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Tribal Education in Telangana: Policy, Practice, And the Persistence of The Access-Quality Gap

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Abstract

This paper examines tribal education in Telangana, analyzing the gap between policy frameworks and ground-level outcomes. Through analysis of government data, news reporting (2024-2025), scholarly research, and NGO documentation, the study addresses the question: What are the primary barriers to educational access and quality for tribal students in Telangana? The findings reveal a persistent access-quality gap—extensive institutional infrastructure (over 1,000 residential schools) coexists with systemic failures including non-functional toilets, overcrowded hostels, over 1,000 teacher vacancies, and linguistic mismatches following the English-medium transition. Particularly vulnerable groups like the Gutti Koya face near-insurmountable barriers due to remote forest locations and lack of foundational schooling. NGO interventions (Smile Foundation's AEEP programme reaching 2,700 students; Priya Nestham's Gutti Koya study centres) demonstrate that targeted support can mitigate these gaps. The paper argues that Telangana's tribal education system requires not additional infrastructure but consistent implementation, language-appropriate pedagogy, tailored approaches for particularly vulnerable subgroups, and systematic community engagement to fulfill the promise of educational equity.

Keywords: Tribal education, Telangana, access-quality gap, residential schools, English-medium instruction, Gutti Koya, teacher vacancies, SDG 4, social welfare schools, educational equity

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Introduction

India is home to the largest population of tribal communities in the world, with over 104 million people belonging to Scheduled Tribes (STs). Telangana's tribal communities—9% of the population—were promised education as a path to dignity and opportunity. The state had hundreds of residential schools (In 1,023 residential schools, the Telangana Tribal Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society – TTWREIS operating 165 institutions: 29 Mini Gurukulams, 114 Residential schools and junior Colleges, 22 Degree Colleges), a visible monument to that promise. But policy committed to infrastructure, not to children. Today, students in Sangareddy defecate in forests because toilets don't work. Over 1,000 teacher posts lie vacant. And when the government switched instruction to English overnight, tribal children—already generations behind—found themselves staring at board exams in a language they cannot read. The Gutti Koya, most vulnerable of all, remain invisible in forest settlements with no schools at all. This is not policy failure. It is policy betrayal—architecture without care, access without quality, inclusion without understanding. Telangana built schools. It forgot to build conditions for children to learn.

This study addresses the following research question: What are the primary barriers to educational access and quality for tribal students in Telangana, and how can we understand the gap between policy frameworks and ground-level outcomes? Through analysis of government data, news reporting, scholarly research, and NGO interventions, this paper argues that tribal education in Telangana is characterized by a persistent access-quality gap—extensive institutional infrastructure coexists with systemic failures in basic amenities, linguistic mismatches between instruction and student capacity, and insufficient attention to the specific cultural and geographical circumstances of different tribal communities.

Literature Review

Scholarly and policy discourse on tribal education in India has evolved through several overlapping frameworks.

1) The Access Paradigm

Early scholarship on tribal education focused primarily on access—the physical availability of schools in tribal habitations. Researchers documented the severe geographical barriers facing tribal communities, with children in remote areas traveling long distances through forests and crossing flooded streams to reach state-run schools. This literature emphasized the need for

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residential institutions to bring education within reach of dispersed tribal populations. The establishment of Ashram schools (dating to the post-independence period) and later Eklavya Model Residential Schools represented policy responses to this access challenge. Scholars noted that tribal children, particularly from particularly vulnerable tribal groups, required not just schools but boarding facilities that could provide continuity of education despite geographical isolation.

2) **The Quality and Relevance Critique**

A second wave of scholarship shifted attention from access to quality and relevance. Researchers documented that even when tribal children enrolled in schools, they faced curricula that felt "irrelevant and foreign to their lives, both culturally and academically". Language emerged as a critical barrier—tribal children often entered schools speaking their mother tongues (Gondi, Lambada, Koya) only to encounter instruction in Telugu or English, languages in which they had limited proficiency. Dr. Bhukya Devender's research on Lambada children documented the "socio-cultural background and the learning difficulties" that emerged from this linguistic and cultural disjuncture. The UNESCO framework emphasized that indigenous children require "an education system that respects their cultural, linguistic and religious needs"—typically through bilingual, intercultural curricula.

