



Implementation and impact of the PESA Act on Local Self-Governance: A study of Gram Sabhas in Scheduled Areas of Odisha

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Abstract

The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) stands as a landmark legislative initiative designed to empower tribal communities in India's Scheduled Areas through the framework of decentralized governance. This study examines the implementation of PESA in Odisha, with a particular emphasis on the functioning of Gram Sabhas as institutions of self-governance among tribal populations. In a state where tribal communities constitute a significant proportion of the population, the effective operationalization of PESA is crucial for advancing participatory democracy and safeguarding indigenous rights. The research critically analyses the role of Gram Sabhas in decision-making, resource management, and dispute resolution across selected Scheduled Areas of Odisha. It identifies both notable achievements and persistent challenges—such as bureaucratic interference, limited awareness among tribal citizens, and inadequate institutional support. Findings reveal that while PESA has opened significant avenues for grassroots participation and empowerment, its transformative potential remains constrained by implementation gaps and structural limitations. The study underscores the importance of strengthening Gram Sabhas through sustained capacity building, administrative accountability, and policy reforms to realize PESA's vision of authentic self-governance in Scheduled Areas. By bridging the gap between legislative intent and field realities, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on tribal governance, decentralized democracy, and inclusive development in India.

Keywords: Forest Rights Act (FRA), PESA Act, tribal empowerment, administrative governance, Odisha, decentralization, policy implementation

Introduction

The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) represents a landmark political reform aimed at empowering tribal communities and redefining power dynamics within India's governance framework. The Act's principal objective is to promote self-governance among tribal populations while preserving their unique cultural heritage, social values, and traditional practices. Although enacted as a central law, its effective implementation largely depends on the commitment and administrative capacity of individual state governments (Philip, 2024). PESA stands as a milestone in India's constitutional and political development. It was introduced to extend the provisions of Part IX of the Constitution to the Fifth Schedule areas, thereby strengthening the foundation of tribal self-rule through the institution of the Gram Sabha. The Act underscores the importance of cultural protection, community-led decision-making, and local control over natural and economic resources (Bose, 2019)^[1]. In Odisha, where nearly 30 percent of the population comprises Scheduled Tribes (Census, 2011)^[2], PESA holds immense potential for promoting inclusive governance and sustainable socio-economic development (Mishra, 2020)^[11]. Recognizing this, the state government has taken significant measures toward operationalizing the Act—most notably, by introducing its own PESA Rules in 2022.

This study investigates the progress and challenges associated with the implementation of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) in Odisha, with particular attention to the Gram Sabha as the nucleus of tribal self-governance. Although the Act embodies a visionary framework for empowering

indigenous communities, its on-ground realization has been impeded by numerous administrative, political, and institutional constraints. The delegation of operational responsibilities to individual state governments has resulted in uneven enforcement and, at times, a dilution of the Act's original intent (Kumar & Mehta, 2021)^[9]. Focusing on the Scheduled Areas of Odisha, this article critically assesses the implementation process of PESA, emphasizing the central role of the Gram Sabha (GS) as the principal institution of participatory democracy and tribal self-rule. The Act affirms the customary rights of Adivasi communities over their land, forests, and natural resources, thereby promoting autonomy and cultural preservation. Moreover, this study evaluates how PESA has influenced participatory and inclusive local governance structures in Odisha (Sisodia & Dalapati, 2018)^[20]. Its primary objective is to assess the degree to which the Act has strengthened grassroots institutional frameworks, enhanced community participation, and advanced the broader goals of democratic decentralization in tribal regions.

The Framework of Tribal Governance in Odisha

In India's Scheduled Areas, tribal societies have long governed themselves through indigenous systems that managed natural resources and regulated social, economic, and political life based on traditional customs and collective decision-making. However, the forces of modernization have increasingly eroded these customary institutions of self-governance. The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) seeks to reverse this trend by granting statutory recognition to tribal communities' rights to self-rule and their customary control over natural

