

The Influence of the Tribal Dominant Constituencies in the Voting Patterns of Jharkhand Elections – Insights from the 2024 Assembly Elections

Shalini Saboo
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-8792-4836

Abstract: *Jharkhand is a state where a substantial 26.2 percent of the population is that of the tribals. The indigenous communities of the state comprising thirty-two tribes have a dominant say in the state not only in terms of numbers but also when it comes to deciding the political leadership. The Jharkhand Assembly elections, the results of which were announced on November 13, 2024, bring to light this fact. The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) Party — a regional party founded by Disom Guru Shibu Soren (father of Chief Minister Hemant Soren) — won a substantial thirty-four seats out of the total 56 seats won by its allies in the 81-member Jharkhand State Assembly. The win, considered a landslide victory for the JMM and its allies, raises a pertinent question: Is it only the core tribal seats deciding the political fate of the state or do the “tribal dominant” seats also play a pivotal role? This paper not only defines such seats but also finds an answer by taking a reality check on their contribution in shaping the political destiny of Jharkhand. The paper employs a descriptive quantitative analysis of secondary electoral data spanning 2005–2024, using constituency-level census and Election Commission data. The central finding is that ST Dominant seats — those with 20% or more tribal population but without formal reservation — are co-decisive with ST Reserved seats in government formation.*

Keywords: *ST Dominant, Scheduled Tribe, Constituencies, Reservation, JMM, Delimitation, Ethnic Voting, Psephology.*

1. Introduction

Patronized by a campaign that made Jharkhandi identity and Adivasi culture its insignia, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) party ensconced its role as a protector of tribal culture, justice and the rights of the indigenous community in the state once again. The results of the 2024 Assembly Elections in Jharkhand reaffirm the fact that voting done on the lines of tribal concerns and local identity decides the fate of political parties. No wonder, the current results depict JMM’s strong resonance with electors who crave for a leadership that will defend their culture and identity. Is it only the tribal constituencies deciding the political fate of the state? The paper delves into the political landscape of Jharkhand by highlighting not only the tribal constituencies but also the role of the ‘tribal dominant’ seats. Which are such seats and have their role in the government formation of the state been adequately highlighted — this is what the paper tries to assess.

Against this backdrop, this paper is guided by three core research questions: (1) How should Scheduled Tribe Dominant seats — those assembly constituencies with 20 per cent or more tribal population but without formal ST reservation — be conceptualised and categorised within Jharkhand’s electoral landscape? (2) What role have these ST Dominant seats

played in government formation across Jharkhand’s assembly elections from 2005 to 2024? (3) Is the voting behaviour of tribal communities in Jharkhand driven primarily by ethnic identity or by broader state-level political calculations? The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on tribal voting, ethnic electoral behaviour and Indian psephology. Section 3 outlines the data and methodology. Sections 4 through 7 present the empirical analysis and Section 8 concludes with implications for future research.

2. Literature Review

The study of tribal electoral politics in India has attracted growing scholarly attention, particularly in the context of post-colonial state formation and the constitutional provisions for Scheduled Tribe representation. Chandra’s (2004) seminal work on ethnic parties in India provides a foundational theoretical lens, arguing that in multi-ethnic democracies, voters tend to support parties that credibly represent their ethnic group’s interests when the state distributes patronage along ethnic lines. This theory of “ethnic outbidding” is directly relevant to the Jharkhand context, where the JMM has consistently positioned itself as the authentic guardian of tribal rights against both national parties and non-tribal political formations.

Wilkinson (2004) extends this analysis by demonstrating that vote-bank politics in India is not merely a product of primordial ethnic loyalties but is instrumentally constructed by political elites who mobilise identity as an electoral resource. In Jharkhand, the salience of land rights, forest rights and linguistic identity as electoral issues — particularly the contested amendments to the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act — exemplifies this dynamic. The tribal electorate's decisive swing toward the JMM in 2019 and 2024 following perceived threats to these rights is consistent with Wilkinson's framework.

Scholarship on the Jharkhand movement specifically has documented the long struggle for a separate tribal state and its political consequences. Corbridge and Jewitt (1997) traced the socio-economic dimensions of the movement, showing how resource exploitation, displacement and cultural marginalisation created a fertile ground for ethnic political mobilisation. Sundar (2007) further examined how the post-statehood period witnessed the institutionalisation of tribal identity in formal politics, with the JMM emerging as the primary vehicle for this process. These historical analyses provide essential context for understanding why tribal identity continues to dominate electoral calculations even after the creation of the state in 2000.

The psephological literature on Jharkhand elections has grown substantially following the Lokniti-CSDS voter survey programme. Kumar and Suri (2019) analysed the 2019 Vidhan Sabha elections and found that tribal voting consolidation around the JMM was driven by a combination of identity concerns and anti-incumbency against the BJP's non-tribal Chief Minister, Raghubar Das. Their analysis highlighted that vote transfers between alliance partners in tribal constituencies were significantly more efficient than in general seats, suggesting a higher degree of strategic voting among tribal communities. Yadav and Palshikar (2003) have more broadly argued that Indian voters demonstrate "issue-based voting rationality," and this paper tests that proposition in the specific context of ST Dominant seats.

Constitutional and legal scholarship on delimitation provides another critical lens. Shastri, Suri and Yadav (2009) examined how delimitation exercises across Indian states have shaped competitive dynamics in reserved constituencies. The unique situation in Jharkhand — where the 2008 legal amendment preserved 28 ST reserved seats despite a proportional entitlement of only 21 — has created a distinctive electoral geography that has not been systematically analysed. Existing studies have focused almost exclusively on reserved seats, leaving the politically significant category of ST Dominant seats largely unexplored. It is this gap that the present paper addresses by offering the first systematic analysis of ST Dominant constituency outcomes in Jharkhand across multiple election cycles.

