

CUSTOMARY LAWS: INHERITANCE IN TRIBAL SOCIETIES OF JHARKHAND

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Areas to be covered

- What is Custom ? Parameters for Custom to become a law
- Tribal Women Land inheritance rights in Jharkhand as per Customary Laws
- Gender in Tenancy Acts and Landmark Judgments
- Hinduization and Tribal Women Land Rights
- Recommendations and way ahead.



An Overview

* A recent report by the World Bank notes that in 40% of the world's economies, women face legal barriers to their land and property rights

- Women's land rights are limited by custom, social norms and legislations which hamper their economic status, opportunities and dignified life in the home.
- Ownership over land empowers women and provides them income, security and status.



An Overview

- Even though the Scheduled Tribe female's population constitutes 49.76% of the total Scheduled Tribes population, has a recorded decadal growth rate of 25% in 2011 as compared to 2001 and the percentage of female operational holdings among Scheduled Tribes has increased from 11.3% in 2010-2011 to 12.7% in 2015-2016, the inheritance rights of such females are governed by discriminatory customary laws that inflict economic injustice upon such tribal women.
- Though the Schedule Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 provides for heritable rights in forest land, the uncoded tribal customary laws often do not recognize women's right to inheritance.

GENESIS OF THE ISSUE

- The concern for land rights of indigenous women was first raised at Beijing + 10 Review by members of Consult for Women and Land Rights (CWLRL) at meetings in Bangkok and New York.
- Tribal women are being denied land rights in a scenario where there are rising incidences of violation of their rights as widows, single and separated women.



STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

- Patriarchy has resulted in violence against tribal women
- Traditions and laws are an obstacle to women's ownership of land, either through purchase or inheritance
- Tribal women in Jharkhand are unable to hold legal title to land though they have a right to till it.
- Legal systems in India and the world being reluctant to interfere with personal laws, maintains the inequality between a man and a women's right to property.



WHAT IS A CUSTOM?

A custom can be defined and described as a conduct which has been in continuous practice and has become a rule or norm of the society of community which has approved of it as such and accepted the same as having the force of law for the members of the society or community.

SALMOND – “Custom is frequently the embodiment of those principles which have commended themselves to the national conscience as principles of justice and public utility. The national conscience may well be accepted by the courts as an authoritative guide; and of this conscience national custom is the external and visible sign”

AUSTIN – “Custom is a rule of conduct which the governed observed spontaneously and not in pursuance of law set by political superior”

ALLEN – “Custom is a legal and social phenomenon growing up by forces inherent in society – forces partly of reason and necessity, and partly of suggestion and imitation”



Parameters for a custom to become a law

A custom should be:

- * Ancient
- * Uniform and continuous
- * Certain
- * Must be consciously accepted as a right
- * Reasonable
- * Not be opposed to morality, public policy and an express enactment



CLASSIFICATION OF CUSTOM

- One which does not have a binding effect

(Concerned with less important aspects of life)

- One which has a legally binding effect

(Possesses the force of law)

Tribal Custom

- Confined to a particular tribe, caste or community



CUSTOMARY LAWS FOR INHERITANCE AND SUCCESSION RIGHTS AMONG THE MUNDA AND THE ORAON TRIBE

- Daughters among the Mundas do not inherit.
- Sons are bound to support unmarried sisters until their marriage.
- When a deceased Munda leaves an unmarried daughter or daughters and no widow or son, the unmarried daughter or daughters will be entitled to the personal property left by their father and will be in possession of the lands left by the deceased till their marriage.
- Neither a daughter's husband nor a daughter's sons are entitled to inherit.
- Ghar-dijoa – Any land that may be given to the ghar-dijoa by the Panch may be enjoyed by him as long as his wife is alive, after which the inheritance passes to the nearest bhayad, as a daughter's son does not inherit.
- In the absence of sons, widow or unmarried daughters of a deceased Munda, his property goes to the nearest male agnate.
- Illegitimate Sons
 - Adopted Son belonging to the same clan
 - Adopted Son from a different clan
- *Bhayads or Agnates



Tribes of Jharkhand

System of Inheritance among the Santhals

*The property is divided equally among the sons. It is only the eldest son who gets a bullock and a rupee more than the others.

