

Missing Soul of Little Republics: A Study of Gram Panchayat in Fifth Scheduled Areas

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ABSTRACT: Panchayat (Extension to Schedule Areas) Act, 1996 popularly known as PESA considered to be a boon to communities who live in forests and hills for continuity of self-rule and empowerment. The main aim of this act is to preserve the *Janjati* culture and land from the exploitation of so-called outsiders. *Gram Sabha* is the soul of *Gram Panchayats* in Scheduled Areas vested enormous powers to protect the land, forests, customs, and traditions of *Janjati* and avail government benefits at the grass root level. Though its provisions are implemented in the election of *Panchayat* members, women's representation, arrangement of *Gram Sabha*, control over village-level offices, natural resources, etc., the real spirit of the PESA Act 1996 is missing at grassroot level. Mining of minerals has become a major threat in Scheduled Areas as it led to displacement of people from their original habitats. In majority of the cases, mining is taking place without the approval of *Gram Panchayat* or *Gram Sabha*. Though the transfer of land to non-tribal is not permitted in these areas, many non-tribals procure the land for mining and other purposes on *benami* transactions. Under these circumstances, the present study tries to understand the dynamics of implementation of PESA provisions in Fifth Schedule Areas. An effort is also made to understand the overlaps between traditional and modern *Panchayats* in conserving their customary law, traditions, and culture from anthropological perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Self-governance is the undeniable norm of *Janjati* who live in isolation, forests, interior places to avoid the subjugation of different kingdoms and colonial rulers in India. In post-Independence, national governments-initiated efforts to bring them into the mainstream by launching various developmental programmes. But due to their age-old customs and traditions, *Janjati* are deprived of enjoying the fruits of development and still languishing in remote areas. Since the isolated forest dwellers were open to the general population through infrastructure, they were subjected to exploitation in terms of money-lending,

land alienation, human trafficking, etc. The larger chunk of forests was cleared and encouraged permanent cultivation and mono-varieties of vegetation. With this, tribals are losing their traditional livelihoods and finally led movements to protect their motherland. One such movement taken place among the *Adivasis* of *Muthang* in Wayanad Wild Life Sanctuary in Kerala. Where innocent tribals were brutally killed, and the uprising was crushed by the police force. The migration of plainsmen and expansion of the land market lured the nature-loving Kuruchian and Kuruman tribes towards the vices of modernity. Their subsistence-oriented lands were mortgaged to plainsmen, and eventually, they were dispossessed

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from their motherland. The Kerala State Land Reforms Act and Scheduled Tribes Act could not protect the traditional rights of tribes, and they became bonded labour in their territory (Bijoy and Ravi Raman, 2003).

Even the implementation of the PESA act also worked for the cross purpose of conservation of *Janjati* culture and identity. In the case of Jharkhand, holding *Panchayat* elections and granting financial powers to the elected heads led to the collapse of traditional political structures. The newly created Tribal Advisory Councils (TACs) are becoming toothless, and the state does not uphold the *Gram Sabha* decisions on the pretext of the non-conduct of elections on time. Though the PESA act gave enormous powers to *Gram Sabha*, the officials were reluctant to withdraw their powers and acted unaware of its provisions (Sundar, 2005). The ground reality of tribal belts in Scheduled areas of Odisha also reveals the blurred picture of the act where the decentralization process is merely a ritual; the integration of tribal culture, customs, and traditions are missing in the actual implementation of PESA. The *Panchayats* in these areas are merely focusing on the implementation of developmental programmes and are not concerned about the core features of the PESA act. Considering the gaps in implementation, evaluation studies made suggestions and recommendations for its effective implementation (Mohapatra, 2015; Patnaik and Patnaik, 2010-11; Ota *et al.*, 2010). Many of the commissions and committees on tribal situations pointed out the miserable condition while implementing PESA provisions in Scheduled Areas by various tribal dominant states. To understand the grassroot implementation of PESA provisions, a case study of Lalpur *Panchayat* of Pushparajgarh *Tehsil* in Anuppur district of Madhya Pradesh was selected and studied intensively.

Madhya Pradesh is the second largest State in India in terms of area and possesses a rich heritage of culture and natural resources. As per the 2011 census, the total population is 72,626,809, of which are male and female, 37,612,306 and 35,014,503 respectively. In 2023 estimated total population is 8,50,02,417, representing 4,40,19,895 males and 4,09,82,522 females. The sex ratio increased from 927 in the 2001 census to 936 in the 2011 census, which is still below the national average. The literacy rate has increased to 69.32,

consisting of male 78.73 per cent and female literacy at 54.49 per cent, respectively. Whereas the sex ratio of women is high in tribal-dominated areas compared to other non-tribal areas, i.e., the Dindori district sex ratio of women is 1007 per 1000 males. It is also having the highest number of tribal populations, i.e., 14.7%, when compared to other states in the Indian union. Among them, Gond is the prominent tribe and has the largest population. According to the 2011 census, 21.1% population belongs to Scheduled Tribes, who inhabit 33.6 per cent of the total geographical area of the notified 5th Schedule. The tribes in Scheduled Areas largely depended on forest resources for their survival besides agriculture, animal husbandry, and wage labour. Minor forests, *nistar* lands, and common pool resources have been managed through their customary laws since generation. However, with the introduction of *Panchayats* in tribal areas, the control and management regimes are shifted from traditional patterns to official administration, where the usurpation of resources is expected.