3. Data and Methodology

This paper adopts a descriptive quantitative analytical approach, drawing exclusively on secondary data. The primary data source is www.indiastateelections.com, a comprehensive repository of Indian electoral statistics compiled from Election Commission of India records. Constituency-level data on Scheduled Tribe population percentages are derived from the Census of India 2011, published by the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India. Vote share and seat-level outcomes for Vidhan Sabha elections (2005, 2009, 2014, 2019 and 2024) and Lok Sabha elections (2004, 2009, 2014, 2019 and 2024) are sourced from the Election Commission of India's official results database. Supplementary contextual data on elector counts and polling percentages are drawn from the same source.

The categorisation of assembly constituencies into analytical types — General, Scheduled Tribe Reserved, Scheduled Caste Reserved and Scheduled Tribe Dominant — follows the constitutional reservation framework established under the Representation of the People Act, 1950 and the Delimitation Commission Order of 2008. The category of "ST Dominant seat" is an original operationalisation introduced in this paper. It refers to assembly constituencies that have not been formally designated as Scheduled Tribe reserved seats but that have a Scheduled Tribe population share of 20 per cent or more of the total constituency population, as per the 2011 Census. This 20 per cent threshold is adopted on the basis that it represents an electorally significant tribal presence — large enough to potentially swing results in a first-past-the-post system — while remaining below the 30 per cent threshold that characterises constituencies where ST voters constitute a near-majority determinative bloc.

The analysis covers 81 Jharkhand assembly constituencies across five Vidhan Sabha election cycles (2005–2024). The unit of analysis is the assembly constituency-election cycle. Vote share data are disaggregated by party and by constituency reservation status (ST Reserved and ST Dominant) to enable comparative analysis across election cycles. Strike rate — defined as seats won divided by seats contested — is used as a measure of party efficiency in specific constituency types.

A key methodological limitation must be acknowledged upfront. The constituency-level tribal population estimates used to identify ST Dominant seats are based on the 2011 Census, which is the most recent publicly available disaggregated census data, as the 2021 Census has been postponed. Population composition in some constituencies may have shifted between 2011 and 2024. Additionally, this paper adopts a single-state focus on Jharkhand and does not claim generalisability to other tribal-majority states, though the analytical framework of ST Dominant seats may be applicable to states such as Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh in future comparative research.

4. Scheduled Tribe Dominant Seats and Their Role in the Political Landscape of Jharkhand

The political landscape of Jharkhand is tribal dominated where the Scheduled Tribe(s) represent substantially in the legislative bodies of the state. Broadly speaking, the Scheduled Tribe Dominant constituencies consist of both reserved seats and those with no reserved seats. The former may be categorized as core Scheduled Tribe seats and the latter as the Scheduled Tribe seats on the periphery according to their strength of the Scheduled Tribe population. The core constituencies are those that have around 30% or more ST population out of the total population of the constituency and the peripheral constituencies (Scheduled Tribe Dominant) are those that have less than 30% but a minimum of 20% of the tribal population. Since the purpose of this categorization is to see how the Scheduled Tribe voting pattern emerges in the Scheduled Tribe reserved seats as compared to the Scheduled Tribe Dominant seats, a limit of 30% ST populated seat has been kept as the core constituency. The logic behind keeping the Scheduled Tribe Dominant seats in the periphery category is that even if the candidates are members of the Scheduled Tribe, they are dependent on the decision of the non-Scheduled Tribe(s) for their chances of winning.

Table 1 depicts the seat distribution by estimated percentage of Scheduled Tribe population out of the total population in an assembly constituency in Jharkhand. The table reveals that although there are a total of 28 declared Scheduled Tribe seats in the state, the Scheduled Tribe Dominant seats — which are 43 in number — are more than 50% of the total 81 seats. Given the substantial share of these Scheduled Tribe Dominant seats in the Jharkhand Assembly, the extent of their role in affecting the formation of the government cannot be left unnoticed.

Table 1: Seats distribution by estimated percentage of scheduled tribe population out of the total population in an assembly constituency in Jharkhand, 2011 census

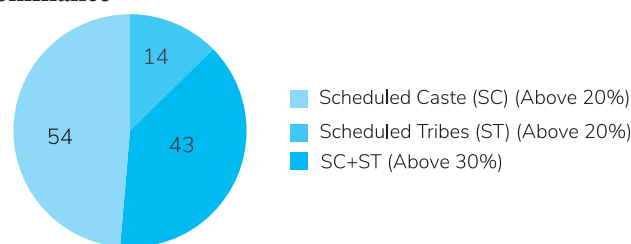
ST Population	General	SC Seats	ST Seats	ST Dominance Seat
0-10	17	5	0	0
10-20	15	1	0	0
20-30	8	1	0	9
30-40	3	2	1	6
40-50	1	0	4	5
50-60	0	0	10	10
60-70	0	0	8	8
70-80	0	0	5	5
Total (ST - 26.21%)	44	9	28	43

Source: www.indiastatelections.com

It must be noted here that although the total Scheduled Tribe population of the state is 26.21%, there are 28 Scheduled Tribe reserved seats in the state. This was based on 2001 Census. The State of Bihar was re-organized under the Bihar (Re-organization) Act, 2000 and a new State of Jharkhand was formed. In Bihar, the earlier delimitation was done on the basis of the 1971 census figures under the Delimitation Act, 1972. The erstwhile State of Bihar was allocated a total of 28 Scheduled Tribe seats under the said Act. Under the Bihar (Re-organization) Act, 2000, the newly formed State of Jharkhand had been allocated 81 assembly seats. All the Scheduled Tribe seats in the erstwhile State of Bihar came to be allocated to the newly formed State of Jharkhand.