*The daughters however have no right to any of the property, the idea being that she is expected to get married and be supported by her husband and her sons. She gets a gift, customary and therefore demandable, but it is not inherited. Lately, however with the sanction of courts, only daughters have been given a life tenure of the father's land and this virtually means inheritance by daughters.

* If a man dies without sons or daughters, the property passes to the father if he is alive and if he is dead, to the brothers of the deceased by the same father (not necessarily by the same mother)

*The widow of a childless man is allowed one calf, one bandi (10 to 12 maunds) of paddy, one ebati and one cloth and return to her parent's house, unless sometimes happens, she is kept by her husband's younger brothers.

*If a man leaves only daughters, their paternal grandfather and uncles take charge of them and of the widow and the property remains in their possession.

*There are special rules in case where there is a son-in-law who has married under the *ghardi jawae* forms. If his wife has no brothers and the son-in-law stays on in the house and works for his father in law till he dies then he inherits all the immovable property and half the moveable property the other half of which goes to the relatives of the deceased. If there is more than one such son-in-law, they divide the property between them.



TENURIAL LAWS AND THEIR GENDERED IMPLICATIONS

- Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, 1908
- Santal Pargana Tenancy Act, 1949
- Wilkinsons Rule

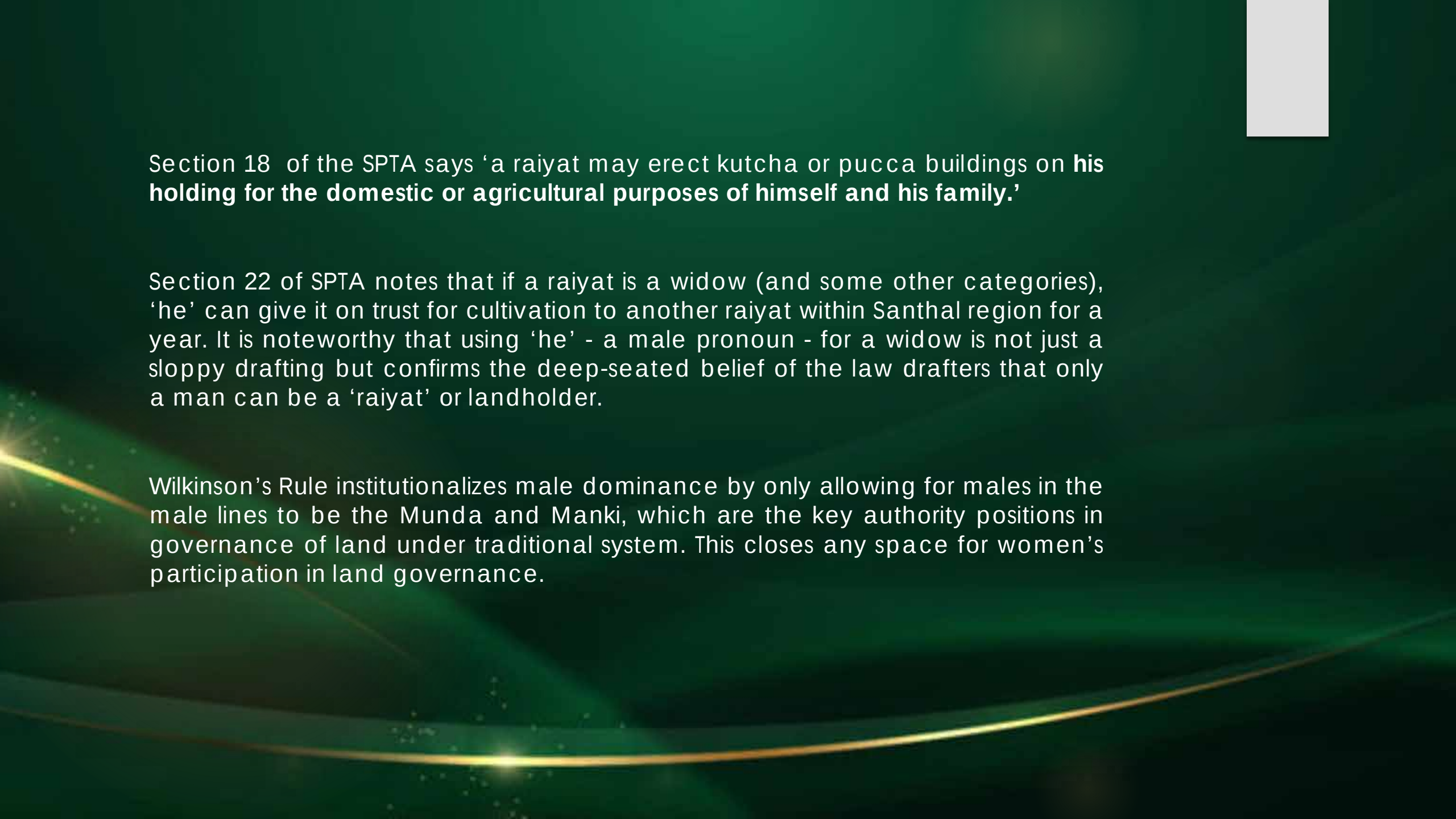


The Acts only identify men as the legal subject. Landowner, *Adhbataidar* (sharecropper), Revenue Officer, District Collector, Raiyat, tenure holder and all the other nouns are referred to as men throughout the Acts. A curious word count of CNTA shows that the act uses the pronoun 'he' 177 times and 'his' 276 times. The pronoun 'she' is not used anywhere, while 'her' is used only once.

