



Self-Governance (Pirha) of Paudi Bhuyan: An Ethnographic Account

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“The political organization in traditional societies is less about the exercise of power and more about the maintenance of equilibrium within a network of kinship relations”

—Claude Lévi-Strauss

Abstract: The self-governance (*Pirha*) system is the backbone of Paudi Bhuyan society, which helps sustain their different aspects of culture, i.e., values, customs, and ethics. Tribal political life requires self-governance because it gives them the ability to stand up for their rights, protect their cultures, and create a future that is consistent with their beliefs and customs. The chapter is very essential to knowing about the Paudi Bhuyan community and how to regulate the behaviour of individuals and ensure the smooth continuation of society in the contemporary era. The fieldwork was conducted among the Paudi Bhuyan community of Banspal block, Keonjhar district, Odisha. The Paudi Bhuyan is one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) inhabiting in the Keonjhar district of Odisha. They are also found in Mayurbhnaj, Sambalpur, Sundargarh, Deogarh and Angul districts. The Paudi Bhuyan are shifting cultivators, and they are also known for their traditional basketry work. They consider son god (*Dharam Devta*) as Supreme Being and Earth Goddess (*BasukiMata*). This chapter explores the life and culture of Paudi Bhuyan as well as the significance of the *Pirha* system. The Paudi Bhuyan *Pirha* Mechanism, rooted in norms, values, and spiritual beliefs, which shapes customary laws, maintains social structure, and preserves cultural identity. *Pirha* is a wider territorial organization composed of a number of

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villages that act as a traditional administrative unit. *Sardar* is the headman of the *Pirha* structure, who holds a hereditary position, but now a days the *Sardar* is chosen by the opinion of *Pirha* members (headman and elder members of the villages coming under the *Pirha* structure). The chapter highlights the structure and functional mechanisms of the Paudi Bhuyan *Pirha* system. *Pirha* is composed of key members who have been entrusted with certain prescribed functions, such as *Pirha Bhandari*, *Behera*, *Jati Behera*, and *Pirha Brahman*, etc. The offenses like incest taboo, adultery, killing of cows, marriage outside the community, and disposal of property of an heirless person have been referred to the *Pirha* Council. The continuity and change provide a holistic understanding of the dynamics within the Paudi Bhuyan community. The Paudi Bhuyan community is somehow influenced by the modern system of political institutions, but still, the community adheres to the traditional one. This chapter contributes to the broader field of contemporary indigenous research by offering insights into how indigenous communities navigate the challenges of cultural continuity and adaptation in the 21st century in the context of customary law and traditional governance structures. Paudi Bhuyan has its own traditional political council (*Darbar*) at the village and *Pirha* levels to decipher disputes and maintain peace and harmony within the society.

Keywords: Self-Governance, *Pirha*, Customary Law, Tribal, PVTGs, & Identity

Introduction

To define the concept of the term “tribe” is an issue. The term “tribe” has assumed different meanings in different historical contexts, it is basically refer by academicians, social workers and administrators. The logic of defining “tribe” is easily understood if it is linked to the debates of constituent assembly where Jaipal Singh a member favoured the use of the term “Adivasi” instead of “Scheduled Tribe”, this was rejected on the ground as argued by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Chairman of the drafting committee of the constitution that the word Adivasi is really a general term which has no specific legal connotation. He argued that the term “Scheduled Tribe” has a fixed meaning as per article 342. The first census report by Baine during 1891, the then Commissioner for Census of India include all tribal groups as “Forest Tribes”, and

kept the same under the sub-heading of “Agricultural and Pastoral Castes”. Their number was estimated as 16 million, who were again classified as “Animist” in the Census Report of 1901 by Risley and as “Tribal Animist” or people following “Tribal Religion” in the Census Report of 1911 by Gait; as “Hill and Forest Tribes” in the Census Report of 1931 by Hutton. These people by that time were numbering 22 million and later on came to be known as “Backward Tribes” in the Government of India Act 1935, and as “Tribes” in the Census Report of 1941 accounting for a total population of 2.47 cores. The term “Tribe” in Indian context, by and large, is synonymously used as Adivasi (original settlers), Girijan (hill dwellers), Vanyajati (forest caste), Adimjati (primitive caste), Janajati (folk communities) and Anusuchit Janajati (Scheduled Tribe). The term tribe is that in spite of various definitions and designations given to it, during last 30 years, anthropologists and other have come across of a new term, which is “Indigenous People” which also conceptually challenges the earlier meaning of the term for tribe. The term “Indigenous People” to a large extent are similar to that of the term “Native” used during the colonial period. To defining the concept of tribe in such a manner in India is still continuing due to the fact that very few studies have developed this issue, rather most of the scholastic studies on tribal themes are associated with tribal welfare. Beteille said that anthropologists in India both before and after independence have been concerned more with the issues of tribal populations.

