

Knowledge, Awareness and Practice (KAP) of PRI Members on PESA Act, 1996: A Case Study in East Singhbhum Jharkhand

Ms. Puja Kumari
Prof. Nilakantha Panigrahi

Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology and Tribal Development, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh

Professor & HoD, Department of Anthropology and Tribal Development, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh

Abstract

The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) stands as a milestone in India's decentralization and tribal self-governance policy. It legally integrates traditional tribal administrative systems within the framework of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), aiming to empower Gram Sabhas with larger governance in the grassroots in the Fifth Schedule areas of India. Nearly three decades after its enactment, the translation of PESA's principles into effective grassroots governance remains inconsistent across states. This study investigates the level of Knowledge, Awareness, and Practices (KAP) of Panchayati Raj Institution representatives regarding the implementation of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 in the tribal-dominated State of Jharkhand. Using a comparative case study approach, the research investigates how socio-economic, educational, and institutional factors influence local governance practices under PESA Act, 1996. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and in-depth qualitative case studies conducted in two selected villages of East Singhbhum district in the state of Jharkhand. The findings indicate that although PRI members demonstrate a fair understanding of the objectives of the PESA Act's but their knowledge on the execution of its provisions and coordination between traditional and statutory governance systems are still inadequate. The study highlights the pressing need for context-specific capacity-building programs, inclusive training, and interventions to enhance the operational effectiveness of PESA Act and to promote tribal self-rule.

Keywords: *PESA Act, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Knowledge–Attitude–Practice (KAP), Decentralization, Tribal Governance.*

Date of Submission: 09-04-2026

Date of Acceptance: 19-04-2026

I. Introduction

The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 thus known as (PESA Act, 1996) was enacted by the Government of India to extend the provisions of Part IX of the Constitution to the Fifth Schedule areas, acknowledging the distinctive socio-cultural identity and traditional governance systems of tribal communities (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2006). The PESA Act empowers Gram Sabhas to safeguard traditions, customs, cultural identity, and natural resources while promoting self-governance and participatory decision-making at the grassroots level (Bharadwaj, 2019). Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) serve as the primary agencies for implementing PESA Act, 1996, to ensure that governance and developmental programs initiative align with the needs and aspirations of local populations (Kumar & Sharma, 2020). The effectiveness of PRIs, however, depends largely on the knowledge, awareness, and practical application of PESA provisions by its members (Das, 2017). Inconsistent interpretation, limited institutional capacity, and inter-state variations in implementation have led to disparities in outcomes, and Gaps in understanding and variations in implementation across states, can significantly affect the success of the Act (Rao & Singh, 2018).

The study examines the Knowledge, Awareness and Practice (KAP) of PRI members regarding PESA in Jharkhand state of India. By adopting a case study approach, the research identifies gaps, challenges and best practices, contributing to more effective policy interventions and capacity building strategies for PRI members in Scheduled Areas. The design of PESA is also rooted in the theory of decentralization which posits that transferring authority from central government to local bodies improves accountability, efficiency and responsiveness (Olown & Wunsch, 2004). In tribal areas, decentralization ensures that governance is culturally relevant and that developmental interventions are adapted to local contexts rather than imposed from above (Kumar & Sharma, 2020). By granting Gram Sabhas powers to approve plans, manage natural resources and safeguard traditions, PESA reflects the principles of community driven development (Mansuri & Rao, 2013).

The Concept of KAP:

The Knowledge, Awareness, and Practice (KAP) model provides a useful framework for evaluating the effectiveness of PRI members under PESA Act, 1996. In this model, knowledge refers to understanding provisions of PESA Act, 1996, awareness reflects an appreciation of their importance, and practice denotes their actual implementation in governance (Launiala, 2009). Social learning theory further explains that such competencies are shaped not only by formal training but also through observation, peer learning, and lived experience in governance settings (Bandura, 1977). Previous research has highlighted significant inter-state variations in the implementation of PESA Act, 1996, influenced by factors such as administrative capacity, political will, and socio-cultural diversity (Rao & Singh, 2018). Jharkhand, a tribal dominated state with its substantial tribal population and extensive under Fifth Schedule coverage, provides critical insights into the implementation and dynamics of PESA Act, 1996.