Section 4 of SPTA defines 'raiya' as 'a person not being a landlord, who has acquired a right to hold land for the purpose of cultivating it by **himself or by members of his family or by hired servants**' and **includes the successor in interest of a person who has acquired such a right.**

In defining a raiya, the act assumes it to be always a man. It defines a tenant in the same way. To consider another example, section 18, in talking about the rights of a raiya to erect buildings says that 'a raiya may erect kutchha or pucca buildings on **his holding for the domestic or agricultural purposes of himself and his family.**'





Section 18 of the SPTA says 'a raiyat may erect kutchha or pucca buildings on **his holding for the domestic or agricultural purposes of himself and his family.**'

Section 22 of SPTA notes that if a raiyat is a widow (and some other categories), 'he' can give it on trust for cultivation to another raiyat within Santhal region for a year. It is noteworthy that using 'he' - a male pronoun - for a widow is not just a sloppy drafting but confirms the deep-seated belief of the law drafters that only a man can be a 'raiya' or landholder.

Wilkinson's Rule institutionalizes male dominance by only allowing for males in the male lines to be the Munda and Manki, which are the key authority positions in governance of land under traditional system. This closes any space for women's participation in land governance.

UNEQUAL LAND INHERITANCE RIGHTS AMONG TRIBAL WOMEN OF JHARKHAND

Madhu Kishwar, a woman's rights activist challenged the provisions of the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (CNT), 1908 under which land and property rights are inheritable only by descendants in the male line among the indigenous communities of Jharkhand.

Citing Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, 1908 Madhu Kishwar, quoted that the Act prohibits tribals from alienating land by sale, gift, will or transfer except with the permission of the Deputy Commissioner (Section 46 (1)).

Land rights are inalienable and hereditary and must pass-on to the sons; and if a Ho (Mundari tribe) does not have a direct male issue, the land goes to his male agnate; and if no kith or kin, to the village community represented by the Munda.

