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Adivasi Women in Andhra Pradesh: The Gap Between Legal Entitlement and Lived Representation

 **DOWN TO EARTH**

8 August 2026

SOCIAL ISSUES**POLITY****GS1****GS2**

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Adivasi Women in Andhra Pradesh: The Gap Between Legal Entitlement and Lived Representation

 Down to Earth

8 August 2026

GS1

GS2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"When a community's own governance model, designed precisely to protect its autonomy from outside interference, is also the site where a vulnerable sub-group within that community faces exclusion, whose claim should the state weigh more heavily, community autonomy or the sub-group's substantive rights?"

 Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A reserved seat is a promise on paper. A woman who can reach the meeting, speak, and be heard is the promise kept.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Answers on tribal governance often stop at naming PESA and the [Fifth Schedule](#) as though citing the law settles the question of representation. This editorial supplies the harder, more testable point: a law can guarantee a reservation and still produce near-total exclusion in practice if the underlying conditions, wages, mobility, safety, that make participation possible are not separately addressed.

GS Paper 1: Role of women and women's organisations, population and associated issues, poverty and developmental issues.

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CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
Fifth Schedule	Constitutional provisions for administration of Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes in ten states	Anchors the constitutional basis for PESA
PESA, 1996	Extends Panchayati Raj to Scheduled Areas via a Gram Sabha-centred model	The specific law whose implementation gap the editorial documents
73rd Amendment	Guarantees not less than one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions	Gives the comparative benchmark the 2.8 percent figure fails against
Gram Sabha	The village assembly, given enhanced powers under PESA over land, forest produce and local resources	The institution where the representation gap is measured
Forest Rights Act, 2006	Recognises individual and community forest rights of forest-dwelling communities	Related law strengthening Adivasi land and resource claims

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Fifth Schedule of the Constitution provides for special administration of Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes across ten states, including Andhra Pradesh, giving the Governor powers to regulate land transfer and moneylending in these areas and establishing Tribes Advisory Councils to advise on tribal welfare. The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, PESA, extends Part IX of the Constitution, the Panchayati Raj system, to Scheduled Areas with modifications that give Gram Sabhas enhanced powers over minor forest produce management, land alienation and mandatory consultation before land acquisition, reflecting a [deliberate](#) design choice to root local governance in tribal community autonomy rather than impose conventional panchayat structures unmodified.

Separately, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment guarantees not less than one-third reservation for women across Panchayati Raj institutions nationally, a floor that several states, including Bihar, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, have since raised to 50 percent in their own panchayat legislation. Down To Earth's 8 August 2026 piece by Palla Trinadha Rao, a practising lawyer and tribal rights activist working on land alienation, forest and governance issues across Andhra Pradesh and Telangana for over three decades, draws on a gathering of around 30 tribal youth leaders from across Andhra Pradesh's Scheduled Areas at Addateegala in Polavaram district on 27 and 28 July 2026, to document how far short of both these entitlements Adivasi women's lived participation falls.

THE ANALYSIS

- The representational gap is the article's sharpest, most testable fact.** Only 108 of 3,908 elected Vice President and Secretary positions in Andhra Pradesh's PESA Gram Sabhas are held by women, close to 2.8 percent, a figure that sits far below even the 73rd Amendment's general one-third constitutional floor, not to mention the 50 percent several states have voluntarily adopted.

- 2 **Economic exclusion is not separate from political exclusion; it reinforces it.** Women performing agricultural labour equal to men's for lower wages, and losing much of the value of the minor forest produce they collect to intermediaries because of poor storage and market access, are denied exactly the economic independence that typically enables confident participation in local decision-making bodies.
- 3 **Mobility is the barrier that makes the other barriers compound.** When women depend on male family members simply to reach a market, bank, health centre or government office, the same dependency extends to reaching a Gram Sabha meeting itself, meaning the representation gap is not primarily a gap in the law's provisions but in the basic physical ability to exercise them.
- 4 **The gap is a governance-design lesson, not only a grievance.** It demonstrates a general principle: legal entitlement to representation, reservation of seats, statutory Gram Sabha powers, does not by itself produce substantive participation if the enabling conditions, safety, mobility, economic independence, social permission, are not separately and deliberately built.
- 5 **PESA's community-autonomy design constrains the fix, and rightly so.** Because PESA's Gram Sabha-centred model exists specifically to protect Scheduled Area communities from externally imposed administrative structures, any response to the gender gap has to strengthen participation from within that model, capacity-building, safety measures, facilitation support, rather than bypass it with generic, top-down reservation management that could itself undermine the autonomy rationale PESA was built to protect.
- 6 **The healthcare and land dimensions widen the frame beyond political representation alone.** Remote habitations that make maternal healthcare and chronic-condition treatment difficult to access, and the absence of secure individual or joint land titles for women, are part of the same underlying pattern, formal entitlement without the material and locational conditions to exercise it, that the representation statistic captures most sharply.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

Gathering of tribal youth leaders: around 30 leaders, Addateegala, Polavaram district, Andhra Pradesh, 27 to 28 July 2026

