

STRENGTHENING LOCAL SELF-GOVERNANCE IN TRIBAL AREAS THROUGH ETHNO-DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE IN TRIPURA, NORTH-EAST INDIA

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INTRODUCTION:

Local self-government is an inherent constitutional mechanism that aims to foster democracy at the grassroots level as part of the decentralization process (Bywalec, 2022; Choudhury & Gupta, 2016). This mechanism involves a significant socio-political process and can transform the socio-economic and political aspirations of marginalized communities in rural villages (Akhup & Tripura (2022)). This institutional arrangement is particularly crucial for marginalized tribal communities, addressing their historically long-standing exploitation, deprivation, and socio-economic challenges; it ensures direct participation and involvement of people in the political system, allowing them to exercise their political agency (Choudhury & Gupta, 2016). With this special provision, the tribal people can make decisions on matters affecting their lives and development. Akhup & Tripura(2022) argued that true development can only arise from the people themselves when they possess agency and capacity to work effectively for their own betterment.

Despite the well-intended local self-governance, this institution often remains ineffective. It failed to include grassroots-level tribal people in exercising their full power in decision-making and political agency, thereby exacerbating socio-economic and development issues. This is persistently evident in the state of Tripura, a region in Northeast India. Local self-governance under the Sixth Schedule is a well-structured provision, which grants tribal communities' internal autonomy in the state of Tripura. However, the indigenous tribal communities of Tripura, designated as Scheduled Tribes (ST) under Article 342, continue to be deprived of their full self-governance rights. Consequently, they have been unable to prevent oppression stemming from social, political, economic, and cultural

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impacts. Worst of all, many development projects have intruded upon the forest lands that the indigenous tribal people of Tripura rely on for their livelihood. Scholars like Mohapatra (2017) and Akhup & Tripura (2022) argue that centralization and state control render local self-governance ineffective in Tripura. A common criticism is the imposition of a homogenous 'one-size-fits-all' framework across India, despite its diverse communities and varying context of state affairs. Consequently, a single, linear institution may not be effective. In this sense, scholars (Fernandes et al, 2021; Akhup & Tripura 2022) advocate for an alternative solution to strengthen local self-governance. This approach suggests not changing the system or policies but adopting an alternative approach or practice which is more tribal or ethnic-centric to enhance local self-governance and promote equal development and prosperity.

Although local self-governance is intended to bring about change at the grassroots level, various underlying issues have undermined the institution and its need for an alternative approach remains inadequately studied or scholarly less attentive. Keeping this in mind, this paper examines the practice of local self-governance in tribal areas institutionalized through the Sixth Schedule in contemporary Tripura. A special focus is given to issues pertinent to governance and violation of tribal participation in the Sixth Schedule tribal areas of Tripura. The paper then explores ways to strengthen and re-position the local self-governance institution that would empower the tribals in their own areas and bring positive change through the approach and practice of ethno-development.

METHODS:

My study is based on both primary and secondary data sources. For secondary sources, I relied on various available books, articles, and government reports. For primary sources, the study relied on multiple methods such as interview schedule, observation, and purposive sampling with 30 respondents, out of which 20 were male and 10 were female which is adapted from a case study conducted in Kamalchara village in Dhalai district of Tripura. This case study provides a solid illustration of the issues of local self-governance as well as an emerging approach of ethno-development or the need for this approach as part of rural tribal development.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATION:

Numerous available scholarly works have explored and pointed out the power structures in local self-governance, explaining why it remains ineffective, even after it is well structured. Some groups of scholars argue that power inequality is structured along caste lines. It is believed that high castes dominate the power structure because they control significant power resources, such as high ritual status, land, economic assets, and other higher levels of education (Srinivas, 1959). For example, Srinivas (1959) have discussed the dynamic relationship between caste and dominance at the rural level. Similarly, Beteille (1996) examined the interplay of caste, ritual, traditions, and domination in village society. This suggests the gradual institutionalization of democratic politics that has altered caste dynamics, as it has shifted power from the ritually purer upper castes to the dominant middle-level castes (Srinivas, 1959; Beteille, 1996).