Section 7 and 8 of the Act while defining Khuntkhattidar and Mundari Khuntkhattidar exclude females (anyone not in the male line) based on the customs of Mundas and Oraons in which females have no inheritance in the ancestral properties. The proscription applied only to two tenure categories of 'raiayat having khuntkhatti rights' and Mundari khuntkhattidari which are restricted to descendants in the male line and the 'heir male in the male line' respectively.



LANDMARK JUDGEMENTS OF THE JHARKHAND HIGH COURT

- *Prabha Minz v. Martha Ekka and Others* – The defendants failed to prove general binding custom among the Oraon tribe that females were excluded from inheritance.
- In *Joseph Munda v. Most. Fudi (AIR 209 Jharkhand 115)* on March 17, 2009 the Jharkhand state high court has held that as per the customary law of inheritance, the rule that only male descendants will inherit the land left by their ancestors cannot be applied in case of female heirs whose name have been entered into the record of rights



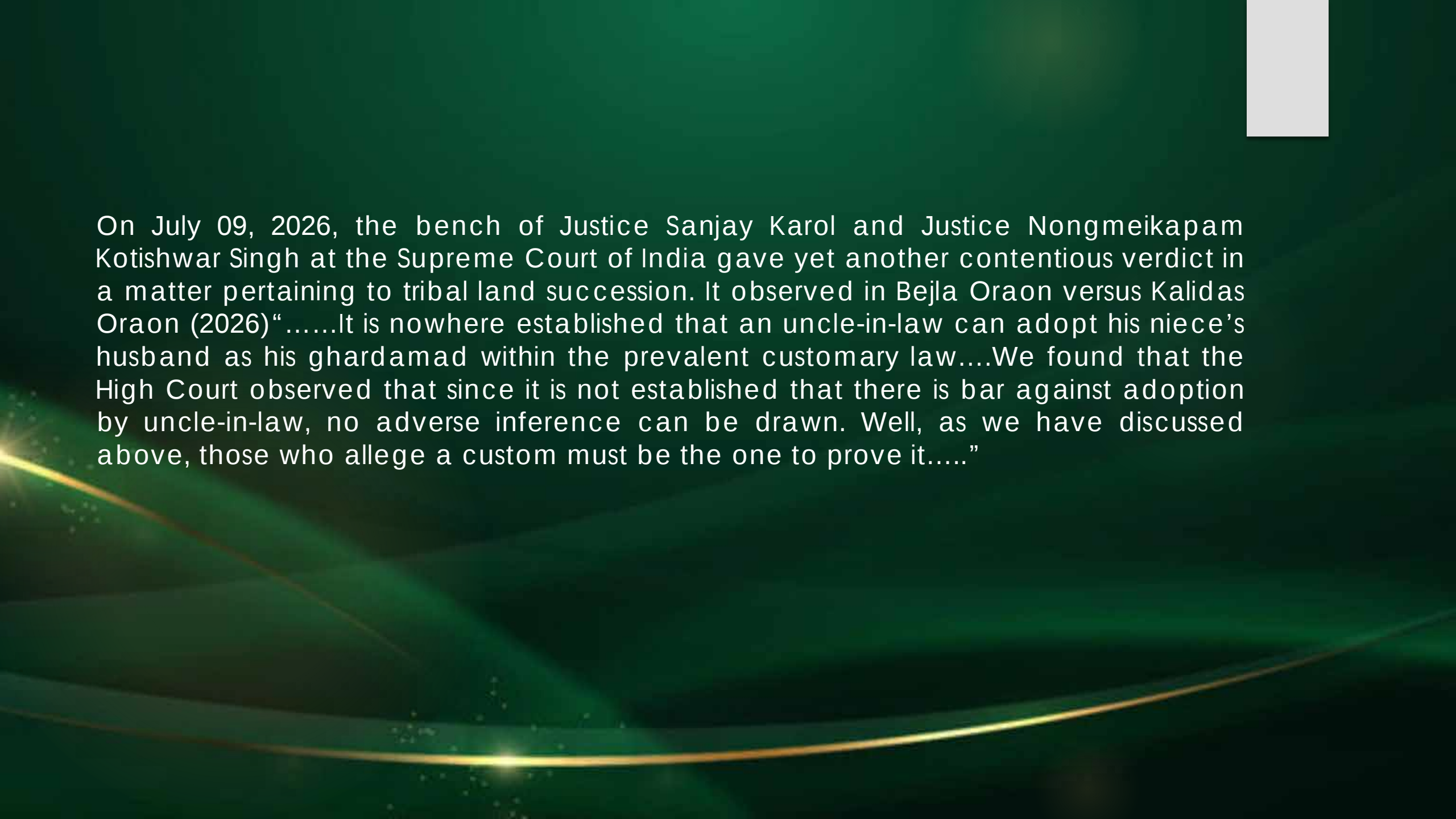
Munda Tribe

NOTED SUPREME COURT'S JUDGMENT

ON

TRIBAL WOMEN LAND INHERITANCE RIGHTS

- In Madhu Kishwar v. State of Bihar (1996) AIR 1864 SCC, p 5 the Court took the view that it was undesirable to declare the customs of tribal communities violative of Articles 14 and 15, and the right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution. It felt that this would lead to a plethora of similar claims to bring personal laws in tandem with the Hindu Succession Act, 1956 and the Indian Succession Act, 1925. The exclusive right of male succession in Sections 6 and 7 of the Act was held to remain in suspended animation as long as the right to livelihood of female descendants remains valid.
- Kamla Neti (deceased; through legal representatives) v. Special Land Acquisition Officer (Civil Appeal No. 6901 of 2022) on December 9, 2022 “When the daughter belonging to the non-tribal is entitled to the equal share in the property of the father, there is no reason to deny such right to the daughter of the tribal community. Female tribal is entitled to parity with male tribal intestate succession. To deny the equal right to the daughter belonging to the tribal even after a period of 70 years of the Constitution of India under which right to equality is guaranteed, it is high time for the Central government to look into the matter and if required, to amend the provisions of the Hindu Succession Act by which the Hindu Succession Act is not made applicable to the members of the Scheduled Tribe....”