With the entry of non-tribal communities and modernity, the age-old institutions of self-rule are gradually diminishing in these areas. While protecting the tribal culture, social institutions, and self-rule, the government extended the *Panchayats* to tribal areas as per the recommendation of the Bhuria Committee to reach development benefits to them. Based on these recommendations, the Government of India promulgated the provisions of the *Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996*. The state governments needed to amend their *Panchayat Raj Acts* according to PESA rules within a year to implement this act. As such Madhya Pradesh *Panchayati Raj Adhiniyam Act* consolidated in 1994 and established *Panchayats* in tribal areas to extend developmental programmes to them. In 1997, Madhya Pradesh state again brought *Dwitiya (Sanshodhan) Adhiniyam* to confirm that the central government launched PESA. Out of 51 districts in the state, the districts of Barwani, Chhindawara, Jhabua and Alirajpur have the highest tribal population, and the rest cover the nominal tribal population. Of 89 Tribal Development Blocks, 5211 *Gram Panchayats* are notified in five Scheduled areas. Even in a single district, some areas are covered under the 5th Schedule, whereas others come under revenue ones. This act

empowers the *Gram Sabha* in these districts earmarked scheduled areas to decide on the rules and regulations regarding natural resources in the area.

To make effective implementation of the PESA act, the Ministry of Panchayat Raj drafted model PESA rules in 2009 and consequently adopted by eight states in different years in their state Panchayat Raj Acts. They are mainly Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Telangana. Recently Chhattisgarh notified PESA rules on 8th August 2022, and states like Jharkhand and Odisha are still under the inter-departmental consultation stage only. However, very recently, on 17th November 2022, the Madhya Pradesh state government notified its PESA rules on the occasion of *Janjatiya Gaurav Diwas* on 15th October 2022. As a result, the debate over democratic governance and participatory development has received the attention of academicians, policy-makers and other action groups. The rapid growth of developmental programmes and their implementation through the *Panchayats* led to the empowerment of tribes by not affecting their socio-cultural issues (Mohapatra, 2018). In this context, it is essential to understand the effects of such democratic decentralization in tribal areas through micro-level studies.

The central government established the nationally reputed first tribal university in Amarkantak (near to Lalpur village) in 2008 to develop the tribal hinterlands of the *Mekal* hills of the Satpura range. Consequently, an exodus of the non-tribal population has been continuously growing, and obviously, demand for tribal land was increased because of their business interests. The present Lalpur is a heterogenous village representing Yadav, Banjara, other backward communities, and Gond, Panika, Agaria, and other tribal communities. However, now the Yadav and other backward classes (OBC) lands are being purchased by the immigrant population and massively constructed *pucca* houses to accommodate the floating student population. These land transfers were limited to non-tribal populations and extended to the encroachment of tribal lands on *benami* names. If such kind of land transfers are not stopped, it will create a chaotic situation and finally lead to the displacement of tribal from their land and make them

labourers in their fields. Further, this area is infamous for illegally mining bauxite, and many of the tribal lands are mined illegally by luring them for pecuniary benefits. As such present study becomes relevant in understanding the impact of the PESA Act, the clandestine exploitation of tribal communities and the future consequences of resource usurpation in Scheduled Areas.

Objective of the Study: The present study focuses on the actual implementation of the Panchayat (Extension in Scheduled Areas) 1996 Act in a tribal village in their *Gram Panchayat*. Further, the study also emphasizes on the role of a traditional village council in the presence of a democratically elected modern *Gram Panchayat*. The main focus was also made on the management of village affairs with the cooperation of village elders and *Panchayat* officials. The study village is located just beside the Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, and the villagers are under tremendous pressure of acculturation. Unavoidable contact with university employees with native tribes in the form of wage labour, security guards, milkmen, and vegetable vendors enforce them to the vices of modernity. As a result, the immigrant population found a niche in the village, which finally led to their land encroachment. As such, the present study focuses on the functioning of *Gram Panchayat*, keeping in view the notification of the latest PESA rules and their impact on the traditional council in the village. Further, an effort is also made to understand how the role of the *Panchayat* in implementing various developmental programmes and coping with external interventions.

METHODOLOGY

Study Area: Since the present study is a micro-level study aimed at understanding the functioning of institutional frameworks in a tribal village, fieldwork was conducted during March-April 2023 and collected primary data using a qualitative research design. Anthropological methods like observation, structured interviews, questionnaires, and focus group discussions were used to collect data. Secondary data were collected from records of *Gram Panchayat* to support the primary data.

For the present study, Lalpur village *Gram Panchayat* was selected. It consists of Lalpur,

Bhamaria, and IGNTU campuses. It comes under Pushparajgarh *Tehsil* of Anuppur District in Madhya Pradesh state. It is a heterogenous village which consists of Gond, Panika, Agaria, Banjara, and Yadav communities. A tribal population and women dominating the study village are catalytic for family income through agriculture, MGNREGA, and wage labour in a nearby university.

