

Tribal Politics and the Question of Internal Inequality: A Case Study of Selected Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal

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Abstract:

This article examines the dynamics of tribal politics and internal inequality among selected Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal, including the Santhals, Oraons, Mundas, and Bhumij. While tribal politics has historically centered on struggles for recognition, land rights, and socio-economic justice, the study argues that tribal communities are not socially homogeneous. Drawing on existing scholarship and regional analysis, the paper highlights how economic differentiation, educational disparities, gender hierarchies, and political elite formation shape internal stratification within tribal society. It explores how identity-based mobilization—though essential for collective assertion—often masks layered inequalities linked to class, gender, and sub-group dominance. The study also situates these processes within a changing political context marked by electoral competition, welfare politics, migration, and the emergence of a tribal middle class. By foregrounding internal differentiation, the article contends that a nuanced understanding of tribal politics is essential for promoting inclusive representation, equitable development, and substantive democratic participation in West Bengal.

Keywords: *Tribal Politics, Internal Inequality, Scheduled Tribes, Identity and Stratification, Political Representation.*

Introduction:

Tribal politics in India has long been associated with struggles for recognition, land rights, autonomy, and socio-economic justice. In the state of West Bengal, Scheduled Tribes (STs) constitute a significant segment of the population, particularly in districts such as Purulia, Bankura, Paschim Medinipur, Jalpaiguri, and Alipurduar. These communities have historically faced marginalization, economic deprivation, and cultural exclusion. Consequently, tribal politics has often centered on collective mobilization against external forces—state institutions, market pressures, and dominant social groups.

However, beneath the narrative of unity and collective resistance lies a complex reality. Tribal communities are not socially homogeneous. They contain internal differences shaped by land ownership, education, gender relations, political affiliation, and access to state resources. This article explores the dynamics of

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tribal politics in West Bengal with particular emphasis on internal inequality among selected Scheduled Tribes, including the Santhals, Oraons, Mundas, and Bhumij.

Tribal Demography and Political Landscape in West Bengal

West Bengal is home to a rich and diverse tribal population that constitutes a significant segment of the state's social fabric. Scheduled Tribes (STs) are unevenly distributed across the state, with higher concentrations in the western plateau districts and the northern tea-growing regions. Districts such as Purulia, Bankura, Paschim Medinipur, Jalpaiguri, and Alipurduar contain substantial tribal populations. The demographic presence of these communities significantly shapes the political landscape of the state, especially at the level of rural governance and electoral mobilization.

The largest tribal groups in West Bengal include the Santhals, Oraons, Mundas, and Bhumij. Each community has distinct historical experiences, cultural traditions, and socio-economic profiles, yet they share common concerns related to land, livelihood, education, and political representation.

Santhals: The Santhal are the largest tribal community in West Bengal. They are predominantly concentrated in Purulia, Bankura, and Paschim Medinipur districts. Traditionally agrarian, the Santhals depend on cultivation, agricultural wage labor, and forest resources. Their social organization is structured around clan systems and village councils, which historically regulated social conduct and dispute resolution.

The Santhals are historically remembered for their resistance against colonial exploitation, most notably the Santhal Rebellion of 1855–56. This legacy of collective struggle continues to influence their political consciousness. In contemporary times, Santhal communities actively participate in electoral politics, grassroots movements, and advocacy for land rights, education, and cultural recognition. Their demographic strength often gives them considerable influence in tribal-majority constituencies.

Oraons: The Oraon community is primarily located in the northern districts of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar. Many Oraons are engaged in tea garden labor, reflecting the historical migration of tribal populations to plantation economies during the colonial period. Others participate in forest-based activities, small-scale agriculture, and seasonal migration to urban centers.

Politically, the Oraons have been active in labor unions and movements related to plantation rights, wage security, and welfare benefits. Their socio-economic position in tea estates often shapes their political priorities, linking tribal identity politics with labor rights and development concerns.

Mundas: The Munda are another important tribal group with cultural roots in eastern and central India. In West Bengal, they are often found in forest-adjacent areas and rural settlements. Like the Santhals and Oraons, the Mundas engage in agriculture, wage labor, and forest-based livelihoods.