Another set of scholars (Bailey, 1969; Choudhury & Gupta, 2016) in the modern agricultural context, argues it is a new emerging class of rich peasants in the village areas who have taken control of all village-level institutions as it is facilitated in the modernization of agriculture system through the means of irrigation expansion, cash crop cultivation, mechanization in cultivation. These scholarships show how even at the grassroots level many factors like caste, class, dominance, and political participation have undermined the smooth functioning of local self-governance (Singh, 1969). However, local self-governance in the domain of tribal areas is somewhat different. Because, unlike other rural populations, tribal in village areas have been protected with a bunch of constitutional measurements and provisions (Fernandes et al, 2021). Nevertheless, they continue to suffer, and their local self-governance remains unproductive, as they cannot prevent exploitative development projects and continue to suffer from it (Akhup & Tripura 2022). Some might argue that the persistence of insurgency and ethnic conflict, particularly in a region like the Northeast region, has hampered the smooth functioning of the governance. However, scholars like Xaxa (2011) argue that tribes are still perceived as incapable of their own development as they are still rooted in their traditional ways of living. This approach has been criticized by scholarly works, but in a

practical sense, the development strategies still follow top-down, highly depend on mainstreaming strategies and continue to be met with bureaucratic apathy (Sen, 1992; Xaxa 2011; Akhup & Tripura, 2022). As a response to this indifference and practice, what is required is to adopt the approach to ethno-development which is rooted in a more ethnic or tribal-centric approach to community development (Stavenhagen 1988; Sen 1992).

STRUCTURE OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNANCE SYSTEM IN TRIPURA:

Tripura is a small (10,491 Sq. Km) but culturally rich state located in Northeast India, bordering Bangladesh on the three sides. The state is part of the 'Seven Sisters' of Northeast India, a region known for its ethnic diversity and stunning landscapes. Despite being one of the smallest states in India, Tripura boasts a vibrant mix of tribal and non-tribal communities. The state is also known for its lush forests, hilly terrain, and rich biodiversity. Tripura had a long history of being an independent princely state before joining the Indian Union on October 15, 1949. In the post-independence era, the state has experienced demographic shifts, primarily due to migration from neighbouring Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan), which has significantly impacted its socio-political landscape. Although Tripura has made some strides in human development, but balancing development with environmental sustainability and protecting the rights of indigenous tribal peoples remains a central issue. According to 2011 census, Tripura is home to nineteen designated tribal communities such as Tripura or Tippera, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, Lushais, Uchoi, Mog, Kuki, Chakma, Khasis, Garo, Halam, Bhutias, Bhils, Mundas, Orangs, Lepchas, Santals and Chaimals.

Historically, tribals were governed by their local traditional institutions based on a common system i.e., community land ownership and forest management, functioning through ethnic institutions (village councils) at the village level. These were integral to their social structure and sustenance. These village councils played a direct role in governance in relation to matters to forest, land water, culture, and overall social life ways. These councils are very well structured, which is led by the village chief, called 'Roaja' or 'Chokdiri'. Tribal chiefs were frequently invited to attend ceremonial purposes, feasts, and meetings at the

Royal Court with the King of Tripura (Akhup & Tripura, 2022). However, the tribal communities face challenges related to land ownership, political representation, and traditional practices in the face of rapid modernization and development projects primarily in the state intervention. For example, the tribal's customary institutions saw their influence diminishing following the merger with India and the establishment of a modern state, leading to the emergence of a new governance system in Tripura.

