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Q3(c)

**Critically examine the impact of modern democratic institutions on contemporary tribal societies. Illustrate with suitable ethnographic examples.**

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Anthropology GS 2 · 15 marks · Social change and contemporary tribal societies

7.2 Social change and contemporary tribal societies: Impact of modern democratic institutions, development programmes and welfare measures on tribals and weaker sections.

**Core demand of the question**

- Critically examine the impact of modern democratic institutions on contemporary tribal societies
- Cover franchise, panchayats, parties, and Sixth or **Fifth Schedule** bodies
- Illustrate with ethnographic examples
- Show gains and strains

**Revision summary**

Adult franchise, reserved seats, PESA, and **Sixth Schedule** councils are the main democratic institutions in tribal India.

They created an ST political class and some women sarpanches.

Bailey, Xaxa, **Niyamgiri**, and Naga or Khasi councils show both voice and capture.

Inner minorities can lose when a council majority behaves like an ethnic state.

Land security still depends on Gram Sabha power, FRA, and cases such as Samata, not on elections alone.

**Introduction**

Modern democratic institutions are adult franchise, political parties, panchayats, autonomous councils, and courts. In tribal India they opened office and law. They also recast clan, chief, and land into electoral blocs. The impact is mixed and must be read from ethnography, not only from the Constitution.

**Body****What arrived**

- Adult franchise after 1950 made ST voters a national constituency. Reserved Lok Sabha and Assembly seats created a tribal political class.
- The **73rd Amendment** and **PESA, 1996** (after the **Bhuria Committee**) put Gram Sabha at the centre of land, minor forest produce, and intoxicants in **Fifth Schedule** areas.
- **Sixth Schedule** Autonomous District Councils in parts of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram, and **Articles 371A and 371G** in Nagaland and Mizoram, are democratic devices that also protect custom.

- Parties - Congress, regional tribal parties, BJP, Left - replaced or captured older chiefs and church or sarna networks.

## Ethnographic gains

- **F. G. Bailey**'s highland Odisha already showed elections entering a tribe-caste frontier. Later Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh show ST MLAs using reservation to contest mining and school posts.
- **Naga** village councils and the **Tatar** or similar bodies now sit beside elected MLAs; the 16-point agreement and later Framework talks are democratic-national negotiation, not only insurgency.
- **Khasi** and **Garo** ADCs give a public form to matrilineal and clan land debates. Women have entered some councils even where clan office remains male.
- Panchayat reservation for ST and women has produced sarpanches among **Bhil**, **Gond**, and **Santal** villages who can sign FRA claims and MGNREGA lists.

## Strains

- **Xaxa Committee** found PESA often paper-thin: Gram Sabha bypassed by mining leases and contractors.
- Factionalism (**Bailey**, **Sachchidananda**) maps onto party tickets. Clan ethics become booth ethics.
- **Samata** (1997) and **Niyamgiri** (Vedanta, Dongria Kondh) show courts as a democratic resource, but only when activists and Gram Sabha can last the case.
- In the North-East, ethnic majorities inside a council can squeeze inner minorities (Bru in Mizoram, non-Bodo in BTR). Democracy at one scale becomes exclusion at another.
- Customary land and elected office collide when a sarpanch sells what a clan cannot alienate.

## Critical judgement

- Democratic institutions ended the colonial fiction that tribes were only subjects of a superintendent.
- They did not automatically deliver land security or gender equality. Capture by contractors, parties, and dominant clans is the living limit.

## Flow diagram

Franchise and reserved seats -> Tribal political class  
 PESA Gram Sabha -> Land and forest  
 Sixth Schedule 371 -> Custom and council  
 Party contractor capture -> PESA Gram Sabha

## Conclusion

Franchise, PESA, **Sixth Schedule**, and reserved seats gave tribal societies a voice in the Republic. Ethnography shows new elites, court wins such as **Niyamgiri**, and also hollow Gram Sabhas and inner minorities. The institutions work where land law and local assembly still bite.

## Facts & figures

**PESA 1996**

Extends panchayats to **Fifth Schedule** areas and names Gram Sabha powers over land, minor forest produce, and intoxicants.

**Bhuria Committee**

Recommended tribal self-rule that shaped PESA.

**Niyamgiri**

Supreme Court-linked Gram Sabha process in which Dongria Kondh assemblies rejected bauxite mining affecting Niyam Raja.

**Article 371A**

Special protection for Nagaland on land, custom, and social practice unless the Assembly agrees to change.

**Xaxa Committee 2014**

Documented weak implementation of protective laws and democratic forms in many ST areas.

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