The then Delimitation Commission was to re-determine the number of seats to be reserved for the Scheduled Tribe(s) in Jharkhand on the basis of 2001 Census. According to the published figures of the said census, the total population of the State of Jharkhand was 2,69,45,829, including the Scheduled Tribe population of 70,87,068. Thus, the proportion of the Scheduled Tribe population to the total population came to be 26.30%. Calculating in proportion to the Scheduled Tribe population, the entitlement of the Scheduled Tribe seats worked out to 21.30% out of the total 81 seats — which would have meant a reduction of 7 Scheduled Tribe seats. This adjustment was met with significant opposition from tribal leaders, political representatives and the public. To address these concerns, the Commission revised the allocation to 22 Scheduled Tribe reserved assembly seats. Ultimately, a legal amendment in 2008 rendered the changes inoperative, maintaining the previous allocation of 28 Scheduled Tribe reserved assembly seats until 2026 (Delimitation Commission of India, 2007).

Figure 1: Number of vidhan sabha seats by social dominance



Note: Percentage of particular community population is above the mentioned ratio (mentioned in parenthesis) out of total population of an Assembly constituency.

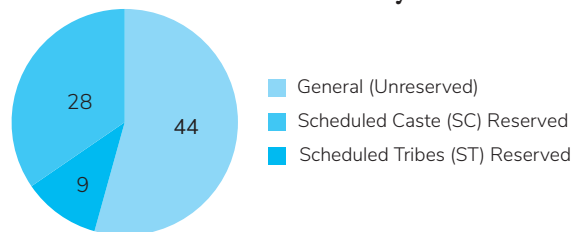
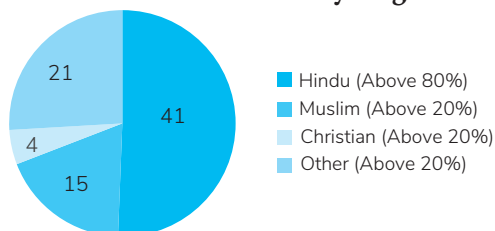
Table 2 enumerates the Scheduled Tribe Dominant seats bearing General Status. In fifteen of these seats, twelve have been won by the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) Party and the Congress party in the 2024 Jharkhand Assembly Elections. However, except for one seat of Gandey won by Kalpana Soren (wife of Chief Minister Hemant Soren), none of the winning candidates belong to the Scheduled Tribe category. These facts raise a moot question: Is it only the tribal candidate who makes it to the winning list from a constituency which has a substantial tribal population?

Table 2: Assembly constituency-wise schedule tribe dominant seats in Jharkhand bearing non-schedule tribe status (2011 census)

AC No.	AC Name	District Name	Total Population	Scheduled Tribe %	Reserved Status	Winning Candidate and Party
8	Nala	Jamtara	3,09,332	37.51%	GEN	Ravindranath Mahto, JMM
9	Jamtara	Jamtara	4,05,694	27.12%	GEN	Irfan Ansari, Congress
14	Sarath	Deoghar	4,06,535	20.38%	GEN	Uday Shankar Singh, JMM
16	Poreyahat	Godda	4,06,266	25.85%	GEN	Pradeep Yadav, Congress
31	Gandey	Giridih	4,19,780	20.23%	GEN	Kalpana Soren, JMM
34	Gomia	Bokaro	3,95,364	20.53%	GEN	Yogendra Prasad, JMM
42	Tundi	Dhanbad	4,33,185	20.09%	GEN	Mathura Prasad Mahto, JMM
44	Baharagora	East Singhbhum	2,98,509	41.88%	GEN	Samir Mohanty, JMM
47	Jugsalai	East Singhbhum	4,14,690	30.05%	SC	Mangal Kalindi, JMM
50	Ichagarh	Saraikela-Kharswan	3,72,663	30.17%	GEN	Sabita Mahato, JMM
61	Silli	Ranchi	2,72,595	31.29%	GEN	Amit Mahato, JMM
64	Hatia	Ranchi	5,78,757	28.24%	GEN	Navin Jaiswal, BJP
65	Kanke	Ranchi	5,85,075	27.99%	SC	Suresh Kumar Baitha, Congress
74	Latehar	Latehar	3,99,370	33.71%	SC	Prakash Ram, BJP
76	Daltonganj	Palamu	5,18,908	20.09%	GEN	Alok Kumar Chaurasiya, BJP

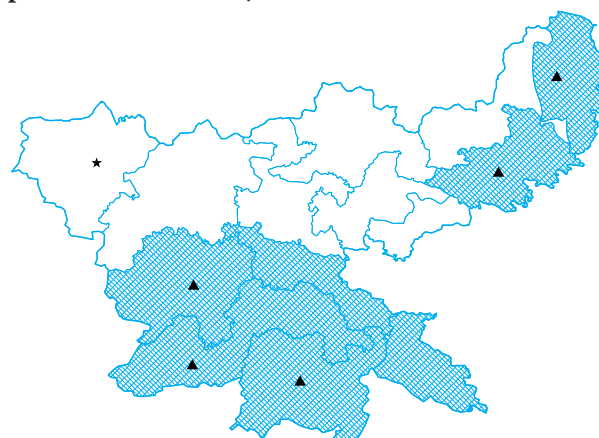
Source: www.indiastateelections.com

The Jharkhand Assembly has a total of 81 seats of which 44 are General (unreserved) seats, 28 Scheduled Tribe reserved seats and nine Scheduled Caste reserved seats as depicted in Figure 2. If we categorize the Assembly seats of the state as per religious dominance, the Hindu community has a major dominance of above 80%, followed by Muslims, Christians and others as depicted in Figure 3.

