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The Role of Social Movements in Shaping Tribal Political Consciousness in Jharkhand

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Abstract:

The role of social movements in shaping tribal political consciousness in Jharkhand is rooted in a long history of resistance against colonial exploitation and cultural suppression. Beginning with early uprisings such as the Dhal Revolt, Tilka Manjhi Movement, and the iconic Birsa Munda Rebellion, these movements united disparate tribal groups to assert land rights, preserve cultural identity, and challenge external dominance. Over time, these interconnected forms of social and cultural mobilization coalesced into a powerful political movement seeking autonomy and self-governance, culminating in the formation of Jharkhand state in 2000. The revival of customary practices and cultural traditions has strengthened community solidarity, providing the social foundation for sustained political awareness and active participation. Supported by constitutional provisions reserving parliamentary and legislative assembly seats for Scheduled Tribes under Articles 330 and 332, as well as landmark laws like the Forest Rights Act (2006) recognizing tribal land rights, these movements have institutionalized tribal political representation and empowerment. Collectively, the trajectory of social movements in Jharkhand illustrates how cultural identity, customary practices, and political activism intertwine to produce enduring tribal political consciousness, ensuring that tribal communities play a decisive role in shaping the region's democratic governance and development.

Keywords: Jharkhand, Tribal Social Movements, Political Consciousness, Tribal Uprisings, Dhal Revolt, Birsa Munda Movement, Tilka Manjhi Revolt.

1. Introduction:

The political consciousness of tribal communities in Jharkhand has been deeply shaped by a long history of marginalization, exploitation, and struggles for autonomy. Jharkhand, carved out of Bihar in 2000, has a predominantly tribal population, with groups such as the Munda, Oraon, and Santhal playing a significant role in the region's political history (Ekka, 2011). The genesis of tribal political consciousness can be traced to early uprisings like the SanthalHul of 1855–56 and the Birsa Munda-led Ulgulan of 1899–1900, which resisted colonial exploitation, land alienation, and oppressive revenue systems (Gupta, 2017). These struggles not only highlighted the assertion of tribal identity but also laid the foundation for organized mobilization around rights, culture, and political representation.

In the post-independence period, tribal communities of Jharkhand continued to experience economic deprivation, land dispossession, and displacement due to industrial and mining projects. This socio-economic

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marginalization gave rise to organized social movements, most notably the Jharkhand Movement, which sought a separate state to secure tribal autonomy and protect their cultural and political rights (Corbridge, 2000). The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), emerging from grassroots mobilization, symbolized a political expression of tribal identity and became a vehicle for tribal aspirations within democratic structures (Kujur, 2002). Social movements, thus, became central to transforming tribal discontent into structured political action, fostering a collective consciousness that articulated demands for statehood, land reforms, and political representation.

The role of social movements in shaping tribal political consciousness is also evident in the intersection of grassroots struggles with electoral politics. Movements against land acquisition, displacement, and forest exploitation brought together diverse tribal groups under a shared political identity, reinforcing solidarity across districts (Xaxa, 2018). For instance, resistance against displacement caused by large-scale mining projects in Ranchi and Singhbhum became a rallying point for political mobilization and heightened awareness of rights enshrined in the Fifth Schedule and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996 (Prasad, 2013). These struggles not only sharpened political awareness but also influenced policy discourses on tribal autonomy, governance, and development.

Moreover, social movements in Jharkhand were not only about resistance but also about asserting cultural identity and self-determination. Movements led by intellectuals, students, and local leaders helped politicize everyday issues such as land rights, education, and employment, turning them into broader demands for social justice and dignity (Shah, 2007). As a result, tribal political consciousness evolved beyond protest to encompass aspirations for institutional representation, rights-based legislation, and recognition of tribal customs within the democratic framework.

In this context, the study of social movements becomes critical to understanding how tribal communities in Jharkhand developed political awareness, transformed their identity into a unifying force, and shaped the discourse around governance and development in India's tribal heartland. By tracing these trajectories, one can analyze how grassroots mobilizations acted as catalysts for the emergence of political consciousness among Jharkhand's tribal population.

