

Research Paper

## Exploring the Experiences of Inequality by the Ethnic Groups from the Reserved Category in Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the educational inequality with relation to reservation policy for ethnic groups within the Scheduled Tribe category in Siliguri Sub-Division. Existing scholarly writings have focused on reservation policy as an “inclusive policy” for historically marginalized groups; but, in reality, reservation in the field of education has also created new social identities, like OBC, SC, ST and so on, based on one’s caste/tribe/class certificates. The new identities come with certain privileges and those who benefit use them as a means to social and economic development and social mobility. However, belonging to a privileged identity doesn’t guarantee the equal distribution of resources to all. This can be established by examining the disproportionate participation of the “reserved categories” in education and employment. Despite the policy and practice of protective discrimination for decades, a large section of the Indian population remains marginalized and even the “reserved categories” are unequally placed to take advantage of reservation. The participation rate in higher education and employment for reserved categories has shown some improvements over the decades but in some recent studies it has been found that some sections of these reserved categories manipulate their social network and resources to lobby for benefits, keeping the ones without “social capital” behind, and this has resulted in new inequalities within the reserved categories. This article looks at how the Adivasis are subjected to educational inequality as compared to other ethnic groups in the region of North Bengal. Based on the primary data, the present paper aims to explore the grounds of academic challenges and the areas of discrimination faced by the ethnic groups within the reserved category. The question of who participates and why will also be dealt with.

**Keywords:** *Reservation, Caste, Inequality, Identity, Reserved Categories, Social Capital*

The Scheduled Tribes are identified as the most deprived and marginalized community, who need not only constitutional protection but also educational empowerment. Though, over some time, the literacy rate of the tribal communities has improved at the level of higher education, a section of tribes are still struggling to access higher education. Despite the implementation of the reservation policy for tribal communities, the benefits have not reached a sizable tribal population. Hence, this results in unequal representation problems among various ethnic groups due to the embedded beliefs and ideologies perpetuating discrimination and limiting the positive impact of the policy

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(Nayyar, 2011). Identified as being a marginalized community for decades, the educational representation of some of the ethnic groups within the scheduled tribes is still low and minimal. They face not only inequality but also exclusion in higher education due to prevailing stereotypes and stigma. Higher education as one of the essential resources for the overall empowerment of an individual and the community can help combat social and economic inequalities (Sen, 1999).

The ongoing socio-economic inequalities have affected the representation of certain ethnic groups within the ST category. The scheduled tribes as an administrative category is highly stratified in which certain tribes are extremely advanced and have overcome from the marginalized positions. However, they still continue to enjoy the benefits of reservation that have influenced the participation rate of other ethnic groups within the ST category. Tilly (1998) argues that inequality is not because of fixed social structure but because of ongoing socio-political processes. The dominant groups strategize to secure their interest and advantages through various mechanisms and institutions. Giddens (2006), too, believed that social inequality is a by-product of social stratification, an ongoing process primarily shaped by human agency and changing norms of society. As a result, a disproportionate representation has conditioned the scheduled tribes students' lives with crisis and lack of opportunities. In a research conducted by Blau and Duncan (1967), they argued that educational achievement is a necessity for overcoming poverty. However, it is also the reason for reproducing social inequality. After independence, many social groups got educational opportunities and could secure social capital, but certain ethnic groups still need an inclusive development approach beyond just reservation policy in higher education. For instance, based on the government report, Birhor, Lodha, and Toto of West Bengal are on the list of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)<sup>1</sup>.

Due to poor schooling background and extreme poverty, many tribal groups have a lower level of living aspirations and educational desire. In the North Bengal region, many tribes come from tea gardens; hence, their livelihood depends on the tea industry. The children become subsequent generation laborers in the tea garden to continue housing facilities, which they get as workers in the tea estate. Many parents sacrifice the educational dreams of their children to improve the present living conditions. Hence, the school dropout rate too is higher among them. However, there are instances where the parents have struggled both financially and psychologically to help their children in education. Through their efforts, many children have managed to gain admission to colleges and universities. However, their academic journey is not smooth as compared to other students. This paper takes a comparative approach to analyze the problems faced by the students of different ethnic groups like Oraon, Santhali and Munda in higher education and how their representation in the campus further discourages them.

