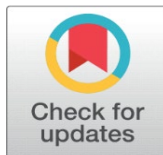


STUDY ON VISUAL SCENARIOS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE POLITICAL ORGANIZATION OF THE KISANS OF SAMBALPUR DISTRICT IN ODISHA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the political organization of the Kisans of Sambalpur district, Odisha, using visual scenario methods. Sambalpur, known for its agrarian diversity, irrigation networks, and history of peasant resistance, provides an important context to understand how farmers collectively negotiate power, leadership, and resources. Conventional approaches to rural political analysis—such as textual surveys, interviews, and statistical documentation—often overlook the everyday visual and spatial dimensions of political life. To address this gap, this research employs participatory mapping, photo voice techniques, network diagrams, and thematic visualizations to reconstruct how Kisans perceive and practice political organization. The findings reveal that political structures among Kisans extend beyond formal institutions like unions, cooperatives, and party units, encompassing informal arrangements shaped by geography, caste, gender, and economic relations. These visual scenarios demonstrate how power is both concentrated and contested within village spaces. The study argues that visual approaches provide a new perspective on rural politics by revealing invisible patterns and encouraging Kisans to reflect on their modes of organization. Beyond research insights, these methods can serve as participatory tools for policy and planning, aiding in dispute resolution, welfare program design, and inclusive governance. Overall, visual scenarios offer both analytical depth and practical utility in understanding and strengthening the political organization of Kisans in Sambalpur.

Keywords: Kisans, Political Organization, Sambalpur District, Odisha, Visual Scenarios, Participatory Mapping, Rural Politics

1. INTRODUCTION

The political organization of the Kisans in Sambalpur district forms a significant component of the tribal governance structure in Odisha. Human beings, regarded as the supreme creation of nature, pass through the universal cycle of birth, survival, and death within the framework of civilization. In the course of life, individuals engage in various social, economic, and cultural activities. Their virtuous deeds are appreciated and remembered, while their mistakes or violations often invite correction or sanction. Among the Kisans, collective regulation of social life has traditionally been maintained through community-based institutions. One such

traditional forum is the Kisan Village or Kisan Jati , where villagers assemble to deliberate on communal matters, resolve disputes, and ensure discipline within the group. These gatherings not only function as mechanisms of social control but also serve as spaces for decision-making, leadership selection, and the preservation of customary norms. (Biswal, K. P., & Acharya, K. N., 2006, pp. 113–114) Unlike the modern Gram Panchayat Bhavan, the traditional Kisan does not possess a permanent building for its activities. Instead, meetings are usually convened in open spaces, often beneath a large tree, where a specially constructed stone platform or seat—locally known as the Slub (Chabutra)—serves as the central site for deliberations. It is in this space that members of the community come together to address a wide range of issues. These include matters related to customs and belief systems, cases associated with practices such as black magic and mantra-tantra, and disputes arising within families, particularly concerning divorce or remarriage. Additionally, the functions as an informal judicial body to resolve conflicts over agricultural lands, gardens, property boundaries, and financial transactions such as loans. In this way, the Kisan continues to operate as a grassroots institution of conflict resolution and community governance. (Biswal, K. P., & Acharya, K. N., 2006, p. 113)

After a dispute is settled, the Kisan Village ensures that its decision is implemented. Offenders may be required to return livestock, repay money, or face other punishments, especially in serious cases like murder or rape. Following the ruling, both the complainant and the accused often provide food and refreshments for those present, with community feasts sometimes serving as part of the penalty. The also reprimands those who violate social or religious norms, reflecting the belief that wrongdoing invites divine punishment. To restore harmony, the community may hold worship ceremonies and festivals to honor their deities and ancestors. (Biswal, K. P., & Acharya, K. N. 2006, p. 113)

With the introduction of Panchayati Raj, the traditional functioning of community gatherings like the Kisan has undergone several changes, affecting the rules and practices of the Kisan community. The Sarpanch, elected according to the Panchayati Raj Act, now holds a position of authority and is accorded prominence within village affairs. As noted by Xaxa, one of the key features of the Panchayati Raj system is that state regulations governing the Panchayats are expected to respect customary practices, social and religious norms, and the traditional management of communal resources. Under this system, every village has a council or village empowered to uphold customary methods of dispute resolution, safeguard local traditions and cultural identities, and protect communal assets. (Xaxa, 2008, p. 71) He stated that the Act now acknowledges the authority, administrative role, and jurisdiction that were traditionally exercised by the community or the village.

To assess the legitimacy of customary laws and their acceptance within the Kisan tribal community, it is essential to examine the structure and functioning of the traditional village, or Kisan.

1.1. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) To examine the structure and functioning of the traditional Kisan in Sambalpur district.
- 2) To analyze how customary laws and social norms are enforced within the Kisan tribal community.
- 3) To explore the impact of Panchayati Raj on the traditional practices of the Kisan.

