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

**ABSTRACT**

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| The 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 promote more inclusive growth among tribal communities. |

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

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Tribal development is approached as a homogenous concern in India, yet growing intra-tribal disparities call for more targeted attention. Among the most pressing of these is the emerging conflict over reservations and resource access between tribal groups themselves, particularly between the Lambadi and Adivasi communities in Telangana. This study foregrounds these tensions, examining how reservation policies in education and employment, while beneficial in principle, have led to unequal gains among different tribal groups. The Scheduled Tribes (STs), comprising more than 8% of the country’s population, face several socio-economic challenges, including 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 in access to education and employment among tribal communities in Telangana, 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.

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**2. METHODOLOGY**

Since tribe-wise secondary data is unavailable, this study relies on primary data collected from key tribal communities specifically the Lambadi, Koya, Gond, Kolam, and Chenchu. These groups were purposefully selected due to their demographic significance and the ongoing social tensions, particularly between the Lambadis and other Adivasi communities. Four districts were selected for the study: Adilabad (home to the Gond and Kolam communities), Mulugu (Koya), Mahabubabad (Lambadi), and Nagarkurnool (Chenchu), based on the moderate concentration of the respective tribal groups in these regions. For each community, two villages or hamlets were randomly chosen, and from each village, 40 households were selected for data collection. In total, the fieldwork covered 10 villages, resulting in a sample size of 400 households. Data was collected using a structured household survey schedule, supported by Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and interviews to gain deeper qualitative insights. Additionally, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with officials from the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) to understand institutional perspectives. The fieldwork was carried out between March 2023 and July 2023. For analysis, simple percentage calculations were used to identify disparities across communities. The qualitative data collected through interviews and FGDs were analyzed using thematic analysis.

**Reflexivity and Positionality:** As researchers with academic training in social sciences and direct engagement with tribal communities in Telangana, we recognize that our interpretations are shaped by our own social locations, academic affiliations, and prior experiences. While every effort was made to present the voices of tribal respondents with fidelity and respect, we acknowledge that our presence in the field as outsiders to some of the communities studied may have influenced the nature of responses shared. We were conscious of power dynamics, especially when working with marginalized groups such as the Kolam and Chenchu, and approached data collection with cultural sensitivity and humility. Reflexivity was central to our research process, guiding how we interpreted narratives, handled contradictions, and represented diverse community perspectives in this study.

**3. 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.

Furthermore, 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 are compounded 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.

**4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**4.1 Access to Reservation**

**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)

Table 2 presents the data on school and college enrolment, access to educational reservations, and receipt of scholarships or fellowships among five tribal communities: Gond, Koya, Chenchu, Kolam, and Lambadi. The Gond, Kolam, and Chenchu communities report 100% enrolment in government institutions, indicating a high dependence on public education. In contrast, the Koya and Lambadi communities show a significant preference for private institutions, with 62% of Koya and 74% of Lambadi students enrolled in private schools or colleges. This may reflect either better access to private education in their regions or a perceived gap in the quality of public education. However, disparities are evident in access to educational reservations. Only 0.9% of Gond and 0% of Kolam respondents reported availing of reservations in educational institutions, suggesting potential gaps in awareness or implementation. The Lambadi (16%) and Koya (12%) communities appear to benefit more from reservations, while Chenchus also lag behind at 5.5%. When it comes to scholarships and fellowships, the Lambadi (75%) and Koya (68%) communities have the highest access, followed by Kolam (37%), Chenchu (36%), and Gond (29%).

**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)

***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 (Table 3).

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 3: 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)

**4.2 Barriers**

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. Gugulothu and Korra (2024) examined various cultural barriers existing among these communities.