### ***Demographic and Educational Profile***

Adivasis or tribes are the indigenous community in India who have been dealing with the issue of inadequate representation in education since decades. Despite being culturally and historically significant, the community suffers from the problem of marginalization and exclusion. The vulnerability of the tribes can be traced through their educational participation. From time to time, there are numerous studies conducted on the tribal communities to address the issues of marginalization and exclusions and the structural problem of backwardness remain the same or with little improvement. In the early writings on tribals, anthropologists have explored the problems of marginalization and exclusion of

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the tribes. Scholars like Xaxa (2001), Bhowmick (1985) have conducted their studies on exploring the socio-economic and educational profile of the tribal communities. The wide range of challenges and problems related to quality of education is highlighted in their studies. Duary (2010) in his study, has assessed the state of educational infrastructure in the tribal region of West Bengal. He has closely examined the issues related to enrolment rate of tribal students from primary level to higher educational level. Roy (2005), has discussed various challenges faced by the tribal students and particularly females in accessing education. Similarly, in a recent qualitative study conducted by the Asiatic Society with Pratichi institute, different issues of tribal life of West Bengal are explored and discussed. A comparative approach has been taken to address the socio-economic and educational status of the tribal communities (Rana et.al 2020). Despite every study on the tribals, the common reasons addressed by the researchers are the problem of unequal access to resources, lack of community participation, and the slow initiatives by the administration.

According to the 2011 census<sup>2</sup>, with 705 ethnic groups throughout the country, the total tribal population of India is more than 104 million, which is 8.6 percent. West Bengal's total tribal population is 52,96,953, or 5.8 percent. As per the SC/ST commission of West Bengal<sup>3</sup>, 40 ethnic groups are identified as ST. In the Darjeeling district of the state, the total tribal population is 3,97,389. Out of 40 ethnic groups in the district, Tamangs are the dominating ethnic group, with a population of 1,13,318. In addition, the second largest group is Oraon, with a total population of 72,487 in the region. The tribes, including Tamang, Limbu, Lepcha, Bhutia, Sherpa, Toto, Dukpa, Kagatey, Tibetan, and Yolmo, comprise a total population of 2,36,918 which is almost 60 percent of the district's tribal population. Oraon, Santhal, and Munda comprise a total population of 1,09,523, which is 27.56 percent in the region. Furthermore, the ethnic groups with small populations, like Mahali, Nagesia, Ho, Asur, and so on, comprise a total population of 50,948. Based on the demographic profile, in the present article, students pursuing higher education from Oraon, Santhal and Munda ethnic groups are selected to understand their social and educational conditions in higher education.

India's total literacy rate in 2011 is 74.04 percent. In West Bengal, it is 76.25 percent, and in Darjeeling district, it is 79.56 percent. Similarly, the literacy rate of ST in India is 48.74 percent; in the state, it is 57.9 percent, and in the Darjeeling district, it is 74.26 percent according to the 2011 census report. Interestingly, at the state level, the literacy rate of Bhutia (81.05%) and Tamang (80.40%) is higher. In higher education, Tamangs (5.89%) and Bhutia (10.59%) have higher representation in the state. With 2.76% of the Tamang population in the state, they comprise 10.19% of graduates. Similarly, Bhutia has only 1.26% of total population in the state but comprise 8.43% of graduates (Majhi and Prasad 2023). However, a variation in literacy rate at different blocks of the Darjeeling district can be seen, as discussed in the table below.