TABLE 1

Population details of Lalpur Gram Panchayat, 2022

Hamlets in GP	Male	Female	Total
Lalpur	593	583	1176
Bhamariya	194	198	392
Total	787	781	1568

Source: Baseline Survey of Gram Panchayat 2022

The present study Lalpur *Gram Panchayat* consists of 1,568 population representing 787 males and 781 females, spread in the main Lalpur and Bhamariya. Gond is the dominant population in Lalpur, followed by Panika, Yadav, Banjara, Agaria, Ahir, Chamar, Choudhuri and Jogi, etc. Since the study village comes under the 5th Schedule Area, land transfer between tribes and non-tribals is prohibited as per law. However, the university employees and non-tribes who frequent from different parts of the country grabbed all the roadside cultivable lands from Yadav and Banjara communities. The tribal lands were also transferred to university Scheduled Tribes employees and non-tribal on *binami* names. Massive *pucca* houses are under construction in the village due to the increasing demand for employee and student accommodation on a rental basis. With the establishment of a university near the village, many non-tribal populations frequent Lalpur on account of business and purchasing tribal lands by resorting to fraudulent ways. Initially, non-tribal communities in the village were given protection certificates for settlement purposes. But now they are selling their lands to employees to fill their monetary needs. The *Sarpanch* expressed deep concern about the rising land encroachment cases in Lalpur and people was unaware of the powers of the existing PESA Act. To procure tribal land, non-tribals resort to fraudulent means, i.e., money-lending, alcohol abuse, and keeping tribal women as *benami*. Earlier PESA rules have not been adhered to strictly in the village, and hence the majority of natural resources are encroached on by contractors exploiting their rich

mineral resources. The village consists of a stone-crushing unit that resorts to illegal mining. The village and *Panchayat* were not getting any revenue from exploiting minor minerals.

Functioning of Gram Panchayat

In 2022 new *Panchayat* body was elected representing Lalpur, consisting of a *Sarpanch*, *Upa-Sarpanch* and ten ward members. They were assisted by secretarial staff such as *Sachiv* (Village Secretary), *Patwari* (revenue assistant), *Rojgar Sahayak* (MGNREGA Assistant), Gram Sabha Mobiliser, *Chaprasi* (peon) etc.

TABLE 2

People's representatives in Lalpur Gram Panchayat 2023

Position held in Gram Panchayat category	Sex	Social category
<i>Sarpanch</i>	M	Gond
<i>Upa-Sarpanch</i>	F	Panika
<i>Dongri Tola</i> (Ward Member 1)	M	Gond
<i>Pandan Tola</i> (Ward Member 2)	M	Yadav
<i>Panika Tola</i> (Ward Member 3)	F	Yadav
<i>Mazha Tola</i> (Ward Member 4)	M	Gond
<i>School Tola</i> (Ward Member 5)	F	Gond
<i>Barra Tola</i> (Ward Member 6)	F	Agaria
<i>IGNTU Tola</i> (Ward Member 7)	F	Panika
<i>Johila Tola</i> (Ward Member 8)	F	Gond
<i>Bheej Tola</i> (Ward Member 9)	M	Gond
<i>Konha Tola</i> (Ward Member 10)	M	Gond

Source: Fieldwork data, 2023

Each ward is known with local names derived from the place or location, such as near school it is school *tola*, near Johila dam it is Johila *tola*, etc. The above table shows that six ward members, including *Upa-Sarpanch*, belong to women, and the remaining are men. Though *Gram Panchayat* is composed per reservation of the PESA Act 1996, the *Panchayat* secretarial staff/officials are dominated by men. Even the women ward members are not actively participating in the decision-making process of *Gram Panchayat* meetings. During fieldwork, it is observed that the *Gram Panchayat* meetings are attended by their husbands, who take decisions on their behalf. Later, it is ratified by taking a thumb impression or signature. Hence, on paper, women's participation is clearly visible, but in practice, it is not so as expected as per the provisions of PESA.

Their age-old traditional village council consists of *Pradhan* (headman), *Gautiya* (priest), *Siyans* (clan elders), and *Kotwar* (messenger) also held its meetings

on essential occasions like dispute resolution, a celebration of marriage and death ceremonies to fix the dates for annual village festivals, etc. However, now, the typical traditional council meetings are not happening as the majority of the decisions for village development are taking place at *Gram Panchayat* and *Gram Sabha* meetings. The *Siyans* are invited to *Gram Sabha* and take their opinion ornamentally before making decisions for developmental works such as laying concrete roads, selecting major works under MGNREGA, and eligibility of beneficiaries for various developmental schemes. Sarpanch acts as a *Pradhan* in even council meetings. Instead of the traditional village council, *Siyans* (clan or hamlet elders) now met often for dispute resolution. Further, they also play a symbolic role in rituals *mangni* (betrothal), marriage, *dasgatra* (funeral rites), and worship at *Gao Gossain* celebration of common village festivals.

Gao Gossain is a common village sacred centre where *Thakurdeo*, *Marrimata*, *Thakurain*, *Budimai* are worship on important occasions such as *Bidri*, *Haryali*, *Chait Navaratri*, *Jawara*, and *Teeja*. Besides, they also worship *Badadev*, *Siddhbaba*, and *Durga mata* at their respective houses and temple located on hillock near to weekly market. In *Chait Navaratri*, villagers implant paddy or wheat at ritualized place at *Gao Gossain* after completion of *Amavasya* (no moon) day and a care taker is selected on behalf of the village who pour water three times a day to the seeds and maintain sacred lamp upto eight days. On 9th day, all the villagers take the seedlings on their heads on procession and immerse in Johila Dam. Presence of *Siyans* is essential in such common worship. In such community festivals, the role of *Siyans* is more visible than the elected *Panchayat* leaders.