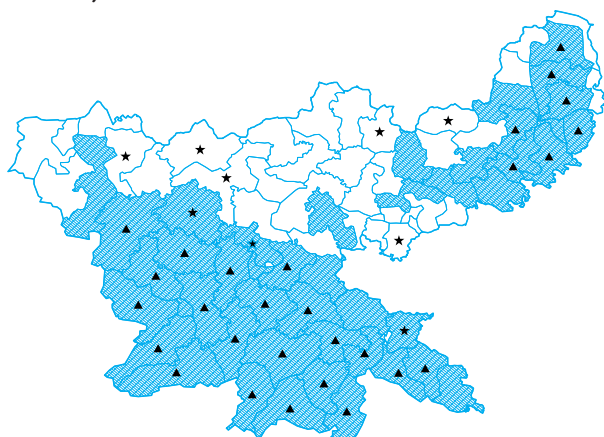
Figure 2: No. of vidhan sabha seats by reservation status**Figure 3: No. of vidhan sabha seats by religious dominance**

Note: Percentage of particular community population is above the mentioned ratio (mentioned in parenthesis) out of total population of an Assembly constituency.

In the fourteen Parliamentary Constituencies of the state, the estimated population of the Palamu Parliamentary Constituency is the highest in 2024 at 28 lakhs. It is lowest in Khunti Parliamentary Constituency at 17 lakhs, where the Scheduled Tribe(s) constitute 73.25% of the total population. There are a total of 43 Scheduled Tribe Dominant Assembly Constituencies in Jharkhand along with 28 Scheduled Tribe reserved constituencies. The electoral maps in Map 1 and Map 2 depicts the distribution of these constituencies.

Map 1: Distribution of parliamentary constituencies with scheduled tribe dominance in Jharkhand (population above 20%)

Map 2: Distribution of assembly constituencies with scheduled tribe dominance in Jharkhand (population above 20%)



	ST	Non ST Dominance
Parliamentary Dominance Seats	7	
▲ ST Reserved	5	
★ SC Reserved		1
Assembly Dominance Seats	43	
▲ ST Reserved	28	
★ SC Reserved	3	6

SC - Scheduled Castes; ST - Scheduled Tribes

As per the 2011 census, 26.2% of Jharkhand’s population comprises of the Scheduled Tribe. However, this population stands scattered. As per the 2011 census, out of the twenty-four districts in the state, 11 have an ST population share of 30 percent or higher while six had less than ten percent tribal population. The Scheduled Tribe population is maximum in the South Chotanagpur and Kolhan sub-regions and minimum in the North Chotanagpur sub-region, which borders the state of Bihar, as depicted in Figures 4 and 5.

Figure 4: Division-wise percentage share of ST population and state population in Jharkhand 2011

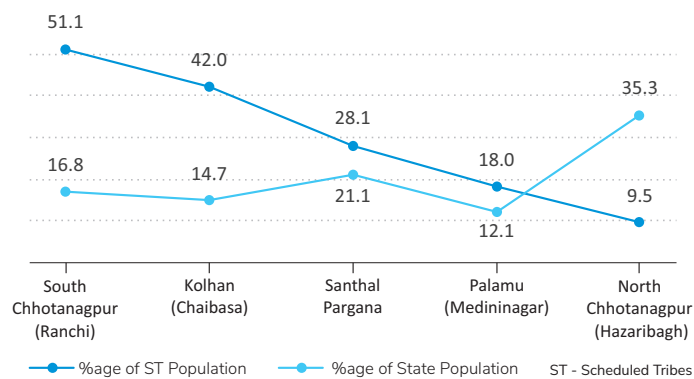
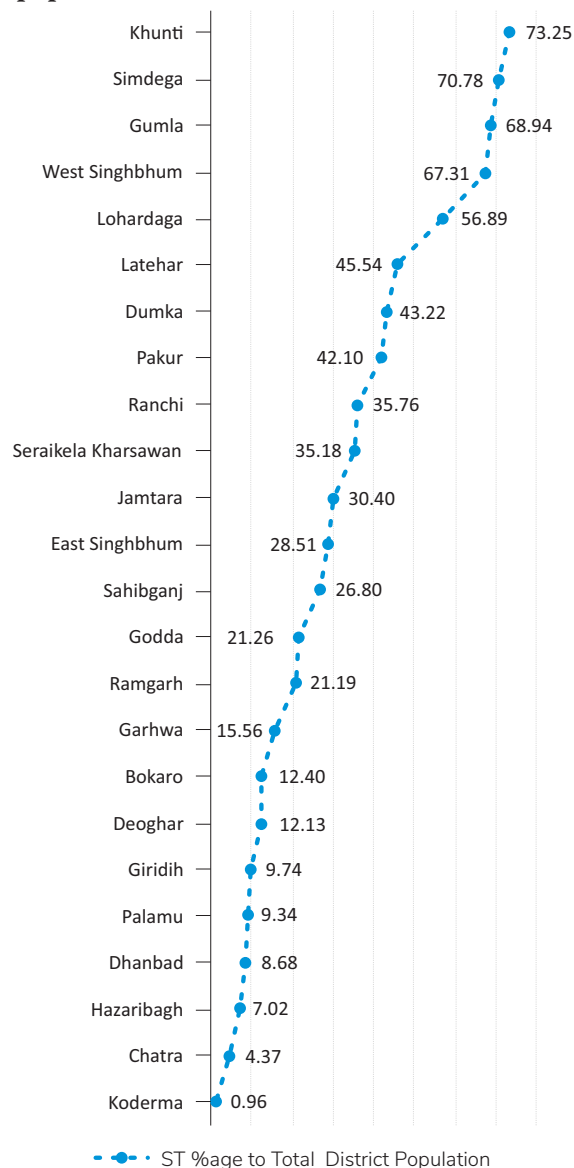