**Table 1: Block wise Tribal Literacy Rate of Darjeeling District, 2011**

Sub-division	Block Name	Total	Male	Female
Sadar Sub-division	Darjeeling	79.59	86.08	72.94
	Pulbazar			
	Rangli Rangliot	80.50	87.66	73.50
	Jorebunglow Sukhiapokhri	82.33	89.58	75.36

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Sub-division	Block Name	Total	Male	Female
Mirik Subdivision	Mirik	79.16	87.03	71.20
Kurseong Sub-Division	Kurseong	76.21	84.56	67.85
Siliguri Sub-Division	Matigara	63.06	72.78	53.80
	Naxalbari	60.02	69.82	50.46
	Phansidewa	58.03	67.26	49.20
	Khoribari	52.54	62.68	42.50

*Source: Census of India, 2011*

Table 1 shows an average literacy performance of Siliguri as compared to the literacy performance of the Sadar, Mirik, and Kurseong sub-divisions. In this article, the ethnic groups classified as Hill tribes are primarily concentrated in the Darjeeling district's Sadar, Kurseong, and Mirik subdivisions which is a hilly region. On the other hand, Adivasis live in the Siliguri subdivision along with some Hill tribes. Also interesting to note that Siliguri Sub-Division is a plain region with better access to transportation and other infrastructural facilities, yet the literacy performance is average and for females it is below average. Within the Siliguri subdivision, the Phansidewa block has 30.61% of the ST population. Similarly, Matigara, Naxalbari, and Khoribari have 13.42%, 19.57%, and 19.46% of the total ST population. According to West Bengal government data, the Darjeeling Hill area has a 1,65,534 total ST population, whereas Siliguri has a 2,31,855 total ST population<sup>4</sup>.

The literacy rate of ST in West Bengal has increased from 43.4 percent in 2001 to 57.92 percent in 2011. Similarly for Darjeeling district, it has increased from 55.48 percent in 2001 to 74.26 percent in 2011. There has been a drastic improvement especially for ST females which was 29.15 percent in the state in 2001 to 47.71 percent in 2011. For Darjeeling district, this percentage increased from 45.85 percent in 2001 to 67.16 percent in 2011. Despite various government schemes like Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan, inclusion of Tamang and Limbu in 2003, might have further increased the overall literacy rate of the ST category.

### ***Higher Education***

In the context of higher education in West Bengal, according to the 2011 census, a total of 62032 persons from the ST category have graduation and above degree. Out of which males were 41711 and females were 20321. Similarly, in the Darjeeling district, a total of 15691 persons had a graduation and above degree, of which males were 8371 and females were 7320. The total tribal participation in higher education in the Darjeeling district is around 3.99 percent of the total population. It is interesting to note that the higher educational degree is high among Bhutia with 10.59% and Tamang with 5.89% out of total scheduled tribe population (Majhi and Prasad 2023). For ethnic groups like Oraon, Santhals, Munda and others, this participation percentage in higher education is lower as their school drop out rate is generally seen higher. Therefore, a small population of students from the Adivasi community pursue higher studies due to various economic and social reasons.

### ***Social Structure of Inequality***

On the Adivasi question, the policy of reservation has been so far more unfair than just. Opportunities to higher education and to have active participation in academics are minimal for Adivasis. The neoliberal reforms have reduced the state's share in providing necessities like education and Adivasis are largely affected (Thorat and Newman 2009). On the other hand, the rising population and political demands from affluent sections to be enlisted under

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scheduled tribes have further marginalized the Adivasis and have created the problem of unequal distribution of resources. In Darjeeling district, Tamang and Limbu were declared as ST on 19.09.2003, which has significantly impacted the overall representation of tribal communities at the state levels.

At present Tamang, Limbu, Lepcha, Bhutia and so on along with Adivasis fall under the ST category and are identified as Scheduled Tribe but the social positioning of all these groups are different from one another and they differ on the grounds of accumulation of resources and power. The living standard of the community also influences the literacy rate of its members. The Adivasis are mainly labourers from tea gardens as compared to Tamangs and other Hill tribes who have other sources of income and employment opportunities. Tamangs (83.08%), Bhutia (75.95%), and Limbu (68.08%) participate in other work other than agriculture. In the government sector employment in the state, the representation of Hill tribes is 95.60%, and for other tribes, it is only 4.4% (Roy 2016). The social, economic, and cultural capital is seen as higher among the majority population of Hill tribes than the Adivasis. Based on the socio-economic profile, the participation rate in higher education is also higher for the Hill tribes. The rich educational legacy of Darjeeling Hills, too, has contributed to creating a “culture of education” among various ethnic groups within the region that has increased their literacy rate, as seen in Table 1. In fact, within the ST category, the Hill tribes are the dominant group and have higher representation at all levels. Generally, it is also seen that they have the privilege of quality education. Eventually, they easily qualify the prescribed merit list of ST for admission to College and University.