- 4) To document dispute resolution mechanisms and leadership roles at the village level.
- 5) To investigate the use of visual scenarios in understanding the political organization of kisans.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative research design with an emphasis on visual scenario methods to understand the political organization of Kisans in Sambalpur district, Odisha. Six villages across three blocks were purposively selected to capture variations in geography, social composition, and agricultural practices. Key participants included village elders, Sarpanch, union leaders, women farmers, and youth representatives. Data were collected through participatory mapping, where villagers illustrated households, communal spaces, and political nodes; photovoice, with participants capturing photographs of significant political and social practices; semi-structured interviews; focus group discussions; and direct observation of village meetings and dispute resolution sessions. The collected data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns in leadership, dispute settlement, and the role of customary laws. Visual outputs, such as maps and photographs, were interpreted to understand spatial, social, and political dimensions of Kisan organization. Ethical considerations were strictly followed, with informed consent obtained from all participants, confidentiality maintained, and community approval sought for all visual materials used in the study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. REGULAR MEMBER OF THE KISAN VILLAGE

Regular participants in the Kisan Village are generally the heads of each household. The household head serves as a permanent member of the (Figure 1), and no formal election is required for this position. Membership does not demand any specific qualifications or credentials; however, members are expected to demonstrate good character, treating their families and fellow villagers with fairness and respect. They are entrusted with addressing issues, grievances, and community initiatives with patience and diligence. Consequently, family heads actively participate in the Kisan and help maintain the institution's integrity. The local also includes household heads from various ethnic groups within the village, ensuring inclusive representation. This structure fosters social harmony, as all families—regardless of caste, ethnicity, or religion—participate in community affairs and coexist peacefully within the village. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 114–121)

Figure 1



Figure 1 The picture is showing the Village council of the Kisan community of the Jharmal village of the Kuchinda Block of the Sambalpur district.

Source The photograph has taken by the scholar.

Members of the village actively contribute their perspectives during decision-making, thereby supporting the functioning of the Kisan. All topics discussed in the meeting are open for deliberation, and the Panigiri questions each party in turn. Decisions are often guided by the ideas and inputs of individual members, who are then assigned specific roles based on their contributions. Through this process, they gain the confidence of the Mukhia and also communicate the gravity of the offender's sentence. While the Mukhia holds the formal authority to enforce punishment, the majority of members may attempt to influence or advocate for adjustments. If it is observed that an offender is receiving a lighter penalty than warranted, the group may approach the Mukhia to request an increase in the sentence. Additionally, members willingly assist both the Mukhia and the Panigiri in tasks related to the as well as other community activities. Members remain available to support the Mukhia whenever needed. Meetings of the village are conducted in an organized and structured manner, ensuring that each participant can contribute effectively. Collectively, the members strive to maintain and uphold the honour and integrity of the traditional Village. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 114–121)

3.2. DISPUTES ADJUDICATED IN THE VILLAGE

At the village level, the primary governing body is known as the Kisan Sabha or the Traditional Community Sabha. The leaders or office bearers of the Sabha are responsible for ensuring that the institution functions effectively. The Sabha becomes more representative, transparent, and participatory when household heads actively participate as members. Decisions are made democratically through public input and majority consensus; however, leaders must also adopt a democratic mindset to exercise their authority responsibly and ensure fairness. In decision-making, the roles and actions of individuals such as the Kalo, Panigiri, and Nayak are carefully considered. The traditional Kisan Sabha serves as the central forum for addressing all community matters, conflicts, and disputes. It handles a wide range of issues, including theft, marriage-related matters such as bride absorption or return to the parental home, divorce, non-compliance with Sabha decisions, fights, general misbehavior, eve-teasing, physical abuse of girls, property and land disputes, family disagreements, conflicts over religious practices, losses arising from superstition, and other social and non-social concerns. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 122–123)

In addition to the previously mentioned matters, the Village Sabha also oversees issues such as road maintenance, scheduling of devotional days, cultural programs, festivals, and other social events. The Sabha is responsible for organizing and managing all these activities. Political engagement begins at the individual level and extends to the household and then the village level. These matters represent some of the most significant aspects of village governance and community life. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 123–125)

- Cases involving women who have been forced to leave their homes.
- Domestic disputes between husband and wife that involve extended family members.
- Conflicts arising when a young man holds resentment toward his brother or others due to an illicit relationship with a sister-in-law or another man's wife.
- Matters concerning a Ghar-jawain who may be driven out of the household.
- Instances of theft or property-related offenses.

- Cases where a young man engages in secret sexual relations with a woman or girl and denies responsibility for a resulting pregnancy.
- Disputes related to an elder brother's relationship with his younger brother's wife.
- Incidents involving sexual assault or rape.
- Conflicts arising from the sudden rejection of a previously agreed marriage proposal.
- Disputes among siblings over the division of family property or household assets.
- Cases where someone is found publicly practicing black magic intended to harm others.
- Situations where a couple elopes despite prior agreement to marry.
- Conflicts arising from the demarcation of land boundaries. Disputes between a young man and women arising from intimate relationships.
- Conflicts over the removal of trees along property boundaries.
- Disagreements regarding the division of meat or food between parties.
- Issues involving women who oppose or quarrel with their mother-in-law.
- Cases involving false accusations about a woman or girl having an affair.
- Situations where a parent without a biological son takes land or property from an adopted son, requiring resolution.
- Conflicts arising if the younger brother's wife has an issue with the elder brother for any reason.
- Cases where a person borrows money and fails to repay, brought before the Sabha for settlement.
- Disputes over property distribution among brothers presented to the Sabha.
- Situations where a divorced woman returns to her parental home and claims property rights.
- Family-related issues, including domestic quarrels, harassment of women, and neglect of elderly parents, addressed by the community Sabha.
- Incidents where young men make inappropriate sexual gestures or remarks toward women or girls.