Whenever disputes arise in the village on account of land, adultery, theft and so on, the *Siyans* assemble and try to resolve the matter in a peaceful manner. The villagers' approach *Siyans* council for smooth resolution since approaching police or court for conflict resolution is an expensive affair. The *Sarpanch* will liaison between traditional council elders and government officials. He has to take decisions considering the advice of the *Siyans*. However, due to vested administrative and financial powers, *Sarpanch* play a more decisive role than *Siyans*.

TABLE 3
Council of Siyans in Lalpur 2023

Name	Social Category
Ahiro (Jai Singh)	Agaria
Pundhi Singh	Gond
Ganesh Singh	Gond
Jagannath	Yadav
Boudha	Panika
Dayadeen	Gond
Phool Singh	Gond

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Unlike earlier Council meetings, now only four to five *Siyans* sit together and resolve the disputes to avoid the unnecessary wastage of time and money by roaming around Amarkantak Police station. Now *Sarpanch* act as *Pradhan* and presence of *Gautiya* and *Kotwar* is not visible. Though post of *Kotwar* exists in official records, he is always accompanied with *Patwari*. Very rarely, *Kotwar* attend the *Siyans* or *Panchayat* meetings. With the introduction of modern *Panchayats* slowly its significance fading away in the village. Now the *Siyans* are working as wage labour or vendors for their livelihood and could not get the status as they enjoyed in olden days.

Farmers in Lalpur often give their lands under short-term lease to fellow tribesmen or non-tribe which is known as *Adhiya Kheti* (share cropping). In case the land owner unable to cultivate his land for any reason, the land is given to landless farmer for cultivation. The harvest is shared equally by the share cropper with the land owner. In case of any investment is made for the proposed crop, the cost of investment is keeping a side and the rest of the crop is shared equally. Sometimes, non-tribe lend money to Gond and other tribal farmers and keep the cultivating land as a mortgage. As long as the money is not returned, the money-lender forcefully cultivate the land and consume the harvest individually. It is known as *Gahan Kheti* (land mortgage). In such case, harvest is not shared with the landowner and keep it as interest. In case the land-owner failed to return, the land is permanently cultivated by non-tribes. There is no written agreement for *Adhiya* or *Gahan* in the village. It is purely based on trust and belief. Generally, tribes are peace loving people and could not claim the right as they feel it is against to their cultural ethos. Taking this point into consideration, non-tribes vanguard to advance loans to villagers with ill-

intension of grabbing their lands. Even such cases are also not discussed in the *Gram Panchayat* or *Gram Sabha* since they take oath or promise not to reveal such kind of agreements with third party. In case disclosed, they were threatened to face the dire consequences. Now a days, cases of land division in joint families are increasing in the village and approaching *Siyans* for resolution. During fieldwork, the Agaria brother approach *Siyans* for division of their ancestral lands since they are planning to sell it to non-tribals. One of the two brother, already taken money under *Gahan* and demanded more share than elder brother. As other party not agreed to this, they approached *Gram Panchayat* which in turn approached *Siyans* for its amicable solution. The case is not resolved so far but still pending.

In compliance of PESA Act, *Gram Panchayat* formed a peace committee with seven members in Lalpur which consists of ex-*Sarpanches* and elderly people. It is also working for the cross purpose of *Siyans*'s council. On enquiry, *Siyans* stated that an educated villagers should act as peace committee members as they are uneducated and could not handle police, officials, and lawyers. Now village is overloaded with diverse developmental programmes, and officials keep on engaging meeting with *Panchayat* representatives and their committees.

Gram Sabha

In the study village, all the villagers agreed to hold *Gram Sabha* once in a month on a particular day in a particular week. Generally, during busy agricultural works, weekly market day, funeral rites they avoid holding *Gram Sabha*. *Sarpanch* decides the proposed date of the *Gram Sabha* by discussion with Vice-*Sarpanch* and other ward members. To mobilize the people, one *Gram Sabha* Mobiliser (GSM) was appointed by *Janpad Panchayat* on contractual basis and paying a monthly honorarium of Rs.4,000/- In the study village, a post-graduate woman is appointed as GSM. Being a Gond, she was able to mobilize the villagers including ward members and self-help groups. An attendance register is maintained to record the minutes and take the signature of the attending members. Prior to *Gram Sabha*, GSM mobilize the ward members, *Siyans*, health and *Anganwadi* workers, and so on. Further, village messenger visits every ward

on motor bike and announce the date and venue of proposed *Gram Sabha* over loud speaker. In case messenger is not available due to some unavoidable reasons, GSM informing the ward members personally or over telephone who in turn asked to inform to the people of concerned ward. The proceedings of the *Gram Sabha* are documented through audio and video clips and shared in *Janpad Panchayat* Whatsapp group. All the mobilizers undergone training at Pushparajgarh *Tehsil* with master trainers witnessing District Collector, District, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), *Janpad* CEO, Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM), *Tehsildar*, and heads of all the live departments.