Historically associated with resistance movements in neighboring regions, the Mundas possess a strong tradition of community solidarity. In West Bengal, their political participation is shaped by concerns over land security, access to forest resources, and inclusion in development schemes.

Bhumij: The Bhumij are relatively smaller in population compared to the Santhals or Oraons, yet they are socially and politically significant in certain pockets of western West Bengal. Traditionally engaged in agriculture and forest-related occupations, the Bhumij have gradually integrated into local political institutions.

Although numerically smaller, their presence in specific constituencies gives them localized political influence. Their participation in panchayat elections and community-based organizations reflects an increasing engagement with democratic processes.

Nature of Tribal Politics:

Tribal politics in West Bengal may be understood through three interrelated dimensions—identity assertion, land and resource politics, and development-oriented mobilization. These dimensions are historically rooted and continue to shape contemporary political engagement among Scheduled Tribes in the state. While tribal political movements often present a unified front against external marginalization, scholarly analyses suggest that these mobilizations also reflect internal complexities and differentiated interests (Xaxa, 1999; Shah, 2002).

Identity Assertion: One of the central features of tribal politics is the assertion of cultural identity. Tribal groups mobilize around issues of cultural recognition, preservation of indigenous languages, protection of customary laws, and safeguarding of traditional governance systems. Scholars have argued that identity-based mobilization among tribes represents both resistance to assimilation and a strategy for negotiating political power within the modern state (Baviskar, 1995; Xaxa, 1999).

In West Bengal, communities such as the Santhal, Oraon, Munda, and Bhumij frequently organize cultural festivals, commemorative events, and community gatherings that reinforce ethnic solidarity. These practices not only preserve cultural heritage but also function as political acts, asserting distinctiveness within a broader socio-political framework. As noted by Xaxa (1999), tribal identity politics often emerges as a response to historical marginalization and attempts at cultural homogenization.

However, identity assertion is not merely symbolic. It has practical implications for claims to constitutional safeguards, reservation benefits, and recognition of indigenous rights. The articulation of collective identity thus becomes a powerful tool for political negotiation, enabling tribal communities to demand representation and policy attention.

Land and Resource Politics: Land and forest resources occupy a central place in tribal political discourse. Historically, processes of land alienation, commercial forestry, and development-induced displacement have profoundly affected tribal livelihoods (Baviskar, 1995). In West Bengal, many tribal communities depend on agriculture, forest produce, and wage labor tied to land-based economies. Consequently, struggles for land rights and forest access remain politically salient.

Political mobilization frequently revolves around demands for secure land titles, prevention of land alienation, recognition of customary rights, and fair compensation in cases of displacement. These demands align with broader national debates on forest rights and agrarian justice. Scholars such as Shah (2002) observe that land struggles often serve as focal points for collective action, fostering solidarity across villages and clans.

At the same time, land politics can also expose internal differentiation. Not all tribal households possess equal landholdings; disparities in ownership and access to productive resources shape varying political priorities within the community. While collective mobilization may emphasize shared grievances, underlying economic differences influence who benefits most from policy gains.

Development and Welfare Politics: A third dimension of tribal politics involves engagement with state-led development and welfare programs. Access to education, employment, healthcare, housing schemes, and infrastructural development constitutes a major concern for tribal populations. Political representatives frequently campaign on promises of scholarships for tribal students, road construction, drinking water facilities, and employment opportunities under government schemes.

As noted by Desai and Kulkarni (2008), affirmative action and welfare policies have significantly expanded opportunities for certain sections of Scheduled Tribes, particularly those able to access education and formal

employment. In West Bengal, tribal politics increasingly intersects with mainstream party politics, where electoral mobilization often centers on distribution of welfare benefits and developmental promises.

However, while development-oriented politics seeks to enhance collective welfare, it may inadvertently reinforce internal disparities. Better-educated and politically connected individuals are often more successful in navigating bureaucratic systems and accessing state benefits. Consequently, welfare politics, though framed as inclusive, can sometimes contribute to elite consolidation within tribal communities (Shah, 2002).