In addition to the aforementioned cases, the Village Sabha also addresses inter-village disputes, conflicts between groups, disagreements within religious communities, personal conflicts, unresolved debts despite repeated reminders, and allegations of a Kisan receiving resources or food from another community. These and other related issues are brought before the Sabha for discussion and resolution.

3.3. FORMATION AND ORGANIZATION OF THE KISAN VILLAGE

The head of each household automatically serves as a member of the traditional village, also called the Kisan, which consists of the Kalo (chief), Panigiri (deputy), and Nayak (leader). The Kalo, or village head, functions similarly to a father in a family, overseeing the social structure of the village and managing both positive and negative events within the community. He is recognized as the primary leader and foremost resident of the village, assisted by an appointed aide (Figure 2). Aside from

the Kalo, Panigiri, and Nayak, there are no formal elections for regular members; they gain membership according to the governing principles of the local. A customary process is used to admit members without requiring an election. The Village holds a central role in Kisan society, and all members, whether elected or admitted by tradition, contribute meaningfully to the governance and functioning of the community. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 112–113)

Figure 2



Figure 2 This picture showing the Kisan community's village council leaders are taking oath at Jharmal village of the Sambalpur district

Source The photograph has taken by the scholar.

1) Kalo

The village chief, or Kalo, is responsible for establishing community rules, assisting residents in resolving problems, and organizing all social events. The Kalo is selected during a self-organized gathering of the villagers. At the meeting, participants discuss potential candidates, and anyone willing to serve as the village head may put forward their name, which the community then considers. Typically, an experienced or senior member presides over the initial proceedings to guide the discussion. Following this, the candidates indicate their willingness to serve, and the villagers share their opinions. Voting is conducted by a show of hands, and the candidate who receives the support of more than half of the attendees is elected as the Kalo, assuming the role of the village chief. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, p. 113)

In most cases, the nominated individual is elected as the village leader and is accepted by all villagers. However, if a candidate faces opposition from some residents, they are still elected Kalo if they receive the majority of votes. Shortly after the election, the interim president officially announces the names of the elected candidates. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, p. 113) Members nominated to the Village do not serve for a fixed term and may hold their position for life. If any individual challenges the authority of the president or vice president, the Nayak calls a village assembly and invites all residents to attend. During the meeting, villagers are given the opportunity to express their views on the current Kalo. If more than half of the attendees support him by raising their hands, he continues in his role. Those who oppose him are publicly reprimanded and warned against repeating such actions. However, if the majority does not support the president or Kalo, he must step down, and a new Kalo is elected through the same procedure. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 113-114)

Candidates for the Kisan or Council are expected to meet specific criteria, including possessing a strong personality, social prestige, and other essential qualifications. Traditionally, the Kalo is seen as a trustworthy, kind, and religious

individual, widely respected within the community. He is elected directly by the villagers and also serves as the Dehuri, leading religious activities and worship in the community. The Kalo is expected to be financially stable, capable of assisting those in need, and skilled in fostering effective communication among residents. He should command respect and obedience from the entire village, have a clear understanding of social norms and customary laws, and act with fairness and impartiality toward all members of the community. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 114-121)

The Kalo is expected to be a religious and honourable individual, rational and competent in carrying out responsibilities. He should have a thorough understanding of the village's unique customs, rules, and traditions. Considered the custodian of the village, the Village, and its traditional religious practices, he must be wise, altruistic, and knowledgeable in various areas. The Kalo is responsible for maintaining harmony within the and ensuring the community's respect for both the village and its institutions. The conduct and leadership of the Kalo along with the Panigiri and Dehuri, significantly influence the social and cultural norms of the community, the functioning of the, and the preservation of traditions. Therefore, the president of the Village must possess high moral character and exemplary personal qualities. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 114-121)

The Mukhia serves as the head of the local and the village, overseeing community matters and guiding decision-making. After hearing all sides of an issue, he considers the opinions of members before announcing a final verdict. The Mukhia holds the authority to punish or pardon offenders and determines the appropriate course of action. As both village leader and president of the, he personally assists villagers, influencing their well-being, happiness, and grief. In cases of death, he organizes funeral rites and comforts grieving families, and he provides immediate support to those facing difficulties. Family disputes are often brought to him for resolution, and urgent matters are addressed promptly, sometimes without convening the full . For broader issues, such as outbreaks of disease or external threats, he calls the village to make collective decisions for the welfare of the community. The Mukhia manages the majority of the village's administrative and social activities, earning the respect and obedience of all residents. On festival occasions, he is given special invitations for devotional ceremonies and receives meals and offerings as a mark of respect. He lives a life of selfless service, dedicated to the welfare and harmony of the entire community. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 114-121)

