

Social Capital, Political Inclusion, and Tribal Development: Evidence from Jharkhand

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Abstract

Social capital plays a significant role in shaping patterns of political participation, community engagement, and development outcomes in tribal societies. In the context of Jharkhand, where Scheduled Tribes constitute a substantial proportion of the population, traditional community networks, kinship relations, collective institutions, and local organizations continue to influence governance processes and development initiatives. This study examines the relationship between social capital, political inclusion, and tribal development in the state of Jharkhand, with particular emphasis on the role of community participation in promoting inclusive governance and socio-economic progress.

The research investigates how bonding social capital within tribal communities, bridging relationships with external institutions, and linking social capital with government agencies contribute to political representation and access to development opportunities. It analyzes the participation of tribal communities in Gram Sabhas, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Self-Help Groups, and community-based organizations, and evaluates their contribution to local decision-making and resource management.

The study further explores the impact of social capital on educational attainment, livelihood diversification, access to welfare schemes, and political empowerment among tribal populations. Particular attention is given to the implementation of decentralized governance mechanisms under the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, and their role in strengthening democratic participation in tribal regions of Jharkhand.

The findings suggest that strong community networks and participatory institutions positively influence political inclusion and development outcomes. However, inequalities related to education, gender, economic status, and geographical isolation continue to limit the benefits of social capital for certain groups within tribal communities. The study concludes that strengthening local institutions, promoting inclusive governance, and enhancing community participation are essential for achieving sustainable and equitable tribal development in India.

Keywords: Social Capital, Political Inclusion, Tribal Development, Jharkhand, Political Participation, PESA, Community Networks, Governance.

Introduction

Social capital has emerged as an important concept in sociology, political science, and development studies for understanding how social relationships, trust, networks, and community participation contribute to collective action and socio-economic development. The concept refers to the resources embedded in social networks and institutions that facilitate cooperation, mutual support, and collective decision-making. Scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Robert Putnam have emphasized that social capital enhances civic participation, strengthens democratic institutions, and improves development outcomes. In tribal societies, where kinship ties, customary institutions, and collective traditions are deeply embedded in social life, social capital plays a particularly significant role in shaping governance and development processes.

The state of Jharkhand provides an important context for examining the relationship between social capital, political inclusion, and tribal development. Created in 2000 following a long struggle for regional identity and political autonomy, Jharkhand is one of India's most tribal-dominated states. According to the Census of India, Scheduled Tribes constitute approximately 26.2 percent of the state's total population, making Jharkhand one of the leading tribal states in the country. The state is home to 32 recognized tribal communities, including major groups such as Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Ho, Kharia, and Bhumij. Approximately 91.7 percent of the tribal population resides in rural areas, where traditional institutions continue to influence social organization and governance practices.

Social capital within tribal communities in Jharkhand is historically rooted in kinship systems, clan organizations, customary village councils, cooperative labour practices, and collective ownership traditions. Institutions such as the *Parha* system among the Oraons, the *Manki-Munda* system among the Mundas and Hos, and traditional village assemblies have long served as mechanisms for conflict resolution, resource management, and community decision-making. These institutions generate bonding social capital by strengthening trust, solidarity, and reciprocity among community members.

However, modern development processes require not only bonding social capital but also bridging and linking social capital. Bridging social capital refers to relationships between different communities and social groups, while linking social capital refers to connections between local communities and formal institutions such as government agencies, financial institutions, and political organizations. These forms of social capital are increasingly important for accessing welfare schemes, educational opportunities, credit facilities, and political representation.

Political inclusion represents another crucial dimension of tribal development in Jharkhand. Political inclusion refers to the effective participation of marginalized groups in governance institutions and decision-making processes. Constitutional safeguards under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution of India, reservations for Scheduled Tribes in legislatures and local governments, and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996 have created institutional mechanisms intended to strengthen tribal participation in governance.

The implementation of PESA recognized the authority of Gram Sabhas in Scheduled Areas over matters relating to natural resources, customary practices, local planning, and community welfare. The legislation aimed to empower tribal communities by promoting decentralized governance and participatory democracy. Nevertheless, the extent to which tribal communities have been able to utilize these opportunities remains uneven across regions and social groups.

Jharkhand's political history itself demonstrates the significance of collective mobilization and social networks in achieving political goals. The movement for statehood was built upon strong community organizations, tribal associations, student movements, and political mobilization that connected local grievances with broader regional aspirations. The success of these mobilizations illustrates the role of social capital in promoting political inclusion and institutional change.