Internal Inequality within Tribal Communities

Despite a shared constitutional identity as Scheduled Tribes and a strong sense of collective ethnicity, tribal communities in West Bengal are not socially homogeneous. Internal stratification has become increasingly visible due to changing economic conditions, state policies, education expansion, and political competition. Scholars such as Xaxa (1999) and Shah (2002) argue that while tribal politics often emphasizes unity against external marginalization, it frequently overlooks inequalities operating within the community itself. The following compact essays examine four major dimensions of internal inequality: economic, educational, gender-based, and political.

Economic Inequality: Economic differentiation within tribal communities has intensified over the past few decades. Historically, many tribal societies were characterized by relatively egalitarian landholding patterns. However, the penetration of market forces, migration, and state-led development programs has created new class divisions (Baviskar, 1995). In districts such as Purulia and Bankura, some families possess larger and more fertile plots of agricultural land, while others survive as landless laborers dependent on seasonal employment.

The emergence of a small segment of salaried employees—teachers, government staff, and contractual workers—has further widened the economic gap. Households with stable government employment enjoy higher and more secure incomes, access to institutional credit, and greater exposure to urban networks. In contrast, poorer families often rely on seasonal migration to cities or other states for wage labor, resulting in fluctuating and uncertain incomes. Such economic disparities influence not only material well-being but also social prestige and political leverage within the village (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008). Wealthier families are more capable of financing electoral campaigns, accessing welfare benefits, and influencing local decision-making, thereby consolidating their authority.

Educational Disparity: Education has emerged as one of the most significant axes of internal differentiation within tribal communities. Although affirmative action policies and scholarship schemes have improved access to schooling, disparities persist (Borooah & Iyer, 2005). Families with relatively better economic resources are able to send their children to secondary schools, private institutions, or colleges in nearby towns. They can afford transportation, study materials, and private tuition, giving their children a competitive advantage.

By contrast, dropout rates remain high among economically weaker households. Financial constraints, lack of infrastructure, early involvement in wage labor, and seasonal migration disrupt educational continuity. In tribal-dominated areas such as Jalpaiguri and Paschim Medinipur, children from migrant families frequently miss academic sessions, limiting long-term educational attainment.

Higher education, particularly professional and technical degrees, tends to be concentrated among a relatively advantaged sub-group. This educational stratification has profound political implications. Educated individuals often become intermediaries between the community and state institutions, occupying leadership positions in Gram Panchayats, local councils, and political parties. As Xaxa (2008) notes, the rise



of an educated tribal middle class can contribute to empowerment but may also produce new hierarchies within the community.

Gender Inequality: Tribal societies are sometimes portrayed as more egalitarian than caste-based Hindu society, particularly with respect to women's participation in labor and community rituals. However, such generalizations obscure persistent gender inequalities (Shah, 2002). Women's literacy rates in many tribal regions remain lower than those of men, reflecting structural barriers to education and mobility. Domestic responsibilities, early marriage, and economic hardship often curtail girls' educational opportunities.

Political participation of women, though supported by constitutional reservations in Panchayati Raj institutions, is frequently constrained in practice. In several villages, women elected to reserved seats depend on male relatives for decision-making, a phenomenon sometimes described as "proxy representation." Decision-making power in customary councils and village meetings often remains male-dominated, limiting women's substantive influence.

Thus, tribal women experience a form of dual marginalization: they face discrimination as members of historically disadvantaged tribal communities and as women within patriarchal social structures. Intersectional analysis reveals that economic poverty, limited education, and gender norms combine to restrict their access to power and resources (Crenshaw, 1991; Xaxa, 2008).

Political Elite Formation: One of the most critical dimensions of internal inequality is the formation of political elites within tribal communities. As democratic decentralization and electoral politics have expanded, leadership roles in Gram Panchayats and local party structures have become significant sources of power and patronage. Often, a small group of educated, economically stable, and politically connected individuals dominate these positions (Shah, 2002).

Welfare schemes and development benefits may be disproportionately accessed by families aligned with these local elites. Control over information—regarding scholarships, employment schemes, housing benefits, or forest rights—further consolidates their advantage. Youth, landless households, and marginalized sub-groups may find limited opportunities for meaningful leadership, reinforcing hierarchical patterns within the community.

This concentration of authority challenges the romanticized assumption that tribal politics is uniformly participatory or egalitarian. Instead, as scholars of subaltern politics suggest, democratization can coexist with elite capture if institutional safeguards are weak (Guha, 1989). Internal power asymmetries thus shape the distribution of both symbolic representation and material resources.