The Dehuri and the Mukhia of the local primarily oversee the community's cultural and religious practices. Acting on behalf of the villagers, they seek the blessings of deities and lead prayers to address and resolve any issues within the community. The village chief and Dehuri are also responsible for performing essential tasks related to worship and community management. Consequently, the head of the Village holds significant responsibilities in Kisan society. As the chief worshipper, he directs preparations for meetings before festivals and makes final decisions on matters debated in the. He administers oaths to offenders in the presence of the community and presides over all sessions. The Mukhia also authorizes appropriate punishments. Supporting the Mukhia are additional council members known as Panigiri, who assist in various duties. In the event of a family dispute between spouses during the Kalo's absence, the Panigiri acts in his place to manage the situation. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 114-121)

2) Panigiri/Panigrahi

In a traditional Kisan community, the Panigiri holds the second-most important position. Whenever the Kalo is unable to perform his duties, the Panigiri takes charge as the acting head. The Panigiri and the Nayak are elected through the same procedure used for selecting the Kalo. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 114-121) The Panigiri does not receive a fixed wage or salary; instead, he is given a small voluntary contribution from the villagers. Within the local, he is regarded as a person of integrity and is considered for this honorable role, which is comparable to a presidency. In the absence of the leader, the Panigiri temporarily performs the duties of the head. To fulfill this position, he is expected to be compassionate, sincere, straightforward, intelligent, knowledgeable, and well-qualified. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 114-121)

Before delivering any judgment in matters of dispute or relationships, the Panigiri may receive a small honorarium from the parties involved. In the absence of the Mukhia, he independently settles conflicts within the community. At the beginning of each, he delivers the opening remarks and announces the decisions of the meeting. He also decides the seating arrangements and ensures that every male participant is treated with due respect. The Panigiri carefully considers both sides of a matter, collects and records all relevant evidence, consults witnesses, and only then arrives at a conclusion. He is also responsible for documenting and reading out the final resolutions of the discussion. Though he is not officially assigned these responsibilities, he carries them out efficiently whenever the Mukhia is unavailable, exercising his authority with a sense of obligation. When the Mukhia is absent for any reason, the Panigiri presides over the proceedings, facilitates decision-making, and ensures the effectiveness of the process. Members openly share their opinions with him, engaging in free discussion before reaching collective decisions. Besides this, the Panigiri also assists the Mukhia, accompanying him on official travels and supporting him in various activities. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 114-121)

3) Nayak

The Nayak is an elected member of the local who carries out various responsibilities on behalf of the Village, receiving remuneration for his service in a general capacity. He is known for his loyalty and for adhering to the directions of both the president and the Panigiri. Among his key duties are convening meetings, informing members of important matters, identifying both complainants and accused individuals, and responding promptly to the leader's call. The Nayak is regarded as a respected and peace-loving figure within the community. He is simple, obedient, and willingly embraces the tasks entrusted to him. His role often influences the smooth functioning and overall operation of the Village. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 114-121)

The Nayak is responsible for arranging the meetings of the Village. Based on the directions of the Mukhia, Panigiri, other members, or community requests, he records and announces the matters to be discussed, keeping the villagers informed about the day's agenda. These gatherings are usually scheduled in the late afternoon or evening, allowing participants to attend after completing their daily work.

During the sessions, the Nayak performs duties based on the nature and requirements of the meeting. He summons and escorts individuals who can provide testimony or relevant information. When the presence of women is required, he accompanies them to the meeting. Additionally, he arranges water for the participants to ensure their comfort.

At the beginning of each meeting, the Nayak introduces the subject of discussion as instructed by the Mukhia, after which deliberations commence. Beyond these

tasks, he consistently supports the Mukhia in various responsibilities, even those not directly related to the Village, demonstrating his loyalty and dedication. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 114-121)

4) Past and Present of village of Kisans

The system of establishing a Village Council in Kisan communities has been practiced for generations. Traditionally, it is composed of the village head, one Panigiri, one Nayak, one Kalo (priest), and the head of each household. This structure, along with the process of selecting or electing members, has remained unchanged. As in earlier times, the household heads are ordinary villagers chosen by the community to represent their families in the council. Meetings of the Village Council are usually held beneath large trees (drumo) rather than in formal buildings (Figure 3). Members sit on the ground, spreading their towels or cloths in front of them, with no designated or reserved seats—even the leaders sit in the same way. Facing the general assembly, the heads actively engage in discussions. The overall manner of conducting proceedings has also preserved its traditional form. The Nayak is responsible for summoning the Village Council for meetings. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 133-135)

Figure 3



Figure 3 This picture showing the Kisan community's village people meeting held beneath large trees

Source <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/group-people-sitting-under-tree.html> (Internet Source)

The Nayak informs the villagers about the subject and timing of the meeting. At the outset, he explains the purpose of the discussion as directed by the head. He then listens carefully to the arguments presented by both parties, along with the testimonies of witnesses. Before arriving at any resolution, he encourages all members to share their views and often plays a role in shaping their decisions. Depending on the outcome, the offender may either face punishment or receive pardon.