**Dropouts:**Another significant barrier is dropout rates. According to Table 4, 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.”*

**Table 4: % of 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)

**5. Disparities and Social Outcomes among the Tribal Communities**

Social stratification refers to the hierarchical arrangement of individuals or groups in a society, where differences in access to resources, economic opportunities, and social privileges create distinct layers or strata. In the study context, social stratification has emerged as an outcome of educational, employment disparities, etc. From the literature, it is evident that most tribal communities were relatively egalitarian; however, unequal access to resources created a social hierarchy in the tribal society, which divides the communities into those who achieve higher positions due to more access to resources such as Lambadi and Koyas and those who remain deprived due to limited access. This would further affect social status and mobility and lead to conflict.

***Social Status and Its Impact on Tribal Communities***: Social stratification is critical in shaping social status, influencing how individuals and communities are positioned within the broader hierarchy of honour, prestige, and recognition. Social status is not merely an economic measure but a reflection of the privileges, opportunities, and recognition afforded to different groups within society. Access to education, employment, and financial stability plays a major role in shaping social status, and these also determine the extent to which individuals or communities can participate in lifestyles associated with higher prestige. Max Weber defines status as “a quality of honour or a lack of it” (Weber, 1974: 405; Ritzer & Ryan, 2011). He argues that status groups enjoy social honour and are characterized by distinctive consumption patterns and lifestyles, reinforcing their position in the hierarchy. In the context of tribal communities in Telangana, disparities in access to education, economic resources, and government benefits have led to clear distinctions in social status between different tribal groups.

***Raised Social Status of the Lambadi and Koya Communities****:* Field interactions and observations indicate that communities such as the Lambadi and Koya have attained a relatively higher social status due to their greater access to education, government employment, and other resources. Moreover, the researcher observed that these communities are gradually assimilating into mainstream socio-cultural structures, which is also helping them to get access to different resources through social networking and social recognition. A respondent, Bhaskar, 38 (Gonduguda) from the Gond tribe, pronounced, “The Lambadis are more educated and have better jobs. Their children attend private schools, whereas we struggle to afford even basic school expenses.” Another Manohar, 45 (Rajampeta), a Kolam respondent, added, “When they enter government jobs, their entire family’s status changes. We don’t have those opportunities, so we remain where we are.” The economic and educational advantages have allowed the Lambadis and Koyas to adopt lifestyles commonly associated with higher social status, including residing in pucca houses, accessing private education, and consuming food. These advantages contribute to their occupying higher positions within the local hierarchy.

***Challenges and Low Social Status of the Chenchu, Kolam, and Gond Tribes****:* Conversely, systemic barriers have become obstacles to upward mobility among Indigenous Adivasi groups such as Chenchu, Kolam, and Gond as they have limited access to quality education, irrigation facilities, and landlessness have affected their economic conditions and professional roles, which in turn affects their social status. Prabha, 26, a Chenchu respondent from a Penta, stated, “We don’t have land, jobs, or proper education for our children. How can we ever move up when everything is against us?” Another Gond community member, Krishnaveni, 22, a graduate from Gonduguda, explained, “People look down on us because we don’t have good houses or government jobs. We work as daily labourers, and that defines how society sees us. I feel hesitant to invite my other caste friends to our home due to our poor housing conditions.” These struggles reinforce a cycle of marginalization, where the inability to access opportunities translates into a lack of social honour and prestige. The deprivation of these communities limits their material well-being and affects how they are perceived and treated in society.

***Higher Occupational Mobility among the Koya and Lambadi Communities****:* According to the Encyclopaedia of Sociology, mobility is defined as the “movement from intermediate categories (skilled manual workers, routine non-manual workers, farmers, etc.) to the service class occupations associated with prestige as upward mobility, whereas movement to the class of unskilled workers is downward mobility” (Ritzer & Ryan, 2011: 615). Applying this framework to the study, it becomes evident that the level of intergenerational occupational mobility varies significantly among different tribal groups in Telangana. The study reveals that intergenerational occupational mobility is more pronounced among the Koya and Lambadi communities. Employment rates for individuals working in sectors other than agriculture stand at **17.9% for the Koya and 16.5% for the Lambadi**. A significant portion of these individuals come from families where the parents were primarily engaged in agriculture or casual wage labour, indicating a trend of upward mobility. Respondents from the Lambadi community highlighted how access to education and government job reservations helped them transition into better employment opportunities. Banoth Surender, 48 (BC Thanda), noted, “My father is a farmer, yet with his support and scholarships, I was able to get an education and now work as a teacher.” Similarly, Koya Devender, 45 (Kalvapally) stated, “Many in our community are now securing jobs in different sectors, which was rare in our parents’ generation.” These statements show how improved access to education and opportunities has allowed these communities to shift away from traditional agricultural labour and into more stable occupations.