Figure 5: District-wise percentage share of scheduled tribe population in Jharkhand - 2011



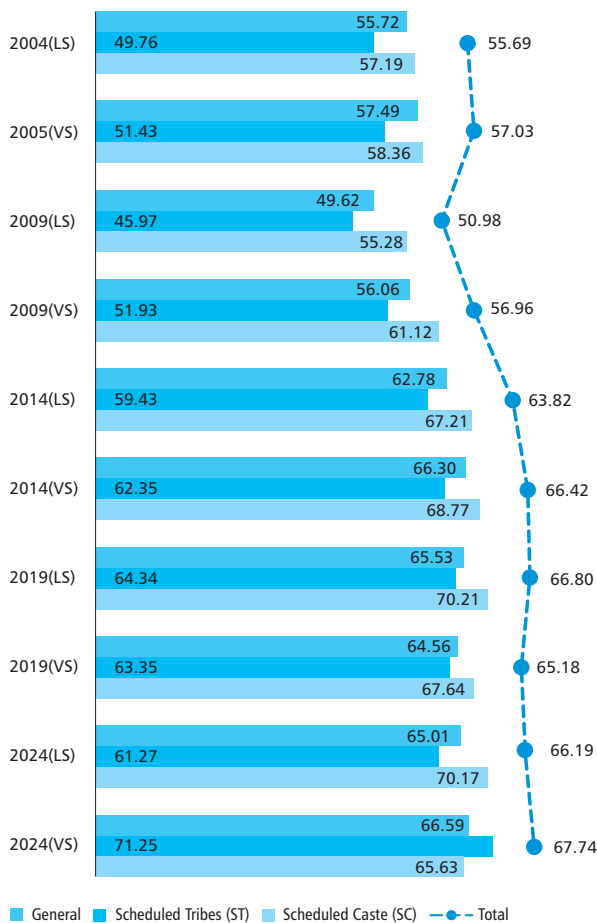
5. Historical context and trends of tribal voting in Jharkhand

There has been a momentous transformation in the voting patterns of tribal communities of Jharkhand, which have been largely influenced by socio-political, economic and cultural factors. During the pre-independence era, the indigenous community of the state had minimal involvement in the political process. However, tribal leaders like Birsa Munda and Sidho-Kanho had started mobilizing these communities for their rights, which indirectly sowed the seeds of political consciousness. Post-independence, the tribal votes in the state surged towards the Indian National Congress (INC). However, dissatisfaction with the mainstream political parties gave rise to tribal-centric movements and aspirations for a separate tribal state gained momentum, uniting the tribals under the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha Party.

The creation of the state in 2000 fulfilled the much-awaited tribal aspiration. Initially, the tribal support went to parties advocating tribal rights like the JMM and the BJP. However, there was a shift in the dynamics between 2010–2020, when leaders like Hemant Soren emerged as influential figures. Since 2020, new challenges have emerged. National parties like the BJP have focused on welfare schemes and their tribal leaders to counter the dominance of regional tribal parties. However, the latest Assembly election results in which a state-level party emerged as a roadblock to the BJP, has two major elements: the remarkable tenacity of state-level forces to counter all-India level intrusions and the nail-biting competition between identity-based politics centred around tribals versus pan-India cultural identity concerns (Ambagudia, 2021).

In the Vidhan Sabha elections, the poll percentage of the Scheduled Tribe community shows an increasing trend. It was 51.43% in 2005, followed by 51.93% in 2009. The increase was substantial in 2014 with 62.35% Scheduled Tribes voting, increasing marginally to 63.35% in 2019. This poll percentage surpassed all categories in 2024 with 71.25% voting from the Scheduled Tribe as depicted in Figure 6. The polling percentage of the Scheduled Caste community was higher than the Scheduled Tribe in each year except 2024, where the tribal voters played a major role in deciding the poll verdict.

Figure 6: Poll percentage in Jharkhand elections



In the 2019 Assembly elections, the JMM-led alliance won 47 of the 81 Assembly Constituencies. 25 of these came from Scheduled Tribe Reserved Assembly Constituencies as depicted in Figure 7. In 2019, the JMM strike rate in the Scheduled Tribe Reserved Assembly Constituencies was 90.48% — the highest ever since 1980 as depicted in Figure 8. The strike rate of a party is defined as the number of Assembly constituencies won divided by the number contested.

Figure 7: Number of seats won by major parties as per reservation status — assembly election 2024

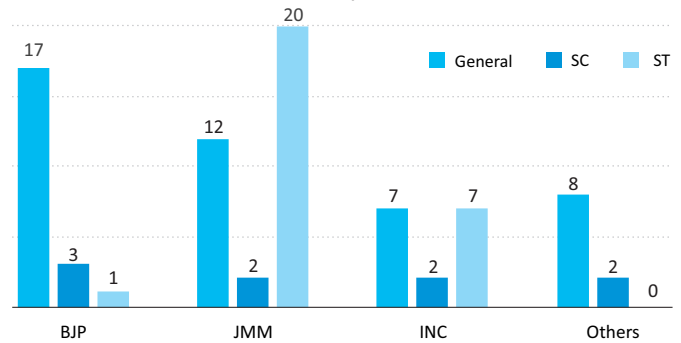


Figure 8: Strike rate in ST reserved assembly constituencies — assembly elections