resources. The Act originated from the Bhuria Committee Report (1995), which emphasized the need for administrative structures that respect and reinforce tribal autonomy in the Fifth Schedule Areas. To actualize this goal, PESA vests substantial authority in the Gram Sabha (village assembly), empowering it to approve local development plans, supervise welfare initiatives, manage minor forest produce, oversee local water bodies and minerals, regulate traditional markets, prevent land alienation, and control the use of intoxicants, among other key functions. In Odisha, the state's legislative framework aligns with these provisions through the Odisha Panchayat Raj Adhiniyam (OPRA), 1993. Section 129-A(b) of the CPRA defines a "village" in Scheduled Areas as one comprising a habitation or group of habitations predominantly inhabited by Scheduled Tribes, managing their affairs according to customary traditions and norms. Similarly, Section 129-A(a) defines the "Gram Sabha" as a body consisting of persons whose names appear in the electoral rolls of the concerned village-level Panchayat or part thereof. The roots of tribal governance in Odisha extend deep into history, grounded in the customary self-rule systems of indigenous groups such as the Gonds, Baigas, and Oraons. These communities historically managed their socio-economic and political affairs through participatory village councils based on consensus, cooperation, and shared responsibility (Xaxa, 1999) ^[24]. Such traditional bodies not only regulated access to forests, land, and water but also preserved ecological balance and social cohesion (Shah, 2010) ^[17]. Colonial interventions profoundly disrupted these indigenous systems. The introduction of British forest laws, land revenue mechanisms, and commercial exploitation of natural resources weakened traditional governance and displaced tribal authority (Guha, 1983) ^[7]. This loss of autonomy sparked several tribal uprisings across central India, including in present-day Odisha (Pradhan, 2016) ^[14]. Following independence, the Indian Constitution acknowledged the unique status and vulnerabilities of tribal populations through the Fifth Schedule (Article 244), designed to ensure administrative safeguards and protection of tribal interests in Scheduled Areas. When Odisha was formed in 2000 after its separation from Madhya Pradesh, it inherited both the complex legacy of colonial disruption and the constitutional responsibility to empower its substantial tribal population, which accounted for over 30% of the state's demographic profile (Census of India, 2011) ^[2]. The enactment of PESA in 1996 marked a significant constitutional advancement in restoring the historical ethos of tribal self-rule. By legally empowering Gram Sabhas in Scheduled Areas, PESA reconnected traditional governance models with modern democratic institutions, thereby reinforcing local autonomy and participatory decision-making. Historically, tribal governance in Odisha relied on local councils and village assemblies for dispute resolution, cultural regulation, and resource management. While colonial forest and land policies severely eroded these systems, post-independence safeguards and later PESA have attempted to revitalize them, offering a framework for decentralized and culturally rooted governance. Demographically, tribal communities continue to hold vital importance in Odisha's governance landscape: according to the 2011 Census, Scheduled Tribes constituted 30.6% of the population (about 7.8 million), with recent estimates (2023) indicating an increase to

approximately 8.97 million, underscoring their continued significance in state policy, planning, and grassroots democracy.

The Centrality of Gram Sabha in Decentralized Governance

In the framework of tribal governance in Odisha, the Gram Sabha functions as far more than a consultative forum—it is envisioned as the foundation of decentralized democracy and the central pillar of local self-governance. The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) positions the Gram Sabha at the heart of the decision-making process, effectively transferring authority from state institutions to the local community. This decentralization of power holds immense significance. The Gram Sabha is legally empowered to safeguard tribal traditions, cultural practices, and social institutions that are increasingly vulnerable to external pressures and mainstream development models. Moreover, the Act grants the Gram Sabha ownership rights over minor forest produce (MFP) and the authority to manage minor water bodies and minerals, marking a transformative shift from earlier centralized policies that had alienated communities from their own natural resources—resources that form the core of tribal livelihoods. Further, PESA mandates that the Gram Sabha's prior approval is essential for all local development initiatives, thereby ensuring that projects reflect community priorities rather than top-down administrative agendas. Originally enacted by the Central Government to extend the principles of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act on Panchayati Raj to the Scheduled Areas, PESA introduced deliberate modifications to preserve and promote tribal customs, traditions, and systems of governance. At its essence, the Act seeks to institutionalize self-rule through the Gram Sabha, enabling tribal communities to exercise genuine autonomy over their socio-economic and cultural development within the broader framework of India's democratic polity. It empowers the Gram Sabha to:

- Safeguard and preserve the traditions, customs, cultural identity, and community resources of the people.
- Manage local markets, prevent land alienation, and regulate the consumption of intoxicants.
- Approve development plans and control all social sectors and local functionaries.
- Exercise mandatory consultation before land acquisition for development projects and before granting licenses for minor minerals or water bodies

