Unequal Access to Education and Employment: Emerging Conflicts among Tribal Communities in Telangana

**ABSTRACT**

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| This study examines the disparities in access to reservations for education and employment among tribal communities in Telangana, with a particular focus on the ongoing conflict between the Lambadi and Adivasi communities over these provisions. Five major tribal communities, Lambadi, Koya, Gond, Kolam, and Chenchu, are studied regarding their relative access to reservations and benefits. Using a survey sample of ten villages and four hundred households, the research assesses both the distribution of resources and the perspectives of different tribes on the Lambadi-Adivasi conflict. Findings reveal significant disparities, with the Lambadi and Koya communities receiving comparatively greater access to educational and employment opportunities. In contrast, Gond, Kolam, and Chenchu communities face persistent barriers due to geographical isolation, infrastructural limitations, and socio-cultural factors. The study emphasizes the need for targeted policy interventions to bridge these disparities and improve more inclusive growth among tribal communities. |

**Keywords:** Tribes; Education; Employment; Reservations; Disparities; Conflicts

1. **INTRODUCTION**

Tribal development remains crucial in achieving sustainable and inclusive growth in India. The Scheduled Tribes (STs), comprising more than 8% of the country’s population, face several socio-economic challenges, making targeted development efforts essential for bridging disparities. These challenges include geographical isolation, lower literacy levels, and limited access to quality education and employment opportunities. The importance of education and employment in the sustainable development of tribal communities cannot be overstated. Education equips individuals with skills, enhances decision-making, and enables socio-economic mobility. Meanwhile, employment provides financial security and social stability, breaking cycles of poverty and creating pathways toward self-sufficiency. Education and employment empower tribal communities to contribute effectively to the economy, enhancing their participation in societal progress. However, various factors contribute to a lack of uniform access to these opportunities, leading to disparities in educational attainment and employment among tribes.

Despite numerous government interventions, tribal communities face obstacles in accessing education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities. To address the development needs of Scheduled Tribes, the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), now known as the Development Action Plan for Scheduled Tribes (DAPST), was introduced in 1974-75 during the Fifth Five-Year Plan. The TSP/DAPST ensures that a proportional share of development investments is allocated to tribal areas, targeting key sectors like education, healthcare, agriculture, housing, and employment. The objective of this plan is twofold: to direct adequate resources to tribal areas based on their population and to foster the all-around development of tribal communities in line with their specific needs. In addition to TSP/DAPST, Integrated Tribal Development Agencies (ITDA) were established in the 1970s and 1980s as specialised institutions to enhance the delivery of public goods and services to tribal communities, especially in Scheduled Areas. These agencies play a key role in implementing tribal welfare programs, such as providing scholarships and vocational training. The reservation system, mandated by the Indian Constitution, helps ensure representation and access to education and employment for Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC), and Other Backwards Classes (OBC), which otherwise face systemic barriers due to centuries of discrimination and exclusion.

Affirmative action has facilitated growth among tribal communities. Xaxa (1999) observed a shift from homogeneity to heterogeneity, with tribal individuals increasingly moving into diverse roles beyond traditional occupations, including government positions and professional careers. Thorat and Newman (2010) and Deshpande (2006) argue that reservation policies have improved socio-economic status by providing access to education and stable employment. Sundaram (2012) found that SC/ST students benefiting from these policies showed marked academic and career progress.

However, these benefits are unevenly distributed among tribal communities. Dubey (2009) notes that regions with higher ST populations receive more constitutional benefits, while Khiamniungan (2014) highlights that backwards tribes in Nagaland remain underrepresented in government employment despite their numbers. Telangana has 32 tribal communities, and disparities exist among them due to factors like education and geographic isolation. Lakshmi (2019) found that primitive tribes lag in education, while the Lambadis have higher literacy and income levels. Susmitha (2019) also found more Lambadi women in government jobs than other tribal women. Reddy (2014) suggests that only a few tribes benefit from government schemes, leading to tensions between groups, as seen in Lambadi-Adivasi clashes over perceived reservation advantages (The Hindu, 2018).