PESA Gram Sabha leadership: 108 of 3,908 elected Vice President and Secretary positions held by women (about 2.8 percent)

73rd Constitutional Amendment: not less than one-third (33 percent) reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions nationally; several states (Bihar, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh among others) have raised this to 50 percent

Fifth Schedule: covers Scheduled Areas across ten states, including Andhra Pradesh

PESA, 1996: extends Panchayati Raj to Scheduled Areas via Gram Sabhas with enhanced powers over minor forest produce, land alienation and land acquisition consultation

Forest Rights Act, 2006: recognises individual and community forest rights of forest-dwelling communities

Author: Palla Trinadha Rao, practising lawyer and tribal rights activist, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana

WATCH THE TRAP: DO NOT WRITE THAT PESA ITSELF FAILS TO PROVIDE FOR WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION; THE LAW AND THE 73RD AMENDMENT BOTH PROVIDE FOR IT. THE GAP DOCUMENTED HERE IS AN IMPLEMENTATION GAP, BETWEEN FORMAL ENTITLEMENT AND THE ENABLING CONDITIONS NEEDED TO EXERCISE IT, NOT A GAP IN THE LEGAL TEXT.

THE DEBATE

Argument FOR prioritising enabling conditions over administrative reform of PESA itself. The legal framework, reservation quotas, Gram Sabha powers, already exists and is not the source of the 2.8 percent figure. Investing in mobility support, safety measures, wage parity and land rights addresses the actual barrier to participation directly, and does so without touching PESA's community-autonomy design, which protects Scheduled Area communities from external administrative imposition for good reason.

Argument FOR more assertive administrative enforcement. A gap this large, from a one-third constitutional floor to 2.8 percent actual representation, may also reflect weak monitoring and enforcement of the reservation itself, not only social barriers to participation; without administrative accountability mechanisms, capacity-building alone may not close a gap this wide within a reasonable timeframe.

Balanced verdict. The two responses are complementary rather than competing. Enabling-condition investment, land rights, wages, mobility, safety, addresses why women who are nominally eligible do not participate, while administrative monitoring of whether reserved positions are actually being filled and exercised addresses whether the entitlement is being enforced at all. Both operate within, not against, PESA's Gram Sabha-centred model, which is the frame any reform here should respect.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

The transferable pattern: **when a formal entitlement and a lived outcome diverge sharply, do not treat the gap as evidence the law failed; ask what enabling conditions the law assumed but did not itself supply.**

Legal reservation, whether of seats, land rights or resource access, changes what is permitted; it does not automatically change what is practically possible for the group it targets. The conditions that make an entitlement exercisable, physical mobility, economic independence, freedom from violence or social sanction, safety in public spaces, sit outside the text of the law and require separate, deliberate investment. A representation figure like 108 of 3,908 is best read not as proof the reservation policy failed but as a measurement of exactly how large that enabling-conditions gap still is.

This same structure recurs in reserved constituencies for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in general elections, where formal political representation has not uniformly translated into proportional influence over policy outcomes; in the Right to Education Act's 25 percent reservation for disadvantaged children in private schools, where enrolment entitlement has not guaranteed retention or learning outcomes without complementary support; and in workplace reservation policies generally, where a seat or post secured on paper still depends on enabling conditions, accessibility, safety, freedom from discrimination, to translate into substantive participation.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

FROM LEGAL ENTITLEMENT TO SUBSTANTIVE REPRESENTATION

73rd AMENDMENT + PESA, 1996

guarantee: one-third (or more) reservation
for women in Gram Sabha leadership

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FORMAL ENTITLEMENT EXISTS ON PAPER

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- enabling conditions NOT automatically supplied:
- wage parity for equal agricultural labour
- fair market access for minor forest produce
- independent mobility (market, bank, health centre)
- safety and freedom from violence
- accessible maternal and chronic-condition healthcare

v

LIVED OUTCOME: 108 of 3,908 posts held by women (about 2.8%)

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v

GAP = ENTITLEMENT MINUS ENABLING CONDITIONS

|
v

FIX WITHIN THE PESA / GRAM SABHA MODEL

(capacity-building, land titling, safety, market access)

NOT a bypass of tribal community autonomy

TAKEAWAY BOX

A reserved seat is a promise on paper. A woman who can reach the meeting, speak, and be heard is the promise kept.

108 of 3,908 PESA Gram Sabha leadership posts held by women in Andhra Pradesh (about 2.8 percent); 73rd Amendment: one-third reservation floor, several states at 50 percent; Fifth Schedule covers ten states; PESA, 1996; gathering at Addateegala, Polavaram district, 27 to 28 July 2026.

when a community's own governance model, designed precisely to protect its autonomy from outside interference, is also the site where a vulnerable sub-group within that community faces exclusion, whose claim should the state weigh more heavily, community autonomy or the sub-group's substantive rights, and can both be honoured at once?

UPSC has repeatedly tested PESA, the Fifth Schedule, and the role of women in local governance and development; this editorial updates the theme with a live, dated 2026 statistic that makes the entitlement-versus-outcome gap directly measurable.