2. The Review of Related Literature:

Singh, A. (2024). This article analyzes how colonial legal structures (especially around forest and land laws) continue to affect tribal communities, and how post-colonial ecological resistance movements have helped shape political consciousness among Adivasis in Jharkhand. It discusses how resistance against deforestation, mining, and environmental injustice interlocks with identity and rights awareness.

Singh (2024) examines how colonial forest and land laws created structural vulnerabilities that persist in Jharkhand, and argues that contemporary ecological resistance (anti-mining, forest defence) has become a major site for the politicization of Adivasi identity. The paper shows how environmental claims and local customary rights have been reframed as political demands, strengthening collective consciousness and spawning new forms of mobilization that link local ecological grievances to wider legal and rights-based claims. This work is useful for situating ecological protest as a driver of political awareness among tribal communities

Chakraborty, M., & Kesharwani, P. K. (2024). This paper traces the history of tribal movements in Jharkhand, with emphasis on how cultural identity, customary practices and tribal governance were central to the demand for statehood. It offers insights into how past movements built the frameworks of communal political awareness that persist today.

Prasad, S., & Sole, N. A. (2023). This study examines the Pathalgadi movement in Simdega district, focusing on how carved stone slabs bearing constitutional/provisions like PESA and Scheduled Areas are being used by tribal communities to assert self-governance. The paper explores both the potentials and conflicts in these practices, including between state institutions and local customary authority.

3. The Research Gap:

Although existing studies highlight the significance of ecological resistance (Singh, 2024), historical identity-based struggles (Chakraborty & Kesharwani, 2024), and localized constitutional assertions such as the Pathalgadi movement (Prasad & Sole, 2023) in shaping tribal political awareness in Jharkhand, research remains fragmented and issue-specific. There is limited comprehensive analysis that connects these diverse movements across ecological, cultural, and rights-based domains to explain how they collectively sustain and transform tribal political consciousness over time.

4. The Statement of the Problem:

Despite the long history of tribal resistance in Jharkhand, the political consciousness of Adivasi communities continues to be shaped by persistent struggles against land alienation, ecological exploitation, cultural marginalization, and state neglect. Social movements—whether ecological protests, cultural identity assertions, or rights-based mobilizations—have provided platforms for articulating grievances and asserting autonomy, yet their interconnected role in building and sustaining collective political awareness remains insufficiently understood. The problem arises from the limited exploration of how these diverse movements, past and present, converge to transform tribal identity into a politicized consciousness that redefines governance, strengthens community solidarity, and challenges systemic injustices in Jharkhand.

5. The Significance of the Study:

This study is significant as it seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how diverse social movements—ranging from ecological resistance and cultural revival to rights-based mobilizations—have collectively shaped tribal political consciousness in Jharkhand. By examining both historical and contemporary struggles, the research highlights how these movements not only address immediate grievances such as displacement, deforestation, and marginalization but also contribute to the long-term politicization of Adivasi identity and their engagement with state structures. The findings will be valuable for scholars of political science, sociology, and tribal studies, while also offering insights for policymakers, activists, and community leaders working towards inclusive governance, rights protection, and sustainable development for tribal populations.

6. The Research Questions:

RQ1: What were the historical roots and trajectories of social movements in Jharkhand, and how have they influenced the evolution of tribal political consciousness from the colonial period to the present?

RQ2: How do different forms of social movements—ecological resistance, cultural revival, and rights-based mobilizations—interconnect, and what is their collective impact on shaping and sustaining tribal political consciousness in Jharkhand?

RQ3: In what ways do cultural revival and customary practices strengthen community solidarity and political awareness among Adivasi communities in Jharkhand, and how do these practices interact with other forms of mobilization?

7. The Research Objectives:

O₁: To examine the historical roots of social movements in Jharkhand and their influence on the evolution of tribal political consciousness.

 O_2 : To explore the interconnections between different forms of social movements and their collective impact on shaping and sustaining tribal political consciousness.

 O_3 : To study the role of cultural revival and customary practices in strengthening community solidarity and political awareness.