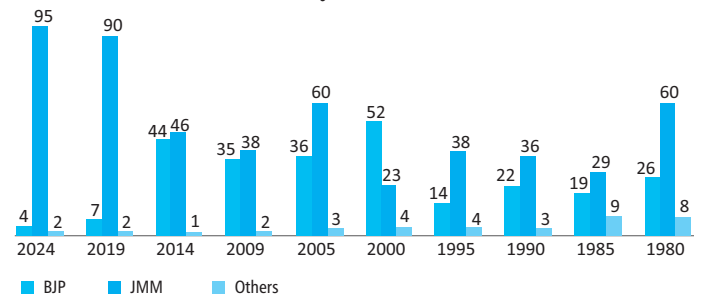
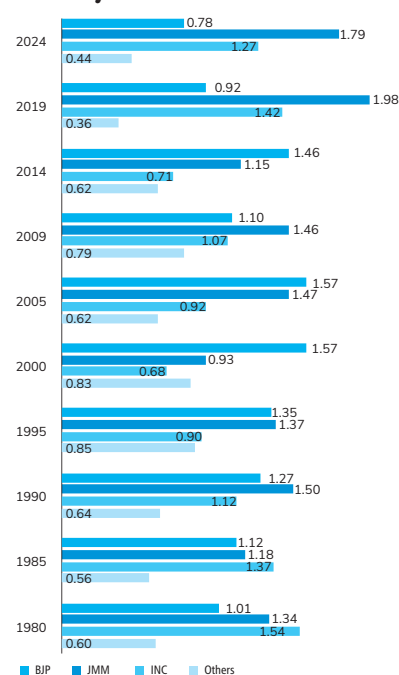


Figure 9: Vote share to the seat conversion ratio in the Jharkhand assembly elections



It is useful to remember the political background in Jharkhand prior to the 2019 Assembly elections. The BJP and the All Jharkhand Students Union (AJSU) alliance won a majority in the 2014 Assembly elections and chose Raghubar Das, a non-tribal Chief Minister for the first time in the state. This was followed by controversial decisions like the proposed amendment to the Chotanagpur Tenancy (CNT) Act, 1908 and the Santal Pargana Tenancy (SPT) Act, 1949 — which were seen as an invasion of the property rights of tribals (Radhakrishnan, 2024). Figure 9 depicts the seat-to-vote-share ratio in the Assembly Elections during 1980–2024.

6. Vote share by major parties in ST reserved and ST dominant seats

In Jharkhand, a look at the vote share of major parties in the Scheduled Tribe Reserved seats in Lok Sabha elections over the past five election cycles reveals that the vote share of the BJP is the highest in comparison to the INC, JMM, RJD and “Others” — except in 2009, where the vote share of “Others” was higher. Figure 10 and 11 depict that among the ST Dominant seats, the vote-share of the BJP in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections was the highest at 48.60%. In the Vidhan Sabha elections, the share of the JMM across the ST reserved seats shows an increasing trend: 17.81% in 2005, 19.11% in 2009, 30.23% in 2014, 34.16% in 2019 and 37.84% in 2024. Among the ST Dominant seats too, the vote share of the JMM shows an increasing trend in the 2014, 2019 and 2024 Assembly Elections with 28.12%, 29.86% and 33.91% respectively.

Figure 10: Vote share by major parties in ST reserved seats

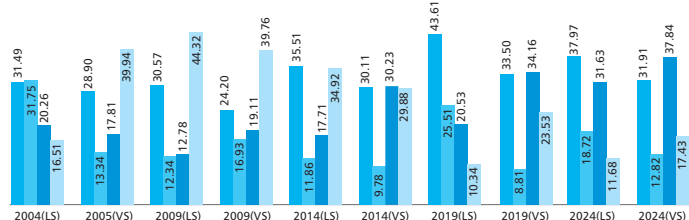
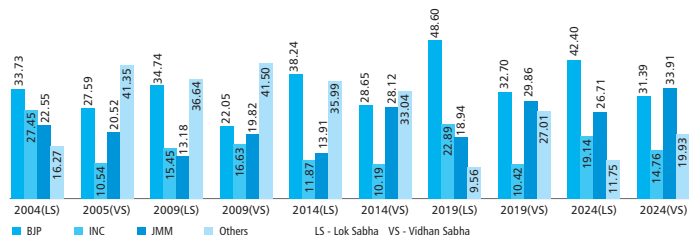


Figure 11: Vote share by major parties in ST dominance seats



7. Demographic overview and factors influencing voting behaviour

There are a total of 81 seats in the Jharkhand State Assembly of which 44 are General (unreserved) seats, 28 Scheduled Tribe reserved seats and nine Scheduled Caste reserved seats. The data of Census 2011 makes it possible to disaggregate

Jharkhand’s Scheduled Tribe population of 0.86 crores into different ST groups (Kishore, 2024). Santals are the largest Scheduled Tribe group with a share of 32% in the state’s total tribal population. If the other three Scheduled Tribe groups — Munda, Oraon and Ho — are added to the Santals, they together constitute almost 77% of the state’s tribal population as depicted in Figure 12.

Figure 12: Tribe-wise percentage population share of ST in Jharkhand - 2011

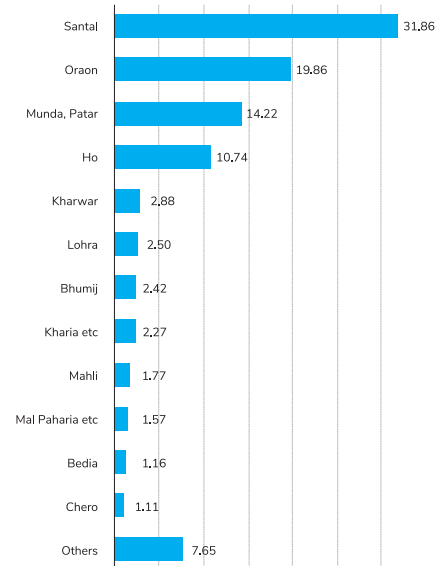
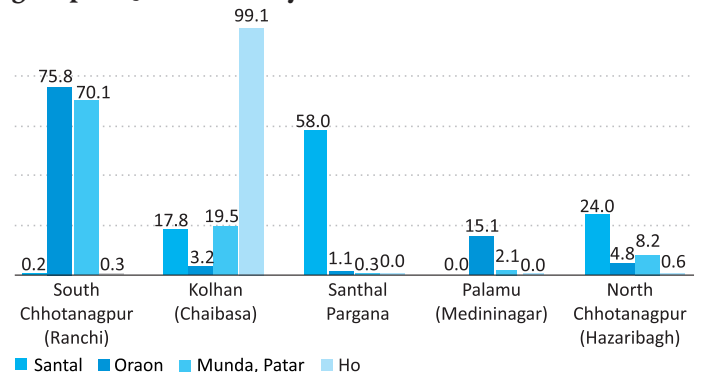