Beyond dispute resolution, the Nayak also assists the general body of the in matters related to the village's overall development, which indirectly benefits the entire community. Despite the passage of time, the structure and functioning of the traditional Community have remained largely unchanged, with its methods and periods of formation continuing in their original form. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 133-135)

Over time, and with the rapid changes brought by a developing society, the customs, social structure, economy, and religious practices of the community—as well as its relations with neighboring classes and tribes—have undergone notable transformation. The younger generation no longer wishes to cling to the past, and

as a result, many traditional procedures have become increasingly difficult to sustain. Education and modern influences have shaped new outlooks, leading people to seek greater access to modern amenities rather than remain bound by old customs. A clear example of this shift is seen in the declining relevance of the traditional community hall.

Although the Village Sabha still exists today, retaining much of its original structure and responsibilities, its prestige and influence are gradually diminishing. Village heads, once central to community life, are now losing their authority and respect. In modern Kisan society, the Sabha no longer carries the same weight it once did. This decline is closely tied to the introduction of the Panchayati Raj system, which was imposed on indigenous communities during colonial rule. As a result, people now tend to approach the police or courts to resolve disputes rather than relying on their traditional leaders or the Sabha. While this transition reflects progress and adaptation, it has also weakened age-old customs. Villagers are often left burdened with financial costs, prolonged legal delays, and psychological stress, as justice may take years to be delivered. Such circumstances cause trauma and hardship. Therefore, it is essential to recognize the significance of the traditional system, even as society continues to evolve. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 133-135)

5) The Process of Decision making

Among the Kisans, a village assembly is generally convened when disputes arise during festivals, ceremonies, or other communal gatherings. Decision-making in such meetings is a collective process, with participation from all members present. The village chief and the Panigiri customarily occupy the central seats, symbolizing their authority. The Nayak, however, is not bound to sit in any fixed position; he may choose his place freely, often between the chief and the Panigiri. The proceedings begin with the village chief asking the Nayak about the purpose of the meeting. The Nayak then explains the reasons for convening the assembly and outlines the matter under discussion. Once the context is set, the formally begins in accordance with custom. The chief calls upon the complainant to present the grievance in detail, after which the accused is given the opportunity to respond and prove their innocence. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 25-28)

If the head Kalo and other members find it necessary, witnesses are called to provide testimony. When a witness is already present, they give their statement immediately; if not, the Nayak is tasked with summoning them. After the testimonies are heard, the viewpoints of the participants are collected and discussed. Following this, the village chief delivers the judgment and determines the appropriate punishment for the offender. He does so calmly and thoughtfully, relying on his own discretion. The chief's decision is generally not challenged. However, if the assembly feels that the punishment is too lenient for the severity of the offense, they may request that it be made stricter. Should the chief find this request justified, he has the authority to increase the punishment accordingly. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 25-28)

In certain cases, members may request the village chief to reduce the severity of a punishment, particularly if the offender is facing financial difficulties or mental health challenges. Such requests, however, are relatively rare. Before finalizing any decision, the chief consults with the Panigiri, regardless of whether a recommendation has been made by the members. The village chief has the authority to pardon the offender or to personally determine and administer an appropriate punishment in the case of minor offenses. Since representatives from different tribes and castes are present during the assembly, there is always concern about potential conflicts between groups. As a result, participants remain vigilant, and the

chief strives to make impartial decisions that prevent interpersonal violence and maintain harmony within the community. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 25-28)

Conflicts often draw the attention of the wider community when a Kisan boy or girl forms a relationship with someone from another tribe. The situation becomes particularly sensitive if a Kisan boy marries a girl from a different caste or tribe, or if he elopes with her. In such cases, a Village is convened, as the majority of participants tend to pressure other tribes or castes, claiming that their community has been wronged. The family of the offending individual may face social ostracism. When a male marries outside his community, his family may disown him, and he is typically unable to return to his home or family, effectively severing all familial ties. Failure to adhere to these sanctions can lead to formal excommunication. These strict regulations serve as a deterrent, encouraging other tribes or castes to be cautious regarding inter-community relationships and marriages. Such rules not only impact personal lives but also influence the overall cohesion, peace, and harmony within the village. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 25-28)

In most cases, the traditional Village enforces penalties through financial fines, physical sanctions, or social consequences. After serving the punishment or paying the fine, the offender is required to make a formal pledge before the members, promising not to repeat the offense. For minor violations, individuals may simply receive advice or be asked to make a commitment in front of the community leaders. The tribal people are generally deeply religious, and such pledges are often made invoking the names of their gods and goddesses. To reinforce the seriousness of the commitment, rituals may involve symbolic items such as water, a copper coin, and a Tulsi leaf. Once the vow is made, the offender is usually too fearful to repeat the act, aware that breaking the promise could bring severe consequences. They believe that disregarding the pledge can lead to misfortunes such as deadly illnesses, social disruption, or complete ruin of the family. As a result, these religious and cultural practices ensure adherence to community norms, preserving peace, unity, and social order. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp. 25-28)

Additionally, the Dehuri requires the offender to take an oath in the presence of the gods or Dharmes. Once this pledge is made, the individual usually refrains from repeating the offense. Observing such vows holds great importance for the entire Adivasi community, as people generally strive to honor their commitments. This practice explains the distinctive functioning of the Village. Even in cases where the offender denies responsibility or claims innocence, the oath is still administered. Through this ritual, the individual ultimately acknowledges their wrongdoing while remaining mindful of the authority of the gods and goddesses, which reinforces adherence to community norms.

