

# **Traditional Governance in Practice: Findings from Two Tribal Districts of Odisha**

Bishnu Prasad Mohapatra

## **Abstract**

*This paper reviews the functioning of the traditional governance system and institutional arrangement in the two districts of Odisha. It tries to shed light on the institutional arrangements and functioning of these institutions, the leadership pattern and interfaces of these institutions with the Panchayats in the districts. It reveals that these institutions form an important aspect of the village governance system despite the institutionalisation of Panchayats. Their role in influencing local level decision-making processes, resolving local disputes, protecting customs, traditions and cultural practices and fostering local economic development are observed in many cases. Further, despite the institutionalisation of the three-tier Panchayats, these institutions are still upholding their importance in the polity and economy of the tribal villages. However, the functioning of these institutions and decision-making process has gone through many changes in the context of the functioning of the Panchayats, though such changes have not affected entirely the importance of these institutions.*

**Words: Traditional Governance, Institutions, Panchayats, Tribal Villages**

## **1. Introduction**

The traditional governing institutions such as the village councils and the caste councils have become an important instrument of promoting effective and transparent village self-governance system in Odisha despite the institutionalisation (institutional arrangement) and functioning of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). These institutions are strongly linked

with the cultural, social, religious, political and economic matters of the people of the villages, both the tribals and the non-tribals. In the case of the tribals, these institutions still occupy a prominent position in the social, cultural, political and economic life of the tribal people and their villages. While the social and cultural functions have continued since time immemorial, the political and economic functions in many cases are observed more explicitly in the recent period, in particular after the extension of the Panchayats in the tribal areas (as per the PESA Act, 1996). The political and economic role of the tribal village councils and the caste councils are observed in the form of fostering peoples' participation in the local democracy and decision-making processes, discussing development plans and programmes in the councils' meetings, and supporting PRIs for achieving their overall socio-economic development agenda. The process of interface between the traditional council leaders and the Panchayat leaders is also to some extent influenced the functioning of Panchayats in a positive way. However, increasing competition among the leaders of these two categories of institutions to control the polity and the economy of the tribal villages also created tension in some cases. Notwithstanding this, the tribal leaders of these institutions are still upholding their significance as the actual leaders of their villages and playing a key role in the matters of the village governance system despite the presence of the elected Panchayat members (Sarpanch and the Ward Members). It is on this basis, this paper tries to trace the institutional arrangement and functioning of the traditional governing institutions in two districts of Odisha such as Sundargarh and Koraput based on a empirical study.

## **2. Objective and Methodology**

The main objective of this paper is to examine the functioning of the traditional tribal governance system and institutional arrangements in Odisha while focusing on how and to what

extent the modern Panchayats have been influenced (positively and negatively) by the functioning of these institutions in the era of decentralisation. The study reviews the case of 16 tribal villages in Sundargarh and Koraput districts of the State. Based on field level observation, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and in-depth discussions, this paper tries to highlight the three key features of traditional tribal governance system and functioning of the institutions (councils) such as (I) the institutional arrangement and functioning of the councils, (II) the Village/Caste Councils and pattern of leadership, and (III) interfaces of the tribal councils and the Panchayats and their overall implications on functioning of the traditional tribal governance system in the study villages. It argues that these councils still occupy a prominent place in the matter of managing village governance in the tribal areas and have contributed positively towards the functioning of the Panchayats, despite the occurrence of conflicts and contestation in some cases.

### **3. Key Findings and Discussion**

**3.1. Institutional Arrangement and Functioning of the Councils:** The institutional arrangements of the traditional tribal self-governance system shows that the traditional village councils and the caste councils are the two major institutions in all the 16 sampled villages though there are functional variances. It further shows that the 'caste councils' (*the Samaj*) are quite visible in all the 8 sampled villages in Sundargarh district and the 'Village Councils' (under a village headman) are quite visible in all the 8 villages in Koraput district.

In the sampled villages of Sundargarh district, *the Samaj* are quite active in managing the overall socio-cultural matters of their respective caste/tribal group. In these villages, the various types of tribals such as the *Oram*, the *Bhuyan*, the *Gond*, the *Paudi Bhuyan*, and the *Kissan* have their *Samaj* such as the *Oram Samaj*, the *Bhuyan Samaj*, the *Gond Samaj*, the *Kissan Samaj* and the

*PaudiBhuyanSamaj* which are the highest decision making bodies of the respective caste/ tribal groups. These institutions are institutionalised at the various levels, such as village level, intermediary level and district level. Each *Samaj* is managed by a tribal headman, who is a deeply respected person. These institutions are functioning within their respective caste members. So in all the villages, there is no unitary village level council and the role of the caste or group leaders is confined within their respective caste or social group only. However, in any common matter of the village, these leaders usually sit together and take the decision collectively, which sometimes create conflicting scenario. In the context of changing political-economy, these institutions are found to be quite aware about such changes that have taken place within their own groups and their villages.