The problem of inequality lies in how one exercises the position of reservation in the best way possible to occupy the benefits. In this process, the affluent tribes have successfully utilized the opportunities to advance their socio-economic position and networks. In contrast, those who were not in a position to negotiate with their crisis and socio-economic handicaps are still backward and struggling with low living standards and self-esteem. Therefore, regarding representation via reservation in West Bengal, the hill tribes are reproducing their representation, creating a nexus of dominance and networking. Going by Tilly’s concept of “opportunity hoarding,” the Tamang have secured advantages for themselves and their descendants through the political influence network, demographic strength, and resource control. Therefore, in education, they are more prominent recipients of reservation benefits, leaving behind the unequal representation problem for other ethnic groups from within the tribal category. Government institutions cannot deny their monopoly. The better-endowed sections have cornered the reservation benefits (Galanter 1993). Hence, Adivasis lag behind the hill tribes in fetching opportunities. The educational structure is unequal and controlled by culturally superior ethnic groups.

### ***Representation in Higher Education***

The present article aims to identify the problems of uneven representation in higher education for various ethnic groups in the ST category. Therefore, the data used for this article is from the University of North Bengal. The University of North Bengal was established with the growing demands of higher education and for various political reasons in 1962. The University of North Bengal was the region's first institution of higher learning, including the nearby state of Sikkim. The institution has been immensely significant in bringing educational empowerment to the region.

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When it comes to educational representation of various communities, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes have a history of marginalization and exclusion; hence, in higher education, the policy of reservation is significantly essential. The Constitutionally protected reservation policy is a provision for reserving seats for SC, ST, and OBC in education. Under the University Grants Commission (UGC), implementing a reservation policy is one of the crucial rules for admission to various government-aided colleges and universities. The reserved seats for central universities and colleges are 17 percent for SC, 7.5 percent for ST, 27 percent for OBC, and 10 percent for EWS. However, the reservation rules vary from state to state. As per the reservation rules of the Government of West Bengal, Higher Education Department 2014<sup>5</sup>, it is mandatory for all government-aided wholly or partly colleges and universities to follow the reservation rules in the admission process. Of the seats, 22 percent is reserved for SC, 6 percent for ST, 10 percent for OBC A, and 7 percent for OBC B. In 2019, the state government of West Bengal<sup>6</sup> directed the implementation of 10 percent of reserved seats to Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) in all the government institutions.

As reservation policy is a mandatory provision for admission procedure in colleges and universities, the students must disclose their administrative category at the time of admission like General, SC, ST, OBC A, or OBC B, and based on this categorization, they are entitled to the benefits of reservations. However, the term schedule castes, scheduled tribes, or other backward classes is the umbrella term used for various castes, classes, and tribes. Hence, when it comes to keeping a record, the same umbrella terms are maintained throughout the institutions. Therefore, obtaining the enrollment details of ethnic group wise representation within the ST category is challenging. To counter the problem of collecting the data, an attempt is made to identify students from different ethnic groups based on their surnames. Surnames is used as a tool for identifying the students belonging to scheduled tribes among various departments within Science stream of University of North Bengal.

In the postgraduate course from University of North Bengal, the details of Scheduled Tribes from all departments of science were collected. The enrollment of ST category students for the academic session 2022-2021 and 2021-2022 was taken for the article.