Intersections of Identity and Inequality: Tribal politics in West Bengal has historically emphasized solidarity against external oppression—whether in the form of land alienation, cultural marginalization, or economic exploitation. Collective identity, rooted in shared history, language, and customary practices, has served as a powerful mobilizing force (Xaxa, 1999). However, beneath this narrative of unity lie intersecting hierarchies of class, gender, age, and education that shape how individuals experience political participation and access to resources.

An intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1991) helps illuminate how multiple axes of identity operate simultaneously. For instance, a landless tribal woman in a village in Purulia may face compounded disadvantages compared to a male tribal landowner. While both share the same ethnic identity and benefit from constitutional safeguards as Scheduled Tribes, their access to voice, authority, and material resources differs significantly. Landownership often correlates with higher status in village society, greater economic security, and stronger political leverage. Gender norms further restrict women's mobility and participation in public decision-making forums, even where formal political reservations exist (Shah, 2002).

Similarly, youth from economically weaker households frequently encounter structural barriers to political engagement. Participation in local governance or party politics requires time, social networks, and sometimes financial resources. Young individuals from landless or migrant families may prioritize wage labor over political involvement, limiting their visibility in leadership spaces. In contrast, educated youth from relatively stable households are better positioned to articulate demands and occupy representative roles (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008).

Another dimension of inequality emerges between tribal sub-groups themselves. In districts such as Bankura and Paschim Medinipur, numerically dominant tribes often command greater political representation in Panchayats and local party structures. Smaller sub-groups may feel marginalized within broader tribal mobilizations, perceiving that their specific needs receive less attention. Thus, identity-based mobilization, while empowering at the macro level, can mask layered inequalities within the community.

In this sense, tribal identity is not experienced uniformly. It intersects with socio-economic status, gender roles, and educational attainment to produce differentiated political experiences. Recognizing these intersections is crucial for understanding why some voices within tribal politics are amplified while others remain peripheral.

Changing Political Context: The political landscape of tribal regions in West Bengal has undergone significant transformation over the past few decades. Increased electoral competition, decentralization through Panchayati Raj institutions, and the expansion of welfare schemes have heightened the strategic importance of tribal constituencies. Political parties actively mobilize tribal voters by promising infrastructure development, employment schemes, educational scholarships, and improved access to healthcare.

This heightened political attention has improved the visibility of tribal issues in mainstream discourse and expanded opportunities for representation. Reserved seats in local governance have enabled greater participation of Scheduled Tribes in decision-making structures. However, this expansion of political competition has also intensified factionalism and patronage-based politics. Access to welfare schemes—housing benefits, employment guarantees, and educational grants—often becomes mediated by party affiliation and local power networks (Shah, 2002). As a result, intra-community divisions may deepen along political lines.

Simultaneously, broader socio-economic transformations are reshaping tribal society. Migration to urban centers, employment in industrial sectors, and exposure to mass media have altered aspirations among tribal youth. In northern districts such as Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar, migration linked to tea garden labor and urban employment has introduced new forms of income and lifestyle differentiation. Urban exposure often brings new educational ambitions and occupational goals that diverge from traditional agrarian livelihoods.

Education, in particular, has become a key driver of changing hierarchies. Access to higher education and formal employment generates a nascent tribal middle class that occupies influential roles in political and administrative structures (Xaxa, 2008). While this development signals progress and empowerment, it also creates new class distinctions within the community. Traditional authority structures coexist with emerging educated elites, producing a layered and dynamic social order.

Conclusion:

Tribal politics in West Bengal reflects both collective struggle and internal differentiation. While Scheduled Tribes such as the Santhals, Oraons, Mundas, and Bhumij have mobilized effectively for rights and development, internal inequalities remain significant. Economic stratification, gender disparities, educational differences, and elite dominance shape the distribution of power and resources within communities.

Understanding tribal politics, therefore, requires moving beyond the notion of a homogeneous tribal identity. A critical examination of internal inequality reveals the need for more inclusive and equitable political practices. Only by addressing these internal disparities can tribal politics fully realize its emancipatory potential and contribute to sustainable and just development in West Bengal.

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