In Odisha, where a substantial portion of the territory is classified under the Fifth Schedule, the state took a significant step toward operationalizing tribal self-governance by officially notifying its PESA Rules in August 2022. This development marked a major milestone in providing legal and administrative backing to the Act's intent, thereby enabling tribal communities to exercise greater authority over their socio-economic and cultural affairs. The 2022 PESA Rules of Odisha introduced important provisions to ensure inclusive participation and representation. Notably, they mandate that 50% of the Gram Sabha members must belong to Scheduled Tribes, with 25% of this tribal representation reserved for women, reflecting a deliberate effort to promote gender equity within traditional decision-making structures. Under PESA, the Gram Sabha serves as the cornerstone of governance in Scheduled Areas.

It is vested with powers to approve developmental plans, grant or deny consent for land acquisition and transfer, and manage minor forest produce, water bodies, and minerals. In line with this, Odisha's state-specific rules detail the procedural mechanisms through which Gram Sabhas can exercise authority in matters such as land restoration, rehabilitation processes, and regulation of local natural resources. However, the effectiveness of PESA implementation depends heavily on the functional autonomy, institutional capacity, and awareness levels of the Gram Sabhas themselves. Although there have been notable examples of successful community-led governance—particularly in regions like Mayurbhanj, where local forest management initiatives have demonstrated positive outcomes for both empowerment and ecological sustainability—the overall implementation process remains uneven and challenging (Sudipta, 2015) ^[21].

The PESA Act and Its Legal Framework for Gram Sabha Empowerment

According to recent data released by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2023) the majority of states covered under PESA have established the requisite legal frameworks. An assessment of governance practices within this context reveals diverse patterns of response among Gram Panchayats in implementing and adapting to these reforms. The PESA Act grants Gram Sabhas significant powers, including ownership of minor forest produce, management of natural resources, prevention of land alienation, and control over local institutions. In Odisha, the state government notified specific rules in 2011 to operationalise PESA in Scheduled Areas (Government of Odisha, 2011). However, studies have shown that the translation of these provisions into practice remains partial with state level rules often limiting the autonomy of Gram Sabhas (Singh, 2018) ^[19]. Odisha has integrated PESA by amending existing state laws (e.g., land revenue and local governance rules) and framing Gram Sabha procedures (constitution, conduct of meetings, etc.). The Sector specific amendments have aligned state laws with PESA:

- The Odisha Land Revenue Code, 1959 (Section 170-B(2-A)) empowers Gram Sabhas to restore fraudulently transferred land to tribal members, while the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation, and Resettlement (LARR) Rules, 2016 mandate Gram Sabha consultation for acquisitions.
- The Odisha Excise Act, 1915 (Chapter VIIIA) grants Gram Sabhas the authority to regulate intoxicants, prohibiting new outlets without consent though exemptions allow tribal distillation for cultural purposes.
- The Odisha Minor Mineral Rules, 2015 require prior Gram Sabha recommendations for concessions and addressing exploitation in mineral-rich tribal zones.
- The State Forest Policy, 2001 and fisheries rules devolve management of minor forest produce (MFP) and water bodies to Panchayats integrating with the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 which has seen over significant claims processed in the state.

Budget allocations for Scheduled Areas fixed at around 32-35% in proportion to the tribal population are designed to strengthen decentralised planning. Flagship schemes such as the Rastriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan further reinforce this

process by deploying coordinators and mobilisers to facilitate the effective enforcement of PESA provisions.

Decision-Making and Autonomy in the Empowerment of Gram Sabha

The Gram Sabha stands as the pivotal institution of tribal self-governance under the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA). Conceptually, it is envisioned as a decision-making body responsible for matters concerning land management, forest resources, and local development planning (Drolia, 2022) ^[5]. In the Scheduled Areas of Odisha, Gram Sabhas have played a crucial role in preventing land alienation, promoting community participation in forest governance, and monitoring the implementation of welfare programs (Verma, 2022) ^[22, 23]. Despite these intentions, empirical evidence from various districts reveals that the autonomy of Gram Sabhas is frequently constrained by bureaucratic dominance, political interference, and a lack of institutional capacity (Sharma & Rao, 2020) ^[18]. A significant number of Gram Sabhas remain inactive or underutilized, largely due to limited awareness among tribal populations regarding their legal rights and the provisions of PESA. Formally, the Gram Sabha possesses statutory powers relating to the approval of development plans, supervision of social sector initiatives, management of minor forest produce, water bodies, and minerals, regulation of local markets, and prevention of land alienation. However, in practice, real autonomy varies considerably. Many Gram Sabhas struggle with inadequate technical assistance, financial independence, and institutional support, which restricts their ability to implement decisions effectively. Recent evaluations, including state government reviews and Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) finance assessments, highlight persistent gaps in fiscal devolution and administrative capacity, indicating that while PESA provides a strong legal framework for self-governance, its practical realization remains only partially achieved across much of Odisha's Scheduled Areas.