Punishment

The Village of Kisans in the Sambalpur district has the authority to impose various forms of punishment on offenders, including physical, financial, social, and compensatory penalties. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, p.129)

1) Physical Punishment

If the offender is unable to pay the imposed fine and the Village considers it justified, physical punishment may be enforced. In cases where the wrongdoer repeatedly ignores warnings and continues to break rules, he faces both financial penalties and bodily punishment. At times, the also assigns community service as a form of penalty, requiring the individual to complete the work within a set deadline. If the accused persists in disruptive conduct or creates disturbances during meetings, he may occasionally be subjected to physical discipline. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, p.129)

2) Financial Punishment

The Village decides on the economic penalty after carefully evaluating the nature of the offence, its severity, and the extent of the damage caused. Monetary fines are generally imposed for minor violations, which make up the majority of cases. For petty offences such as theft, quarrels, or verbal abuse, fines usually range from Rs. 50 to Rs. 100, and in some instances, the offender is also required to arrange a small feast for the community. If a boy forces a girl into marriage, he must pay Rs. 100 in addition to providing food for the gudi. Since this act brings disrepute to the girl's family, her parents also demand compensation in the form of cattle and gold from the boy. In cases where a Kisan girl leaves with a Kisan boy without a formal engagement (pindhen not performed), a fine of Rs. 1000 is imposed by the gudi council. Half of this amount is given to the girl's parents, 25% is allocated to the village and gudi, and the remaining 25% is used for community purposes. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp.129-130)

If a boy and girl from the Kisan community are widowed, widowers, or divorced and decide to marry, each of them is required to pay Rs. 250 to the Village and arrange a simple vegetarian meal for the community. In cases where a wife seeks divorce on grounds of her husband's unlawful cheating, she is entitled to all remaining marriage gifts along with a compensation of Rs. 10,000. From this amount, 50% is given to her husband, 25% to the community or gudi, and 25% is set aside to meet the expenses of the local community and members present during the proceedings.

When a couple separates without following customary procedures, all jointly acquired property is divided, and a penalty of Rs. 10,000 is imposed. Out of this, 50% is allotted to the woman, 25% to the Jati Samaj, and 25% to the Village and gudi. In situations where an engaged Kisan boy and girl (after pindhen) elope on or before the wedding day, the boy must pay Rs. 5550 while the girl pays Rs. 3000. Additional penalties are also imposed by both the gudi and village. Of the collected fines, 50% is given to the boy whose marriage was disrupted, 25% goes to the Village and gudi, and the remaining 25% is used to cover neighbourhood expenses.

If a girl marries outside the Kisan community, no fine is imposed on her directly. Instead, her parents are required to pay Rs. 101 as a penalty, after which a traditional ritual is conducted. Following this, the decision is made that the girl cannot continue residing within the community.

In cases where a married woman leaves her husband and marries a young Kisan man, the Village council along with the Ganga Gudi imposes a penalty of Rs. 10,000 on the man and Rs. 5,000 on the woman's parents. Families that actively supported or encouraged the elopement are not granted any compensation. The collected amount is distributed as follows: 10% is given away, 50% to the newly married couple, 20% to the Village, 20% to the Ganga Gudi or Maha Gudi, and the remaining 20% to the community.

Apart from monetary fines, conflicts are sometimes resolved through community feasts instead of direct economic penalties. In such cases, families provide non-vegetarian meals and drinks as a way of reconciliation. These meals are often arranged to settle disputes such as property division among brothers, land boundary disagreements with neighbours, or other family-related conflicts. A traditional local drink, handia (a rice-based liquor), is commonly served alongside meat dishes as part of these gatherings, serving both as a social reconciliation and an indirect form of financial penalty.

3) Social Punishment of Kisans

Although no fixed social sanction is prescribed, an individual who disregards the ruling of the Village and fails to pay the imposed fine often faces social exclusion. If the girl's father is capable of returning the gold, the family concerned may also be separated, leading both the offender and the girl's parent to suffer unintended social consequences. In such cases, the offender loses community ties and becomes socially disconnected, unable to interact freely with fellow villagers. This results in numerous difficulties and psychological stress, while also weakening the family's social standing. Individuals and households are often viewed with disdain, labeled quarrelsome, and treated with hostility by other members of the community.

