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Political System in Munda Tribal Society: Continuity and Change

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Abstract:

The Political system plays an important role in tribal community as well as in tribal life. Such organisation is found among the tribal as a whole or social grouping such as local group, clan etc. It is the sum total of the patterns, relations, process etc. builds up around the concept, art and practice of the government. Like other institutions political organisation also included traditions, laws, functionaries, conventions, communication devices etc. This organisation is accomplished through a leader or group of leaders who command the members of the groups. These leaders maintain peace within the political groups & organisation. The headman in the Munda tribal society is partly independent and partly regulated by the non-tribal tradition but headman played his traditional role in the inner world of traditional society. Now- a- days they do not keep themselves away from the light of education .Even Munda women are going to schools and colleges. Though they have adopted the modern social and political system, they have not rejected their traditional system and culture. Here is the peculiarity. They absorb themselves in appropriate jobs under public or private sectors, taking part in various developmental programme organised by the Government, responding to the various social medical programme initiated by the Government. They are habituated with the modern social & political system but they have not given up their own traditional socio-political system. Generally Munda tribes do not go to the Police or modern political system to settle their disputes as they rely much more on their village leaders. Today the role of traditional Panchayat is on decline. Mundas have also deviated from their own traditional Panchayat System based on the primitive customary rules of the tribal community. They aptly participated in Panchayat System of the state in spite of having their own Panchayat System. They also take part in active politics and in election system. Thus the several changes occurred in the lifestyle of Mundas since various tribal developmental programmes initiated by the government from the days of First Planning.

Key Words: Political Organisation, Hatu Panchayat, Continuity and Change, Tribal community, Parha Panchayat, Pahan, Pujar, Mahato, Pascimbanga Panchayat Act, Aboriginal.

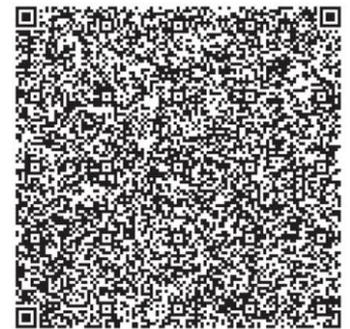
Introduction:

India has a tribal population of over 84 million which consists about 8.2% of the total Population (Census– 2001) which is the second largest tribal population in the world, next to African communities.

In West Bengal, according to the 1961 census, the Munda population was 1, 60,245. In 1981 census, it was seen that their population hiked to 2, 30,016 –that means, their number was 6.92% of the total Adivasi population. Among them males were 1, 16,771 and females were 1, 13,245. According to the 2001 Census. There are 533 tribal communities living in India as per the notified Schedule under Article 342 of the Constitution of India with the largest number of 62 being in the State of Orissa. Some o the major tribes of different Sates are:

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Table: 1

MAJOR TRIBES IN INDIA

States	Tibes
Andhra Pradesh	Bhil, Chenchu, Gond, Kondas, lambadis, Sugalis etc.
Assam	Boro, Kachari, Mikir (Karbi), Lalung, Rabha, Dimasa, Hmar, Hajong etc.
Bihar & Jharkhand	Asur, Banjara, Birhor, Korwa, Munda, Oraon, Santhal, etc.
Gujarat	Bhil, Dhodia, Gond, Siddi, Bordia etc.
Himachal Pradesh	Gaddi, Gujjar, Lahuala, Swangla, etc.
Karnataka	Bhil, Chenchu, Gond, Kuruba, Kammara, Kolis, Koya, Mayaka, Toda etc.
Kerala Madhya Pradesh and Chhatisgarh	Adiyam, Kammara, Kondkappus, Malasis, Palliyar etc. Bhil, Birhor, Damar, Gond, Kharia, Majhi, Munda, Oraon, Parathi etc.
Maharashtra	Bhil, Mhunjia, Chodhara, Dhodia, Gond, Kharia, Nayaka, Oraon, Pardhi, Rathwa etc.
Meghalaya	Garos, Khasi, Jaintia etc.
Orissa	Birhor, Gond, Juang, Khond, Korua, Mundari, Oraon, Santhal, Tharua etc.
Rajasthan	Bhil, Damor, Garasta, Meena, Salariya etc.
Tamil Nadu	Irular, Kammara, Kondakapus, Kota, Mahamalar, Palleyan, Toda etc.
Tripura	Chakma, Garo, Khasi, Kuki, Lusai, Liang, Santhal etc.
West Bengal	Asur, Birhor, Korwa, Lepcha, Munda, Santhal etc.
Mizoram	Lusai, Kuki, Garo, Khasi Jaintia, Mikir etc.
Arunachal Pradesh	Dafra, Khampati, Singpho etc.
Goa	Dhodi, Siddi (Nayaka)
Daman & Diu	Dhodi, Mikkada, Varti etc.
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	Jarawa, Noco barese, Oranges, Sentineless, Shompens, Great Andamanese
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	As in Daman & Diu
Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal	Bhoti, Buxa, Jaunsari, Tharu, Raji
Nagaland Sikkim	Naga, Kuki, Mikir, Garo etc. Bhutia, Lepcha
Jammu & Kashmir	Chaddangpa, Garra, Gujjar, Gaddi etc.