In the case of Koraput district, the functioning of the traditional tribal self-governance system and institutional arrangement is quite different from Sundargarh district. The main reason behind such difference is the prevalence of the homogeneous tribal groups in the villages and the existing socio-cultural set up. In Koraput, the concept of a traditional village council under the village headman is quite strong and these councils play a greater role in the socio-cultural and politico-economic matters of the villages. Though there are various non-tribal groups living in the villages, but they also have a great amount of regards towards the tribal dominated village council and its institutional arrangement. In all the 8 sampled village councils, the headman belongs to the Tribes, that of a particular tribal groups, either from the *Perajas* or from the *Gadabas*. In each village, there are two persons such as the village priest (*Disari*) and the village communicator (*Bariki*), those who are the part of the functioning of the Village Councils.

Each council has a unique pattern of institutional arrangement, though there are functional differences observed among these institutions in the sampled villages. The functioning of these

institutions in Koraput district was found to be more informal in nature and based on the traditional value system like mutual trust and cooperation. But in the case of Sundargarh, on any issue related to the socio-economic and cultural matters of the village, the caste councils' leaders usually take decisions collectively which sometimes leads into conflicting situation. This is because of the prevalence of multi-social tribal groups (heterogeneous groups) and competition among them to control the overall governance system of the village.

In the matter of the functioning of these councils, it was observed that the participation of people forms an important part of the functioning of these institutions in both the districts. On the meeting days<sup>1</sup>, one member from each tribal household usually comes to attend the meetings, though there is a restriction for the women in the meetings. In these meetings, the discussion usually takes place on the socio-cultural issues such as organisation of festivals, celebration of various rituals, settlement of disputes related to caste such as inter-caste marriage, inter and intra caste conflicts, performing of various religious practices such as the *Puja* , the *Parab*, the *Jatra* and the overall matters related to caste or social groups.

However, in the recent period, the meetings of these councils and issues that used to be discussed in these councils had witnessed a change. Apart from the socio-cultural issues, the development issues were also figured out in the process of discussion. Our interaction with the various tribal leaders in the sampled villages revealed that, issues related to education, health, drinking water, forest conservation and plantation, child marriage, migration and various development

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<sup>1</sup>The meetings of the tribal self-governing institutions usually takes place before the time of observing various festivals (*Pujas, Parabs and Jatras*) to decide the manner, date and timing of organisation of these festivals.

programmes are being discussed in these meetings which show the changing nature of these institutions.

The issues related to the functioning of the Panchayats are also discussed in the council meetings in various villages. The issues such as planning for villages through the Palli Sabhas and the Gram Sabhas, selection of beneficiaries, management of village forests, issues related to liquor, related to migration and issues related to implementation of various schemes and programmes of Panchayats is sometimes discussed in these meetings considering the importance of such issues. But the issues related to Panchayats are not discussed frequently in these meetings.

### **3.2.The Village/Caste Councils and the Pattern of Leadership**

The leadership at the village level, at the level of various traditional tribal institutions and at the Panchayat level forms three important components of local level leadership which was found during the process of data collection. Apart from these three components of leadership and categories of leader (village leader, council leader and Panchayat leader), there are also leaders of the various formal and informal institutions such as the leaders of the Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Clubs, Farmers' Groups, Joint Forest Management (JFM) and Community Forest Management (CFM) Committees, Village Health Committees, and Village Education Committees/School Committees. However, since one major aspect of this study was to understand the nature of the functioning of the leaders of various traditional tribal institutions and how these leaders are involved with the functioning of the Panchayats, so based on this, the data collection process was aimed at unravelling the functioning of these categories of leaders and their interface with the elected PRI Members (particularly the Ward Members and the Sarpanches). We further focused on to understand the role of the traditional leaders and the PRI

Members in the overall matters (Social, Economic, political and cultural) of the villages and their present position in the policy and the economy of the villages.

The overall trend shows that the introduction of the Panchayats in the study areas has not diluted the importance of the traditional leaders as majority of the respondents acknowledged the importance of these leaders in the villages. The introduction of Panchayats has rather created many new leaders in the tribal villages. Many traditional tribal leaders have also become part of the Panchayats. In this case the provision of seat reservations for Tribals at the various tiers of the Panchayats has also contributed positively towards enhancing their degree of political participation and leadership quality. (FGD Note). Many traditional tribal leaders, those who have become members of the Panchayats acknowledged the provision of seat reservation which has helped them in contesting elections and projecting them as the future leaders of the Country. (Field Note/In-depth interview)

### **3.3. Interfaces of the Tribal Councils and the Panchayats:**

A main aspect of interface that was observed through this study is the nature and degree of the participation of the traditional tribal councils and the caste councils in the functioning of the Panchayats. The nature of participation of these councils in general and leaders of the councils in particular in the various matters of the functioning of the Panchayats in sampled villages was observed positive as well as negative, collaborative as well as contesting and individualistic oriented as well as institution oriented. The traditional tribal village councils and the caste councils have become instrumental in promoting peoples' participation in the functioning of the *PalliSabhas* (Village Assembly) and the *Gram Sabhas* (Panchayat Assembly) in the study area. This study in the various stages of data collection also revealed positive interface between tribal

councils and the *PalliSabhas* in many cases, despite some degree of conflict and confusion (Field Note).