The government and constitutional initiatives aim to benefit all tribal communities and reduce the gap between tribes and non-tribal groups. However, only certain tribal communities tend to receive more advantages from these initiatives, which can lead to disparities within tribal society. These disparities result in conflicts among the tribal communities, raising concerns about the development of marginalized groups within the tribes. This study focuses on how reservations in education and employment can benefit tribal communities in their development, the reasons behind the existing disparities, and why some tribal communities progress while others do not. The study also aims to identify gaps in current policy implementation and propose recommendations to improve educational and employment outcomes, ensuring more equitable development for all tribal communities.

**1.1 Background of the Study**

Tribal communities in India, collectively called Scheduled Tribes (ST), represent over 8% of the population and are integral to the country’s social and cultural fabric. Despite their diversity and contributions, these communities remain among the most marginalized groups. Historically excluded from mainstream socio-economic processes, they face challenges such as limited access to quality education, healthcare, and employment. Their geographical isolation, inadequate infrastructure, and cultural barriers further exacerbate these issues. Over time, the Indian government has introduced numerous interventions, such as the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) and reservation policies, to bridge these gaps. While these efforts have led to significant progress for some tribal communities, development remains uneven.

In states like Telangana, which is home to 32 recognized tribal communities, this uneven development is particularly evident. Some tribes, such as the Lambadi and Koya, have made notable progress in education and employment due to better socio-economic positioning and proactive utilization of government schemes. In contrast, tribes like the Gond, Kolam, and Chenchu continue to face significant challenges, including low literacy rates, high poverty levels, and limited access to basic resources. The geographic isolation of many of these tribes, combined with systemic barriers, has hindered their ability to benefit from affirmative action and welfare programs.

These disparities have also led to tensions among tribal communities. For instance, the Lambadi community, which has made significant strides in leveraging reservation benefits, has faced criticism and conflict from Adivasi groups, who feel marginalized in the distribution of resources. The Lambadi-Adivasi clashes, particularly over reservations and representation, highlight the socio-political complexities of tribal development in Telangana.

This study aims to delve into the broader issue of tribal development, focusing on education and employment as pathways to empowerment. By examining the disparities among Telangana's tribal communities, it seeks to understand the factors enabling progress for some while leaving others behind. Additionally, the research will explore the implications of these disparities, including inter-community tensions, and propose strategies to foster equitable development that benefits all tribal groups, especially those currently marginalized.

**2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

This study aims are

* To examine the disparities in access to reservations for education and employment among tribal communities in Telangana.
* To explore the factors enabling progress for some communities while leaving others behind and identify strategies to foster equitable development for all tribal groups.
* To find ways to redress the disparities in access to reservations for education and employment among tribal communities in Telangana.

3 **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The unequal access to education and employment is a significant issue that affects individuals and communities worldwide, including tribal communities in Telangana. The geographic barriers in rural areas have fewer educational institutions and job opportunities compared to urban centres, thus creating a gap of knowledge. The skills gaps is caused by a lack of access to education leads to a workforce that do not meet the demands of modern economies. The unequal access is evident in economic disparities among different individuals from low-income families often lack the resources to pursue quality education and job opportunities. The social inequalities continue to ignite discrimination based on race, gender, or disability can limit access to both education and employment at tribal Communities in Telangana. The lack of infrastructure in managing transportation, internet access, and educational facilities hinder opportunities for education and employment. The health impacts continue to affect the tribal communities due to the limited access to information which worsen the situation to implement the policies. As a result, the social unrest is caused by the inequality that lead to frustration and conflict within communities linked to education and employment disparities. The protesters challenge on the legality of actions or regulations in court were aimed at seeking declaratory relief or interdicts against unlawful conduct from the public officials managing education and unemployment.