During *Gram Sabha*, *Sarpanch*, Panchayat Secretary, *Rojgar Sahayak*, *Patwari*, Community Health Worker, ANM, and villagers present. The village *Sarpanch* state that for January month *Gram Sabha*, very few people attended. Due to lack of quorum, they are forced to cancel it and rearranged on the next date. In this *Gram Sabha*, *Shanti Samithi* (Village Peace Committee) along with *Sarpanch* gave speech on prohibition of making indigenous *Mahuwa* liquor at their respective households. Further they created an awareness on ill-effects of alcohol consumption by youth and children. It is decided that in case of any disputes in the village, first they report in *Gram Sabha* or *Gram Panchayat*. If not resolved, then proceed to the police station or courts. Apart from this, members raised issues of irregularities in the supply of ration, water problem, toilet construction, sanitation works etc.

In the month of February 2023, only 10 women participated in *Gram Sabha* and 40 to 50 male members attended. To fill the quorum, GSM took signature from the womenfolk who frequent *Panchayat* Office on official work. Majority of the villagers attribute that if they want to attend the *Gram Sabha*, they need to lose one day wage labour. As such, *Gram Sabha* is attended by the villagers who have individual problems as well as members of Self-Help Groups. Generally, the agenda of the meeting was the inclusion of below poverty line (BPL) ration cards, issue of *Ayushman* card, job card, proposal of new works under MGNREGA, issues of Self-Help Groups, Survey for women for *Laadli Bahna Yojana*, *Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana*, inclusion of new names and deletion of non-residents, editing of

names in old lists, making new *Aadhar* cards, etc. During the launch of any government scheme also, *Panchayat* convey a special *Gram Sabha* for creating awareness and selection of beneficiaries as per eligibility.

On such *Gram Sabha* was held on 14th March 2023 in the afternoon to discuss about the *Ladly Behna Yojana*. The proposed *Gram Sabha* was supposed to held at 11 am but it was started after 12.30 pm. Nearly about 50 to 60 people attended the meeting of *Gram Sabha* of which two-thirds consists of women. Many of the villagers came and returned due to non-availability of *Sarpanch*, ward members, and other office bearers. Some got angry and expressed their dissatisfaction over the persistent delay in the beginning. Despite of these initial hiccups, *Gram Sabha* was started at 12.45 pm with the inaugural speech of *Sarpanch* regarding people awareness. Later on, *Sarpanch* requested the Secretary to explain the agenda of the meeting. Initially Secretary to explained to the august gathering about the ongoing door to door survey with regards to government survey on the ongoing developmental programmes in the village. Wherein list of programmes that are being implemented in Lalpur and their eligibility along with necessary documents are informed to the people. In the meeting, all the members are requested to present at their homes whenever the survey team approaches ward by ward to provide the requisite information. In case anyone devoid of governmental programmes or lacuna or omission of benefits due to technical reasons are noted there itself in the survey for resolution as early as possible. Further, Secretary also made awareness about the newly launched Madhya Pradesh state government scheme of *Ladli Behna Yojana*. For the proposed scheme, the documents required for online registration, the place of registration, available private services for early registration, etc., are explained minutely with the villagers. For the present *Gram Sabha*, other departmental staff participation is not found except Auxiliary Nurse and Midwife (ANM). Even she came and present for a while and left the venue after completion of photo coverage. The villagers expressed their satisfaction about the ongoing efforts of *Gram Panchayat* and all are agreed to extend their cooperation when the survey staff approaches their wards. With regard to persistent water problem,

Secretary revealed about the sanction of around one crore under *Nal Jal Yojana* and construction of water tank, pipeline connection to every household. For this already *Silanyas* (inaugural stone) was made during *Vikas Yatra* that was held in Lalpur in February month.

Exercising the Powers of Gram Sabha under PESA Act

In Lalpur *Gram Panchayat*, a weekly market used to held on every Wednesday wherein entry fee was collected from every vendor by *Gram Panchayat* through its nominated contractor. Generally, it is given for a whole year through bidding or auction. This year a Private Contractor belong to Barber community from nearby Bejhri village got the contract for an amount of Rs.1,40,000/- per annum. Wherein the sale and consumption of alcohol is prohibited by *Panchayat*. But the *Sarpanch* stated that due to university, so many vendors are coming to *Bazar* (weekly market) and getting huge amount of revenue. Hence, they decided to scrap the auctioning system next year and *Gram Panchayat* would initiate measures to collect the tax directly from the shop keepers and vegetable vendors. Recently, some *pucca* constructions were made in the weekly market place for accommodating frequenting vendors from Pendaroad, Pushparajgarh, and Anuppur by *Janpad Panchayat*. For this *pucca* construction, *Gram Panchayat* had no role in monitoring the construction works as it is overseen by the engineers from *Janpad Panchayat* along with contractors. As a result, the quality of constructions was compromised and hence getting damage day by day.

One stone crusher is located on the outskirts of the village who indulge in surface mining in Lalpur for stone boulders. As per PESA, prior permission from the *Gram Panchayat* is mandatory for grant of license or lease for exploitation of minor minerals in Scheduled Areas. But the present crushing unit has not taken any permission from it. Apart from this, revenue generated through small-scale mining or exploitation of minerals should be shared with the concerned *Gram Panchayat*. But Lalpur *Panchayat* is not getting any income from the existing Stone Crushing Unit. It belongs to non-tribe contractor from Amarkantak who hire labour from Lalpur, Karanjija,

and Uttar Pradesh.