The conceptual foundation of PESA Act, 1996 lies in the broader theory of decentralization, which advocates the devolution of authority from centralized government to local bodies to promote efficiency, accountability, and democratic participation (Olowu & Wunsch, *ibid*). Decentralization is particularly vital in tribal regions, where governance must align with local cultural contexts and traditional decision-making systems rather than externally imposed administrative models (Kumar & Sharma, 2020). By granting Gram Sabhas the power to approve developmental plans, manage natural resources, and safeguard community customs, PESA Act, 1996 embodies the principles of community-driven development (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). It operationalise the idea that sustainable governance can only be achieved when local people—especially marginalized and indigenous communities—participate directly in decisions affecting their lives.

II. Review of Literature

The paper has attempted to review couple of research articles which are directly based on KAP study in relation to the functioning of PESA Act, 1996.

Olowu and Wunsch (*ibid*), analyze decentralization as a democratic reform strategy across African and developing contexts. They argue that devolution of authority from central governments to local institutions enhances accountability, responsiveness, and public participation. Their theoretical framework supports the idea that decentralized systems, such as PESA, improve governance effectiveness when local communities are empowered with real decision-making power.

Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2006), report provides a comprehensive overview of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996. It explains the constitutional intent behind extending Part IX to the Fifth Schedule areas, emphasizing tribal self-governance through empowered Gram Sabhas. The document highlights the role of PESA's in preserving tribal culture, promoting participatory democracy, and ensuring decentralized decision-making in Scheduled Areas.

Cornwall (2008) explores the concept of participation, analyzing how meanings and practices of “community involvement” differ across contexts. She argues that participation is not just about attendance in meetings but also about empowerment and voice. Her work contributes to understanding the attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of participation, relevant to evaluating PRI members’ engagement under PESA Act, 1996.

Launiala (2009), introduces the Knowledge, Attitude, and Practice (KAP) framework as a tool to understand human behavior in social research. The author explains how KAP surveys reveal the relationship between what people know, how they feel, and how they act. In governance contexts, this framework helps to assess how awareness and perception influence the effectiveness of policy implementation.

Mansuri and Rao (2013), examine the effectiveness of community-driven development programs in promoting local participation. They argue that decentralized governance succeeds only when local institutions are empowered and socially inclusive. Their study supports PESA’s community-centered approach and emphasizes that participatory development must build upon existing social capital, cultural practices, and local decision-making traditions.

Das (2017), conducts an empirical investigation into the knowledge and awareness levels of PRI members regarding PESA implementation in tribal areas. The study finds that most members possess limited understanding of legal provisions and Gram Sabha powers. Das stresses the need for continuous training programs and institutional support to bridge the knowledge gap and improve grassroots governance.

Rao and Singh (2018), provide a comparative analysis of PESA implementation across Indian States. They observe significant inter-state variations influenced by administrative strength, political will, and socio-cultural factors. Their research concludes that those States with structured training programs and active Gram Sabhas perform better, while weak institutional integration leads to limited tribal participation in local governance.

Bharadwaj (2019) examines the challenges of tribal governance in India, focusing on gaps between legal provisions of the PESA Act, 1996 and its practical execution. The author emphasizes that bureaucratic

dominance, limited awareness among tribal representatives, and weak institutional coordination hinder effective implementation. The study calls for strengthening Gram Sabhas, enhancing training and integrating traditional tribal systems within formal governance mechanisms.

Kumar and Sharma (2020), explore the evolving role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) under PESA Act, 1996 in empowering rural governance. Their study highlights how decentralization has shifted decision-making power to local bodies, improving service delivery and participation. However, they also note that administrative inertia, lack of capacity-building, and uneven policy application restricts PRIs from realizing the full potential of PESA Act, 1996.

Patnaik (2021) work focuses on capacity-building initiatives for PRI members in the Scheduled Areas of Odisha and Jharkhand. The author finds that well-designed training programs, combined with community mobilization, improve awareness and participation in Gram Sabhas. He recommends policy measures that encourage convergence between traditional tribal councils and statutory Panchayati Raj structures for more inclusive governance.