The state of Tripura implemented its first Panchayat system (Local self-government) under the United Provinces Panchayat Raj Act of 1947. Under this Act, Goan Sabhas as development blocks were subsequently established. Afterwards, in 1959, a separate Panchayat Department was constructed under the commendations of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee. Following this, Tripura Panchayat Raj Rules 1961 was crafted under this provision which became a serving foundation for planning and development. Thereafter, in January 1984, the Tripura Panchayats Act, 1983 replaced the United Provinces Panchayat Raj Act, 1947. This replacement lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. This was also made a special provision for the representation of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), by establishing a two-tier system. Considering the evolving role of Gram Panchayats, primarily following the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act of 1992, the Tripura Panchayat Act of 1993 was then enforced and subsequently introduced a three-tier structure (Directorate of Economics & Statistics Planning 2024). In this way, since the state merger, different provisions and various local self-governances were introduced in Tripura. Especially, a separate autonomous council namely the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) under the Sixth Schedule in the form of local self-governance is significant especially for tribals in their areas in Tripura.

LOCAL (TRIBAL) SELF-GOVERNANCE UNDER SIXTH SCHEDULE:

The establishment of the new autonomous council was a response to the increasing unrest of the cultural, political, and economic marginalization faced by the tribal community in Tripura. This marginalization began in the early post-independence period due to a massive demographic shift in Tripura, which turned the tribal community into a minority in their own homeland (Bhattacharya 1989,

p.38; Akhup & Tripura 2022). Subsequently, the state has taken control of almost all the land through the means of land reform policy and for the rehabilitation of immigrants from East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh). Due to that the indigenous tribal faced massive land alienation and displacement from the state-led development intervention in the state (Fernandes et al, 2021). As a result, they were marginalized within the electoral and representative democracy (Akhup & Tripura, 2022). Certainly, this structural change fostered a new political awareness, struggle, and protection of the tribal communities, particularly between 1940 and 1960 in Tripura. A few such Tribal political organizations are 'Jana Mangal Samita,' 'Jana Shiksha Samity' and 'Tripura Upajati Juba Samity' came in to existence.

Initially, it started as a campaign demand for "education for all" (Akhup & Tripura, 2022). However, as unresolved tribal issues like land protection and political struggles to safeguard the indigenous population from displacement and cultural erosion persisted, these organizations began advocating for the fulfillment of tribal aspirations. Some of their demands were 1) the creation of an autonomous district council under the Sixth Schedule, 2) restoration of tribal land from the non-tribal, 3) official state recognition of the Kokborok language, and 4) adoption of Roman Script for writing Kokborok language. These struggles even led to insurgent groups in the 1970s and resulted in ethnic conflict such as the Mandwi 1980s Riot. In response to this unrest and to address tribal aspirations, both the state and Indian governments agreed to establish an Autonomous District Council (ADC) in those areas where tribal communities are residing.

As a result, the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council Bill, 1979 was passed by the Tripura Legislative Assembly on March 23, 1979. Following this, the Indian Constitution was amended on August 23, 1984, to include the Tripura Autonomous Tribal Areas under the constitutional provision of the Sixth Schedule. Consequently, the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) was established under the Sixth Schedule in 1985 as a separate district council in Tripura. This new district council empowered the Village Committee (VC) to serve as the basic unit of local government and governance in tribal areas. This is because in Tripura many villages are not

homogenous as different tribal communities settle in different villages. The main significance of this TTAADC under the Sixth Schedule is that it aimed to grant the tribal communities' internal autonomy that would allow them to pursue their social, economic, and cultural interests.

Currently, as per the available TTAADC official website, the geographical area of TTAADC covers 7,131.56 sq.km, accounting for nearly 68 per cent of the total state's geographical area. This area spans all eight districts of Tripura. The TTAADC, as of 2016, 73.04 per cent of its area covers forest land. According to the 2011 census, in the Sixth Schedule areas are total of 12,65,838 people are living, out of which 10,66,298 are Scheduled Tribes (ST), 60,993 are Schedule Castes (SC) and 64,850 are Other Backward Classes (OBC), 26,473 Minorities and 47,224 are others. Overall, 34.45 per cent of the state's population lives in the Sixth Schedule areas of Tripura.