The literature of anthropology justifies the research themes through in-depth analysis from various anthropological perspectives. In the state of Odisha, 13 tribal groups have been identified as PVTGs. Paudi Bhuyan is one of the PVTGs communities of Odisha, which are mainly concentrated in Keonjhar, Sundergarh, Deogarh and Angul districts. They speak in a distorted Odia language, which falls under the Indo-Aryan linguistic group. The men wear dhoti, banian, and shirts. The women wear saris. The women folk love to adorn their bodies with brass, gold, and silver ornaments. The Paudi Bhuyan food culture is based on rice, and millet is the staple food. The wild varieties of leaves, roots, mushrooms, and vegetables also supplement the diet (Pradhan, 2015).

The classical anthropological literature provides a more critical analysis of current research areas. Tribal communities have their own political organisations to regulate behaviour and maintain law and order within their societies. The author explored the traditional council of the Munda tribe, the procedure of solving conflicts, disputes and maintaining social order. The customary law plays a major

role in the social life of the Munda community (Roy, 1912). The author focused on the political institution of the Bhumij community, in which both secular chiefs and religious specialists are important aspects of the leadership system. He also examined the balance existing between spiritual power and political authority in societies (Sinha, 1959). In the Gond community, clan head and village council are the most powerful systems that govern the people. The integration of religion and political rules are applicable in governance within Gond society (Elwin, 1943). Levi-Strauss presented how kinship systems are implanted within the traditional political institution. He highlighted that the kinship system provides the basis for maintaining social and political structure properly in traditional societies. He emphasized that in traditional societies where formal institutions are absent, people can maintain peace and exercise power on the basis of kinship ties (Levi-Strauss, 1949). The author explored the pattern of chieftainship and local governance among the Naga community. The Naga tribe kinship system has a tremendous role in social control, and decentralized governance continues through customary law practice (Bose, 1953). In Ghana, the headman is chosen from the clan group. He exercises the power based on the norms, values, and traditions of Tallensi culture. The political organization is constituted by hierarchical leadership involved in the decision-making process considering social and religious rules and norms (Fortes, 1945). Among the Tiv society, centralized authority is absent. Like other indigenous communities, they retain social order through segmentary lineage and kinship systems. Social order is assisted by a chain of elders who settle conflicts and impose law among members. Traditional societies maintain through social ties and customary law (Bohannan, 1957). The Ndembu rituals play an important role in political organization. The chieftaincy was confined to political leaders to enforce law and order. The rituals and ceremonies are not only confined to religion but also political organization, which sanctioned the hierarchy of the chief within the society (Turner, 1967). Leadership is based on unanimity and admired rather than forceful power. The decision was taken by the elders collectively. That shows the value system and a sense of togetherness lie among the Montagnais-Naskapi. Political organization reflects the society functioning smoothly without the concept of hierarchy (Leacock, 1981). The Maler community maintained the chieftainship is both hereditary and achieved. The Maler political institution maintains a balance between tradition and modernization processes that influence the governance system continuously (Vidyarthi, 1963). The author highlighted how personality