A main indicator taken on measuring the degree of interface between these two institutions was to understand the degree of the participation of the council leaders in the *PalliSabha* meetings and issues raised by these leaders in these meetings. On this issue it was revealed that a majority of respondents have observed the participation (physical presence) of the council leaders in the *PalliSabhas* (Village Assembly) and issues raised by these leaders on various issues pertaining to their villages and their castes. In this context it is worth to be mentioned that the nature of participation of these leaders in *PalliSabhas* was based on various socio-political attributes such as availability of the these persons at the time of *PalliSabhas* (timing factor), nature of their relationship with the PRI Members (social relation), and understanding the overall socio-economic issues of their respective village and how those issues can be channelised through *PalliSabhas* (level of awareness and personal interest). Their participation also varied from one place to place (geographic variance), from one meeting to another (institutional variance) and from one person to another person (personal variance). However, their participation in the meetings of the *Gram Sabhas* was not quite encouraging because of various reasons like distance of the *Gram Sabha* venues<sup>2</sup> from their villages.

Further, the participation of the council leaders in the matters of implementing various socio-economic development programmes of the Panchayats was also observed in the sampled villages. In many cases (11 out of 16 sampled villages) the council leaders and the Ward

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<sup>2</sup>The Gram Sabha meetings usually take place at the Panchayat offices which are far away from the many remote villages.

Members are involved closely on various development matters of the villages. On the issue of socio-economic development of the villages and involvement of the council leaders, many of them pointed out that the Panchayat leaders usually take the suggestions of the traditional institutions and the traditional leaders at the time of planning for and implementation of the various development programmes.

The perception of the respondents about the functioning of the traditional councils and the Panchayats also in many cases reinforced the degree of interface which was observed through this study. The respondents in all the sampled villages were observed to be more aware about the fact that the Panchayats' main work is to promote socio-economic development programmes while the traditional councils' main work is to look into the socio-cultural matters of the villages and their respective groups.

The caste factor in some cases (3 villages) was also observed as reinforcing the degree of interface. While interacting with various traditional leaders, they highlighted that 'the caste of the elected PR Members usually reinforce the degree of interface' between the two leaders (ward members and the traditional leaders) in particular and the two institutions in general. (In the sense that if the Panchayat members and the traditional leaders belongs to a same caste, the relationship is believed to be more positive). In the case of one study village in Koraput district it was revealed that the nature of interface between the village council head and the ward member was extremely contesting because of the caste affiliation of the two leaders (the traditional leader was from ST category and the Ward Member was from SC category). However, caste was not a factor in determining the degree of interface in all the cases.

However, in some sampled villages (5 of the 16 villages) there was a tension observed between the traditional leaders and Panchayat members because of the rapidly changing role of both the categories of leaders and increasing competition among them to control the political-economy of the villages. In this case many traditional leaders have a feeling that the elected PR Members are the real leaders of the village and this has taken place in the context of the institutionalisation of Panchayats. While discussing with the various traditional leaders in Koraput, it was revealed that because of the presence of the Panchayat leaders such as Sarpanch and Ward Member, many traditional leaders have lost their importance. Earlier (before the introduction of the Panchayats) the traditional leaders used to manage the overall affairs of the villages. During the Princely rule, they were part of the revenue collection system. As a part of this, they were responsible for the collection of land revenue (*sistu*). Even they were also part of the village justice system. But now things have changed. The functions and importance of these leaders have been diluted in the course of the emergence of the modern Panchayat. (Field Note, Koraput). However, this was not the case in all the study villages. In majority of the villages our interaction revealed that ‘there is a positive interface between the traditional leaders and PR Members’.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The study conducted in two tribal districts of Odisha presents the changing nature of the traditional village councils and the caste councils in the tribal areas in the context of the changing polity and economy of the villages. In many cases, these institutions have become an important instrument of stimulating the socio-economic and cultural system of the people, in particular the tribals, despite the existence of the Panchayats. These institutions have been influencing the functioning of the Panchayats in a positive way, despite various modes of contestations observed in various sampled villages. In the context of the functioning of the PRIs and increasing

involvement of these institutions in the matters of local governance and economic development, these councils have also faced multiple challenges, but these challenges have not paved the way for their extinction.