**4 LITERATURE REVIEW**

The unequal access to education and employment highlights the disparities in different literature collected during this study. The unequal access to reservations for education and employment among tribal communities in Telangana, with a particular focus on the ongoing conflict between the Lambadi and Adivasi communities over these provisions. The power of tribal communities in Telangana is a dynamic force for change, driven by a commitment to social justice and educational equity. Their activism, innovative initiatives, and engagement with policymakers highlight their critical role in shaping the future of education and employment among the tribal communities in Telangana. Thus, harnessing their collective strength, tribal communities in Telangana influence policies and practices that impact their lives and the broader community, especially in education and employment. The inequalities are explained by the public officials when managing the situation in tribal communities in Telangana, eager to prosper, indicated in detail.

**5. METHODOLOGY**

Since there is no available tribe-wise secondary data, this study relies on primary data collected from major tribal communities, specifically the Lambadi, Koya, Gond, Kolam, and Chenchu. These communities were purposefully selected due to their numerical dominance and clash between Lambadis and other Adivasi tribes. Four districts were chosen for the study: Adilabad (home to Gond and Kolam), Mulugu (Koya), Mahabubabad (Lambadi), and Nagarkurnool (Chenchu), as these areas have a moderate population of the respective tribes. For each tribe, two villages/hamlets were randomly selected, and from each, 40 households were included for data collection. In total, 10 villages were chosen for the field study, resulting in data collection from 400 households overall. A structured household schedule was utilized to gather the data, supplemented by focus group discussions (FGD) and interviews. Further, the study also collected the KII (Key Informant Interviews) of ITDA officials. The fieldwork was conducted between March 2023 and July 2023. The analysis was conducted using simple percentage calculations to highlight disparities between communities. For the qualitative data gathered through interviews, thematic analysis was used to interpret and organize the responses into meaningful categories.

**6. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The conceptual framework of this study is rooted in the theory of Social Exclusion and Affirmative Action. Social exclusion highlights how systemic barriers restrict marginalized groups from accessing opportunities, thereby reinforcing socio-economic disparities. Tribal communities in Telangana face exclusion due to factors such as geographic isolation, lack of awareness, and socio-political dynamics. Affirmative action, such as reservations in education and employment, is intended to counteract these barriers. However, the uneven distribution of benefits among tribal groups, as observed in this study, is influenced by factors like literacy levels, geographic accessibility, and socio-political participation. This framework emphasizes the need to examine how social, cultural, and economic factors interact to shape access to resources among tribal groups. It provides a lens to understand disparities and identify pathways for equitable development. Further, this study adopts the concept of **cumulative effect** to understand the layered effect of disparities among tribal communities. The cumulative effect refers to how disadvantages or advantages in multiple aspects. For instance, lack of access to education can limit employment opportunities, resulting in lower income, and social mobility. The cumulative effect provides a lens to examine disparities’ immediate consequences and long-term outcomes, as the Cumulative Disadvantage Theory suggests.

**7. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

**Reservation in Education: Disparities and Barriers**

**Disparities in Educational Status:** The educational attainment levels across these five tribal communities reveal distinct patterns (Table 1). The Koya tribe exhibits the highest levels of education, with notable representation at the secondary (15.3%), higher secondary (17.1%), and graduation (13.6%) levels, and even 1% in postgraduate studies, followed by the Lambadi community. On the other end, the Gond and Chenchu tribes have the highest illiteracy rates at 36.6% and 36.3%, respectively, indicating educational challenges within these communities. The Chenchu tribe has a large proportion (29.6%) of people who have only completed primary education. Additionally, the Kolam tribe shows moderate representation across educational categories but is lower in higher education. The Kolam, Gond, and Chenchu communities have notably fewer graduates and no representation at the postgraduate level, emphasizing a substantial gap in higher education within these groups.