and personal influence have a great role in traditional political institutions. He emphasized the customary practices and dynamic nature of leadership prevalent among tribal societies of India (Ghurye, 1963). The author analyzed the role of the headman (Patel) and village council among the Bhil community of India. He stressed that despite external influences, traditional political institutions are still continued without losing their significance (Naik, 1949). The Polynesian societies are not static but are able to rejoin external forces. Traditional leaders maintain social cohesion and stability in society through the legitimacy of leadership power. It is appreciated that traditional societies tackle the external forces to preserve the beauty of political organization (Sahlins, 1985). Bali presents a unique perspective on traditional political organization. He argues that in 19th-century Bali, political power was not exercised through direct control but was instead dramatized through elaborate rituals and ceremonies. The state functioned as a stage where the ruler's authority was symbolically enacted, reflecting the importance of cultural and religious practices in maintaining political order. Geertz's work is a significant contribution to the understanding of how symbolic and ritual practices reinforce political structures in traditional societies (Geertz, 1980). The traditional political structures in Orissa's villages, particularly focusing on the interaction between local headmen and the colonial administration. His study provides a nuanced understanding of how traditional political systems interact with external political pressures (Bailey, 1957). The author studied the political organization of Konyak Naga. He presented in detail how the Morung (youth dormitory) was considered a place for political and social affairs. He further highlighted the contribution of youth organization and age set towards local administration (Burman, 1972). The author explained the concept associated with Coorgs of Karnataka. He forwarded the concept of dominant caste among Coorgs and the influence of the dominant caste in the local politics and controlling the behaviour of the village populations (Srinivas, 1959).

Significance of the Study

The self-governance system of the Paudi Bhuyan tribe, known as the Pirha, holds immense significance in understanding indigenous political institutions in Odisha. Functioning as a traditional council, the Pirha system represents a deeply rooted form of community-based governance that ensures social order, justice delivery, conflict resolution, and cultural continuity. It reflects collective decision-making

practices guided by customary norms, where leaders are chosen based on wisdom and experience. Critically, the Pirha stands as a symbol of autonomy and resistance against external administrative impositions, preserving tribal identity and values. Here the researchers Research on the self-governance (Pirha) system of the Paudi Bhuyan is crucial for several reasons. First, it documents and analyzes an indigenous governance structure that has historically maintained order, justice, and socio-cultural integrity in a tribal society. The Pirha represents a form of grassroots democracy, offering insights into alternative political systems rooted in tradition rather than imposed frameworks.

Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to achieve two core objectives related to the Paudi Bhuyan tribe and their traditional governance system known as the Pirha. Through this dual focus, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of indigenous governance and cultural continuity among the Paudi Bhuyans. The entire study has two main objectives related to Paudi Bhuyans and their Pirha system.

1. To explore the life and culture of Paudi Bhuyan as well as the significance of the *Pirha* system.
2. To highlights the structure and functional mechanisms of the Paudi Bhuyan *Pirha* system.

Geo-Ethnic Profile of Paudi Bhuyan

Paudi Bhuyan is the most vulnerable section of the Bhuyan Tribe. They are inhabited in five districts of Odisha like Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh, Angul, and Deogarh. This research was conducted in Karagadihi village, located in the Banspal Block of Keonjhar district, Odisha, where the Paudi Bhuyan tribe actively practices their traditional self-governance system known as the Pirha. The name is derived from the Sanskrit word "Bhumi," which means land or earth. Bhuyan believe they were born out of mother earth and called themselves "Bhumiputra" (Patnaik et al., 1980). The Paudi Bhuyan consists of nuclear, joint, and extended families, but nuclear families are common. Youth dormitory is found in every Paudi village known as Darbar. Dharam Devata (sun god) is considered the supreme being and Basukimata (Earth Goddess) as the supreme deity. Dehuri, Raulia, and Bejuni have a special role in the religious sphere. Paudi Bhuyans have their own traditional village council where Naik is the secular head. The Paudi Bhuyan speaks local Odia, pronounced

differently. The male members wear dhoti and shirt, and the women wear saree and blouse. Women adorn ornaments like bangles, armlets, necklaces, nose rings, ear rings, etc. Rice is staple food. The Paudi Bhuyans are consuming different types of liquors, like *mahuli*, *pachhi*, *taddy*, *salapa*, etc. The property is inherited from father to son. The elder son gets a share of the property. Paudi Bhuyan society is patrilineal and patriarchal. Father is the head of the family.

Methodology of the Study

The study on the self-governance system (Pirha) of the Paudi Bhuyan tribe was conducted using qualitative research methods, with an ethnographic approach as the central framework. Fieldwork was carried out in Karagadihi village, located in Banspal Block of Keonjhar district, Odisha. The ethnographic method allowed for in-depth understanding of the everyday practices, values, and decision-making processes within the Pirha system. The Participant observation was employed to understand the functioning of Pirha meetings, community rituals, and conflict resolution practices. This method provided insight into the roles of traditional leaders, social norms, and the collective decision-making process. In-depth interviews were conducted with village elders, Pirha members, community leaders, and women to gather narratives on the historical evolution, structure, and functions of the Pirha system. This helped in understanding both the institutional mechanisms and people's perceptions of legitimacy, justice, and change. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were organized with different age groups to capture intergenerational views on the continuity and transformation of the Pirha. Overall, this combination of methods allowed for a holistic and critical perspective on the Pirha as a self-governing institution.