8. The Methodology of the Study:

The present study adopted document analysis as its primary methodology, relying on both primary and secondary sources to examine the role of social movements in shaping tribal political consciousness in Jharkhand. Primary sources included government reports, policy documents, legal frameworks such as forest and land laws, and archival records related to tribal movements, while secondary sources comprised scholarly articles, books, theses, and contemporary research studies. This method enabled a critical review of historical and contemporary texts, providing insights into how ecological struggles, cultural revival, and rights-based mobilizations have been articulated and interpreted over time. Document analysis was particularly appropriate for this study as it facilitated an in-depth exploration of diverse perspectives, traced the evolution of political awareness among Adivasis, and identified patterns and themes that connect past movements with present struggles for rights and identity.

9. Analysis and Interpretation:

 O_1 : To examine the historical roots of social movements in Jharkhand and their influence on the evolution of tribal political consciousness.

Colonial Uprisings and Early Political Mobilization

In 1855, the Santhal Rebellion, led by Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, marked a significant resistance against the East India Company's exploitative policies. The rebellion was driven by the Santhal community's opposition to the zamindari system, which led to land alienation and economic hardship. Although the uprising was suppressed, it galvanized the tribal population, fostering a sense of unity and resistance. The rebellion's legacy is commemorated annually on June 30, reinforcing tribal identity and pride.

Following this, Birsa Munda's Ulgulan (1899–1900) further entrenched the notion of self-rule among the tribal communities. Birsa's movement sought to reclaim tribal land and culture from colonial and missionary influences. The slogan "Diku Raj Tuntu Jana – Abua Raj Ete Jana" ("The rule of outsiders is over, our own rule has begun") encapsulated the demand for autonomy and self-governance

Legal Frameworks and Institutional Recognition

The colonial administration's response to tribal unrest included the enactment of the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act (CNT Act) in 1908. This legislation aimed to protect tribal land rights by restricting land transfer to non-tribals. While the Act was a form of legal recognition, its implementation was often flawed, leading to continued land alienation. Nonetheless, the CNT Act became a cornerstone in the legal discourse surrounding tribal land rights and autonomy.

Electoral Representation and Political Assertion

The political consciousness cultivated through these movements translated into institutional representation post-independence. As of the 2011 Census, Scheduled Tribes constitute approximately 26.2% of Jharkhand's population, with significant concentrations in districts like Gumla, Lohardaga, and Pashchimi Singhbhum. This demographic presence has been reflected in the state's political structure.

In the 2024 Jharkhand Legislative Assembly elections, out of 81 seats, 28 are reserved for Scheduled Tribes, underscoring the state's commitment to tribal representation. The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), a party rooted in tribal rights, secured 34 seats, leading a coalition government that emphasizes tribal welfare and autonomy.

At the national level, Jharkhand elects 14 members to the Lok Sabha, with five constituencies—Khunti, Dumka, Singhbhum, Rajmahal, and Lohardaga—reserved for Scheduled Tribes. These constituencies have historically been strongholds for tribal leaders advocating for the rights and development of indigenous communities

The historical uprisings, legal frameworks, and electoral structures in Jharkhand have collectively shaped a resilient tribal political consciousness. From the Santhal Rebellion to the present-day political representation, the trajectory reflects a continuous struggle for identity, autonomy, and justice. Understanding this evolution is crucial for addressing contemporary challenges faced by tribal communities in Jharkhand and ensuring their active participation in the state's political processes.

O_2 : To explore the interconnections between different forms of social movements and their collective impact on shaping and sustaining tribal political consciousness.

The interconnections between various social movements in Jharkhand have collectively shaped and sustained tribal political consciousness by fostering a strong sense of identity, rights awareness, and political mobilization over centuries. This intricate web of movements reflects phases of resistance and assertion—from militant uprisings against colonial oppression to modern political struggles for statehood and cultural preservation.