**Table 2: Ethnic Group Wise Representation of Scheduled Tribe Students in Various Departments of Science, University of North Bengal**

<b>Students Surname</b>	<b>2020-2021</b>	<b>2021-2022</b>
Tamang/Lama	12	15
Subba/Limbu	8	7
Lepcha	4	2
Bhutia/Kagatey	1	3
Sherpa	–	1
Oraon	2	5
Santhal	2	3
Munda	–	3
Chik Baraik	1	–
Barua	1	–
Naga	1	–
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>39</b>

*Source: Administrative data collected from the office of Faculty of Sciences, University of North Bengal*

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Table 2 depicts the enrolment of various ethnic groups in the two different academic sessions. It is found that the Tamang/Lama are the largest recipient of reservation benefits followed by Subba/Limbu at the university level education in science stream. On the other hand, Oraon, Santhal and Munda have a small representation. Being the dominant ethnic group in the region, Tamang, occupy a larger share of group representation and accumulation of social and cultural capital too is seen higher among them. The other ethnic groups who identify themselves to be nepali, have collectively better socio-economic and educational profile then those who have accepted the identity of Adivasi. It is generally believed that the science stream is tough and holds a superior position in the academic structure. Hence, the representation of tribes is generally seen lower for the ST category. In the academic session 2020-2021, out of 466 of the the total number students enrolled in 15 departments of Science, 32 students which is 6.87 percent were found to be from ST category. Similarly, in the academic session 2021-2022, out of 483 students, 39 were from ST category which is 8.07 percent. Going by the ethnic group wise representation, the percentage of Hill Tribes stands at 78.12 percent of the total ST enrolment in the session 2020-2021 and 71.79 percent in 2021-2022.

The Adivasi have a lower participation rate at the university level of education. The reasons for higher and lower participation rates are based on two major structural grounds: a) the demographic representation, and b) the prevailing social and cultural capital.

### *Inequality in Education*

When the social structure is unequal, then the educational system is unjust. The structural disparities in economic resources have not only contributed to unequal access to quality education and advanced learning but have also created the problem of cultural forwardness and backwardness within the social and educational levels. In this regard, Adivasi students generally face cultural barriers like language problems and a lack of academic counseling. Due to historical marginalization and inefficient quality education, Adivasi students have less cultural capital than the other dominant ethnic groups in the region. The opportunity to get private schooling, tuition, or coaching is comparatively less for Adivasi students. They come from humble backgrounds and need help in finding the career space and proper course guidance. In academics, Adivasi students continue to have disadvantaged positions due to fewer resources, and lack of support system. They face the problem of anxiety and stress due to institutional failure in this aspect. In contrast, the affluent ethnic groups remain well-prepared to select the courses for their graduation. Career-related guidance and counseling are also available to second or third generation learners or if not then have the economic capability to enjoy the private services. These services help them to succeed academically, and eventually, the benefits of the reservation policy are enjoyed within their groups.

Despite considerable variations in the quality of education received at the schooling level, college and university enrollment through reservation policy has given backward communities a fair opportunity. However, reservation policy, too, has merit criteria for the admission process. Only candidates with slightly higher marks than others are selected within the reserved category. Merit is also a psychological tool for one's identification as better than the rest. In this context, the Adivasis are seen as less meritorious. Those students who have managed to get admission face hurdles of higher learning. Hence, it was found that the ST students of Darjeeling districts who preferred private schooling at all levels were in advantageous positions at college and university levels. In contrast, Adivasi students who have come from government schools and whose quality of education is below average face

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the hurdles of completing higher education and obtaining a degree. The dropout rate, too, is higher among the Adivasi students, as narrated by the respondents based on their observation of the academic gap and lower participation.

The Adivasi students face significant barriers in academic achievement. In the society to which they belong, the question of Adivasi students going to college and university is more significant. With high hopes and aspirations when they enter college, they become victims of “educational violence” and “academic stereotypes”. The imaginary cultural construct attributed to the Adivasis is less deserving, and backward. The ST category is generally seen as below-average category as its merit cut-off is lower than the other categories. While discussing with the respondents on ST category, the students admitted to the stereotypes attached with the ST category. In fact, Adivasi students have told that they are targeted and other classmates demean them. Within the ST category, the hill tribes specifically Tamang view Adivasis as below average and not academically sharp. While interviewing the students, a sense of pride was reflected among the Hill tribe students on the question of comparison with Adivasis. They consider themselves academically better than the Adivasi students. Even the students from different categories, consider the Adivasi students as academically weak and less deserving.