The Functioning and Role of Gram Sabha in Scheduled Areas

In Odisha's Scheduled Areas, Gram Sabhas are constituted at the village level managed by a Scheduled Tribe member with a one-third quorum including women. Their functions include:

- **Resource Management:** Overseeing land, water, forests, and MFPs with ownership rights transferred to communities.
- **Development Planning:** Approving local plans, issuing utilisation certificates and controlling expenditure.
- **Social Regulation:** Controlling money lending, intoxicants and markets to curb exploitation.
- **Consultative Authority:** Mandatory input on land acquisitions and mining ensuring tribal veto in disruptive projects.

Integration with FRA enhances Gram Sabha roles in recognising community forest rights, promoting sustainable livelihoods.

Under the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA), the Gram Sabha serves as the statutory consultative authority for matters related to land acquisition, forest access, and protection against fraudulent land transfers, including the reversion of alienated land. The Odisha PESA framework explicitly recognizes these roles, granting Gram Sabhas the power to participate in land reversion processes and to be consulted prior to the approval of development projects—crucial safeguards aimed at preventing tribal dispossession and ensuring community consent. However, the effectiveness of these safeguards largely depends on the regular functioning of Gram Sabha meetings, maintenance of transparent records, and follow-up actions by administrative authorities. Within the Fifth Schedule Areas, Gram Sabhas hold express powers under Sections 4(m) and 4(k) of PESA to:

- a. Regulate or prohibit the use of intoxicants;
- b. Exercise ownership over minor forest produce (MFP);
- c. Approve and supervise local development plans and management of community resources; and
- d. Recommend concessions for minor minerals prior to any lease or auction.

The Government of Odisha's notification of the PESA Rules in August 2022 significantly strengthened the composition, authority, and decision-making procedures of Gram Sabhas. Subsequent implementation measures have included state-level capacity-building programs, training workshops, and the appointment of PESA coordinators to facilitate local-level governance (Government Notifications; MoPR Reports). Further institutional reinforcement came through the Odisha Minor Mineral (Sand) Rules, 2023, which mandate Gram Sabha approval for declaring ordinary sand-bearing areas and related commercial activities. Additionally, prior recommendations from the Gram Sabha or Panchayat are now compulsory before granting mineral concessions or leases within Scheduled Areas, enhancing local oversight over resource extraction (State Implementation Reports). PESA also empowers Gram Sabhas to regulate or prohibit intoxicants, and Odisha has operationalized this provision through special excise regulations (often referenced as Chapter VIII-A in state documents). These provisions authorize village-level decisions regarding the sale, production, or prohibition of liquor, thereby aligning traditional community authority with statutory governance frameworks (State Excise Department and PESA presentations).

Case Studies of Successful Gram Sabha Initiatives (Post-PESA)

In May 2022, a significant milestone in community forest governance was achieved in Similipal National Park (Mayurbhanj district, Odisha), where the Gudiyapadar hamlet (Chitalgur Gram Panchayat) received formal recognition of 403 hectares of Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights. This recognition, facilitated through the Gram Sabha, exemplifies how community-led forest management and conservation can align with the broader vision of PESA and the Forest Rights Act (FRA) by reinforcing local ownership and decision-making authority over natural resources (Verma, 2022)^[22, 23]. Similarly, in Lohandiguda, a landmark case of land restoration demonstrates the transformative potential of Gram Sabha-centered mobilization. Following sustained village-level resistance