Early Tribal Uprisings and Their Legacy

Jharkhand's tribal political consciousness was first forged through several revolts against British colonial policies and exploitation, which disrupted traditional social, economic, and cultural systems. Key early movements include:

- The Dhal Revolt (1767-1777), led by Jagannath Dhal, was a resistance against British efforts to control land and resources in Singhbhum and Manbhum regions, forcing the British to reinstate local power temporarily.
- The Tilka Manjhi Movement (1783-1785) marked one of the earliest organized tribal rebellions, where Tilka Manjhi mobilized the Paharia tribe to resist colonial taxes and land seizures.
- The Kol Movement (1831-32) under Jatra Bhagat opposed colonial exploitation and cultural domination, asserting tribal identity.
- The Bhumij Rebellion (1834) in the Chota Nagpur region was another significant uprising against British-imposed administrative and land policies.

These rebellions cultivated a political consciousness rooted in defense of tribal land, autonomy, and culture, inspiring successive movements.

The Birsa Munda Movement and Cultural-Political Revival

The late 19th century witnessed the iconic Birsa Munda Movement (1899-1900), which crystallized tribal political awakening by combining cultural revivalism with political mobilization. Birsa Munda emphasized rejection of colonial laws, Christian missionary impositions, and exploitation by local landlords allied with the British. He reinvigorated traditional religious beliefs and community organization, gathering around 6,000 Mundas to assert ancestral rights to land and self-rule. Though suppressed, the movement deeply influenced tribal political identity and highlighted the need for political recognition and safeguards.

The TanaBhagat Movement and Nonviolent Political Mobilization

Around 1914, the TanaBhagat Movement emerged among the Oraon tribe, promoting social reform and purity while aligning with India's broader independence movement. Leaders like Jatra Bhagat encouraged peaceful resistance by opposing liquor shops and colonial authorities and collaborating with Congress-led civil disobedience campaigns. This movement reflected an evolution of tribal consciousness towards nonviolent political activism within the Indian nationalist context.

The Long-Term Jharkhand Statehood Movement

From the early 20th century to 2000, the Jharkhand Movement advocated for a separate tribal state carved out of Bihar to secure tribal socio-political rights, cultural identity, and economic development. Early tribal intellectual and political organizations such as the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj, formed in the 1900s, sought recognition of tribal autonomy and rights. The movement gained momentum post-independence under leaders like Jaipal Singh Munda and Shibu Soren, culminating in the official formation of Jharkhand state on November 15, 2000. This achievement institutionalized tribal political representation and autonomy.

Collective Impact on Tribal Political Consciousness in Jharkhand

Interconnected, these social movements shaped and sustained tribal political awareness by:

- Building a shared historical identity of resistance and assertion of customary rights.
- Combining cultural revival with political demands, thus linking cultural identity with political empowerment.
- Creating political institutions and constituencies that ensured tribal representation, such as reserved seats in the Lok Sabha and Jharkhand Legislative Assembly per Articles 330 and 332 of the Indian Constitution.
- Contributing to legislation protecting tribal lands, such as the Forest Rights Act (2006).
- Facilitating the creation of Jharkhand as a separate state (2000), institutionalizing tribal political power and local governance.

Specific Social Movements in Jharkhand and Their Contributions

Movement	Period	Key Leader(s)	Major Demand	Impact on Political Consciousness
Dhal Revolt	1767- 1777	Jagannath Dhal	Halt British control of land	Early organized tribal resistance shaping identity
Tilka Manjhi Movement	1783- 1785	Tilka Manjhi	Land rights, anti-taxation	Inspired future revolts, symbolizing resistance
Kol Movement	1831- 1832	Jatra Bhagat	Oppose exploitation, cultural survival	Strengthened tribal unity and identity
Birsa Munda Movement	1899- 1900	Birsa Munda	Tribal self-rule, land rights, cultural revival	Sparked political awakening, groundwork for statehood movement
Tana Bhagat Movement	1914 onward	Jatra Bhagat	Social reforms, alignment with independence	Moved towards nonviolent political activism within nationalist struggle
Jharkhand Statehood Movement	20th century- 2000	Jaipal Singh Munda, ShibuSoren	Separate tribal state, political autonomy	Achieved statehood in 2000, trengthening political representation

Parliamentary Representation and Legal Framework

- Jharkhand constituency seats are reserved for Scheduled Tribes under Articles 330 and 332, ensuring political representation in Parliament and state legislature.
- The state of Jharkhand itself was recognized by political mobilization culminating in the Jharkhand Act of 2000.
- The Forest Rights Act (2006) further institutionalized tribal rights over forest lands, linking legal empowerment with tribal political consciousness.