Figure 13 depicts that the major Scheduled Tribe groups are concentrated in different sub-regions of the state. 58% of the Santal population is concentrated in the Santal Pargana sub-region while the Oraon and Munda tribes are primarily concentrated in the South Chotanagpur sub-region. The North Chotanagpur sub-region, which has the largest number of Assembly Constituencies, has the lowest tribal population and no Scheduled Tribe reserved Assembly constituency.

Figure 13: Percentage population share of major ST groups in Jharkhand by divisions - 2011

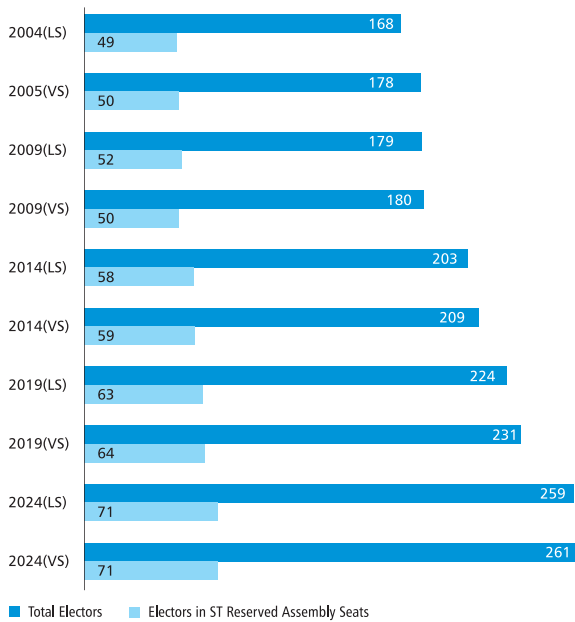


The Jharkhand Assembly Constituency seats from the perspective of the Scheduled Tribe dominant seats reveal that they are 43 in number while Scheduled Caste Dominant seats are 14. Thus, the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Dom-

inant seats constitute more than 70% of Assembly constituency seats of the state. Jharkhand’s Chief Minister Hemant Soren constantly emphasizing about the Sarna Dharm Code to be added in the census column indicates the segregation of the tribal voters who have to forcibly identify themselves as Hindus despite being followers of the Sarna Dharm.

Figure 14 depicts a steady increase in the number of electors in Jharkhand from 168 lakh in 2004 Lok Sabha to 261 lakh in 2024 Vidhan Sabha, reflecting significant voter expansion. The number of electors in ST-reserved seats has also grown from 49 lakh in 2004 to 71 lakh in 2024, indicating increased tribal participation.

Figure 14: Number of electors in Jharkhand (in lakh)



The 2024 Assembly results in Jharkhand showed a thumping victory of the INDIA alliance. In all the Scheduled Tribe reserved seats, the vote share of the JMM has increased over the years: 17.81% in 2005, 19.11% in 2009, 30.23% in 2014, 34.16% in 2019 and 37.84% in 2024. In the Scheduled Tribe Dominant seats of the state, the vote share of the other parties besides JMM on an average is around 22%. All this analysis brings to light the fact that the Scheduled Tribe(s)’ electoral behavior is determined more by ethnicity than by state politics.

Figure 15 to 17 depict the seats won by major parties in the Scheduled Tribe Reserved and Scheduled Tribe Dominant Seats. In all the Vidhan Sabha elections from 2005 to 2024, cutting across Scheduled Tribe reserved and dominant seats, the JMM party won the largest number of seats in Jharkhand. Both the INC party and the BJP show a fluctuating trend. The JMM party did its magic by keeping the poll narrative focused on two issues: Hemant Soren’s arrest as a question of persecution of a Scheduled Tribe leader and the Maiya Yojana cash transfer scheme to women, which appealed both to the Scheduled Tribe(s) and the non-Scheduled Tribe(s) (Kishore, 2024).