3) **The Political Economy of Tribal Education**

More recent scholarship has examined tribal education through political economy and sociological lenses. Rekha Rathod's doctoral research (2024) on "Investigating barriers to tribal girls education in Telangana State" with a case study of Adilabad district represents this approach, examining how economic constraints, gender dynamics, and social structures intersect to produce educational disadvantage. Shankar Gugoloth's ongoing ethnographic research on "aspiration formations among Dalit and tribal college-going youth" in Telangana's Social Welfare residential schools examines how marginalized students navigate educational institutions and construct futures for themselves. This work shifts from a deficit framework (what tribal students lack) to an aspirational framework (how tribal youth imagine and pursue possibilities through education).

4) **The Policy Implementation Gap**

A consistent finding across this literature is the gap between policy frameworks and implementation. Government schemes exist in abundance—

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Pre-Matric and Post-Matric Scholarships, Ambedkar Overseas Vidya Nidhi, Best Available Schools Scheme, economic support programs—yet ground-level outcomes lag. Scholars have documented how teacher vacancies, infrastructure deficits, and administrative apathy undermine well-intentioned policies. This study builds upon these scholarly insights while examining the specific contours of the access-quality gap in contemporary Telangana.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative analysis of multiple data sources to examine tribal education in Telangana.

- Government documents formed the primary source base. District portals like Kamareddy and Nirmal provide official data on tribal welfare institutions, student enrollment, teacher positions, and scheme implementation. These sources reveal the policy architecture—the provisions meant to serve tribal students.
- **News reporting** from 2024-2025 documented ground realities. The New Indian Express, Eenadu, etc., exposed specific school conditions: overcrowding at Bommareddygudem school in Sangareddy, students using forests as toilets, and large teacher vacancies across residential institutions. These reports capture implementation failures that official data often obscures.
- **Scholarly research** provided academic rigor. Various research scholars' articles, PhD thesis and articles news, etc. are basic for building new knowledge.
- **NGO documentation** offered grassroots evidence. The Smile Foundation's AEEP programme reports detail intervention design, student reach, and the English-medium transition crisis in Adilabad. Priya Nestham Charitable Trust's Gutti Koya study centre documentation captures efforts with the most marginalized subgroups. These sources reveal what works when state systems fail.

This study triangulates across these sources, comparing policy intentions with documented realities and academic analysis with ground-level reporting. The thematic analysis organizes evidence around key dimensions of the access-quality gap.

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Findings

Analysis of available evidence reveals four interconnected dimensions of tribal education in Telangana.

A) The Infrastructure Paradox: Extensive Networks, Systemic Deficits

Telangana has constructed an extensive network of tribal educational institutions. District-level data documents 17 Ashram High Schools in Nirmal district alone, serving over 4,300 students, along with 41 Tribal Welfare Primary Schools and two Post-Matric Hostels. Across the state, 1,023 residential institutions operate under various societies—TGSWREIS, TTWREIS, TMREIS, and EMRS—representing a substantial infrastructure investment. Yet within this extensive network, systemic deficits persist. The Bommareddygudem Tribal Welfare Residential School in Sangareddy illustrates the pattern: built in 2010 with capacity for 150 students and 16 washrooms, it now houses 275 students with only 10 functional toilets—a ratio of one washroom per 27 students against the norm of one per ten. Students wake at 5 AM to defecate in the adjacent forest, risking snake bites and public humiliation. A student's question captures the human cost: "Who will be responsible if a snake bites one of us?". Overcrowding is addressed by removing cots from rooms, packing up to 40 students into spaces meant for 25. Food quality complaints compound the infrastructure failures. While government sanctions for improvements exist—Rs 15 lakh for additional washrooms at Bommareddygudem—implementation lags.

B) The Human Resource Crisis: Teacher and Warden Vacancies

The infrastructure crisis is matched by a human resource crisis. Currently, more than 1,000 teacher posts remain vacant across Telangana's 1,023 residential institutions. The warden shortage is equally severe—over 1,000 wardens are required statewide, yet positions remain unfilled, forcing teachers to shoulder both teaching and supervisory duties. Teachers describe the consequences: "Without wardens and supervisors, schools suffer from poor maintenance, leading to an increase in food poisoning and snakebite cases". The last major recruitment occurred in 2023, but work pressure has driven many to resign, creating a vicious cycle where vacancies breed more vacancies. Over 600 schools operate from rented buildings, adding infrastructure uncertainty to staffing instability.