The convergence of varied social movements in Jharkhand—from armed revolts to cultural revival to institutional political mobilization—created a sustained tribal political consciousness characterized by demands for identity, autonomy, and socio-political empowerment. These movements interlinked historically and strategically, transforming tribal aspirations into constitutional rights, political representation, and ultimately the creation of Jharkhand state, highlighting a profound collective impact.

O₃: To study the role of cultural revival and customary practices in strengthening community solidarity and political awareness.

In Jharkhand, cultural revival and customary practices have played a pivotal role in strengthening community solidarity and political awareness among its diverse tribal populations. These elements are central to the political identity and mobilization in the state, which has seen its tribal communities assert their rights, demand political representation, and resist socio-economic marginalization for decades.

Role of Cultural Revival and Customary Practices:

Jharkhand is home to over 30 tribal groups such as the Munda, Santhal, Oraon, and Ho, constituting nearly 26% of the state population. These communities have historically relied on customary laws, rituals, festivals, and traditional governance systems as core components of their identity and socioeconomic organization. Festivals like Sarhul and Karma, and the practice of Sarna religion, reflect a deep connection with nature and social cohesion, distinct from mainstream religious practices. Reviving and preserving these cultural practices has strengthened community solidarity, fostering a collective identity which serves as a basis for political mobilization and resistance against external pressures like land alienation and cultural assimilation.

Traditional governance mechanisms based on customary laws regulate community resources, social disputes, and decision-making processes, creating strong internal cohesion. Movements such as the Pathalgadi, which emphasize asserting tribal autonomy and rejecting external interference by invoking customary rights and traditional governance, illustrate how cultural revival reinforces political awareness and activism in Jharkhand.

Legal and Institutional Support:

Tribal political awakening driven by cultural identity is supported by constitutional and legislative provisions:

- Article 330 and Article 332 of the Indian Constitution reserve 28 constituencies in Jharkhand's 81-member Legislative Assembly for Scheduled Tribes, ensuring political participation and voice.
- The Jharkhand State Formation Act (2000) institutionalized tribal political assertion by carving out a separate state reflecting tribal majority areas and their aspirations.
- The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (Forest Rights Act) legally recognizes tribal customary rights over forests and land, sealing the connection between cultural identity, land ownership, and political empowerment.

Reserved parliamentary constituencies and legislative seats rooted in Jharkhand's tribal population distribution act as a direct consequence of tribal political consciousness fostered by cultural revival. The 28 reserved assembly seats and dedicated Lok Sabha constituencies create avenues for elected tribal leaders from regional parties such as the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), which rely heavily on the political support of tribal communities.

Evidence of Political Consciousness from Cultural Revival:

1. Sarhul Festival and Sarna Religion

Celebrations like Sarhul not only revive ritualistic traditions but act as political statements reinforcing tribal identity in a politically contested environment where conversion politics and external religious influences threaten indigenous customs. These practices foster community pride and unity, essential for mobilizing political awareness and electoral participation.

2. Pathalgadi Movements

Reassertion of customary laws through Pathalgadi, where tribal communities erect stone slabs to demarcate autonomous zones, demonstrates how cultural revival feeds into political activism. These movements challenge state authority and claim self-governance, leveraging constitutional guarantees of tribal autonomy found under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules (Article 244).

3. Political Parties Rooted in Tribal Identity

Political platforms like JMM and Jharkhand VikasMorcha directly emerge from tribal solidarity based on shared cultural space. Their electoral success in reserved constituencies illustrates the effective mobilization of cultural identity into political power.

