

The inequality within

My 1-year-old is battling Acute Leukemia. Please help me save my Aadriti

The boycott of teachers from the Lambada community, a Scheduled Tribe, by a section of Adivasis in northern Telangana districts reveals an emerging faultline among social sections that avail of reservation. Major tribes in Telangana accuse the Lambadas, who are relatively better off as compared to other Adivasi groups, of cornering all the benefits of the reservation policy and want the government to exclude them from the ST category. The protests have hit tribal schools hard since a majority of teachers here are from the Lambada community. The absence of teachers has led to poor results and raised the prospect of students dropping out. By all accounts, the Lambadas moved ahead of other tribes because they had access to education and made the most of it to find jobs in government, including as teachers. But the boycott of teachers deprives tribal children of education, the most important tool for social and economic mobility, making a bad situation worse.

Similar narratives of a single caste or tribe being accused of cornering the quota benefits have been reported from many regions across the country. For instance, the Meenas of Rajasthan have faced similar charges from other tribes. Such divisions have been reported among OBC groups as well as Dalits across the country. In the case of OBCs, political parties and the state have been more responsive to demands for positive discrimination within the reservation system. Some states have legislated subquotas within the OBC category to prevent groups that are relatively more advanced socially and educationally from monopolising reservation benefits, thereby ensuring a greater degree of equality and fairness in the policy outcome. The judiciary has also intervened through the introduction of the concept of creamy layer. However, claims of relative inequality and discrimination within the Scheduled Caste and Tribe categories have been largely ignored by the government. Bihar introduced the Mahadalit category in 2007 to protect weaker sections among the Dalits, but political exigencies subsequently led to its expansion to include every Dalit caste.

Though many Dalit communities have raised the demand for subquotas — the Madigas in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, for instance — governments have avoided the issue. The boycott in northern Telangana lays bare the political and policy challenge for the state: Of meeting the imperative of assuring equality of opportunity to all in ways that address the special and specific needs and concerns of the most marginalised.

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