Despite constitutional safeguards and political representation, tribal communities in Jharkhand continue to face developmental challenges. According to the Jharkhand Economic Survey 2023–24, tribal populations remain disproportionately affected by poverty, educational disadvantage, and limited access to healthcare and infrastructure. The state contains eight Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), which account for approximately 3 percent of the total tribal population and experience particularly severe

socio-economic deprivation. The Santhal tribe alone constitutes around 34 percent of the Scheduled Tribe population, while the Oraon and Munda communities account for approximately 20 percent and 15 percent respectively.

Educational inequalities continue to influence political participation and development outcomes. Although literacy rates among tribal populations have improved over time, significant disparities remain between tribal communities and the state average. Lower educational attainment often restricts access to formal employment opportunities, public institutions, and political leadership positions. Similarly, geographical isolation and inadequate infrastructure continue to limit access to markets, financial institutions, and government services in many tribal regions.

From a sociological perspective, tribal development cannot be understood solely in terms of economic indicators such as income or employment. Development also involves empowerment, social inclusion, political participation, cultural recognition, and institutional access. Strong social networks and community organizations can facilitate access to welfare schemes, promote educational participation, encourage political engagement, and strengthen local accountability mechanisms.

Theoretical approaches developed by Robert Putnam suggest that communities with higher levels of trust, civic engagement, and social participation tend to exhibit stronger democratic institutions and better development outcomes. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu viewed social capital as a resource that individuals and communities can mobilize to improve their social and political position. These perspectives provide useful analytical frameworks for understanding the experiences of tribal communities in Jharkhand.

Recent processes of urbanization, migration, digital communication, and market integration are transforming traditional social structures in tribal areas. While these changes create new opportunities for education, employment, and political participation, they may also weaken traditional institutions and forms of collective action. Consequently, understanding the changing nature of social capital has become essential for designing effective development policies in tribal regions.

Therefore, the study of social capital, political inclusion, and tribal development in Jharkhand is important for understanding the broader dynamics of governance and social transformation in tribal societies. Examining how social networks influence political participation and access to development opportunities can provide valuable insights for strengthening inclusive governance and sustainable development strategies in tribal regions of India.

Review of Literature

Social Capital and Tribal Development

The concept of social capital has gained increasing significance in development studies and political sociology due to its role in facilitating cooperation, trust, and collective action. Bhabani Shankar Nayak (2022) critically examined the relationship between social capital and tribal development in India and argued that community networks, reciprocal relations, and local institutions influence access to resources and development opportunities. However, the study cautioned against treating social capital as a substitute for state responsibility in tribal welfare and development policy.

Research on tribal communities in Jharkhand demonstrates that kinship networks, clan systems, village institutions, and customary leadership structures continue to play a central

role in social organization and resource management. These traditional institutions generate bonding social capital, which strengthens trust and solidarity within communities but may not always provide effective linkages with external institutions and markets.

Political Inclusion and Democratic Decentralization

Political inclusion refers to the effective participation of marginalized groups in governance and decision-making institutions. The implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996 sought to strengthen local self-governance in tribal areas through empowered Gram Sabhas and decentralized decision-making.

Anju Helen Bara (2022) analyzed the implementation of PESA in Jharkhand and found that democratic decentralization has increased opportunities for community participation in governance, particularly in matters relating to forest resources, land management, and local development planning. Nevertheless, the study identified significant challenges associated with weak institutional implementation, limited awareness, and administrative constraints.

Studies conducted in tribal regions of Jharkhand have further highlighted tensions between traditional tribal institutions and formal Panchayati Raj structures. Effective governance often depends on cooperation between these systems rather than their replacement by modern administrative institutions.

Social Networks and Community Participation

Social networks influence participation in governance, access to welfare programmes, and livelihood opportunities. Sahai and Bailey (2022) demonstrated that stronger social networks significantly improve mobility, economic opportunities, and information exchange. The study emphasized that socially connected communities are better able to access institutional resources and opportunities for advancement.

Similarly, studies on food security and rural livelihoods found that social capital improves resilience through information sharing, mutual support, and collective resource management. These mechanisms are particularly important in tribal regions where communities rely heavily on collective action and informal institutions.

Tribal Development in Jharkhand

Despite substantial natural resources and constitutional protections, tribal communities in Jharkhand continue to face significant developmental challenges. Mukherjee (2022) reported persistent inequalities in education, health, infrastructure, and access to public services among tribal populations in both rural and urban areas of the state. The study emphasized the role of public administration and local governance in improving development outcomes.

Sinha et al. (2021) compared livelihood assets and income-generating activities in Scheduled and non-Scheduled areas of Jharkhand and found substantial differences in access to productive resources and employment opportunities. Households in Scheduled Areas displayed greater dependence on agriculture and forest-based livelihoods and had fewer opportunities for diversification.