Source: Annual Report, 2000-2001, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Govt. of India

There are 39 tribal communities scattered over the various district of West Bengal. There are three numbers of primitive tribes present in the state of West Bengal namely, the Munda, Lodha, Sabar the Birhor and the Totos mostly found in the district of Paschim Medinipur, Purulia and Jalpaiguri. The Lodhas, traditionally Mundari speaking population, are presently found to occupy the forest covered tracts of Paschim Medinipur District of West Bengal, Mayurbhanj District of Orissa and East and West Singbhum District of Jharkhand, broadly known as Jangle Mohal. According to S.C. Roy (1912), the Munda were originally inhabitants of north-west India, who later moved to the Chhotanagpur plateau of Bihar and settled there after clearing the forests. Their present day homeland comprises the Chhotanagpur plateau, the Ranchi district and the Khunti subdivision of Bihar, to where they migrated from further east. They are concentrated in these areas. They stay at the hut, covering the leaf-fringed wall of jungle. But now some of them reside in the house was made out by mud made tiles, C.I.sheets, asbestos. The Mundas are settled agriculturists. They also collect minor forest products from forest to supplement their economy; Hunting, Fishing and Animal husbandry are subsidiary to agriculture. They also work as unskilled labourers. They eat kandumul (tuberous-root), rice, collecting different food grains from the forest and edible snails from nearby ponds. Their life cycle ceremony was performed by using wood. They earn for their livelihood by selling of forest products like wood, maul, honey and Sal leaves .The male members of Mundas use bows and arrows and axes for hunting .The female collect inferior food in the forest. Conventionally, they were forest dwellers, but now they have started cultivation either owners or as agricultural laborer. They are also engaged in Govt. or Non-Govt. Services. They have a typical Indian tribal personality, with darkish complexion and curly hairs. With the passage of time some of the Mundas resembles same features as that of the Bengali's. Munda tribe belongs Proto-Australoid race and speaks Mundari of Austro-Asiatic language family. They also speak Hindi, and other local dialects. In West Bengal very naturally Bengali is their second language.

OBJECTIVES & RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:



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The main objective of the present paper is to bring on the surface how the structure of political organisation of traditional Munda society is changing. The main objectives of the study are:

- i) To study the political organisation of traditional Munda tribal society.
- ii) To study how the modern political system affects the traditional Munda society.
- iii) To study how Munda tribal society negotiates the modern political system with their traditional political system.
- iv) To suggest the measures should be followed to save their own traditional political system from extinction.

The present research work is based upon primary as well as secondary data. Researcher has chosen tribal population in West Midnapur District for the study, but the same analysis can be extended to the other tribal areas as well. In my work I took help from different type of method such as for the village map and description I applied observation and interview method. But in the case of recent all Indian political parties activity I followed narrative method. Besides these observation method was also help me for proper understanding of their political organisation. The present research study is an attempt to find out the wage & means of survival of Mundas traditional political system from the powerful approach of modern political system.

Let us first briefly described the traditional political organisation in Munda tribal society.

The Mundas, in course of time have tribal organisation of their own. The village is organised by the Patti system. The villages by batches generally of Twelve –but sometimes more and sometimes less –came to be grouped together as a Patti with the strongest and most influential amongst the headmen of these villages as the Manki or Patti Chief. The remaining village headmen swore allegiance to the elected Manki. In the internal administration of each village, the Munda was assisted by the village Panch or council of village elder. In disputes between the village and village and in case of unusual important or tribal interest, the Patti-Panch presided over by the Manki was called upon to adjudicate. The village panch and the Patti Panch play important role in Munda village polity.