Objective:

More specifically the present study has the following specific objectives:

1. To find out the status of the convergence of traditional tribal leaders into the Panchayati Raj Institutional structure (PRI).
2. To analyze the socio-economic and educational background of PRI members.
3. To examine the knowledge level of PRI members on different government schemes implemented at Panchayat level.
4. To assess the extent of participation of PRI members at various levels of implementation of the PESA Act in village development programs.

III. Research Methodology:

The study adopted purposive random sampling. The present study conducted in four villages: Tangarsai village of Potka Gram Panchayat under Potka Block of East Singhbhum district, and Jamshol village of Meriya Gram Panchayat under Musabani Block of East Singhbhum district in Jharkhand. All the Ward members, Sarpanchs and Naib Sarpanchas were personally interviewed with the help of semi-structure interview schedule.

The qualitative data relating to various responses, Knowledge, Attitude, Practices, (KAP) are presented and analyzed by using qualitative techniques like descriptions, case study presentation and quantification of certain qualitative data as required enriching the data analysis. Case studies are appropriately and contextually analyzed to improve the quality of data analysis.

Profile of the Respondents of the Study Village:

The socio-economic and demographic profile of the respondents (N = 189) reveals important structural factors that may influence the Knowledge, Awareness, and Practice (KAP) of PRI members regarding the PESA Act, 1996. The higher representation of women (60.3%) reflects increasing female participation in grassroots governance, possibly influenced by reservation policies in Panchayati Raj Institutions. The majority of respondents fall within the age group of 31 to 50 years (49.73%), representing an economically active and socially engaged population, which may positively contribute to governance participation. However, the presence of elderly respondents aged 61 to 70 years (17.98%) suggests reliance on traditional knowledge systems, which may interact uniquely with statutory provisions under PESA.

Educational attainment is notably low, with over one-third (35.97%) illiterate and 42.32% educated only up to primary level. The absence of respondents in the categories of higher secondary or graduate indicates limited formal exposure to legislative frameworks, which may directly affect the *knowledge* component of the KAP model. Lower literacy levels can restrict understanding of legal provisions, procedural requirements, and documentation processes under PESA Act. Occupational patterns further reflect their economic vulnerability. Since a significant proportion of respondents are agricultural laborers (28.04%), housewives (15.87%), and dependents (14.81%), indicates limited economic security. Since all respondents belong to the Below Poverty Line (BPL) category, livelihood concerns take precedence over active engagement with governance mechanisms which potentially influence the *practice* dimension of implementation of the PESA Act, 1996.

Housing conditions of the respondents predominantly is semi-pucca (55.55%) and kuccha (37.03%) type, also reflect modest living standards. Although universal access to electricity and ownership of homestead land indicate a degree of infrastructural stability, overall socio-economic constraints may limit institutional capacity-building and effective participation in decentralized governance. Collectively, these characteristics of the respondents suggests that while there is demographic representation and grassroots rootedness, structural limitations such as low literacy, economic vulnerability, and occupational precocity may significantly influence

the knowledge levels, awareness intensity, and practical implementation of PESA provisions among PRI members in the study area. Keeping this in mind the following section presents few case studies of PRI members which reflect multiple dimensions of the governance under PESA Act.

IV. Case Study Analysis:

Case Study-1 Community trust helped Riddhi, a tribal woman to be elected three times as Sarpanch.

Mrs. Riddhi, 39-year-old tribal women of Tangarsai village of East Singhbhum Jharkhand belongs to Munda tribe. She has been serving as the Sarpanch in gram panchayat for the past 15 years, elected consecutively three times due to her strong leadership and community trust. Riddhi affiliated with a recognized political party in Jharkhand and completed her education up to the 10th standard. Despite limited formal education, she possesses considerable knowledge about the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA Act) and actively works for the development of her Gram Panchayat irrespective of caste categories and village boundaries of the households.

According to Riddhi, the PESA Act, 1996 is “a law made to give the rights of Adivasi people so that they can take decisions for their own village”. She understands that under PESA Act, the Gram Sabha enjoys multiple powers to approve or reject development projects in the village, to protect tribal culture, customs and community resources and to ensure fair utilization of land and forests resources.