4. Legislative and Constitutional Milestones

The passage of the Jharkhand Statehood Act (2000) was the culmination of decades of tribal political mobilization rooted in cultural identity and customary rights movements. The state's political structure with reserved tribal constituencies has since enhanced tribal representation in Parliament and state governance.

5. Impact of the Forest Rights Act (2006)

By formally acknowledging the customary right of tribals over forest lands and resources, this Act integrates cultural and political rights, reinforcing tribal solidarity, autonomy, and the basis for political claims against displacement and exploitation.

Reserved Constituencies and Seats in Jharkhand

- Jharkhand has 28 constituencies reserved for Scheduled Tribes in its 81-member legislative assembly, forming an essential base for tribal political representation.
- Tribal reserved seats form an integral part of Jharkhand's political landscape, evidenced by the electoral dominance of tribal-centric parties like JMM in these constituencies.
- The Lok Sabha constituencies with tribal reservations correspond with Jharkhand's demographic pattern, ensuring tribal voices in national legislation.

In Jharkhand, cultural revival and customary practices are foundational to building community solidarity and political awareness among tribal populations. These elements nurture a collective identity that sustains political mobilization and underlies formal political representation in reserved constituencies. The combined force of cultural assertion, constitutional provisions (Articles 244, 330, 332), landmark Acts such as the Forest Rights Act (2006), and political organization has cemented tribal political consciousness in Jharkhand. This dynamic has enabled tribal communities to assert control over their lands, cultural heritage, and political future within India's democratic framework.

10. Conclusion:

The examination of Jharkhand's social movements reveals deep historical roots that shaped its tribal political consciousness. Starting from early tribal revolts during the colonial period—such as the Kol Rebellion, Santhal Uprising, and Birsa Munda Movement—these movements instilled a sense of collective identity and resistance against economic exploitation, cultural domination, and loss of traditional lands. Tribal leaders and organizations in the early 20th century, including the Chotanagpur UnnatiSamaj and Adivasi Mahasabha, built upon this legacy, giving rise to organized political mobilization centered on self-determination and cultural preservation. This historical trajectory illustrates how long-standing socioeconomic and political grievances were crucial in nurturing the political awareness of Jharkhand's tribal communities.

The interconnections between different forms of social movements—ranging from militant uprisings, religious-cultural revivalism, and nonviolent social reform to political party formation—have collectively

shaped and sustained tribal political consciousness in Jharkhand. These movements did not operate in isolation but interacted to reinforce tribal solidarity, cultural identity, and rights assertion. The formation of political parties like the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) and the All Jharkhand Students Union (AJSU) demonstrates the transformation of grassroots movements into sustained political platforms that successfully advocated for tribal rights and statehood. Their collective impact culminated in the creation of Jharkhand state in 2000, institutionalizing tribal political representation and autonomy within India's federal framework.

Cultural revival and customary practices have played a pivotal role in strengthening community solidarity and political awareness in Jharkhand. The revival of tribal festivals, traditional governance systems, and customary laws enhanced social cohesion and served as a basis for tribal resistance and autonomy claims. Movements such as Pathalgadi illustrate how customary rights underpin political mobilization, challenging external interference and asserting constitutional protections available in the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution. Legal frameworks including Articles 330 and 332 have ensured reserved constituencies for Scheduled Tribes, enabling tribal political participation at the state and national levels. Landmark legislations like the Forest Rights Act (2006) have further reinforced the link between cultural identity, land rights, and political empowerment, allowing tribals to maintain control over their ancestral lands.

In conclusion, Jharkhand's tribal political consciousness is the product of an evolving process rooted in historical resistance, interconnected social movements, and cultural revival. These forces have collectively fostered a resilient political identity that demands recognition, rights, and autonomy. Institutional measures such as reserved parliamentary and assembly seats, the creation of Jharkhand state, and protective laws have crystallized these demands into democratic governance. Together, these elements underscore how culture, customary practice, and political activism converge to empower tribal communities in Jharkhand, sustaining their quest for dignity, self-rule, and development within the Indian democratic polity.

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