Results & Discussion

The Paudi Bhuyan tribe is renowned for its legacy of resistance, particularly through the contributions of Dharanidhar Naik, a prominent Bhuyan leader who was born in Kusumita village of Keonjhar district in Odisha. His leadership in anti-colonial struggles and efforts to protect indigenous rights significantly influenced tribal movements in Odisha, symbolizing courage, identity preservation, and the assertion of self-governance. Paudi Bhuyan practices shifting hill cultivation and relies on the forests for the collection of minor forest products and firewood. Their villages are mostly settled on the hill slopes, hilltops, or valleys. They have their own traditional

council, where village-level disputes are settled by the village headman. The political head of the village is called Naik or Pradhan. Along with Naik, Dehuri and elder members of the village take part in the traditional council. He enjoys a high status within the community.

Like other tribal communities in Odisha, Paudi Bhuyan has traditional political institutions and leadership to maintain peace and harmony within the village. In the village, the headman is called Pradhan, who presides over the meeting. Pradhan, along with other religious and secular leaders, deal with different matters. It is the prime duty and responsibility of the village Panchayat to control the behaviour and conduct of its members, solve disputes related to land, property, and the and the distribution of land for shifting cultivation, and decide cases like adultery, divorce, elopement, marriage with members outside the own group, etc. The Panchayat examines the severity of the problems and decides the punishment and amount of compensation or fine imposed on the culprit. A group of villages comes together and forms a federation called the Pirh Panchayat. The head of the Pirh is called Sardar. The disputes where two villages or members of villages are involved are taken to Pirh for judgment (Patnaik, Choudhury, Rath, Senapati, Giri, Mishra, Mohanty & Jena, 2015). The post of Pradhan is hereditary, and usually the eldest son succeeds his father and becomes the next head. Pradhan enjoys a high status and respect in the community. As an administrative head, he is so powerful, and his decisions are final. The youth dormitory is usually used for the meeting. He conducts the meeting in the early morning or in the evening (Ota & Sahoo, 2021). Different kinds of conflicts are resolved at the village level by a group of members led by Pradhan. Besides the conflicts that are not solved by the village council, inter-village conflicts are referred to the territorial organization called the Pirh Council. Being a patriarchal society after Pradhan, his eldest son, acquired the post. A turban is the insignia of the office of the Pradhan. When a new Pradhan is appointed, villagers tie a turban on his head. During the king's rule, the Pradhan were given the responsibility to collect revenue, solve societal matters, attend to the officers during their visits, etc. Within the village, along with the Pradhan, Dehuri, the religious head, and elite elders, they all equally participated in the meeting (Patnaik, Ali, Rout, & Debi, 2021). Among the Paudi Bhuyan societies of Odisha, oaths and ordeals form a vital component of traditional justice administered by the *Pirha Panchayat* (village council). In situations where empirical evidence is lacking and conflict resolution becomes difficult through conventional inquiry, these ritualistic

practices are invoked to determine truthfulness and culpability. Such mechanisms are not arbitrary but are deeply rooted in moral symbolism and communal belief systems (Roy, 1935).