She uses her position to explain these rights to villagers, encouraging them to attend Gram Sabha meetings and raise their concerns in Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat meetings. Riddhi actively ensures that Gram Sabha meetings are organized regularly. She motivates women, especially from marginalized sections to participate and raise their voice and opinions. She insists development works- such as road constructions, sanitation improvements and water facility projects in each village. During her tenure, she has initiated repair works of roads, attempted to improve garbage management, and followed due procedures for projects approvals. However, she also faces challenges such as incomplete projects due to slow administrative processes and supply of limited fund. Despite these huddles, she is re-elected thrice which reflects the continued faith of her community in her leadership. She got support from her husband who plays a significant supportive role in guiding her about legal provisions and ensuring administrative process, and about different development schemes for the village. The family conditions of Riddhi have improved over the years, allowing them to construct a pucca house, reflecting gradual upward mobility. Riddhi ensures that Gram Sabha meetings conducted regularly and encourages active involvement from all the sections of the society. The case of Riddhi, the Sarpanch shows that because of her personal commitment for the causes of the people, she is able to understand the provisions and aims of the PESA Act, 1996. Therefore, she is repeatedly elected by the villagers to become their representatives in Panchayat.

Case Study 2 Traditional Leadership of Hemlata, Sarpanch of Jamshol Village, Jharkhand helped to become a successful leader in Gram Panchayat.

Mrs. Hemlata, a 42-year-old Santhal woman is the Sarpanch of Meriya Gram Panchayat of Musbani Block in East Singhbhum district. She represents as the icon of growing leadership of tribal women in local governance. Despite being illiterate, she has been elected twice as the village Sarpanch, reflecting the community's trust in her leadership abilities and moral values. She lives in a modest household and has balanced her family responsibilities with her public duties effectively. Her leadership journey reflects the growing participation of tribal women in local self-governance institutions under the Panchayati Raj System.

She has not received formal education that demonstrates life skills related to village administration. She is well-versed in local customs, land issues, and welfare schemes. Her ability to mediate conflicts and dissolve disputes ensure in Gram Sabha meetings has made her a trusted figure in the village. Under her tenure as sarpanch, several welfare initiatives—such as rural housing schemes, sanitation drives, and women's self-help group (SHG) activities—have been implemented efficiently. Hemlata faces challenges in maintaining paperwork and official documentations due to illiteracy. However, she overcomes these barriers with the support of the Panchayat Secretary and community members who assist her in reading and writing official documents. Gender bias and caste-based barriers continue to pose obstacles, yet her consistent efforts has gradually changed local attitude towards accepting women's leadership.

This case study highlights how experiential knowledge, community values, and moral integrity with the villagers can substitute for formal literacy in effective grassroots governance. Hemlata's leadership illustrates the empowerment of tribal women through the Panchayati Raj system and the potential for inclusive and value-based local governance which could be possible through the convergence of traditional value systems and wisdoms with the formal governance system under the banner of the PESA Act, 1996.

Case Study 3: Participation of a Tribal Ward Member in Gram Sabha meeting in Tangarsai Village of East Singhbhum Jharkhand

Monika is the ward member of Tangarsai village of East Singhbhum Jharkhand. She is an elected representative under the Panchayati Raj system. Although she is formally illiterate, due to school dropout she has acquired a basic functional knowledge of reading and writing. This functional literacy enables her to recognize names, symbols, and some official documents but restricts her ability to engage fully with administrative procedures. Despite these challenges, she participates in Gram Sabha and Panchayat meetings. Her presence is often irregular due to household responsibilities, low confidence in formal discussions, and limited comprehension of official documents. However, she values these meetings as important space where decisions about village development schemes, welfare benefits, and infrastructure projects for the village and villagers are discussed. Her main motivation for attending meetings Gram Sabha villagers to ensure that her community's basic needs like drinking water, health services, and road connectivity etc are not overlooked. She admitted that she does not always voice her opinion, but she listens carefully and later discusses issues informally with women and elders in her hamlet.