and Gram Sabha interventions opposing land acquisition for a proposed Tata Steel project, the state government-initiated actions between 2016 and 2019 to return approximately 1,764 hectares of land to affected farmers across ten villages (Land Conflict Watch; Indian Express & Times of India, 2019). Although this development predated the 2022 PESA Rules, it serves as a compelling instance where Gram Sabha-based collective action directly influenced a major land-use decision, resulting in the restoration of community land rights. Another practical dimension of PESA's implementation in Odisha concerns the regulation of intoxicants. Public statements by government officials in Mayurbhanj division have emphasized that decisions regarding the sale or prohibition of liquor fall within the purview of Panchayats and Gram Sabhas, thereby reaffirming local autonomy under PESA's statutory provisions. This acknowledgement not only validates the Gram Sabha's legal authority but also highlights its emerging role as a democratic institution governing social norms and public welfare at the village level.

Mayurbhanj District

Gram Sabhas in the Hasdeo region (e.g., Ghatbarra, Hariharpur, Salhi) have passed multiple resolutions contesting coal mining, alleging that "consent" was fabricated or coerced. Investigations and reportage since 2022-2025 have spotlighted the Gram Sabha's statutory role and objections under PESA/FRA, even as administrative processes remain contested (Sirur, 2024; Land Conflict Watch profile; Down To Earth, 2025). Even amid disputes, these Gram Sabha actions have (i) kept consent at the center of decision-making, (ii) triggered formal probes, and (iii) sustained legal/policy scrutiny over forest diversion processes an assertion of PESA principles from the village level upward. In September 2024, Chainpur Gram Sabha (Ambikapur area) voted to ban liquor and tobacco in public places and instituted fines monitored by a women's committee an explicit use of PESA's intoxicant-regulation power. (Kaiser, 2024)^[8]. Demonstrates the practical community regulation of public health and order through Gram Sabha resolutions consistent with PESA 4(m). Sand governance under 2023 rules Mayurbhanj Gram Sabhas are a required checkpoint for identifying/approving sand ghats. Where applied, this has increased transparency and bargaining power of villages in quarrying decisions.

Before vs. After PESA: Governance on the Ground

Before PESA, tribal governance was primarily customary with little statutory backing; post-PESA there is a statutory framework that formally recognizes Gram Sabhas and prescribes institutional roles. The change is significant on paper in practice the shift is mixed, some customary practices have been re-embedded into statutory processes while other areas still experience administrative displacement of tribal decision-making. Empirical assessments show partial recovery of local autonomy but incomplete institutionalization. In this analysis, the governance landscape of Scheduled Areas in Odisha has undergone a significant transformation since the enactment of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), with notable acceleration following the notification of the state's PESA Rules in August 2022. Prior to PESA (pre-1996 and well into the 2000s) decision-making was largely shaped by top down departmental control, where

Gram Sabhas were treated as consultative forums with little binding authority. Licensing for minor minerals such as sand often proceeded without village-level veto or meaningful transparency and state agencies or marketing federations dominated the management of forests and minor forest produce (MFP) with community forest rights (CFR) recognition remaining limited. Land acquisition typically treated community consent as a procedural formality leading to serious conflicts such as Lohandiguda. Similarly, excise and intoxicant licensing was controlled by the excise department with minimal village say while administrative support for PESA-specific governance was sparse with little training or capacity-building in place.

In contrast, the post-PESA trajectory particularly since the 2022 Rules has reinforced the formal standing of Gram Sabhas as key decision-making institutions. Today, Gram Sabhas hold mandatory approval authority for sand mining in Scheduled Areas (2023) and must provide prior recommendations for concessions of other minor minerals with Gram Sabhas in Mayurbhanj effectively acting as gatekeepers for such decisions. CFR recognitions such as the Gudiya Padar case in Mayurbhanj (2022), further anchor forest governance within Gram Sabha-based structures, while PESA reiterates the ownership of MFP by Gram Sabhas though implementation remains uneven across districts.

Land governance has also shifted with Gram Sabha consent and resolutions now at the center of contestations and remedies as seen in the Hasdeo Arand forest conflict. On the excise front, Gram Sabhas have asserted their authority by banning liquor sales such as the Chainpur (Kendujhar/Mayurbhanj) case in 2024 with official recognition of their competence in regulating intoxicants. Complementing these shifts the state has initiated systematic efforts to operationalise PESA powers through training programs, deployment of PESA coordinators and the development of training modules although rollout remains ongoing capacity gaps persist.