Here we take case study of Derengpirh. The study village Karangadihi is coming under Derengpirh. The Derengi Pirha is managed by three individuals from the area: Tamala Pradhan (Sardar), Kishor Kumar Khatei (President), and Satrugan Mantri (Secretary). During the researcher's fieldwork, interactions were held with the village Sardar, Tamala Pradhan, who is currently employed as a government official at the Banspal Block of Keonjhar District. According to his statement, there are six Pirhas in the Banspal region. These are: Derengi Pirha, Atasha Pirha, Charigaon Pirha, Sri Sarakhanda Pirha, Sarakhanda Pirha, and Panchapada Pirha. These six Pirhas cover approximately 30 villages, including 27 revenue villages and 3 hamlets, within the Banspal Block of Keonjhar District, Odisha. In these 30 villages, around 3,000 Paudi Bhuyan people are settled in both lowland and highland areas of the hills. As we discussed with the *Sardar*, he first explained the names of the villages under his jurisdiction. These include Karangadihi, Lanjipada, Baitarani, Anasuan, Lata, Tantadihi, Temera, Rangadihi, Mundatapa, Taimiri, Tala, Tana, Amarasa, Benidihi, Upara Erida, Mangalpur, Tentulikhunti, Tala Tangarapada, Upara Tangarapada, Nipa, Haladipani, Bandhadihi, Jamunadiha, Talapada, Tala Erida, Kuanr Rugudi Sahi, Kuanra, Kuanrakalani, Tamanga, Gobindpur, and Mujajhiri. The Derengi Pirha Sardar briefly explained the existing Pirha structure and how it plays a significant role in supporting the local community. The Pirh has different function towards the development of its member. The welfare and progress of the each and every Paudi Bhuyan village is the prime task of the Pirh. The last meeting was organised on 10th March, 2023. In that meeting around 2000 populations of 20 villages were attending the meeting. The meeting was held in the Kamera village of Karmadi Gram Panchyat. The place and date was fixed before the meeting. The number of agenda on which discussion was made in the meeting for the overall development of Paudi Bhuyan society at large such as 1. Put restriction on cutting the trees and protect the forest, 2. Discuss regarding distribution of Pattas in Pirh basis, 3. planning on major festivals of Paudi Bhuyan, 4. Discuss to do survey in villages to know the status of literate and illiterate people, 5. motivate the villagers banned from consumption of alcohol and other intoxicants, 6. Motivate the villagers for self-dependence and to do honey farming, poultry, goatery and fruit farming etc.

Formation of Constitution of the Bhuyan: An Ethnographic Overview

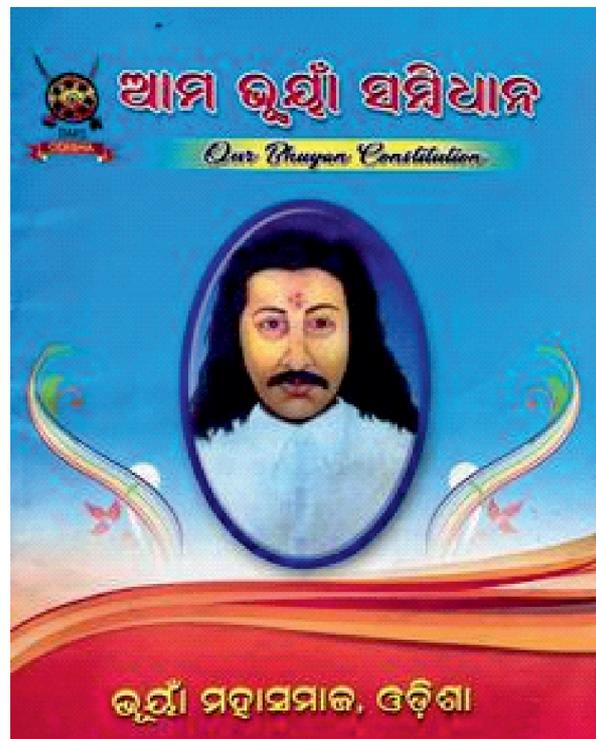
The Bhuinya community, primarily spread across Bonai, Kuchinda, and Deogarh regions of Odisha, has undertaken a significant socio-political initiative by drafting a formal constitution titled “*Constitution of 500 Bhuinya Society (Panchasaha Bhuinya Samaj Sambidhana)*”. This constitution, intended for immediate implementation, establishes a multi-tiered governance structure encompassing village, pargana, central, and apex levels of the Bhuinya confederacy. The document outlines a broad range of socio-cultural reforms aimed at modernizing traditional practices while reinforcing indigenous identity. Notably, it addresses purificatory rites associated with birth and death, introduces transformative changes in marriage and divorce customs, and emphasizes compulsory education and literacy. Further, the constitution focuses on eradicating poverty, discouraging alcohol consumption, and promoting the modernization of rituals and festivals. These efforts reflect a dynamic attempt by the Bhuinya to balance cultural continuity with progressive adaptation. Such codification of customary norms marks a significant development in the political consciousness of the Bhuinya, complementing earlier ethnographic accounts of their socio-political life (Patnaik et al., 2015).

