

1. Manki-Munda System – Art & Culture / Governance

The Ho tribe of Jharkhand is protesting alleged state interference in their traditional Manki-Munda self-governance system. This has sparked a conflict between customary laws and modern administration, highlighting calls for reform while preserving tribal heritage.

Context – Conflict Between Customary Law and State Administration

Core Issue – Adivasis of the Ho tribe in Jharkhand's West Singhbhum district protested against the Deputy Commissioner in September 2025.

Allegation – The tribe alleged interference in their traditional Manki-Munda self-governance system following reports that some village heads (Mundas) were being removed.

Administration's Stance – The district administration clarified that the Manki-Munda system remains an integral part of the revenue and administrative framework, denying any attempt to dismantle it.

Underlying Tension – The incident highlighted the ongoing friction between the Ho tribe's customary self-rule and the formal state administration in the Kolhan region.

Triggers of the Current Conflict

Complaints from Non-Ho Communities – The issue was partly sparked by complaints from Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) living in Ho-dominated villages.

The Gope community, for example, alleged discrimination and restrictions on pursuing non-traditional livelihoods. They also raised issues with absentee Mundas, which delayed their access to essential documents and services.

Administrative Response – In response, the Deputy Commissioner (DC) issued a nine-point directive to ensure transparency and accountability. This directive was intended to remind Mundas of their official duties as outlined in the historical 1837 Hukuknama.

Misinterpretation and Rumours – The directive was misinterpreted by many villagers as a punitive measure against all Mundas, fueling fears that the state was attempting to undermine their customary laws.

Systemic Challenges and Need for Reform

Vacancies and Representation – Out of 1,850 Manki-Munda posts in West Singhbhum, approximately 200 remain vacant. There is significant resentment within the Ho community because some of these hereditary posts have been filled by non-tribal raiyats (tenants).

Calls for Reform – While the system is culturally significant, there is a growing demand for reform, particularly from the educated youth within the Ho community.

Key reforms suggested include – Ending the strict hereditary nature of the posts. Allowing educated tenants from the community to be appointed. Modernizing the system's functions to improve dispute resolution and provide greater legal clarity.

About the Ho Tribe

Ethnic Identity – The Ho (also known as Kolha, Hodoko, or Horo) are an Austroasiatic Munda ethnic group. The term "Ho" means "Human" in their language.

Geographic Distribution – They are primarily concentrated in the Kolhan region of Jharkhand and are also found in Odisha, West Bengal, and Bihar.

Language – They speak the Ho language.

Society and Livelihood – They are predominantly an agricultural community, working as landowners, cultivators, and labourers. Some are also employed in the mining sector. Women in the Ho community traditionally enjoy a relatively higher status compared to many other tribes.

Culture – Each village typically has an akhra (community dancing ground). Traditional musical instruments include the dama (drum), dholak, dumeng (mandar), and rutu (flute).

Belief System – Over 90% of the Ho people practice Sarnaism, an indigenous faith centered on nature worship. A deuri (village priest) performs rituals, while a deowa (spirit doctor) conducts sacrifices to deities. Rituals are often held in sarnasthals (sacred groves) located outside the village.

The Manki-Munda System of Governance

Definition – It is a traditional, decentralized self-governance model unique to the Ho tribe in the Kolhan region.

Leadership Structure –

1. **Munda –** The hereditary head of a single village, responsible for resolving local disputes.
2. **Manki –** The head of a pidh (a cluster of 8 to 15 villages), who handles appeals and disputes that cannot be resolved by the Munda.

Historical Evolution and Legal Status

Pre-British Era – The system operated as a community-driven governance model with no concept of land tax or submission to an external sovereign authority.

British Intervention – After the Battles of Plassey (1757) and Buxar (1764), the East India Company acquired Diwani rights (1765) and later imposed the Permanent Settlement Act (1793). This led to the seizure of Ho lands by outside zamindars, sparking major uprisings like the Ho Revolt (1821–22) and the Kol Revolt (1831–32).

Wilkinson's Rules (1833–37) – Unable to subdue the tribes militarily, the British adopted a strategy of co-opting the traditional system. Captain Thomas Wilkinson, a political agent, codified the Manki-Munda practices into 31 rules known as Wilkinson's Rules, which were officially implemented in the Kolhan Government Estate (KGE) in 1837.

Impact of the Rules – It formally recognized Mankis and Mundas but transformed them into agents of the British colonial authority. It integrated the Kolhan region into the colonial revenue system. It introduced the concept of private property, turning tribals into raiyats (tenants) with pattas (land deeds). It facilitated a massive influx of outsiders (Dikkus), whose population grew from 1,579 in 1867 to 15,755 by 1897.

Post-Independence Status – The Kolhan Government Estate was dissolved in 1947, but Wilkinson's Rules continued to be followed.

Judicial Interpretation – In the *Mora Ho vs State of Bihar* (2000) case, courts ruled that Wilkinson's Rules were customs, not formal laws, but allowed their continued practice.

Recent Recognition – In 2021, the Jharkhand government officially recognized the Nyaya Panch under this system to handle revenue, land, and dispute settlement functions.

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