In Mayurbhanj, PESA has shifted the formal centre of gravity toward Gram Sabhas most clearly in minor minerals, intoxicant regulation and forest/community rights and communities are increasingly using these levers. Yet, implementation is uneven departments sometimes proceed without full Gram Sabha due process and Gram Sabhas need sustained capacity-building to exercise their rights effectively (National and state implementation assessments).

Challenges in Implementation

Despite the notification of the PESA rules in Odisha their effective implementation faces significant obstacles. These include:

- **Lack of Awareness:** Many tribal communities are still unaware of their rights under PESA and limiting their ability to exercise the powers granted to them.
- **Bureaucratic Apathy and Political Interference:** A lack of political will and bureaucratic resistance to relinquishing power has often led to PESA being implemented “in letter rather than in spirit.” Administrative agencies frequently override Gram Sabha decisions weakening their legal authority.
- **Conflicts with Other Laws:** PESA's provisions can sometimes be in conflict with other state or central

laws, such as the Forest Rights Act (FRA) creating legal ambiguities and hindering implementation. The tension between state-driven resource exploitation and community ownership has limited the effectiveness of PESA (Roy, 2019)^[16].

- **Limited Resources:** Gram Sabhas often lack the financial resources and technical expertise to carry out their functions effectively and relying on the very government departments they are meant to oversee.

For PESA to truly realize its transformative potential in Odisha there must be a concerted effort to address these challenges. This involves raising awareness among tribal communities, building the capacity of Gram Sabhas, clearly delineating the roles of different government departments, and aligning state laws with PESA's spirit. By empowering the Gram Sabha, the state can foster a model of governance that is not only democratic but also culturally sensitive and sustainable ensuring the protection of tribal rights and the preservation of their unique way of life.

Future towards Strengthening Tribal Governance

Recommendations include intensive awareness campaigns, harmonizing state laws with PESA, and establishing monitoring committees. Capacity building for women, punitive measures for violations, and digital tools for meetings are essential. For PESA to achieve its intended impact in Odisha, reforms must prioritize:

- Capacity Building of Gram Sabhas through training and awareness campaigns on PESA rights at village level.
- Mandatory, well-documented Gram Sabha agendas and minutes with public disclosure.
- Dedicated technical support teams at block/district level to aid Gram Sabhas in planning, SIA (social impact assessment) and resource mapping.
- Policy Reforms to harmonize state rules with the spirit of central legislation.
- Administrative Accountability by ensuring state agencies respects Gram Sabha decisions.
- Community Empowerment by enhancing participation of women and marginalized groups in local governance.
- Strengthen fiscal control by Gram Sabhas over certain local funds and ensure timely transfers (linked to e-governance reporting).
- Encourage NGO-government partnerships for capacity building and social audits.

Future prospects hinge on full PESA implementation with 2025 conferences emphasizing Gram Sabha strengthening. Potential includes better resource governance amid climate challenges, though extremism poses risks. Enhanced FRAPESA synergy could drive sustainable development.

Conclusion

The PESA Act embodies a vision of democratic decentralization tailored for tribal self-rule. In Odisha, the Gram Sabha has emerged as a potential instrument for safeguarding indigenous rights and promoting participatory governance. Yet, the promise of PESA remains underrealized due to systemic constraints. Strengthening institutional frameworks, enhancing grassroots capacities, and fostering genuine state-community partnerships are

essential for transforming PESA from a legislative aspiration into a lived reality for tribal communities.

PESA has re-legitimized the Gram Sabha as the primary locus of tribal self-governance in Odisha and provided statutory tools to protect customary rights and manage local resources. Implementation has advanced through state rules, e-portals and selective local successes, but persistent gaps in awareness, fiscal authority and administrative practice mean outcomes remain uneven. Strengthened capacity building, fiscal devolution, transparent Gram Sabha processes and sustained government-civil society collaboration are key to translating PESA's promise into measurable gains for tribal self-rule.

PESA has transformed tribal governance in Odisha by empowering Gram Sabhas though challenges like incomplete implementation persist. Its impact on resource protection and development is evident promising equitable growth if gaps are addressed. In conclusion, while PESA has laid the foundation for tribal self-governance in Odisha, realising its full potential requires addressing implementation lacunae to ensure Gram Sabhas function as empowered pillars of decentralised democracy ultimately fostering equitable development in Scheduled Areas.

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