The Parha now become the unit of social as well as political organisation. Mundas of a single Parha often hailing from two or three separate parties. The executive authority is vested in a select body known as the Panchayat. The judicial authority of the Panchayat is now exercised only in case of breaches of marriage laws and other social rules, disputes regarding the right class med by family to bury their dead in the village, disputes about inheritance and portion and boundary disputes between two Munda villages.

In ordinary private disputes, a private Panchayat is convinced by the disputants to decide the dispute. Beside these, the favorable method sometimes employed by a *Parha Panch* (group of five people) as well by a *Private Panch* to find out the truth about a dispute or to detect a culprit are the both oath and ordeal.

Hatu Panchayat and Parha Panchayat is the two important institutions of the Munda polity. The former functions at the village level while the latter is the regional council of a group of villages. In some parts of the Munda country these institutions are in a process of decay though efforts are being made to rejuvenate them. With the introduction of statutory Panchayats and courts of law the tribal areas the significance of the traditional socio-political institutions has been undermined.

Hatu Panchayat:-

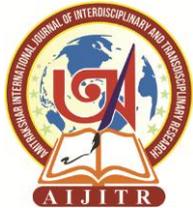
The Hatu Panchayat is composed of all the adult males of the village and at least one adult male from each household is expected to attend the weekly meeting of the Panchayat. Children and women are excluded from participation in the Panchayat. The Panchayat meetings are held more regularly during the agricultural season, certainly to help in regulating the various activities related with agricultural operations.

Recent studies have shown that the Hatu Panchayat is not in a state of decay, as is generally held, at least in some areas. These are highly effective and influential bodies. Very few cases go to police stations or law courts from these areas. Hatu Panchayat does not only settle disputes, but also act as an instrument for the development and welfare of the village community.

Parha Panchayat:-

Parha is an important institution of the tribal polity of Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas in Bihar. It is the union of a number of villages of a clean situated around the village of origin. The legal authority of the Parha is vested in the *Parha Panchayat*. The basis of the formation of *Parha* differs in the Bhuinhari patti and Khutkati patti. This institution is conspicuous by its absence in the Punch Parganas area of the Munda country.

The Parha in the Bhuinhari area is based on kinship. As a consequence of his birth a Munda become the member of the Parha of his clan. So when a Munda settles in the jurisdiction of another Parha he has to fulfill double obligations. The jurisdiction of the Parha Panchayat extends over the entire area of the Parha.



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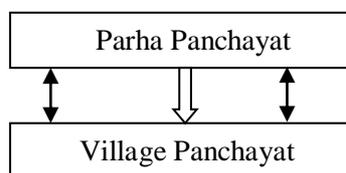
The judicial authority of the Parha Panchayat is now exercised in cases of breach of marriage laws and other social rules, disputed regarding the rights claimed by a family to bury the bones of the dead in the village sasan (crematory), disputed over inheritance and partition, and boundary disputes between two villages. If such a case occurs in any village, it is the duty of the village Munda to refer it to the Parha Raja. The complaint may be lodged by the Munda, Mahato, Pahan or the complainant himself. The proceedings of the Parha Panchayat are carried out in the same way as in any government court of law. The verdict of the Parha Panchayat binding on both the parties. A person who disobeys is liable to be excommunicated. The expenditure for the feast on the meeting of the Parha Punch is incurred by both or either of the two parties as the case may be.

The jurisdiction of Parha Panchayat extends only over social offences connected with the breach of tribal custom. For theft, assault, murder, disputes over property etc. people generally go to courts of law. This is because traditional sociopolitical institutions and leadership are gradually weakening and do not command the obedience of the emerging tribal elite. In some areas though the Parhas are in decay, some of the Parhas are quite active. Moreover, the educated Munda of the Narayangarh Block in West Midnapur area are making best efforts to rejuvenate and revive the Parha and modify it to suit the present political situation. They have even gone to the extent of establishing a new institution- **Parha Hadri** which is a confederation of Parhas. A constitution has been drawn up defining the membership, powers, and roles for restructuring the **Hatu Panchayat** and **Parha Panchayat**, and formation of **Parha Hadri**. Since these new tribal organizations derive its sanction from the traditional Parha organization, it commands universal respect and legitimacy.