According to the TTAADC administration rules, 1988 (Schedule 1), there are specific powers and functions of the district councils such as 1) administrative power with using and managing forest land, excluding research areas, 2) establishing and managing schools, dispensaries, markets etc. 3) village planning, fisheries and matter related to plantations and 4) in terms of financial powers, the council shall receive a share of forest royalties for the natural resources extraction which is granted by the state of Tripura. In summary, the TTAADC intends to establish internal autonomy aimed at both protection and the exercise of autonomy in community development. However, the tribal populations continue to suffer from exploitation, land displacement and an inability to shield themselves from development projects. To illustrate these issues, in the following section, I examined Kamalachara village as a case study to understand the challenges faced by tribals, despite the presence of Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in the form of local self-governance in Tripura.

KAMALACHARA VILLAGE: A CASE STUDY:

Kamalachara village is a tribal village that falls within the Ambassa development block in the Dhalai district of Tripura. It is situated approximately 95 km from the administrative headquarters and Agartala, the state capital city. The village has around 800 households which are composed of four different

tribal communities such as Hrangkhawl, Molsom, Garo and Kuki. The primary livelihood of the villagers is agriculture, and some are still practicing shifting cultivation. The village falls under the jurisdiction of the TTAADC, which provides local self-governance for the villagers. It functions through a Village Committee (VC), which is comprised of two villages, Kamalachara and its neighboring village Dhanchara. This VC oversees all the village-level development planning and activities in coordination with the TTAADC and state departments like the Block Development Office (BDO). However, the development of tribal areas heavily relies on the support of the state departments. Therefore, agro forestry-related planning, schemes and activities are primarily implemented through various state departments, especially the forest department, in the tribal areas. For instance, in Kamalachara village, the forest department formed the Joint Forest Management Committee (JFMC) to execute agro forestry-related schemes in the reserved forest areas. However, currently, the JFMC members remain inactive for several years or it is believed discontinued.

The village is also selected as a model for the JICA project for afforestation plantations, with a few youths chosen as partner members. However, many of these village youths are unaware of JICA's activities. Occasionally, the forest department distributes fruit trees saplings and commercial plants as part of agro forestry projects in the village. However, the villagers' actual needs are rarely heard and seldom implemented. For example, interviewed villages stated that some welfare schemes are initiated, but are often discontinued shortly after it's implemented. This indicates an inconsistency in the projects and leads to ineffective outcomes. This also suggests how land use practices are continually changing to generate income for the tribal sustenance, primarily to secure food, education for their children, healthcare, and other sustenance needs. Villagers expressed frustration that their proposals for individual and village needs are placed during Village Committee Gram Sabha meetings, but such requests are not reflected in the development projects.

Currently, many tribal families from Kamalachara have received land pattas under the RoFR Act commonly known as Forest Rights Act (FRA) in those reserved forest land. It is observed that only those families with land pattas are entitled to development plantation projects. These projects have encouraged

the tribal families to more cash crop plantations and agro forestry plantations. Because of these, many villages have now converted their jhum lands or forest land into cash crop plantations. It is observed that these families are ready to convert in the hope of securing various governments' welfare programmes and receiving subsidies. Meanwhile, landless families who are still practicing shifting cultivation are now restricted and have limited access to forest land for their traditional farming because forest areas are converted into individual ownership through land pattas. The empirical results of the study suggest that although local self-governance is well structured with a special provision of tribal autonomy under the Sixth Schedule, tribals are still suffering from a top-down paternalistic approach and practice in the planning and implementation of development projects in Tripura.