The data from Nirmal district shows 240 teaching positions across Ashram and primary schools, but this aggregate figure masks the gap between

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sanctioned and filled posts. Teachers report that revised timings (8 AM to 4:30 PM instead of 9 AM to 4 PM) leave students without proper breaks, while dinner served between 6 and 7 PM creates long evening gaps.

C) The Language Barrier: English Medium as Exclusion

Perhaps the most significant educational barrier documented in recent evidence is the language of instruction. Until 2023, something simple worked. Telangana's tribal welfare Ashram schools taught in Telugu. Children learned in the language they spoke at home. Their parents understood it. Their communities lived in it. Then came a state mandate. Overnight, instruction shifted to English medium. On paper, the logic was sound. English opens doors. It leads to higher education. It promises better jobs. For tribal children, this was supposed to be their ladder.

But policy made on paper does not always work on ground. Implementation created a crisis no one had planned for. Students who had studied in Telugu for years suddenly sat in classrooms where teachers spoke English. Many teachers were unprepared themselves. They struggled to explain concepts. Children struggled to understand. The gap between what was taught and what was absorbed widened every day. The Secondary School Certificate board examinations decided to issue question papers only in English., They know the answers—in Telugu, in their mother tongue. But the exam does not ask in those languages. As the Smile Foundation report noted, students faced a "huge bottleneck." High-stakes board exams in a language they barely understood. Their educational trajectories hung by a thread.

For thousands of tribal students in Adilabad district alone, that thread was about to snap. A response came not from government alone, but from partnership. The Smile Foundation joined hands with the Tribal Welfare Department. Together, they launched the Academic Enhancement and Examination Preparedness programme. Not in one school. Not in ten. Across all 67 Ashram high schools in Adilabad district. It did not lecture but taught. Remedial coaching in English, mathematics, and science. Not complicated theories. Not lofty concepts. What these children needed most—help understanding their textbooks. Help decoding exam questions. Help believing they could pass. A child in the remotest Ashram school received the same resource as a child in the district headquarters. For once, the gap closed. What the Adilabad experience demonstrates is simple but profound. Language barriers can be mitigated. They are not destiny. When political will aligns with

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resources, when government partners with those who understand ground realities, when intervention is systematic rather than symbolic—tribal children can cross the bottleneck. They can pass. They can dream beyond the exam hall. For the students in Adilabad, the AEEP programme was a lifeline. For the children who will come after them, the question remains: Will they need another lifeline? Or will the system finally learn to build bridges instead of bottlenecks?

D) The Particularly Vulnerable: Gutti Koya and the Challenge of Remote Access

If mainstream tribal communities face significant barriers, particularly vulnerable tribal groups face near-insurmountable challenges. The Gutti Koya tribals arrived in Telangana between 2005 and 2006, fleeing conflict in neighboring Chhattisgarh. They settled deep inside the forests, hoping for safety. Today, they represent the most extreme case of educational marginalization in the state. Their habitations are scattered across Bhadradri Kothagudem, Mulugu, Jayashankar Bhupalpally, and Khammam districts. These are remote places. There is no electricity, no roads, no basic amenities and crucially, there are no schools. A child from this settlement wants to study has to reach a state-run school, that child must walk through dense forest. During monsoons, the journey means crossing flooded streams and the water rises. The currents grow strong, which made parents fear for their children's safety. The right to education exists on paper but in the forest, it dissolves into distance and danger.