**Table 1: Education Status among Tribal Communities (%)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Tribe | Illiterate | Primary | Upper  Primary | Secondary | Higher  Secondary | Graduation | PG | Total |
| Gond | 36.6 | 12.4 | 14.4 | 18.6 | 12.9 | 5.1 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Koya | 32.8 | 12.4 | 7.8 | 15.3 | 17.1 | 13.6 | 1.0 | 100.0 |
| Chenchu | 36.3 | 29.6 | 10.0 | 8.3 | 12.9 | 2.9 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Kolam | 34.4 | 23.4 | 12.6 | 15.6 | 11.0 | 3.0 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Lambadi | 34.7 | 16.0 | 8.8 | 18.4 | 11.2 | 9.9 | 1.0 | 100.0 |

*Source*: Field Survey (2023)

**Causes of Disparities:** According to the Tribal Welfare Department, there are 2,311 educational institutions for tribal students, including primary schools, hostels, Ashram schools, post-matric college hostels, and TTWREIS (Gurukulams) (Tribal Welfare Annual Report, 2019). On the other hand, intermediate and degree residential colleges were established for the tribal population to prioritize tribal educational development. At the same time, the question arises: *Can all the community students benefit from these educational institutions?* The finding (Table 2) shows that among the students (school and college-going), 100% from the Gond, Kolam and Chenchu communities are enrolled in government schools/colleges. This situation can be attributed to various factors. A respondent named Jangu Bai from the Gond community explained, *“I wanted to send my children to a private school due to insufficient income from agriculture, so I chose free education for them instead.”* A similar response has been observed from other respondents, which emphasises the financial barrier. On the other hand, the Chenchu and Kolam communities residing in the forest face additional infrastructural challenges apart from their economic conditions. The Chenchus live in the Nallamala hills, where the nearest schools are about 35 km away. The village head stated, “*We do not have roads or transportation facilities to reach the towns. As a result, we are forced to send our children to hostels.”* Similarly, the Kolam tribe’s village is around 15 km from the nearest town, and the lack of road infrastructure makes it difficult for them to access schools or colleges.

In contrast, from the Lambadi and Koya, a noteworthy percentage of students are enrolled in private schools and colleges, with 74% and 62%, respectively. This trend suggests that the Lambadi and Koya tribes can afford private education for their children. Factors like the quality of education in government schools/colleges contribute to their choice of private education. For instance, Sudhakar Naik, from the Lambadi community, mentioned, *“I enrolled my children in a private school because there was no improvement in their studies at government schools.”* Similarly, a respondent from the Koya community stated, *“Despite my low income, I have enrolled my children in private school for their future, as government schools neglect the students.”*

**Reservation in Higher Education:** The data on higher educational admissions and reservation policies indicates that several students from studied communities secured seats in colleges and universities through ST reservations. Table 2 shows that the Lambadi community has the highest enrolment, with 16% of students from the studied villages attending universities due to reservations. The Koya community follows with 12%, while the Chenchus account for 5.5%. Conversely, the Gond and Kolam communities have enrolment rates of less than 1%. These findings specify that the prevalence of higher education is considerably low among the Gond, Kolam, and Chenchu communities, which limits their ability to benefit from university reservations. It’s important to note that various factors contribute to the low educational levels in these communities, including high dropout rates and sociocultural influences.

**Table 2: Enrolment, Access to Reservation and Scholarship (%)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Tribe | Enrolment in School/college | | Reservation in an educational institution | Benefit Scholarship/fellowship |
| **Govt** | **Private** |
| Gond | 100 | 0 | 0.9 | 29.0 |
| Koya | 38 | 62 | 12.0 | 68.0 |
| Chenchu | 100 | 0 | 5.5 | 36.0 |
| Kolam | 100 | 0 | 0.0 | 37.0 |
| Lambadi | 26 | 74 | 16.0 | 75.0 |

*Source*: Field Survey (2023)