Generally, every villager is expected to comply with the gudi's decisions, as even minor offences can attract fines of up to Rs. 500. If a person refuses to accept the ruling, temporary social exclusion is enforced. To restore his honour and rejoin the community, he must offer handia (traditional liquor) and chicken to the gudi. However, if he continues to ignore this obligation, the period of social boycott is extended, further deepening his isolation. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp.131-132)

On rare occasions, the Village enforces extremely harsh punishments. If a boy or girl is found to have entered into an illicit relationship with close kin—such as an uncle, aunt, niece, or nephew—either within their own village or a neighbouring one, the responds with the ultimate penalty of excommunication. Such relations are considered a direct violation of Kisan customs and are met with contempt and ridicule from the entire community. These acts are never tolerated, and the families involved are permanently ostracized. Excommunication is also imposed when individuals openly defy the decisions of the Village in grave matters, as such defiance is seen as a breach of long-standing traditions. Similarly, Kisans who consume food or beverages offered by members of the Dom, Pani, or Chamar castes are expelled for breaking cultural boundaries. Eating pork, which contradicts customary practice, also invites the same punishment. In all these cases, communal expulsion acts as both punishment and a safeguard to preserve the sanctity of tradition. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp.131-132)

Within the Kisan community, special norms are observed in cases involving widows, divorcees, or unmarried women who become pregnant outside socially accepted ties. When a young man refuses to acknowledge responsibility for such a situation, or when the facts remain uncertain, the matter is taken up through a series of deliberations—beginning in the village or Gudi and extending to the Maha Gudi. Until a final verdict is reached, the boy and his family face social boycott. Women who give birth outside wedlock—irrespective of whether the child is of Kisan origin or not—may also be subjected to excommunication, and in such instances, the child too is denied community recognition. Similarly, if a man or woman enters into marriage with a sister-in-law belonging to the same Gotra, they are barred from taking part in communal functions. Reintegration into the community requires undergoing the ritual of purification (Jati), which involves symbolic acts such as washing the feet of fellow villagers and hosting a collective feast. In addition, a contribution of 21 rupees must be paid to the Village. Refusal to comply with these requirements results in permanent exclusion from the group. (Biswal & Acharya, 2006, pp.131-132)

Divorced individuals are permitted to remain within the community only if their separation has been carried out in accordance with customary or legal norms; otherwise, they lose this right. A woman who abandons her husband and children is not granted a recognized position in social life. In cases where a person marries a member of the Kisan community after divorce, they are required to pay Rs. 10,000

as compensation to the former husband and also perform the jati purification ritual. Such practices function as forms of social punishment. They not only weaken the individual held responsible but also bring disrepute upon their family. In effect, these sanctions are more stringent and burdensome than ordinary acts of public disapproval or social protest.

Leadership Pattern

The strength of a tribe largely depends on the leaders it produces within its social framework. Effective leaders not only preserve traditions but also guide their people through changing circumstances. This chapter outlines the leadership structure of Kisan society, tracing its development across different social levels and highlighting recent changes. (Mohanty, 1963, pp. 55–63)

Kisan leadership is largely informal, making their social and political system inherently democratic. However, historical interactions with feudal lords and other castes influenced their social structure, incorporating caste-based elements. The tribe recognizes two key positions: the Bariha and the Panigiri. While the Panigiri mainly oversees the reintegration of excommunicated members and the annual Gangaghat ceremony, the Bariha historically held significant power, functioning as the community's supreme authority within the democratic framework. (Mohanty, 1963, pp. 55–63)

1) Bariha in the Kisan Society

Kisan society was historically led by the Bariha, a title believed to mean “king” in Arabic. Acting alongside village chiefs (Gountia), the Bariha served as a subordinate ruler, recognized by regional kings such as those of Gangpur and Bamanda. Their role was primarily social, with limited administrative, judicial, or revenue responsibilities. Barihas earned income through fines and levies and oversaw marriages of widows, divorcees, and women who became pregnant outside marriage, often collecting bride fees. Over time, this method of income and social control contributed to the decline of the Bariha office. (Aiyappan, 1988, pp. 109–110)

The office of the Bariha facilitated the unification of multiple Kisan communities, covering at least 100 villages, and provided a framework for inter-village social authority. The Bariha had the power to punish, excommunicate, or readmit offenders and resolved disputes that local communities could not handle. The support and misuse of the office by regional Rajas initially enhanced the Bariha's prestige. However, after the British took control and the Rajas lost authority, the Bariha's power declined. Practices such as managing widows and other women in controversial ways clashed with evolving tribal norms, leading to a gradual erosion of respect for the office and a decline in its use for dispute resolution. (Aiyappan, 1988, pp. 131–132)

The Bariha office gained stability by uniting numerous Kisan communities and providing a framework for inter-village governance across more than 100 villages. The Bariha had the authority to punish, excommunicate, or reinstate offenders and settle disputes that local villages or small groups could not resolve. The position's prestige was initially reinforced by the Rajas, who used it for social influence. However, British rule led to the loss of authority for both Rajas and Barihas. Controversial practices, such as managing widows and other women in ways that conflicted with emerging tribal norms, further weakened support for the office. Gradually, villagers stopped approaching the Bariha for dispute resolution, and inter-village cases ceased to be brought before the office. (Aiyappan, 1988, pp. 131–132)

About twenty-five years ago, a criminal case challenged the Bariha's authority to impose certain traditional fines. According to custom, the sister of an accused woman could be taken in cases of alleged misconduct by her brother. Educated Kisans opposed this practice, considering it unjust and unethical. Though details are limited, the case illustrates how new social norms can weaken traditional leadership. (Aiyappan, 1988, pp. 110–111)