Village Organisation:-

Previously most of the Munda villages were administered by their own Panchayat, but this system cannot be followed any more. They were forced to be disunited for the sake of jobs. A complete Munda village is a rarity now. So, they cannot follow the old Panchayat system. However, among the office bearers of the Munda village Panchayat, three are special. They are – Munda (the village chief), Pahan (the Priest), and Mahato (the messenger). They must be present in every Panchayat session.

Generally, the chief is chosen from that family who sets up the village. This title is hereditary. In case of the Munda's absence, his son or any other elderly member conducts the meetings. But he has to be intelligent, impartial and commanding. The Munda solves all the villagers' problems with the help of other members of the Panchayat. Next to the Munda is the Pahan or the Priest. But he is not selected genetically. It is true that, the Pahan is chosen from the Pahan family, but nobody can have the fortune of becoming the Pahan without an oracle. On the day of the Pahan's selection, all the villagers assemble in one place. The village wizard is also present there. He places handful of rice in five spots. Then he calls a few villagers and tells two of them to propose 5 names secretly to him. He takes 5 pebbles in the name of 5 candidates and puts them on 5 rice dumps. After that he takes a little rice on a thresher and requests someone to hold a stick. One end of the stick should touch the thresher. The wizard chants the hymns and moves the stick. The candidate, on whose name the stick stops is declared by the wizards as the Pahan. He does all the rituals and he is the Priest. He fizzes the festival dated after discussing with the elders. It is his duty to look after the welfare of the village, and please the deities at the time of epidemics. The *'Pahan'* holds the priesthood, propitiates the deities formulates religious rules and regulations binding on all and keep all safe from unwanted dangers. The assistant of the *'Pahan'* is called *'Pujar'*. He helps the *'Pahan'* in oblations. He is appointed in the same way. *'Mahato'* or *'Munda'* presides over the post of administrator, collect rents, sellers the disputes, applies and adjudicates the rules in all social and religious matters: birth : marriage : theft : witchcraft : sex abuse : property disputes: punishments like fine. Apart from this, there is one messenger who informs the villages about the festivals and their dates- he is called the *'Mahato'*. He inherits this position. All the elderly persons are present in the Panchayat meetings. It is noticed that in the Munda society booty Autocracy and Democracy are prevalent. On one hand Monarchy is followed where the rule of one family is accepted traditionally, on the other, members are selected from among them in the Democratic way. The structure is like below (Fig-1)





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(Fig-1)

According to the traditional law of the Munda society, only sons can inherit father's property. If the father wants, he can distribute his estates in his life time. Daughter is well maintained in her father's house, and for that purpose a piece of land is allotted in her name. But that is in no way supposed to be her property. After her marriage the land comes to her brothers. If the daughter is an only child, and if her husband agrees to live in his father-in-laws' house, then they are given some land after consulting the Panchayat. In such case, the husband can enjoy that property till his wife is alive- after her death he has no claim on the land, neither his sons can claim it. The land comes back to the wife's family. If anybody has no sons, he can adopt a son from his own family.

Here I want to clarify whether there is any alienation from the traditional political organisation to modern political organisation or not. In the above study I want to focus on the political system of Mundas, an aboriginal group of people of India. I have tried to show the changes of political organisation of their own. And if it is affirmative, then how much and & how far it is happen.