**Dropouts:**According to Table 3, dropout rates are notably higher among the Chenchu, Gond, and Kolam communities and comparably lower among the Lambadi and Koya communities. Most dropouts occur during secondary education, particularly after the 10th grade. Financial challenges faced by tribal households are a primary reason for these dropouts. Deputy Director of Tribal Welfare-ITDA, noted that “*students from the Gond and Kolam communities often drop out because of their economic conditions and work as wage labourers. He emphasized a lack of motivation and parental support as critical barriers to educational success”.* Additionally, Cultural aspects play a role, particularly for the Gond and Kolam communities, who fear that sending their children to urban areas for higher education may lead to cultural contamination. For instance, a student from the Gond community in 11th grade stated, *“My parents will not send me to pursue graduation because they think I might marry someone from another caste and become influenced by mainstream culture”,* which demonstrates how ingrained cultural practices can hinder educational attainment for these tribal communities. Similarly, among the Chenchu community, dropout rates are largely attributed to financial circumstances. Lingaiah, a member of the Chenchu community, stated, *“Once our children grow up, they work with us and drop out of school to support the family.”*

**Disparities in Utilising Scholarships:** These disparities in educational attainment resulted in the availing of scholarships; the study’s findings (Table 2) indicate that 75 of eligible respondents from the Lambadi community have benefited, followed by 68 of Koya tribe parents stating that their children received scholarships. However, the benefits of scholarships are lower among other communities, ranging from 29 to 37.

**Table 3: Dropout rates among Tribal Communities**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Tribe | Total No. of Students | No. of Dropout | of Dropout | Willing to Send for Higher Education |
| Gond | 140 | 62 | 44.2 | 61.0 |
| Koya | 125 | 39 | 31.2 | 92.0 |
| Chenchu | 110 | 67 | 60.9 | 69.2 |
| Kolam | 146 | 64 | 43.8 | 52.4 |
| Lambadi | 132 | 46 | 34.8 | 94.0 |

*Source*: Field Survey (2023)

***Disparities in Employment:*** Educational status influences employment opportunities. Individuals with lower levels of education face reduced employment opportunities. As noted earlier, the Koya and Lambadi communities have higher educational attainment than other communities, contributing to their employment rates. According to the data, the Lambadi community has the highest percentage of individuals benefiting from reservations in employment, standing at 12.4. The Koya community follows this at 8, and the Chenchu community at 5. In contrast, communities such as the Gond and Kolam report less than 1 benefit or none.

These results highlight the disparities in educational achievements; on the other hand, additional factors such as awareness, motivation, and understanding of the significance of education and employment also play crucial roles. An ITDA official (Utnur), who requested anonymity, noted that “*people from the Gond and Kolam communities tend to remain focused on agriculture. Although they may send their children to school, they do not encourage them to seek urban employment or prepare for it. There is a prevailing expectation that job opportunities should come to them rather than putting in the effort to pursue them. The official also mentioned that many parents, especially from the Kolam and Chenchu communities, fail to recognize the importance of education. In contrast, communities such as the Lambadi, which identify as a plain tribe, have assimilated more with mainstream society and are generally well-informed about various schemes and employment opportunities”.*

The Deputy Director of Tribal Welfare underlined the challenges faced in skill development training organized by the ITDA. Candidates from the Gond and Kolam communities leave training centres before completing their courses or returning from urban jobs due to difficulties adapting. To foster motivation, the Deputy Director suggested that if one or two individuals from a village secure good jobs, they could inspire others. This success could raise awareness about available schemes and opportunities.

Employment opportunities for the Chenchu community have improved due to the agency area, as noted by MADA official Mannanur. Since this is an agency area, the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) has been established to support the Chenchus. Educated Chenchus, particularly those living among non-tribal people, have benefitted the most because they are more aware of available opportunities. However, the official mentioned that those living in the forest are often reluctant to seek work outside their tribal area.