STRENGTHENING LOCAL SELF-GOVERNANCE THROUGH ETHNODEVELOPMENT:

Despite the Sixth Schedule being designated to provide internal autonomy, the socio-economic disadvantages faced by the tribal people persist which suggests the improvement or strengthening of institutional setups with its tribal-centric approach. This is imperative because the Sixth Schedule holds significant potential to bring positive changes in tribal areas (Akhup & Tripura 2022). The study findings warrant the need for attention in remote tribal rural villages. Within this context, development measures should take into account the struggles of tribal people striving to achieve basic subsistence in these rural areas. The study indicates that top-down beneficially welfare-oriented governance is not capable of bringing about a desired transformation. In response to this, as the state intends to bring about socio-economic changes among the tribals in their areas, the state and development practitioners must adopt an approach of such local self-governance which is more tribal-centric and empower them in a way so that they can design their own development strategies and protect themselves from further land alienation and political marginalization. Although tribals are granted various protective provisions and welfare programs, they still fail to prevent development exploitation and exercise their full participation in matters concerning their own community development, and protection of land, forest, and culture. In this context, tribals' participation in the decision-making process, policy drafting

and implementation of development projects in their own vicinity should be strengthened. Without actual participation in the developmental process, mere political integration rhetoric will not prevent ongoing development challenges for tribals.

To strengthen the tribal participation and involvement in the existence of local self-governance under the Sixth Schedule for tribals and also to reinforce the district council of TTAADC, what is required now is to adopt a new approach or way of looking and to apply it in the execution of community development programs in Tripura. Within this context, I propose adopting and applying the approach of ethno development. This approach seeks to revise an approach and practice of the current top-down and economy-centric development approach in the development strategies that threaten ethnic identity, cultural resilience, land rights, participation in development and overall self-determination (Chernela, 2011, p.94). This approach is more attuned to the specific needs of ethnic minorities, including marginalized tribal communities and empowers their decision-making without any dilution or ignorance in the implementation of development projects in their areas. The approach of ethno-development and its definition was affirmed in the Declaration of San Jo as follows:

"..the amplification and consolidation of ... a culturally distinct society's own culture, through the strengthening of its capacity to guide its own development and exercise self-determination ... and implying an equitable and proper organization of power. This means that the ethnic group is a political-administrative entity, with authority over its own territory and decision-making power in areas constituting its project of development, within an expanding process of autonomy and self- management" (Cited in Davis, 1988, p.7)

This approach may appear new, some might even argue that this approach does not apply to the Indian context. However, as the definition of this approach expresses the basic principle of ethno-development, its fundamental issue of local self-governance is left to recognize and protect the indigenous tribals land rights and greater participation of tribal peoples in the development process (Davis, 1988, p.7; Sen, 1992), which is often overlooked in the Indian context. As observed in the study, for tribals land is integral to their culture, identity, and

survival, which continues to be exploited by predominant top-down economy-centric approaches and hence often do not consider the tribal perspectives. In this sense, the approach to ethno development is aligned with the life ways of the tribes in Tripura, which requires full consideration (Sen, 1992). Hence, local self-governance should recognize this approach as the perspectives of the tribals' live-in experiences, uniqueness and their stringent regulation that centered on sustainable use of land and forest resources and management. Adopting the approach of ethno development underscores the co-existence of different collective identities with a mutual understanding of the spatial needs and social development inherent within the socio-legal democratic framework (Akhup & Tripura 2022). For example, as observed in the study, the tribal village institutions are well structured but remain underutilized, and hence these exercises need to be strengthened, as the basic unit of self-governance along with the Village Committee (VC). This unit will handle micro-planning and decision-making in the developmental process, ensuring accountability and transparency within the village communities. This is imperative because many times, as is observed in the study, zonal and sub-zonal bodies under the Sixth Schedule are often neglected and have minimal roles and responsibilities (Akhup & Tripura 2022). In this way, the anticipated development will originate from the people for whom it is intended without discrimination and exploitation.

CONCLUSION:

This paper, based on empirical data, explored the role and practice of local self-governance institutionalized through TTAADC under the sixth schedule in tribal areas of Tripura. It focused on the issues arising from institutional convergence without constitutional protection for the scheduled tribal communities in Tripura. The paper reveals an emerging paradigm of ethno development aimed at empowering the indigenous tribal communities in Tripura. Within this context, the paper argues for strengthening local self-governance through ethno-development within the Sixth Schedule framework, highlighting its potential to shift the development approach and influence the equal development process.

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