- Ram Charan and Ors. v. Sukhram and Ors. (Civil Appeal No. 9537 of 2025) on July 17, 2025 “unless otherwise prescribed in law, denying the female heir a right in the property only exacerbates gender division and discrimination, which the law should ensure to weed out



On July 09, 2026, the bench of Justice Sanjay Karol and Justice Nongmeikapam Kotishwar Singh at the Supreme Court of India gave yet another contentious verdict in a matter pertaining to tribal land succession. It observed in Bejla Oraon versus Kalidas Oraon (2026)“.....It is nowhere established that an uncle-in-law can adopt his niece’s husband as his ghardamad within the prevalent customary law....We found that the High Court observed that since it is not established that there is bar against adoption by uncle-in-law, no adverse inference can be drawn. Well, as we have discussed above, those who allege a custom must be the one to prove it.....”

Is sufficient Hinduization' still a touchstone set by the Adjudicating Authorities?

- Labishwar Manjhi v. Pran Manjhi on July 19, 2000 (2001(1)BLJR30 – The Supreme Court declared only the Santal tribe to be sufficiently 'hinduized' because they were following Hindu traditions. The division bench of Patna High Court in Chunku Manjhi v. Bhabani Manjhi held 'it does not consist in their following the religious rules of the *srutis* and *smritis* or their completely giving themselves up to Brahmanical rules and rituals but in their acknowledging themselves to be Hindus and, in adopting Hindu social usages, the retention of a few relics of their ante-Hinduism period notwithstanding.
- According to Patna High court's ruling in Budhu Majhi v. Dukhan Majhi, dated July 19, 1955 AIR 1956 PAT123, the non-Hindu tribes do not need to be fully Hinduized in order to be subject to Hindu succession law, it is enough even if they have been sufficiently Hinduized.
- In Gopal Singh Bhumij v. Giribala Bhumij and others dated February 28, 1990, AIR1991PAT138 the Patna High Court observed that whether or not the parties had become completely or sufficiently Hinduised was a question of fact, and as such the burden of proof would be borne by the person approaching the court.