**Table 4: Reservation in Employment and access to skill development**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Tribe | Reservation in Employment | Skill development |
| Gond | 0.00 | 8.00 |
| Koya | 8.10 | 10.00 |
| Chenchu | 5.00 | 3.00 |
| Kolam | 0.90 | 3.00 |
| Lambadi | 12.40 | 9.00 |

*Source*: Field Survey (2023)

**Perception of Tribal Communities on Disparities and Conflicts**

The study observed the perceptions of various tribal communities regarding the ongoing conflict between the Lambadi and Adivasi tribes. Bhima, a village leader from the Gond community, noted that the “*Lambadi community receives more reservations in education, employment, and politics. He expressed concern that the government has overlooked the Adivasi communities, stating, the Lambadi people take advantage of every opportunity that arises.”*

Another respondent, Bhaskar from the Koya community and a member of the ‘**Thudum Debba’** (Adivasi Hakkula Porata Samiti) emphasized, *“We are Indigenous people and entitled to greater reservations. Our children are struggling to secure government jobs because the Lambadi community is monopolizing these opportunities. He added that the Lambadis have more resources, such as land and income.”* Another respondent who works as a headmaster at a government school in Pasra village mentioned, “*It’s a well-known fact that the Lambadi community receives more benefits than any other community in the state. This disparity arises from their better education, political networks, and awareness of governmental schemes and policies. Our Adivasi communities are marginalized, living in geographically isolated areas, which limits our access to quality education and contributes to our backwardness.”*

On the other hand, Ramesh Naik from the Lambadi community argued that “*the literacy rates of Lambadis is lower than other tribal communities. He stated that since the Lambadis are more populous, we are entitled to more reservations. We are recognized as Scheduled Tribes (STs) by the Indian Constitution. He also mentioned that there are political motives behind the protests, suggesting that some individuals are trying to provoke disharmony among tribal communities”.* Suman Naik, also from the Lambadi community, added, *“With our population around twenty lakh, it’s natural that we receive more benefits. However, that doesn’t mean the entire community benefits; only certain Lambadis gain from these advantages based on their merits. A significant portion of Lambadis works as daily wage labourers and migrates to cities like Hyderabad for work.”*

Ultimately, it is evident that Adivasi respondents view themselves as marginalized, perceiving the Lambadi community as more resource-rich and politically empowered, which intensifies their sense of deprivation. Conversely, Lambadi respondents emphasize their own challenges with poverty and low literacy rates, noting that benefits are not equitably distributed within their community. This exhibits the reality that disparities persist even among groups that may appear to have more advantages.

**8 RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Indian government must allocate enough resources to support the awareness campaigns in Telangana communities to support development and sustain education. This raises the awareness about the importance of equitable access can mobilize support for change.

The Telangana community programs must support the creation of the initiatives that provide resources and support for underserved populations. This allows the local organizations to recognised the tribal communities in Telangana to contribute to the economic development of the people.

The Indian government must set up the policy interventions in promoting equality in education and employment at different institutions. The Individual governments must implement policies that promote equitable access to education and job training programs.

Technology integration must be encouraged by the public officials when implementing the policies to manage the equal access to education through the online learning to help bridge gaps for those in remote areas.

**9 CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

This study highlights the persistent challenges faced by tribal communities in Telangana, particularly in education, employment, and socioeconomic development. While reservation policies and welfare schemes have provided some relief, financial constraints, inadequate infrastructure, and unequal access to these resources continue to marginalize these communities. Among them, the Lambadi community has made progress in accessing resources and overcoming marginalization, followed by the Koya tribe. However, other communities, such as the Gond, Kolam, and Chenchu, still face significant barriers to accessing education, reservations, and other government benefits. These disparities not only perpetuate inequality but also contribute to tensions and conflicts between communities. Addressing their marginalization requires targeted interventions that ensure equitable access to resources and opportunities for all.

Improving infrastructure such as roads, transportation, and schools is essential to enhance tribal communities' access to education. Regular awareness programs highlighting the importance of education and government initiatives can encourage these communities to avail themselves of available benefits. Additionally, skill development programs and the creation of local employment opportunities can boost their economic status and reduce dropout rates. Involving local tribal leaders in the policymaking process is crucial to ensure that policies and schemes are targeted, effective, and tailored to the specific needs of these communities.

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