The *Constitution of the Bhunya Society* represents a significant step toward formalizing indigenous governance through a codified customary framework rooted in the traditions of the Bhuyan people of Odisha. On April 20, 2021, at 10:00 AM, a significant assembly of the Bhuyan tribal community was convened in the village of Kadakala under the jurisdiction of Sri Sarakhanda Pirha, located in Keonjhar district. This Mahasabha (Grand Assembly) was presided over by Shri Mahendra Pradhan, a senior social worker, former sarpanch, and former president of the Sarakhanda Pirha. The event brought together a large number of Bhuyan tribal members from various regions, including the Sadar sub-division of Keonjhar, Bonai sub-division of Sundargarh (particularly from Purba Bonai), Pallahara sub-division of Angul, Barkote block of Deogarh, as well as Champua, Telkoi, Harichandanpur, Patna, and Jhumpura blocks of Keonjhar district. The culturally significant premises of the Baba Shri Shri Nilakantheswar Mahadev Temple and Ashram, near the historic Khandadhar waterfall, the Mahasabha had both symbolic and strategic importance. The event was organized by the leadership of Sri Khanda Pirdha and Sri Sarakhanda Pirdha with cooperation from the Bhuiyan communities of Keonjhar, Sundargarh, Deogarh, and Angul districts. The primary agenda was to deliberate upon and adopt new resolutions concerning the constitutional and socio-cultural

governance of the Bhuyan society. The assembly marked the formal initiation of drafting a new constitutional framework, meant to govern the Bhuyan tribal society in a cohesive and modernized manner. This effort represents a unique synthesis of traditional leadership institutions (Pirhas) and emerging collective aspirations for codified indigenous self-governance. It reflects an organic movement toward formalizing customary laws, revising ritual practices, and redefining socio-political roles within the Bhuyan tribal community in Odisha.

A unanimous proposal was adopted to establish a unified organization encompassing the Bhuyan communities residing across the four districts and their respective traditional units (Pirhas). As a result, the integration of 20 Bhuyan Pirhas from Keonjhar, 6 from Sundargarh, 3 each from Deogarh and Angul, and an additional 5 from the bordering areas of Jharkhand was agreed upon, with the aim of consolidating the socio-political identity of the Bhuiyan people through a formal indigenous confederation.

I: View of Paudi Bhuyan Constitution



In this Bhuyan Mahasabha (Grand Assembly), detailed discussions were held on the structure of the Bhuyan society and the diverse social formations spread across Odisha and Jharkhand. The assembly unanimously agreed upon the integration of the Bhuyan community and endorsed the formulation of a constitutional framework along with codified customary rules and regulations. The Mahasabha aimed to unify all Bhuyan Pirhas (traditional socio-political units) residing across district-level regions of Odisha (such as Sundargarh, Keonjhar, Angul, and Deogarh), Jharkhand (including the Chaibasa region), and parts of Chhattisgarh, under a common set of customary laws and governance structures. Through this Bhuyan Mahasamaj, efforts were initiated to institutionalize a standardized cultural and social policy across all Pirhas, focusing on cultural integration, fostering kinship solidarity, and eliminating harmful customs and social evils. It resolved to legislate unified customary norms regarding marriage, funerary practices, substance abuse prevention, communal food-sharing, education, health, and organizational development. The assembly also emphasized the need to reform discriminatory practices and eradicate regressive traditions prevalent within different sections of the Bhuyan society.

Conclusion

The *Pirha* system of the Paudi Bhuyan tribe, an indigenous community inhabiting the highlands of Odisha and bordering regions of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, represents a sophisticated model of self-governance rooted in customary law and collective consensus. The ethnographic inquiry into the Pirha structure reveals a non-state, decentralized political institution that regulates socio-political affairs, mediates conflicts, maintains cultural norms, and organizes communal rituals. This institution operates outside the formal structures of the Indian state, yet commands deep legitimacy among the Paudi Bhuyan, showcasing the tribe's resilience and autonomy in the face of modern state expansion. Moreover, internal challenges such as generational shifts, education, and migration are altering the Paudi Bhuyan's perception of the Pirha's relevance. While the older generation remains committed to its authority, younger members are increasingly influenced by external political norms.

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