The crushing unit depend on tribal lands for extraction of stone boulders. For this, the land owner is not paid any royalty or cash for removal of stones from the land. It is only the labour who extract stones and load the trucks will be given wages. After some time, if the land become flat, then the land owner converts this land into an agricultural field. In case stones are not removed properly, they leave these fields like barren land. For such extraction of minor minerals, neither *Gram Panchayat* nor provisions of PESA act are compiled in Lalpur. Instead of conserving such precious natural minerals, villagers they themselves engage in mining in their agricultural fields on free of cost to supply the boulders to the stone crushing unit with a hope to convert them into *Barra* (wet agricultural) lands.

Though *Gram Sabha* has the power to prevent alienation of land and take appropriate action to restore alienated tribal land. However, the sale and purchase of lands in Lalpur are taking place without the notice of *Gram Panchayat*. Even the tribal lands are purchased on *benami* names on cheaper rates. *Sarpanch* expressed his concern over the illegal land transfers and could not initiate proper action. But with the promulgation of new rules by the State government in 2022, now they are planning to discuss such illegal land transfers in *Gram Sabha* if victims come forward. But so far, no single case is discussed in *Gram Sabha*. This is attributed to lack of awareness of PESA rules and cumbersome bureaucratic procedures.

Gram Panchayat prohibited the manufacture and consumption of alcohol in the village. In case anyone attend *Gram Sabha* after consuming *mahuwa* will be fined upto Rs.1,000/- and debarred from attending consequent one. However, this rule is not strictly adhered to by the villagers. The village is basically a tribal village and *mahuwa* making is a household activity as it is compulsory for celebration of socio-cultural activities, marriage, death rites, offerings to their gods and goddesses, etc. As a curtesy, *Sarpanch* motivate the villagers for non-indulgence in liquor brewing in his *Gram Sabha* speeches.

Bhamaria hamlet situated very close to the forest and Johila dam whereas Lalpur is distantly located to the forest region. Minor Forest Produces like *mahuwa*,

tendu, char, fuelwood, roots and tubers, wild leaves, and medicinal herbs are collected from the nearby forest. Hence, *Van Samrakshana Samithi* (VSS) is created in Bhamaria hamlet not in Lalpur long back. But after formation new *Panchayat* body, it is not renewed. The erstwhile VSS is not active and hence *Sarpanch* is planning to change it for effective management of forest resources.

To resolve the problems of villagers, *Gram Panchayat* also maintains a *Jan Samasya Nivaran Panji* (complaint register) wherein problems or complaints in the village are written with date and follow-up action or solution is also mentioned in the same register after attending the complaints.

Auditing of funds under different developmental works are takes place at Pushparajgarh *Tehsil* level. At that time, *Sarpanch, Sachiv, and Rojgar Sahayak* visit along with records and vouchers. Due to this reason, while certification of works, *Sarpanch* will personally examine the work and certify only after its completion.

Water tanks located besides IGNTU campus and another one located at *Dongri tola*, grazing lands, *Gotan* (Peepal grove), forest near to Bhamaria are common property resources of the Lalpur village. In which all the villagers had access and *Gram Panchayat* monitor these resources from time to time. In case of any dispute relating to sharing of resources are dealt by *Panchayat* and an amicable solution is made.

Role of Gram Panchayat in Developmental Works

At present, *Katchara Ghar* (village dust-bin), Soak Pits, *Sakshata Parisar*, Irrigation Shed, *Samudayak Parisar, Nadebs*, etc., are the major developmental works active under MGNREGA in Lalpur. Sometimes payment for MGNREGA works are getting delayed due to lack of funds. As a result, *Sarpanch* and ward members face the wrath of the villagers. Due to this problem, many of the villagers are not willing to undertake MGNREGA works in the village and going to university for labour works as they will get higher wages and prompt weekly payment on weekly market day. Out of 304 job cards, only 205 are active in Lalpur now. Many proposals for new MGNREGA works i.e., *murmikaran* (Gravel Road repair), tank construction, *samatalikaran* (land

levelling), *naali nirman* (construction of water channels) are pending due to lack of labor in the village. In *Gram Sabha*, *Sarpanch* and other ward members pursuing the villagers to undertake these works. Though payment is less, the assets created will be useful for the village in long run.

Information of Self-Help Groups also *Gram Panchayat* playing a pivotal role in Lalpur village. Altogether 12 Self-Help Groups are functioning in the study village. They are mainly Santoshi *Swa-Sahayata Samuh*, Lakshmi *Swa-Sahayata Samuh*, Gomti *Swa-Sahayata Samuh*, Durga *Swa-Sahayata Samuh*, Gulab *Swa-Sahayata Samuh*, Siddhababa *Swa-Sahayata Samuh*, Johila *Swa-Sahayata Samuh*, Dhanlakshmi *Swa-Sahayata Samuh*, Jaleswar *Swa-Sahayata Samuh*, Shanti *Swa-Sahayata Samuh*, Narmadanchal *Swa-Sahayata Samuh*, and Narbadiya *Swa-Sahayata Samuh*. Every SHG consists of 10 women. Of which only two SHGs are undertaken the contract works such as Public Distribution System (PDS) ration distribution and arrangement of mid-day meal in schools. The remaining ones are simply contributing thrift amount of Rs.10/- per week per individual. They were availing loans and repaying them in time. In case of any defaulter, *Gram Panchayat* intervene and resolve the matter amicably. Otherwise, the entire group will have to face the consequences.