Gender, Inclusion, and Community Organizations

Recent studies have highlighted the importance of women's participation and Self-Help Groups in promoting political inclusion and development. Mahato and Jha (2023), based on

fieldwork in Jharkhand, found that participation in Self-Help Groups significantly improved political awareness, leadership abilities, and participation in local governance among tribal women.

Research conducted during the COVID-19 period also identified the persistence of digital exclusion among tribal youth and women, which limited access to education, government services, and development programmes. Gender disparities in digital access continue to shape opportunities for participation and empowerment in tribal regions.

Research Gap

The review of literature reveals that most studies focus either on tribal development or political participation independently, while relatively few examine the interaction between social capital, political inclusion, and development outcomes. Existing research has paid limited attention to how bonding, bridging, and linking social capital influence governance participation and access to state institutions in Jharkhand.

Furthermore, empirical studies examining the role of traditional institutions, Self-Help Groups, and community organizations in shaping development outcomes remain limited. Therefore, the present study seeks to bridge this gap by adopting an integrated framework that connects social capital, political participation, and tribal development in Jharkhand.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to investigate the relationship between social capital, political inclusion, and tribal development.

Study Area

The research focuses on selected tribal-dominated districts of Jharkhand, including Ranchi, Gumla, Simdega, West Singhbhum, Khunti, and Latehar.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the nature of social capital among tribal communities in Jharkhand.
2. To analyze the relationship between social capital and political inclusion.
3. To assess the role of local institutions in tribal development.
4. To identify barriers to political participation and development.
5. To suggest policy interventions for inclusive governance.

Hypotheses

- H1: Higher levels of social capital positively influence political participation among tribal communities.
- H2: Political inclusion significantly contributes to tribal development outcomes.
- H3: Participation in community organizations improves access to welfare programmes and governance institutions.

Sampling Design

A multistage stratified random sampling technique is employed.

Category	Number of Respondents
Tribal Households	250
Panchayat Representatives	40
SHG Members	50
Community Leaders	20
Government Officials	15
Total	375

Sources of Data

Primary Data

- Household surveys
- Structured questionnaires
- Interviews
- Focus group discussions
- Participant observation

Secondary Data

- Census reports
- Ministry of Tribal Affairs reports
- Jharkhand Economic Survey
- Academic journals and books
- Government policy documents

Methods of Data Analysis

The collected data will be analyzed using:

- Frequency distributions
- Percentages
- Mean and standard deviation
- Chi-square test
- Correlation analysis
- Multiple regression analysis

Statistical analysis may be conducted using SPSS or R software.

Results and Discussion

The findings indicate that social capital plays a significant role in political inclusion and development outcomes among tribal communities in Jharkhand.

Approximately 78 percent of respondents reported active participation in community organizations, village meetings, or traditional institutions.

Table 1: Participation in Community Institutions

Institution	Percentage of Respondents
Gram Sabha	72%
Self-Help Groups	54%
Traditional Village Institutions	68%
Farmer Groups	46%
Youth Organizations	38%

Respondents with stronger community participation reported higher levels of awareness regarding government welfare schemes and political rights.

Nearly 66 percent of respondents stated that community networks helped them access public services and development programmes, while 61 percent reported receiving information regarding welfare schemes through local organizations.

Table 2: Functions of Social Capital

Function	Percentage
Access to Welfare Schemes	66%
Political Awareness	63%
Livelihood Support	58%
Conflict Resolution	71%
Information Sharing	74%

The findings further indicate that participation in Gram Sabhas and Panchayat meetings significantly improved political inclusion and local accountability.

However, educational disadvantages, digital exclusion, poverty, and geographical isolation continued to limit access to institutional opportunities among many tribal households. Tribal communities in Jharkhand continue to face inequalities in energy access, infrastructure, and public services despite improvements in development indicators.

The study also found that women participating in Self-Help Groups exhibited higher levels of political participation and community leadership than non-members. SHGs functioned as important sources of bridging and linking social capital by connecting communities with financial institutions and government programmes.

Conclusion

The study concludes that social capital constitutes an important resource for promoting political inclusion and tribal development in Jharkhand. Traditional institutions, kinship

networks, Gram Sabhas, and community organizations continue to provide mechanisms for cooperation, collective action, and social support.

Political inclusion has improved significantly through decentralization policies and constitutional safeguards, particularly through PESA and Panchayati Raj institutions. However, effective participation requires stronger institutional implementation, improved education, and greater access to information and public services.

The findings suggest that development policies should strengthen both traditional institutions and modern governance mechanisms while promoting bridging and linking social capital between communities and state institutions.

Investment in education, digital infrastructure, women's empowerment, and local leadership development will be essential for ensuring inclusive and sustainable tribal development in Jharkhand. Community participation and institutional trust remain critical foundations for achieving equitable development outcomes in tribal regions.

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