Here, in this context I would like to present the experiences of Adivasi students. I have collected their narratives through face to face interviews with structured as well as unstructured questionnaires.

K. Oraon<sup>8</sup> who is currently doing Masters’ have shared her struggle like this: ‘humlog ko koi padhayi mein batane wala nahi hai, humare maa baap bhi utna kuch nahi jante jo humko madad kar sake (there is no one to guide us in studies, even our parents do not know much that can help us). We are left on our own’. We face a lot of academic challenges and we are often targeted for using reservation policy. ‘Humlog se jyada koi baat nahi karta aur help bhi nahi karna chahta padhayi mein (no one is interested in talking with us nor ready to help us academically)’.

This statement also reflects the problem of less representation of adivasis in the educational sphere and the struggle they go through within the institution.

Another experience by P. Soren, which she frequently encounters about Adivasis, is that they are foolish people with poor IQs, unsuitable for higher learning. She recalls when she was confused about selecting a course for college admission. With the hope of guidance, when she went to one of her neighbors' houses, her neighbor mocked her by calling her dumb, though jokingly.

The prejudices attached to Adivasis have resulted in the negative challenge towards inclusiveness in the social structure. Hence, this also influences their academic representation.

Another respondent, A. Beck stated that in the teaching faculty, nobody belongs to their community who can understand and guide their problems. The teachers are least bothered about the students' studies and rarely care. Out of fear and shyness, they do not approach the teacher. They feel hesitant to approach the teacher with their problems.

The lack of community empowerment of Adivasis in higher educational positions has perpetually unmotivated the students. They need more academic and moral support from their departments.



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### *Other Challenges*

Even though both the Adivasi and Hill tribes fall under the category of reservation at the societal level, the Hill tribe students don't want to be associated with the tag of being identified as Adivasi in particular. The primordial identity for them is Nepali (an identity they are very proud of at social and political levels). Due to the Gorkhaland Movement, the community sentiments through Nepali identity have strengthened, and the students carry the same identity in educational institutions. Therefore, both these groups vary in their understanding of 'tribal identity' and their position at the social level including educational institutions. In Siliguri, the relationships in the academic institutions are motivated by community-centric identity. It is essential to understand the role of friendship in educational institutions as it shapes academic performance and provides mental support to students. Many Adivasi students struggle to integrate into the campus which on the other hand is minimal for the hill tribes. The nepali student representation is higher as compared to the Adivasis which helps them in assimilation and integration in the campus. In contrast, the Adivasis generally come from backward regions and have lower representation at university level. Hence, the 'academic integration' for students from backward regions is less than for urban students. In this context, students shared some experiences like this:

K. Oraon, a University student, stated that she was lucky enough to have her community students in her class. Otherwise, it would have been difficult for her to continue her education. She added that classmates from different communities are least interested in interacting with us as they have their circle of friends. They provide us with information when we ask, but close bonding is absent with them. As we come from rural areas of tea gardens, we, too, feel hesitant to approach them.

This experience indicates that the student's community identity is vital to academic life. The influence of social and cultural capital on interpersonal relationships has negatively impacted the inclusive philosophy of educational institutions.

Another respondent, S. Lohar, stated that her educational difficulty level is much higher than other Adivasi students from different departments. As she is the only student from the Adivasi community in her class, academic and moral support is absent. She often feels alienated. She shared an instance where she was interacting with her teacher regarding the UGC NET examination preparation, and her fellow mates sarcastically taunted her, "tor toh hoi jabe (you will qualify)". She felt humiliated.

This experience indicates that Adivasi students suffer from marginality on campus. They are soft targets by the students who criticize lower cut-offs due to reservation benefits.