Field Study:-

I have selected a village in Narayangarh Block of west Midnapur District viz. Harinagerya, my centre of activities, as an example in support of my observation. According to the 2001 Census, comprising 3, 41,542 people in numerical term the Munda represents 7.8% of the total ST population in West Bengal. As per the same Census report the concentration of Mundas in undivided Midnapur was 65,501 in total. As per the information received from local Panchayat of Narayangarh Block of West Midnapur, there is about 35 families of Mundas 40 tribal family in Harinagerya, respectively. I have chosen the district of West Midnapur in West Bengal as the area of my field work because it has the largest tribal concentration, particularly the tribals like Mundas, Santhals and Sabars than that of other districts of West Bengal. West Midnapore is situated in the South Western side of West Bengal, bounded by Bankura and Purulia districts in the North, Mayurbhanj and Balasore districts of Orrisa in the South, Hooghly and East Midnapore districts in the East and Singhbhum district of Jharkhand and Purulia district of West Bengal in West. The district is between 21°47' N-23°00' and 86°40' E-87°52' E. The district consists of 4 sub divisions, 27 Police Stations, 29 Blocks and 8 Municipalities. It has 9295.28sq. Km. of geographical area and population of 5193411 as per Census, 2001. There are 6, 41,315 cultivators, 6, 63,626 small and marginal farmers, 746209 agricultural labourers, 162797 artisans and allied agro-industrial workers and 584197 other workers. The S.C and S.T percentages are 18.05 and 14.87, respectively. Population density of the district is 558.71 persons per sq. km. I concentrate my study on the Mundas' Political organisation pattern—its two faces: tradition strewed and modernity-touched. Present study is the political organisation in Munda Tribal Society in Harinagerya Village in West Midnapur of West Bengal. After independence about 60 years have passed away with in this period Government through their various measures for the emancipate of tribal folk ,which naturally reflected in all phases of their socio-political life in spite of varies short coming of course communication system also developed to a great extent.

Political organisation:

My present work is the political organisation at the Munda of Harinagerya village, West Midnapur of West Bengal. For this purpose I studied traditional political organisation in Munda tribal society, new Panchayat system recognised by Govt. and also activities the political party of the village. The Panchayat system of the Government of India was introduced shortly after independence. In west Bengal the Panchayat system was reviewed and activated in 1973 with the Paschimbanga Panchayat Act. The Panchayat Act is applicable only to that place which does not fall under the Municipalities. A number of villages together many constitute a Panchayat. The member of the Gram-Panchayat comes from on village each. The head of the Gram Panchayat is the Gram Pradhan. A number of villages together from an "Anchal" and the Anchal has *Anchal Panchyat*. The entire district has got an administrative body the *Zela Parishad*. The body of the *Zila Parishad* is constituted by a number of members from the different villages. This three tier system works to administer the villages of West Bengal that is three tiers is following type. The structure is like below. (Fig-2)

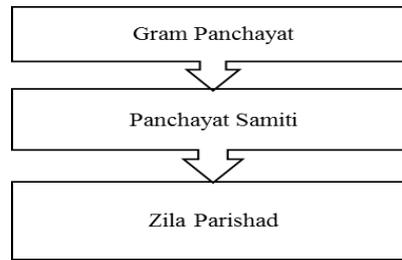


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(Fig-2)

Population Distribution according to age and sex in Harinagerya village.

AGE Group	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
0 – 14	26	20.46	23	18.11	49	38.57
15 – 29	15	11.87	19	14.96	34	26.83
30 – 44	10	7.86	4	3.14	14	11
45 – 59	5	3.93	12	9.44	17	13.37
60 -74	4	3.14	4	3.14	8	6.28
75+	3	2.36	2	1.57	5	3.93
Total	63	49.62	64	50.36	127	99.98

From the table it is clear that the total population is 127 out of which total males are 63 (49.62%) and the total females are 64(50.36%). The age group 0-14 years has the highest population 49 (38.57%).The maximum number of the females is in the 0-14 age with 23 (18.11%). The number progressively decreases as one goes down the age groups with 75 age group having the least number of females are 2 (1.57%).

Table 4

Family Size of MUNDA Population of Harinagerya village.

Total Number of Families	Small (1 – 3)		Medium (4 – 6)		Large (7+)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
14	3	21.42	6	42.85	5	35.71

There is table of 14 Munda families. The medium sized families occur most, 6 of them (42.85%). There are 3 small families (21.42%) and 5 (35.71%) large families.

Table 5

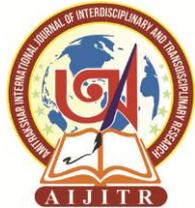
Educational Status of the MUNDA in Harinagerya village

AGE Group	Cannot Sign		Can Sign		I -IV		V - VIII		IX - XII		Total
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
0 – 14	24	26	Nil	1	4	2	1	Nil	Nil	Nil	58
15 – 29	10	15	3	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	2	Nil	30
30 – 44	3	3	8	4	1	Nil	2	Nil	Nil	Nil	21
45 – 59	Nil	8	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	3	Nil	Nil	Nil	11
60 -74	3	1	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	4
75+	1	1	1	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	3
Total	41	54	12	5	5	2	6	0	2	0	127

In this table we find that total number of males are 41 and females are 54 who are the belongs to the cannot sign group.12 (males) and 5 (females) are can sign persons. The 75 plus age group has minimum number cannot sign person i.e. 1 male 1 female where the 15-29 year age group has maximum number can sign person i.e. 3 who are the male members.