Panch Parivartan Yojana: Major works undertaken under this scheme are *med bandhan* (bund making around the pond), construction of toilets under *Swachh Bharat* by *Gram Panchayat*. Though toilets are constructed for every house, they are not in use for long as the whole village undergoing water crisis. Other major works undertaken under this scheme are afforestation, provision of drinking water, road laying, arrangement of kitchen-shed for midday meal in school.

Panch Parameswar Yojana: The significant works undertaken by the *Panchayat* are construction of boundary wall to *Panchayat Bhavan*, emergency well, light, computer facility as a part of smart *Panchayat*. Further, *Gram Panchayat* also engaged in *Naare Lekhan* (writing slogans) on the walls of the houses at important places where it gets attraction of people. Under this, *Panchayat* engaging private artists to create awareness in the village about the significance of *Gram Sabha*, PESA act, *Swachata Abhiyan*, etc.

Lady Bahna Yojana: It is a new scheme of Madhya Pradesh state government inaugurated on 15th March 2023 in the study village. For this, *Rojgar Sahayak*, *Panchayat Secretary*, *Gram Sabha Mobiliser*, *Anganwadi* workers are actively engaged in door-to-door survey to identify eligible women between 23 to 59 years. Under this scheme, the government is planning to transfer Rs.1,000/- to eligible women on a monthly basis to make them empower economically. March month *Gram Sabha* is specially arranged on this theme to make wide awareness among the villagers about the scheme. Further, members of *Gram Panchayat* also assisting the uneducated tribal women in the creation of bank account, KYC linking, generation of *Aadhar*, Age and Nativity certificate, Family *Samagra* ID, etc.

Ladli Lakshmi Yojana: Altogether 46 families are getting benefit under *Ladli Lakshmi Yojana* in Lalpur. For this, *Gram Panchayat* issue birth certificate as per the records of *Anganwadi* and nativity certificate proving the original inhabitants of the village. It also certifies the income details of the beneficiaries and certifies the details on the form. Apart from this, *Gram Panchayat* playing an active part in reaching social security pension to its beneficiaries from time to time and maintaining proper records.

TABLE 4

Social Security Schemes in Lalpur 2023

Type of Pension	Total Beneficiaries
Old Age Pension	45
Widow Pension	18
Physically Challenged	01
CM Kalyani Pension	34
<i>Nishakt</i> Pension	02
Social Security Pension	02
Total	97

Source: Gram Panchayat Records, 2023

TABLE 5

List of Beneficiaries of Development Schemes in Lalpur 2023

Development Scheme	Beneficiaries
PM <i>Awas Yojana</i>	140
MGNREGA <i>Shramik</i> job cards	304
<i>Ladli Lakshmi Yojana</i>	46
Toilet under <i>Swachh Bharat</i>	226
<i>Ayushman</i> Cards	797
BPL Ration Card holders	141

Source: Gram Panchayat Records, 2023

In case of any anomalies, the same is discussed

in *Gram Sabha* and rectified by producing valid proofs. In *Gram Sabha*, some people are complaining about the non-issue of Below Poverty Line (BPL) ration cards. On enquiry, Panchayat Secretary and *Sarpanch* reveal that altogether 29 columns in the application form need to be complied. In case anyone is lapsing issue of BPL card will be a difficult task. Since now a days all the certificates and cards are generated through e-portals. If sufficient documents are not uploaded, the concerned certificate or card will not generate. The practical difficulties are being explained in *Gram Sabha* and making awareness of stringent rules of government that are revised from time to time.

Siksha Samithi (Education Committee)

Lalpur *Gram Panchayat* monitoring the quality of education, school timings, quality of education, maintenance of school buildings, mid-day meal and formation of *Siksha Samithi*. At present three primary schools (i.e., Barratola, Lalpur, and Bhamaria) are functional in Lalpur *Gram Panchayat* and every school has its own educational committees with the parents of the pupils. Actually, *Siksha Samithi* consists of 18 members representing Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste, Other Backward Castes. But due to lack of SC members at Lalpur, it is formed with 16 members leaving two posts vacant. Every *Siksha Samithi* is having bank account on a joint basis with the president and member secretary. The present committees are formed in 2022 and revised once in two years at respective schools. Generally, selection is based on the greater number of wards studying in respective school. In case opposition arise, school teacher will organize secret ballot method to select the members as well as president.

At present Siddhababa *Swa-Sahayat Samuh* is providing mid-day meal to the two schools in Lalpur

i.e., School *tola* and Barra *tola*, and Saraswati *Swa-Sahayat Samuh* to Bhamaria school. Quality of the meal served by the *Samithi* is being checked by *Sarpanch* and ward members from time to time. Since children of their own families are eating the mid-day meal in schools, the *Samithi* is taking care in providing fresh vegetables and good quality rice. Teachers representing school problems in *Gram Sabha* meetings. Both *Sarpanch* and Panchayat Secretary resolve the issues, if possible, otherwise sent it to education department for intervention. Recently a proposal is made to solve the acute water problem in the school as already existing handpump is not working since 2019 onwards. The proposal is made by the headmaster of the school which is endorsed by *Sarpanch* and forwarded to the education department. Likewise, drop-out, continuous absenteeism, new enrollments, kitchen house repair, compound wall, new building, and other issues are the major concern which need intervention of *Gram Panchayat* through *Gram Sabha*. Under *Samajik Chetna Kendra*, school teacher and the nominated educated person are imparting adult education in Lalpur. At present 33 women are ready for giving examination.