One respondent, A. Minj, a hosteller, stated that Nepali students are friendly and easily approachable and provide guidance, which is helpful for personal growth. However, they feel a sense of domination by them.

The constant interaction process with others has shaped the self of Adivasi students with low self-esteem. How other fellow mates treat them has negatively influenced their self-identity of being capable. Although there is no direct discrimination against Adivasi students, subtle forms of exclusions can be observed, such as avoidance, non-cooperation, discouragement, groupism, language-based dominance, and not sharing class notes. The invisible form of discrimination psychologically affects students from already backward communities (Thorat et al. 2016). As a result, Adivasi students have formed a small group on campus to support

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each other morally. However, the academic pressure, including the English language, is the biggest hurdle for them in fulfilling their educational aspirations.

### CONCLUSION

To sum up, the present investigation conceptualizes the disadvantaged position of Adivasi students despite being protected through reservation policy. They are still the vulnerable ethnic group who face social exclusion and are victims of institutional inequality. As the data suggests, the educational mobility of the Adivasi community is lower; hence, it has also affected their participation in the employment sector. Over the past few years, the dominant communities have been using the policy, making the Adivasis second-class public policy recipients in the North Bengal region. The majority of them come from poor-income households. Hence, they are inherently disadvantaged and need special treatment compared to the hill tribes on the campus, including classrooms.

With the shrinking government institutions, population growth, and the political agenda, the reservation policy has been manipulated by elites. This paper argues that in higher education, there is already a presence of dominant groups who are enjoying the benefits of the policy while creating a new form of inequality via class inequality for historically marginalized communities. The increasing gap between the affluent and non-affluent groups within the ST category needs further investigation. Instead of removing the affluent groups from the ST category, the new demands for inclusion are politically getting motivated. In Darjeeling Hills, there is an ongoing demand to include 11 communities in the ST category. Politically, if the demand gets accepted, then in the future, the state of Adivasis will be in a more vulnerable position within the state. With increased ethnic groups in the ST category, the competition for the Adivasis will further increase. Their higher educational representation is already less. Therefore, there is a possibility that it might negatively impact them in the future.

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### Notes

1. List of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups for 2022-2023 is retrieved from the given link <https://tribal.nic.in/downloads/Statistics/AnnualReport/AREnglish2223.pdf>
2. Official data on total tribal population is taken from the government website <https://censusindia.gov.in>
3. The state of West Bengal identifies 40 ethnic groups as Scheduled Tribes. However, there is no terminology used for the Tamang, Lepcha, Bhutia or Lamas as hill tribes in the official record of the state. For comparative analysis of the present paper the term "Hill Tribes" is used as an identification of the tribes including Tamang, Limbu, Lepcha, Bhutia, Sherpa, Toto, Dukpa, Kagatey, Tibetan, and Yolmo. Similarly, Adivasi is used for the tribes including Sathal, Oraon, Nagesia, Ho, Asur, Mahali etc.
4. The ST population data on Darjeeling Hills and Siliguri is retrieved from the given link: <https://adibasikalyan.gov.in/scheduled-tribes-of-west-bengal>
5. The reservation rules in the higher education of West Bengal is retrieved from the given link: [https://wbhed.gov.in/readwrite/uploads/Reservation\\_Rules.pdf](https://wbhed.gov.in/readwrite/uploads/Reservation_Rules.pdf)
6. The reservation rules for EWS is retrieved from the given link: <https://wbpar.gov.in/writereaddata/WBCSDirectory/12287.pdf>
7. To note the point many of the Tamangs identify themselves as Lama when the Tamangs were not included in the ST category, that is, before 2002. Presently, Lama is not identified as a tribe in the state. It is seen as a sub-group of Tamang. Hence Lama gets the reservation benefit of the tribe as a part of Tamang identity.
8. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this article to protect respondents' identities.
9. Earlier, the idea of this paper was presented at the 48th All India Sociological Conference at Vellore Institute of Technology, 28th to 30th December 2023.

## Exploring the Experiences of Inequality by the Ethnic Groups from the Reserved Category in Higher Education

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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