***Limited Occupational Mobility among the Gond, Kolam, and Chenchu Tribes***: In contrast to the Lambadi and Koya tribes, these **communities exhibit lower intergenerational occupational mobility**, with employment rates in non-agricultural sectors at **6.8%, 10%, and 2.3%, respectively**. These numbers suggest occupational stagnation, where individuals remain confined to low-income, unskilled jobs across generations, thereby perpetuating economic hardships and limiting upward mobility. The field observation by the researcher reveals that many of the educated children work as agricultural labourers, particularly among the Gond and Kolam tribes, as they do not want to migrate to urban areas for work. Among the forest-dwelling Chenchus, few respondents stated they work as tourist guides, whereas the majority still depend on traditional occupations, as discussed in Chapter 3. This occupational stagnation extends cycles of deprivation, where the lack of education and employment opportunities prevents these communities from improving their socio-economic status. Many are forced to remain in agricultural labour or daily wage work, which provides minimal financial security and keeps them vulnerable to economic instability.

**6. Disparities and Emerging Conflict between Communities**

The conflict between communities in the study area directly results from the deeply entrenched disparities in access to resources, state benefits, and socio-economic opportunities. As conflict theory explains, structural inequalities between groups create tensions that manifest in competition over scarce resources. **Thorbecke and Charumilind (2002)** state that high levels of income inequality are associated with increased social conflict and political instability. This can manifest in various forms, such as riots, political demonstrations, and even revolutions. The unequal access to education, employment, land, and government schemes among different tribal communities has intensified clashes, particularly between the Adivasi and Lambadi communities.

***Historical and Structural Roots of the Conflict:*** Fieldwork findings reveal that Adivasi communities, including the Koya, Gond, Kolam, and Chenchu, perceive themselves as indigenous to the region, historically reliant on subsistence agriculture and forest-based livelihoods. Respondents from these communities recurrently expressed that systemic barriers such as geographical isolation, lack of access to quality education, and weaker political representation have placed them at a disadvantage compared to other ST groups.

A recurring statement among the respondents of these tribes was the belief that the Lambadi community has unfairly benefited from state resources after being recognized as a Scheduled Tribe (ST). During the FGDs and personal Interviews, several respondents argued that Lambadis, who migrated from Maharashtra after the 1950s, should not have been granted ST status in Andhra Pradesh (before Telangana’s formation). A participant, Tulasirao, 46 (China Gangapur), from the Gond community, stated, “Lambadis who came after ST recognition in Andhra Pradesh have taken all the benefits meant for us. They were not originally from this land, yet they secured jobs and education that should have been ours.” Another respondent, Jalapthrao, 52 (Kolamguda) from the Kolam tribe, emphasized, “The government should stop giving ST certificates to the Lambadis who migrated later. Most of them were migrated from other states, yet they now dominate all government jobs.” These statements reflect a broader sentiment of exclusion and resentment, underlining a fundamental divide within the ST category itself.

***Education and Employment as Key Arenas of Conflict:*** One of the primary sources of conflict stems from disparities in education and employment opportunities. The Hindu (13-Jan-2018) reported that the Tudum Debba, an Adivasi rights organization, has raised concerns over the disproportionate representation of Lambadis in government jobs. For instance, in Khammam district, 400 out of 405 teacher posts were occupied by Lambadis in 2012. Similarly, in the undivided Adilabad district, despite comprising only 22% of the population, the Lambadi community holds nearly 45% of the 2,800 teaching positions (The Hindu,13-Jan-2018). This unequal representation fuels resentment among the Adivasi communities, who feel that their historical presence in the region does not translate into equal opportunities.