The government's response has been complicated. Legal and political factors tie its hands. Gutti Koya settlements lie in deep forest areas. Central government regulations bar construction in these zones, which become obstacle to build new schools. Both Mulugu and Bhadradri Kothagudem are agency areas and non-tribals cannot purchase land here. The Gutti Koya are not original inhabitants of Telangana and they came as refugees. For years, authorities showed little enthusiasm for recognizing their settlements. When a community is not officially acknowledged, it receives no services. The current approach, such as it is, involves sending Gutti Koya children to residential tribal welfare schools. But here lies another problem - these residential institutions begin at Grade III. A child who has never seen the inside of a classroom arrives at age eight or nine, expected to learn alongside peers who have been studying for years. They cannot recognize letters and they do not

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know how to hold a pencil. They sit in confusion while lessons proceed around them. The gap is too wide, which makes dropout inevitable. One observer put it bluntly: Gutti Koya children are "at least two generations behind other kids." It is not their fault. They were never given a chance.

When the state fails, non-governmental organizations attempt to fill the void. Priya Nestham Charitable Trust stepped in and they established study centres inside Gutti Koya habitations and by employment of local teachers—often young men and women who had themselves dropped out after Class VIII or Class X. These were not trained educators but they spoke the children's language and understood their world. They taught letters and numbers in the forest, under trees, in makeshift spaces. The Lions Tribal Study Centre at Kumuram Bheem Nagar now educates 16 children. The Priya Nestham Tribal Study Centre at Gundengavai habitation reaches approximately 50 children. Students receive study materials. They get uniforms. They learn from someone who looks like them and speaks like them. These children proved that bridge education works. Given the right support, Gutti Koya children learn just as fast as anyone else. The problem was never their capacity. It was the absence of opportunity.

The Gutti Koya experience reveals something profound about tribal education in Telangana. It shows that community-based approaches can succeed where formal systems fail. A local teacher, basic materials, instruction in a familiar language—these simple elements transform what is possible for a child in the forest. But it also shows that even success stories face resistance. The system that cannot reach these children sometimes works to ensure that no one else reaches them either. At the heart of this story are children. A mother wondering if her child will ever escape the life she has known. These are not policy problems. They are human beings. Their education is not just about statistics or SDG targets. It is about whether a child born in a forest habitation gets the same chance as a child born in Hyderabad.

E) Aspirations and Possibilities: Beyond the Deficit Framework

Despite these formidable barriers, evidence also documents tribal students' aspirations and the transformative potential of education. Shankar Gugoloth's ethnographic research examines "aspiration formations among Dalit and tribal college-going youth" in Telangana Social Welfare Residential Educational Institution Society (TSWREIS) schools. His work moves beyond documenting deficits to understand how marginalized students construct

futures through education. The Fulbright-Nehru fellowship enables Gugoloth to engage with TSWREIS alumni now studying or working in the United States, exploring how these institutions shape aspirations and enable trajectories that would otherwise be unimaginable for tribal youth. This research suggests that despite systemic failures, residential welfare schools can function as pathways to social mobility when they function as intended. Similarly, the Smile Foundation intervention in Adilabad demonstrates that targeted support can improve outcomes. By providing remedial coaching and study materials, the AEEP programme addressed immediate learning gaps and built test-taking confidence. The involvement of local facilitators and community engagement helped families feel invested in their children's success—a crucial factor given research showing that parental involvement correlates with educational persistence.

Conclusion

The evidence on tribal education in Telangana reveals a complex and contradictory picture. The state has constructed an extensive institutional architecture—hundreds of residential schools, scholarship schemes, and support programs—representing a genuine policy commitment to tribal educational advancement. Yet this architecture is undermined by persistent implementation failures: non-functional toilets, overcrowded hostels, teacher vacancies exceeding 1,000 positions, and linguistic transitions that exclude rather than enable. Several conclusions emerge from this analysis: 1) The access-quality gap constitutes the central challenge of tribal education in Telangana, 2) Language policy has become a site of exclusion, 3) Particularly vulnerable tribal groups require particularly targeted approaches, 4) Partnership models show promise but cannot substitute for systemic reform, 5) Tribal students' aspirations deserve recognition alongside their challenges. The implications for policy are clear. Infrastructure maintenance must match infrastructure construction; teacher and warden recruitment cannot lag perpetually behind need; language transition requires bridge programs, not sink-or-swim implementation; particularly vulnerable groups need tailored approaches; and community engagement must be systematic rather than incidental. The SDG 4 commitment to "quality education for all" remains distant for many tribal students in Telangana—not for want of institutional architecture, but for want of consistent, adequate implementation within that architecture.

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