Figure 15: Seats won by major parties in ST reserved seats

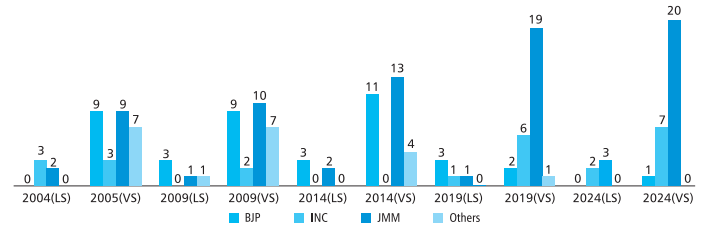


Figure 16: Seats won by major parties in ST dominant seats

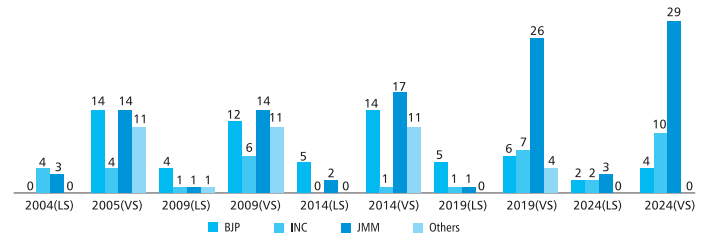
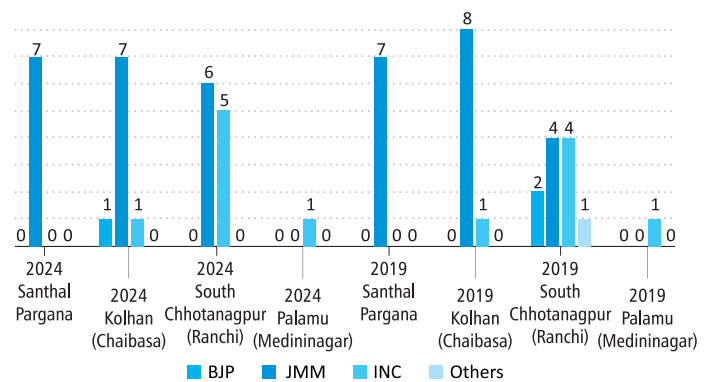


Figure 17: District-wise ST reserved assembly constituencies won by major parties — last two elections



Traditional Chiefs and community leaders have historically held significant influence in the tribal constituencies of the state. These tribal leaders act as intermediaries between tribal voters and the political parties, ultimately influencing the voting decisions of electorates. For instance, in the Simdega constituency, the traditional tribal leadership backed by Church figures played a key role in shaping voter preferences. In Lohardaga, Rameshwar Oraon, the incumbent MLA, garnered significant community support. In the Kharsawan constituency, JMM candidate Dashrath Gagrai received substantial support from traditional leaders which helped him win the seat.

8. Conclusion

This paper has introduced and operationalised the concept of Scheduled Tribe Dominant seats in the context of Jharkhand’s electoral politics, defining them as assembly constituencies with 20 per cent or more tribal population that have not been formally designated as ST reserved seats. The central finding is clear: ST Dominant seats are not peripheral to Jharkhand’s political destiny — they are co-decisive. Together with the 28

formally reserved ST seats, the 43 ST Dominant seats constitute over 86 per cent of the 81-seat Jharkhand Assembly. Any party or alliance aspiring to form the government must secure a substantial share of both categories.

Three research questions guided this enquiry. First, the paper has demonstrated that ST Dominant seats constitute a distinct and analytically meaningful category — one that has been overlooked in the existing psephological literature on Jharkhand. Second, the longitudinal analysis of seat wins and vote shares from 2005 to 2024 confirms that the JMM has consistently performed strongest in both ST Reserved and ST Dominant constituencies, with its vote share in ST reserved seats growing from 17.81 per cent in 2005 to 37.84 per cent in 2024 and a similarly rising trend in ST Dominant seats (28.12 per cent in 2014 to 33.91 per cent in 2024). Third, regarding whether tribal voting is driven by ethnicity or by state-level political calculations, the evidence points to a complex interplay of both. The 2024 result — driven by the Hemant Soren arrest narrative, land rights anxieties and the Maiya Yojana — suggests that identity politics and programmatic welfare politics are not mutually exclusive but are actively fused by the JMM as an electoral strategy. What is striking is that this ethnic consolidation extends into ST Dominant seats where non-tribal candidates win — demonstrating that tribal voters support the party perceived as a protector of tribal interests regardless of the individual candidate's community.

The paper's findings have important implications for the analysis of delimitation and reservation policy in India. The legal preservation of 28 ST reserved seats through the 2008 amendment — despite a proportional entitlement of only 21 seats — reflects the political weight of tribal communities in Jharkhand. This paper argues that ST Dominant seats deserve equivalent analytical attention in any future delimitation exercise or reservation policy review.

Limitations

This paper's analysis rests on 2011 Census population data, which is now over a decade old. The absence of the 2021 Census data is a structural constraint. Additionally, this is a single-state study and does not claim that its findings generalise to other tribal-dominant states, though the analytical framework is potentially transferable. The paper also does not account for sub-constituency variation in tribal population concentration or for intra-tribal voting differences across the Santal, Munda, Oraon and Ho communities.

Directions for Future Research

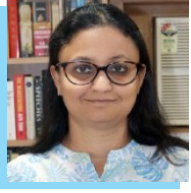
Future studies should undertake a comparative analysis of ST Dominant seat dynamics across tribal-majority states — Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and the north-eastern states — to examine whether ethnic consolidation

around regional tribal parties is a pan-Indian phenomenon or a Jharkhand-specific outcome. Surveys of voter preference at the constituency level in ST Dominant seats would allow a more granular assessment of whether voters are guided primarily by ethnic loyalty, party leadership, welfare scheme delivery or a combination of factors. Further research into the Sarna Dharm Code movement and its potential electoral implications — particularly its capacity to create a distinct religious-identity cleavage within the tribal electorate — would also be valuable.

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About Author



Dr Shalini Saboo

Shalini Saboo is currently a Junior Fellow at the Centre for Contemporary Studies, Prime Ministers' Museum and Library, Teen Murti House, New Delhi. She has previously served on the faculty of the Department of Law, Ranchi University. A former Doctoral Fellow of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), she holds a PhD in Tribal and Customary Laws from the Central University of Jharkhand, along with Master's degrees in Law (Ranchi University) and Political Science (St. Xavier's College, Ranchi) and a Postgraduate Diploma in Human Rights Law from NLSIU, Bengaluru. In recognition of her contribution to the Election Olympiad initiative, she was felicitated by the then Governor of Jharkhand, Smt. Droupadi Murmu. Email: shalinisaboo2014@gmail.com