Table No: 6

Name of the Village - **Harinagerya.**



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Political Participation					
Political Participation in Gram Panchayat	Political Participation in Panchayat Samiti	Political Participation in Zilla Parisad	Women Participation in Administration	Is there any Political Leader in the Village	Is there any Trade Union in the Village
1	1	NIL	NIL	3(TMC)	NIL

Whether the Munda's of the Village are mainly have faith in their traditional Social Judicial system or in Modern administrative or Judicial system?	Whether they participate in Election System?	Whether they participate in Political Discussions amongst themselves?	Whether they participate in any Political Meeting?	Whether they participate in Political Canvassing?	Whether they are faithful to local Political party leader?
Believe in traditional Social Judicial system but they follow the modern administrative judicial system.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Source: As Researcher Surveyed

So far political participation of the villagers is concerned it is noticed that there is one person who participates in Gram Panchayat and also three political leaders are there, three belongs to TMC. It is also found that the villagers participate in Election System, in political discussions amongst themselves, attend political meetings and also participate in political canvassing but in spite of these they are not at all faithful to political party leaders. In case of taking any political decisions villagers are not considered at all because maximum decisions are taken by the political leaders.

Following observation is made:-

My field work is done in the tribal village of West Midnapur District of West Bengal named Harinagerya. In the village there is only one tribal community, the Munda. Beside this there are some other caste families. In the village there are 22 families and 127 individuals. Out of which 14 families belong to Mundas. In the previous page I have tried to state about political organisation of the Munda people. In the following paragraphs I am going to draw a general observation in brief. Till now the traditional political system exists in the areas of Mundas. The Mundas of this area also obey & respect the old system. It is also found on survey that the Mundas of the village have no faith in modern administrative or judicial system but they mainly believe in their traditional social & judicial system. Though the present situation compel them to obey the modern judicial system. There is a Headman or village leader in the area. The richest & oldest person of this Munda people in this village is Biren Sing. He is also the village Priest. He is respected as a village leader or headman of the Munda society. He is a traditional village leader & had power in the minor crime. Besides these he works after different socio-cultural activity of village such as marriage, death, ritual festivals etc. Cases of disputes among the Mundas are not frequent and the disputes which were described mainly related to land dispute and drunkenness. As the population of this village of my work is very small, so it reduces the chance of dispute to a great extent. Cases of wife beating mainly in drunk mood are not rare but they do not pay much more attention to this situation as they think it is quite natural & generally they do not go to the Police or Panchayat to settle their disputes as they rely much more on their traditional village leader. Whatever decision it is taken in the meeting concerning village elders who are present in that meeting. It indicates the democratic nature of the leader. It can be mentioned here that it is the village leader's duty to the arrange a social feast with cash or kind given by that convicted person. The amounts of cash or kind are fixed depending on the economic condition of the convicted person as well as on the intensity of his or her affiance. The leader as well actives worker of various political parties who are directly associated with election campaign, are quite aware of the key of this tribal culture because they know that if they can influence the village headman of the Munda tribe then it will be effortless job for them to penetrate into the rest of the villagers as into the rest. The villagers as they never disobey the order or advice of their village headman in this respect. The village leaders are not so much conscious about the political parties of their choice. In case of a major crime, the guilty person treated by the Govt. law and punishment according to Indian Penal Code given by Govt.



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Police station (Thana) and Court. In fact law and order of the locality is praise worthy. The people are found of peace. Social disputes and conflicts are rare. Administration is smooth and sound. The various developmental activities of the locality are mainly based on political parties. It can be finally concluded that due to national level planning, Government's administrative approach and frequent interaction with neighboring non-tribal people, the Mundas are gradually began to participate in the field of the larger political areas. Though the Mundas now cast their votes in favour of different political parties. Forces are mainly associated with their village headman. Considering the different aspects of politics & developmental programme it may be concluded that the modernization in social & political thoughts are not far behind to the aboriginal Munda Society.

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