Anganwadi Centre

At present six pregnant women and six delivered mothers are given nutritious food along with malnourished children in Lalpur whereas four pregnant women and two delivered mothers in Bhamaria. *Gram Panchayat* playing a vital role in the functioning of *Anganwadi* centre in Lalpur. Since, the previous building of *Anganwadi* has become too old and in a dilapidated condition. For the safety of children, *Sarpanch* and Panchayat Secretary shifted the centre to newly constructed community bhavan adjacent to the *Gram Panchayat* Bhavan.

TABLE 6

Strength of children, pregnant and delivered women at anganwadi centre

Name of the <i>Anganwadi</i>	06 months to 03 years		03-06 years		Pregnant women (Garbhavati)	Delivered Mother (Dhatri)
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls		
Lalpur	15	20	25	21	06	06
Bhamaria	11	11	01	11	04	02

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Panchayat also catalytic in motivating the parents of the malnourished children to send their

wards to *Anganwadi* for nutritious food. In case children having low weight or extreme level of mal-nourishment are referred to Nutrition for Rural Children (NRC) center located at Pushparajgarh *Tehsil* for proper nutrition. But unfortunately, the tribal families who frequent to NRC could not accommodate in new place and hence return within four or five days instead of completion of 14 days camp. Frequently they visit *Anganwadi* and check the activities, i.e., teaching, immunization, supply of nutrition, etc. They also monitor the quality of food supplied by *Swa-Sahayata Samuh* to the children, pregnant women and delivered mothers. They are also motivating the parents for creation of *Samagra* Identity Cards for 3 to 6 years children. Otherwise, they deprive of ration from Public Distribution System (PDS). *Anganwadi* workers help the uneducated parents in the creation of *Aadhar* and birth certificates at *Gram Panchayat*. At present, all the children who are admitted in *Anganwadi* are created *Samagra* Identity Cards. In turn, *Anganwadi* workers also assist *Gram Panchayat* in conducting door to door survey every year for population census, selection of beneficiaries for any development programme, vaccination, assistance in health camps, etc.

Tadhar Samithi

It is created exclusively to monitor the activities of *Anganwadi*. It consists of a president, a secretary, and eight members. Except member secretary who is by default *Anganwadi* worker other office bearers change every year. It is just a mere selection by *Gram Panchayat* instead of election. A savings bank account is opened in a cooperative bank on joint account of President and Secretary. The money sanctioned by the ICDS is spent on *annaprasana* (first feeding) and *mangal diwas* (*godhbharai* or felicitation to pregnant women). Every *Anganwadi* has its own *Tadhar Samithi* i.e., Lalpur and Bhamariya has separate *Tadhar* committees and reorganized every year basis of the newly admitted wards.

CONCLUSION

From the above data, elected *Gram Panchayat* are playing a pivotal role in accruing developmental benefits to its target population. Since all the developmental benefits (i.e., ration card, *Aadhar*,

health card, voter Identity Card, birth and death certificates) are channelled through online, the role of *Gram Panchayat* has become important in the village. Now a days, the documentation was channelized through online in all the *Gram Panchayats* in the state. Hence, people approach *Panchayat* for clearance of documents as well as uploading the fresh documents with the help of secretarial staff. After the implementation of PESA act, *Gram Sabha* has become a vital in creating awareness about the ongoing developmental programmes and schemes. However, the true spirit of PESA i.e., integration of tribal culture, customs, and traditions in planning process, significance of traditional council in dispute resolution, management of common property resources are really missing.

Gram Panchayat has become another wing of bureaucracy in facilitating the access of developmental benefits to target population. It is acting just as implementing agency and not exercising real powers of self-governance, i.e., prevention of illegal land transfers, mining, and resource exploitation. *Sarpanch* and ward members acting just on the advice of *Panchayat* Secretary who is an agent of administration. Basic provisions PESA Act to empower the *Gram Sabha* to manage and control its own resources is not meted out as it is evident from the extraction stone boulders from farmer's land in Lalpur. Council of traditional headman *Siyans* are ornamental in *Gram Sabha* meetings and the elected representatives are become power mongers. Further special powers endowed to *Gram Sabha* are not visible as importance is given on how to reach the development schemes to target population. No efforts are made to ensure the development in harmony with their culture, tradition, and practices. Conservation of traditional rights over natural resources i.e., land, forest, and water and other minor forest produce are missing and the *Panchayat* acting as the real owner of the resources. As a result, factions are created in a village to win the election and become its office bearer. If things carry on like this, violence, corruption, and exploitation may become common feature in peace-loving tribal hamlets. As such, it is the need of the hour to create awareness of PESA act through folk media to enable the tribals to harvest the benefits of the PESA Act rather than simply adhering to

procedures.

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