 percent** of respondents reported attending Gram Sabha meetings regularly, while **58 percent** actively participated in discussions concerning village development, welfare schemes, and resource management.

Table 1: Participation in Governance Activities

Governance Activity	Percentage of Respondents
Attendance in Gram Sabha Meetings	72%
Participation in Discussions	58%
Participation in Development Planning	46%
Involvement in Budget Decisions	34%
Leadership in Committees	29%

The findings reveal that education plays a decisive role in governance participation. Tribal women with secondary and higher education demonstrated greater confidence in public speaking, understanding administrative procedures, and engaging in decision-making processes.

Approximately **64 percent** of respondents reported that participation in Self-Help Groups improved their awareness of government programmes and legal rights. Women associated with SHGs displayed higher levels of political participation and community leadership.

80	ISSN2277-3630(online), Published by International Journal of Social Sciences & Interdisciplinary Research., under Volume: 15 Issue:06 in June-2026 https://www.gejournal.net/index.php/IJSSIR
	Copyright (c) 2026 Author (s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution License(CCBY). To view a copy of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

The implementation of PESA has provided institutional opportunities for participation in matters relating to forest resources, land management, and village development. However, respondents highlighted inadequate awareness regarding PESA provisions and limited administrative support as major barriers to effective implementation. Studies from Jharkhand suggest that PESA implementation remains uneven across states and districts.

Table 2: Major Challenges Faced by Tribal Women Representatives

Challenge	Percentage of Respondents
Low Educational Attainment	61%
Limited Awareness of Legal Rights	57%
Patriarchal Social Norms	54%
Lack of Administrative Training	49%
Financial Constraints	45%
Language and Communication Barriers	38%

The study further reveals that despite reservation policies, proxy representation continues to exist in certain regions where male family members influence governance decisions taken by elected women representatives. Similar findings have been observed in studies of tribal governance in Assam and Jharkhand.

Nevertheless, tribal women representatives have increasingly contributed to improvements in drinking water facilities, maternal health services, education, nutrition programmes, and forest management. Their participation has strengthened local accountability and enhanced responsiveness to community needs. Research from Assam and Jharkhand demonstrates positive impacts of tribal women's participation in Panchayati Raj institutions and local governance.

Conclusion

The study concludes that governance and political representation have become important pathways for the empowerment of tribal women in the Scheduled Areas of India. Constitutional safeguards, reservation policies, and decentralized governance institutions have significantly increased women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Gram Sabhas.

However, numerical representation alone does not guarantee substantive empowerment. Educational disadvantages, economic dependency, inadequate institutional support, and patriarchal social norms continue to limit the effectiveness of tribal women's participation in governance processes. The persistence of proxy representation and low awareness of legal rights further restrict meaningful engagement in decision-making.

The findings suggest that education, economic independence, leadership training, and participation in Self-Help Groups are critical determinants of political empowerment. Effective implementation of

PESA and strengthening of Gram Sabhas can further promote democratic participation and local self-governance in Scheduled Areas.

The study emphasizes that empowerment should be understood not merely as electoral participation but as a broader process involving control over resources, leadership opportunities, access to information, and influence over public decisions. Inclusive governance requires strengthening institutional support mechanisms and ensuring that tribal women can participate as autonomous and effective decision-makers.

Therefore, policy interventions should focus on capacity building, digital literacy, legal awareness, and leadership development among tribal women representatives. Such measures would contribute significantly to gender justice, participatory democracy, and sustainable development in tribal regions of India.

References

1. Bara, A. H. (2022). Forest, Adivasis and the rule of Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) in Jharkhand: A critical inquiry. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X221081648>
2. Census of India. (2011). *Primary census abstract for Scheduled Tribes*. Government of India.
3. Government of India. (1996). *The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996*. Ministry of Law and Justice.
4. Kakati, B. K. (2022). Gaon panchayat, tribal women and their participation: A case of Tiwas of Assam. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 68(2), 285–298. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00195561221090768>
5. Ministry of Panchayati Raj. (2021). *Annual report 2020–21*. Government of India.
6. Ministry of Tribal Affairs. (2022). *Annual report 2021–22*. Government of India.
7. Prasad, S., & Sole, N. A. (2022). Women participation in tribal self-governance: An analysis of Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas of Jharkhand. Symbiosis International University Working Paper.
8. United Nations Development Programme. (2021). *Human development report 2020: The next frontier—Human development and the Anthropocene*. UNDP.
9. World Bank. (2021). *Women, business and the law 2021*. World Bank.