In 1945, a new tribal organization emerged, including Gonds, Telis, and other castes. The Kisan Jati passed several early resolutions, notably calling for the abolition of the Bariha's position. To manage disputes across multiple villages, the Pancha Palli—a council of leaders from five villages—was established. Previously, villagers could approach multiple Barihas or elders if a Bariha refused to resolve a dispute. Although unofficial councils existed for up to five villages, the Pancha Palli formalized this structure through a Kisan Jati resolution. (Aiyappan, 1988, p.111)

2) The Ritual Leader Panigiri

The Panigiri, also known as Ghata Bariha, acted as an authority figure in Kisan society, primarily overseeing purification rituals and the reintegration of excommunicated members. Operating under the direction of the Bariha or community leader, he conducted ceremonies at Ganga Ghats and mediated disputes beyond the village level. Although his influence has diminished—less sharply than that of the Bariha—his role has been further reduced with the rise of the Pancha Palli and the Kisan Jati Mahasabha, which now handle most community matters. (Aiyappan, 1988, p.111)

In addition to village groups, the Kisans maintain a regional social body led by the Panigiri. Chosen from respected, educated, and resourceful families, the Panigiri oversees ritual duties at the Ghat, where annual ceremonies honor ancestors by immersing pots (Kundhis) containing remains. He is also responsible for readmitting offenders who confess their mistakes and pay fines, with formal rituals and community approval. Disputed cases, however, prevent Kundhi immersion. Through such practices, the Panigiri upholds tradition and reinforces the caste order in Kisan society. (Aiyappan, 1988, p.111)

3) Leaders at the village Level

The Kisans' most important social unit is the regional group, usually a hamlet or ward of several households. Leadership rests with the Sian, an elder chosen informally for his respect, land ownership, or ability to represent community interests. Though without formal authority or permanent office, the Sian guides collective affairs and often emerges from influential clans or prosperous farming families, sometimes even becoming the Gountia if he belongs to the Kisan community. (Mohanty, 1963, pp. 55–62)

The Sian gains only prestige from his role, with no material benefit. Elders are compensated through a community feast (Jati Bhoji Danda), held as punishment in major offences. Cash fines are avoided, except for compensating the victim, to prevent corruption among village leaders. (Mohanty, 1963, pp. 55–62)

The Kisan tribe has experienced major changes over time, splitting into two groups in modern society due to religious differences. Many Kisans have adopted Christianity, while others follow Hinduism. Thus, in western Odisha's Sambalpur district, both Christian and Hindu Kisans coexist. At the village level, leadership lies with a Raja or Bel, elected by the community for a five-year term, who holds authority over local affairs.

Today, the Kisan community recognizes the importance of preserving its language, culture, and traditions. To this end, they have established organizations that convene the Kisan Jati Mahasava, with participation from both Hindu and

Christian Kisans. During these annual meetings, members are selected, and issues such as culture, customs, social concerns, and the challenges posed by modern technology are discussed. Leaders listen to the community's concerns and work to address them. (Kujur, 2008, pp.93-95)

Kisan Jati Maha

The Kisan caste meeting is an essential part of the tribe's social framework. Established after India's independence, it aimed to foster reform and collective action through caste-based organization. A 1962 report compared its role to the annual Kisan gathering, noting that the Kisan Jati Mahasava was convened to explore how caste meetings could encourage social change within traditional tribal communities. (Mohanty, 1964, p. 45)

The Kisans gradually spread over different regions in search of land and livelihood, leading to their dispersal. Known for their hard work, they adapted well to the customs of the areas where they settled, often living in mixed caste and tribal villages. Despite this, their social status remained low, as upper castes avoided sharing food or water with them. Yet, the Kisans preserved elements of their culture—such as their own language, distinctive dances, music, rituals, and traditions—while keeping limited contact with outsiders. (Mohanty, 1964, p. 45)

Over the past 30–40 years, Kisan leaders in Sambalpur district, Odisha, established the “Kisan Jati Mahasava,” modeled on the caste assemblies of neighboring communities such as the Agharias, Telis, and Kaibartas. Motivated by modernization, education, anti-British movements, and post-independence aspirations, the Kisans created this new institution to strengthen their social organization, challenge outdated practices, and promote social, educational, and economic development within their community. (Mohanty, 1964, p. 46)

4. CONCLUSION

It is evident that the political activities of the Kisan tribe in the past were very different from those observed today. Historically, there were no specialized political institutions like Panchayats solely dedicated to Kisan affairs. Instead, the traditional Kisan Assembly managed both social and political functions. Over time, the opening of broader political and economic processes, coupled with government and non-governmental development initiatives, integrated the Kisan community more closely into mainstream Indian society, bringing significant changes to their economic and political life.

Today, the political organization of the Kisans reflects a blend of traditional and modern structures. While statutory Panchayats mainly handle developmental projects and serious judicial matters, traditional village heads continue to oversee the community's social and cultural affairs. In remote areas especially, these traditional Panchayats remain active, resolving disputes at individual, family, and neighborhood levels based on customary laws.

The transformation of the Kisan community's cultural and political framework highlights the dynamic interaction between indigenous traditions and modern governance. Studying the political organization of the Kisans in Sambalpur district offers valuable insight into the tribal polity of western Odisha and the enduring role of customary institutions in tribal social life.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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