"Legal entitlement to political representation for marginalised groups is necessary but not sufficient for substantive participation." Examine with reference to Adivasi women's representation in PESA Gram Sabhas.

Sources: *Down To Earth, Ministry of Tribal Affairs*

Source: Adivasi Women in Andhra Pradesh: The Gap Between Legal Entitlement and Lived Representation —
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• KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Down To Earth's 8 August 2026 piece by tribal-rights lawyer Palla Trinadha Rao, drawing on a July 2026 gathering of around 30 tribal youth leaders at Addateegala in Andhra Pradesh's Polavaram district, argues that Adivasi women in the state's Scheduled Areas carry disproportionate labour, agricultural work, forest produce collection, household sustenance, while remaining systemically excluded from the decision-making structures, PESA Gram Sabhas, that formal law was designed to give them a voice in.

✓ SUPPORTING

- The starkest single fact is representational: across Andhra Pradesh's Scheduled Areas, only 108 of 3,908 elected Vice President and Secretary positions in PESA Gram Sabhas are held by women, roughly 2.8 percent, dramatically below both the 73rd Amendment's constitutional floor of one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions and the 50 percent reservation several states have since adopted.
- Economic exclusion compounds political exclusion: women perform agricultural labour equal to men's but are paid significantly less for the same work, and women who collect minor forest produce face poor storage, inadequate processing infrastructure and restricted market access that force them to sell through intermediaries who capture much of the value, leaving primary producers with the smallest share of returns.
- Structural barriers extend beyond wages and markets into basic mobility and health access: many Adivasi women depend on male family members simply to travel to markets, banks, health centres or government offices, and remote tribal habitations make maternal healthcare and treatment of chronic conditions difficult to access even when formally available nearby.

⚠ COUNTER

PESA's Gram Sabha-centred model was deliberately designed to protect tribal community autonomy from external administrative imposition, giving Scheduled Area communities control over their own local governance rather than importing conventional panchayat structures wholesale; any reform response to the gender representation gap has to work through and strengthen that same community-rooted model, not bypass it with top-down administrative fixes that risk undermining the autonomy PESA was written to protect.

→ WAY FORWARD

Close the implementation gap rather than the legal one: enforce the existing reservation quotas within Gram Sabhas rather than treating them as a ceiling that need not be filled; invest specifically in capacity-building, safety measures and mobility support that let women who are nominally eligible actually attend and speak in Gram Sabha proceedings; secure joint land titling and direct market access for minor forest produce so that economic independence reinforces political voice rather than the two staying disconnected; and treat the 108-of-3,908 statistic as an implementation audit finding, not merely a grievance, that PESA-administering state departments should be required to report against annually.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

Legal entitlement to political representation does not automatically translate into substantive participation for marginalised groups. Examine this proposition with reference to Adivasi women's representation in Panchayati Raj institutions in Scheduled Areas, and suggest measures to close the gap within the PESA framework. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 extends Panchayati Raj to India's Fifth Schedule Scheduled Areas through a Gram Sabha-centred model designed to protect tribal community autonomy, and the 73rd Constitutional Amendment separately guarantees women no less than one-third reservation in Panchayati Raj institutions nationally. Down To Earth's 8 August 2026 piece by Palla Trinadha Rao, drawing on a July 2026 gathering of tribal youth leaders in Andhra Pradesh's Polavaram district, shows how far the lived outcome in Scheduled Areas falls short of both these formal entitlements.

BODY

The clearest evidence is representational: only 108 of 3,908 elected Vice President and Secretary positions in Andhra Pradesh's PESA Gram Sabhas are held by women, a share far below even the 73rd Amendment's general one-third floor, let alone the 50 percent several states have since adopted. This gap is not explained by the law itself, which formally provides for women's participation, but by the enabling conditions that formal entitlement does not automatically create: women who perform agricultural labour equal to men's are paid less for it, women who collect minor forest produce lose much of its value to intermediaries because of poor storage, processing and market access, and many women cannot travel to a market, bank, health centre or government office, let alone a Gram Sabha meeting, without a male family member's involvement. This illustrates a general governance principle: legal entitlement to representation, without the mobility, economic independence, safety and social permission that make participation practically possible, does not translate into substantive representation, it produces a formal quota that goes structurally unfilled. The necessary complication is that PESA's Gram Sabha-centred design was deliberately built to protect tribal community autonomy from external administrative imposition, so the correct response to the gender gap is not to bypass that model with generic, top-down fixes but to strengthen it from within, through capacity-building, safety measures and support that let Gram Sabhas themselves fulfil the representational promise the law already makes.

CONCLUSION

The 108-of-3,908 statistic should be read as an implementation audit finding rather than only a grievance: PESA and the 73rd Amendment already provide the legal framework for Adivasi women's political voice, and the gap lies entirely in enabling conditions, wages, land rights, mobility, safety, that the law does not itself supply. Closing it requires investment inside the PESA framework, joint land titling, market access for forest

produce, and targeted capacity-building for Gram Sabha participation, that turns an entitlement already on the books into representation that is actually exercised.

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