Meanwhile, the Lambadi community, benefiting from early exposure to formal education and stronger political networking, has accessed state benefits more effectively, further widening the disparity. The resultant competition over limited resources has intensified resentment and led to visible conflicts, with Adivasi organizations demanding corrective measures to address these inequalities.

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 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.

**6.1 Conflict Dynamics and Long-Term Implications**

The conflict between Telangana’s Lambadi and Adivasi communities, rooted in perceived disparities over reservation benefits, has broader implications beyond immediate grievances. These tensions highlight emerging fault lines within tribal society that threaten both social cohesion and the long-term effectiveness of affirmative action policies.

***Immediate Outcomes of Intra-Tribal Conflict:*** Field data, interviews, and secondary sources indicate that resentment among Adivasi communities, such as the Gond, Kolam, Chenchu, and Koya, toward the Lambadi community stems from unequal access to government jobs, educational benefits, and political representation. This has manifested in protests, political mobilization, and formal complaints to state authorities. Organizations like Tudum Debba have publicly challenged the inclusion of the Lambadis in the Scheduled Tribes (ST) category, citing their relatively better access to opportunities. As observed in Khammam and Adilabad districts, Adivasi communities express anger over what they perceive as a monopoly of teaching and administrative positions by the Lambadis (The Hindu, 2018).

***Long-Term Political and Governance Implications:*** The persistence of such conflicts may lead to increasing demands for the sub-categorization of Scheduled Tribes, an idea gaining traction in policy circles. This could complicate the reservation framework, adding strain on governance mechanisms such as the ITDAs and the Department of Tribal Welfare. These institutions may face challenges balancing representation, equitable benefits, and community trust. Moreover, intra-tribal conflicts may weaken the broader political unity of tribal communities, reducing their collective bargaining power and leading to fragmentation in electoral politics.

***Social and Cultural Fragmentation:*** Beyond politics and policy, the conflict has consequences for social and cultural relations between tribal communities. Respondents frequently referenced a growing social divide, with Adivasi groups increasingly framing the Lambadis as outsiders or non-indigenous beneficiaries of tribal status. This reinforces binary identity narratives—"indigenous" versus "migrant" that threaten the traditional cultural cohesion among tribal groups. Such narratives also risk exacerbating exclusionary practices, discrimination, and intergroup hostility, especially among youth exposed to politicized interpretations of identity.

***Erosion of Solidarity and Representation*:** As intra-community tensions deepen, the solidarity that once unified ST communities in their struggle for rights and development risks eroding. This fragmentation may further marginalize the most vulnerable among them. Additionally, political parties and other actors may instrumentalize these divisions for electoral gain, thereby institutionalizing the rift. The Lambadi-Adivasi divide, if left unaddressed, could set a precedent for similar identity-based conflicts in other regions with diverse tribal populations.

**6.2 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 are lower than those of 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. Many Lambadis work as daily wage labourers and migrate 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 highlights the complex nature of intra-community disparities, even among relatively better-off groups.

**7. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

This study highlights the persistent challenges tribal communities face 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 progressed 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 perpetuate inequality and 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.

**Competing Interests**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

**Authors’ Contributions**

**First Author:** Conducted the field survey, collected data, and analysed.

**Second Author:** Contributed to the conceptualization of the study, provided guidance throughout, and was responsible for proofreading and final approval of the manuscript.

**Ethical Approval**

Ethical approval was obtained where applicable. Informed consent was taken from all respondents before participation in the survey and interviews. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity when reporting data.

**Ethical Considerations:**

To protect participants' privacy, all names used in this study are pseudonyms. Respondents were assured that their identities would remain confidential, and no personally identifiable information was disclosed.

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

Option 1:

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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Details of the AI usage are given below:

1.

2.

3.

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