Interestingly, her role as a ward member has given her a sense of identity and recognition in the village. Community members approach her for small grievances, particularly related to ration cards, MGNREGA job card, PM housing schemes and access to welfare schemes. In such cases, she relies on her relatives or educated co-members of the Panchayat to help her file applications or to communicate with block officials. This case reflects the broader dynamics of tribal women's political participation in rural Jharkhand, where structural barriers coexist with emerging opportunities for empowerment. With proper capacity-building, literacy support, and institutional encouragement, such representatives can play a stronger role in ensuring inclusive and transparency governance at local level.

Case Study 4: Life Skill experiences key to success: The case of Sunita of Tangarsai with village.

Sunita, 32 years old married Santhal housewife, limited literacy became the Ward member in Tangarsai village. Her husband cultivates paddy and seasonal vegetables on a small piece of land. Sunita supplements the family income through **stitching blouses, petticoats, and daily-wear clothes** for women of the village. Despite low literacy, she has developed **strong social understanding**, of household needs, women's concerns, and welfare schemes and strong connectivity with the villagers. Her tailoring work helps her to maintain **regular contact with other women**, making her a known face in the hamlet. Economically, the family falls in the **lower-income group**, but they have received a pucca house under PMAY, mobile connectivity, and access to PDS and MGNREGA.

Her personality differs significantly from other ward members in terms of her sincerity involvement and community acceptance. She listens closely in Gram Sabha meetings and takes mental notes. She even though clearly understands day-to-day issues like water scarcity, ration irregularities, repair needs of roads, and health problems. Women often approach her because she is friendly maintains patience, and non-judgmental. She has approached the Panchayat Secretary several times regarding drainage, hand pump repair, and pension verification. While she is not very vocal in large meetings, she actively speaks in smaller women's groups.

Compared to other ward members, Sunita is more regular and attentive. She believes that attending meetings is essential for "*gaonkakaamaaur logon kabhalai.*" Her tailoring clients often share community problems, which motivates her to present these issues in meetings. She wants to ensure that woman's needs—such as toilets, water supply, and health services—are included in planning. Though not formally trained, Sunita has a basic functional knowledge of the PESA provisions through village meetings and discussions with social workers. She knows that Gram Sabha has the power to approve or reject development plans. She understands that land-related decisions and natural resource use must involve the community. She is aware that tribal rights and participation are important parts of village governance. She often says: "*Gaonkafaisla Gram Sabha hi karega—yeh hum log kaadhikarhai.*"

However, her knowledge remains partial, and she cannot interpret official documents or legal clauses herself. She helps to identify the beneficiaries who need toilets and housing schemes. She informed the Panchayat about irregular mid-day meal supply in the school. She supported a women's group in demanding repair of a defunct hand pump. In the last Gram Sabha, she raised the issue of unsafe pathways used by school children during monsoon. Despite her dedication, she faces several barriers in the form of limited literacy which restricts her ability to read official information, application forms and scheme details. Her household responsibilities and tailoring work many times restricts her movements. Sometimes she feels shy in front of officials, especially during budget discussions. Sunita case shows that even with limited literacy, tribal women can play a significant and attentive role in grassroots democracy. Her active participation in Tangarsai reflects the emerging empowerment of tribal women under Panchayati Raj and PESA Act. With proper support, she has the potential to become a key voice for inclusive and gender-sensitive local governance.

Case Study 5: PRI is a key to development: The case of Laxmi of Jamshol village

Laxmi, 38-year-old housewife belongs to Ho tribe (ST), lives in a nuclear family. She has completed 8th standard and belongs to a lower-middle rural tribal household. Her family owns a small piece of land where they cultivate paddy and vegetables. Unlike many women in her area, she has started a **small backyard poultry enterprise** with 25 to 30 chickens, which gives her stable side income. Her husband works as a MGNREGA laborer during off season and does masonry work occasionally. She has a smart phone, which she uses for WhatsApp groups and Panchayat announcements. She is well **organized and punctual**, maintains a small notebook to take meeting notes in gram sabha discussions.