On Question of Applying Constitutional and Human Rights Standard & Justice, Equity and Good Conscience

- Bahadur v. Bratiya and Others (AIR 2016 HP 58) - Daughters in the tribal areas in the state of Himachal Pradesh shall inherit the property in accordance with the HSA, 1956 and not as per customs and usages in order to prevent the women from social injustice and prevention of all forms of exploitation. The laws must evolve with the times if societies are to progress.
- The Bombay High Court in Babulal v. Sau Reshmabai Narayanrao on January 04, 2019 emphasized that, in accordance with the principles of fairness, equity, and good conscience, the burden of proof for establishing the exclusion of daughters from inheritance under customary laws would lie with the party asserting such exclusion

Is 'Trade-off' between Hinduization and Tribal Identity still a pre-requisite for claiming Land Rights?

- The several judgments referred to and discussed illustrate that tribal women were forced into a trade-off: they either retained their tribal identity in the face of a discriminatory customary law of inheritance and lose their rights, or they discarded their tribal identity, pleaded and proved 'sufficient Hinduisation' in order to secure inheritance rights
- In the verdict of Nawang v. Bahadur on 8th October 2025 the Supreme Court stated that the Hindu Succession Act 1956 is not applicable to the members of the Scheduled Tribes

Rethinking Tribal Women's Inheritance Rights – The Hindu – February 24, 2026

<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/rethinking-tribal-womens-inheritance-rights/article70666472.ece>

Property Rights, tribals and the gender parity gap – The Hindu – September 13, 2025

<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/property-rights-tribals-and-the-gender-parity-gap/article70042998.ece>

An article titled “Codification of Customary Laws: Need of the hour” was published in the prestigious Bar and Bench on June 20, 2022 accessible at

<https://www.barandbench.com/columns/codification-of-customary-laws-need-of-the-hour>

An article titled “Succession Rights of Tribal Women: Time for Gender Equality” was published in the prestigious Bar and Bench on April 09, 2023 accessible at

<https://www.barandbench.com/columns/succession-rights-of-tribal-women-time-to-make-them-gender-equal>

SPECIAL RECOGNITION OF CUSTOMARY LAWS UNDER THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION

- The constitution of India under Schedule V calls for recognition of customary law even if it is not codified.
- Article 9, Clause 4 and 5 of the constitution says that the Scheduled Tribe be safeguarded from the operation of constitutional rights if they come in conflict with custom.
- Customary law is held to be operative with regard to inheritance, succession, marriage and other social practices in all Schedule V areas and among the tribal communities.
- Further, the Hindu Succession Act under sub-section 2 (2) excludes Schedule Tribes unless otherwise directed by the Central government. This makes both the Hindu Succession Act and the Indian Succession Act non-applicable to the Scheduled Tribes.



CONCLUSION

- In Velamuri Venkata Sivaprasad v. Kothuri Yenkateswarlu the Supreme Court has observed that the statutes such as HSA, 1956 which grants rights to women, should be interpreted keeping in mind the constitutional requirement of equality and in manner which is in consonance with the wishes and desires of framers of our constitution.
- Religion is of no significance as an ST continues to remain a tribal even if he or she changes his or her religion (Eleventh Report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes)
- Jharkhand is demanding a separate code 'sarna' in the ensuing census under the rubric of religion
- A separate tribal succession act can be made.



THANK YOU