She tries to find practical solutions rather than just reporting issues. She uses phone to share updates, photos of developmental work, and complaints. She is known for her firm yet calm nature, which makes officials take her seriously. Laxmi is one of the most active ward members in Jamshol region. She regularly attends Gram Sabha meetings and often encourages younger women to join. She keeps photos of damaged roads, defunct lights, and water issues to present during meetings. Laxmi has reasonably good functional knowledge about village development planning, welfare schemes (pensions, MGNREGA, PMAY, piped water schemes etc.). She explains to villagers that Gram Sabha can approve land use, select beneficiaries, and monitor works. She doesn't know legal sections in detail, but she understands that PESA gives tribal communities control over resources and decision-making. She helps villagers to fill pension forms, updating Aadhaar-ration link, submitting applications at block office, understanding MGNREGAs job card procedures. She is known for walking door-to-door during health drives and water-related surveys. She viewed that the structural barriers and operational barriers in various forms affect the functioning of PESA Act, 1996. A few of them as she visualizes includes that officials sometimes ignore demands of tribal villages, the delay in release of funds affect planned works, tribal people are not acquainted with digital processes (online forms) of governance and as a part of the gender bias—some male members undermine women's opinions. Laxmi case shows moderate literacy, confidence, exposure, and strong community ties can transform a ward member into an effective grassroots leader. Her active engagement in gram sabha reflects the growing political awareness among tribal women in Jamshol village. She signifies a shift from symbolic representation to active, accountable, and community-driven governance under the PESA framework.

V. Discussion

The analysis of KAP of the PRI members with the help of the case study approach on various aspects of PESA Act, 1996 shows that there is a trend in the convergence of traditional leaders into the PRI structures at primary tier represented by ward member and sarpanch, but all the PRI members are not traditional leaders rather around 60 percent of them are generations of new leaders who are elected two to three times in PRI structure under PESA Act. They enjoy the good will of the village and are accepted by the villagers. In the study villages the traditional leaders of the community are mostly not interested in participating in state sponsored governance system. They want to continue as a leader enjoying the socio-cultural acceptance within the village. However, they support villagers to contest in the election who will work in their favor. The study shows that all the new generation leaders are economically not wealthy or land-owning groups in the village. Both the male and female PRI members are mostly lower-class category households who have come as a neo-class category. Most of them are in the age groups of less than 40s and also have low level of education or no education. In spite of their high illiteracy, most of the PRI member particularly tribal women because of their sincere labor and duty to village and to the villagers, they are very popular in village. All of them are genuinely involved in the Gram Sabha meeting among villagers, basic issues like road communication, water sanitation, old age and widow pensions, health requirements, house under PMAY etc. This neo-leadership among the tribal women in the village as a part of the PRI structure are above political affiliations who are more concerned about villagers' basic problems. This has motivated the villagers to select these new young leaders again and again.

The tribal PRI members of both male and female background are mostly illiterate or have the education up to primary level which is of only use to give the signature. However, their sincerity to work and to the basic needs of the villagers to participation in grams sabha meetings made them to realize and well informed about the rights of the villagers for their basic needs like water, sanitation, education with health services etc. Such members are very important for the villagers to operate at village level to create an awareness and participation among the villagers for their rights, they are well aware of the welfare schemes of the government meant for the villagers. The PRI members have understood that right to own and use basic resources which are provisioned by PESA Act, 1996 of the government for the villagers. The lady tribal PRI members have ensured the quality in the implementation of welfare programs in terms of the selection of right beneficiaries and ensuring benefits to them shows a positive attitude towards serving the needy villagers. All the PRI members have felt their participation as very important in the gram sabha as compulsory and necessary so as to ensure quality implementation of the programs. The women PRI members have pulled women villagers who have participated in gram sabha meetings under PESA Act, 1996.

To conclude PESA Act, 1996 has created opportunities for the tribal women to represent in the PRI structure and villagers to participate in the gram sabha meetings. Almost all the PRI members' illiterate but because of their sincerity and commitment they have well understood various programs and procedure required at Panchayat level while implementing several development programs in the village. Therefore, KAP approach seems to be one of the effective approaches to understand the PRI members and their functioning through case study method.

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