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# Without internal reservation, ST quotas fail the most excluded

There is no legal bar preventing internal reservations within the ST category.

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In the cluttered noise of electoral politics and policy debates, the voices of forest-dwelling Adivasi communities in Karnataka have long been drowned out—by design, not by accident. The state government’s decision to introduce internal reservation for Scheduled Castes (SCs), ostensibly in the interest of social justice, raises a pressing question: Why does this commitment stop short when it comes to Scheduled Tribes (STs), particularly the forest-dependent, numerically small, and structurally excluded Adivasi communities?

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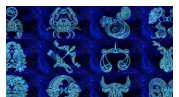
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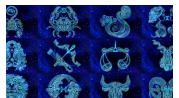
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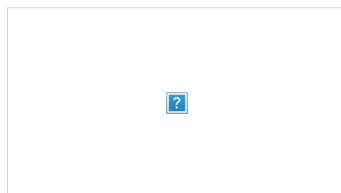
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There is no legal bar preventing internal reservations within the ST category. On the contrary, the Supreme Court of India has left such decisions to the discretion of state governments. Then why has Karnataka chosen to ignore Adivasis, whose claims are among the most compelling? This is by no means a call for charity; it is a demand for rightful access to the promises of our Constitution. For decades, numerically dominant communities within the ST category have overwhelmingly cornered the benefits of reservation.

Of the 50 Scheduled Tribes in Karnataka, a single community (listed as No 38 in the ST schedule) accounts for over 77% of the ST population. That means 32.96 lakh out of Karnataka's total 42.48 lakh, according to the 2011 census. The remaining 49 tribal communities, including Jenu Kuruba, Soliga, Iruliga, and Paniya, together make up barely 10 lakhs. Among these, there are 28 tribal communities with populations under 1,000. At least 21 of them have fewer than 500 members. Forest-based communities such as the Iruliga, Kudiya, Paniya, Jenu Kuruba, and others remain almost entirely absent from even the lowest government jobs in Group C and D jobs. More than seven decades after the introduction of reservations, these communities have seen little to no benefit.

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This is not merely a policy failure – it is a continuing humanitarian crisis. In 2025, villages in Chamarajanagar district like Keredimba and Kokkabare received electricity for the first time. Incredibly, this means our villages got or are getting electricity 125 years after power came to Karnataka. In Kodagu, Mysuru, and Ramanagara districts, Adivasi families still drink water from stagnant rock crevices, cook on firewood outside leaf huts, and lack basic documents like Aadhaar cards, caste and income certificates.

The idea of competing for government jobs is a distant dream when survival itself is in question.

And yet, as Adivasis, we are told we must wait. Wait for research studies, commissions, and expert recommendations; while other numerically dominant

groups are promptly granted sub-reservation. This repeated exclusion, even by governments claiming to speak for the most oppressed, amounts to a quiet but cruel erasure.

The Congress party, at national forums, proclaims its commitment to Adivasi welfare. But in Karnataka, its government has failed to act. Why is there hesitation to implement internal reservation within STs? Is it because Adivasis are not a vote bank? Because we lack political clout? Or because our numbers are too few to matter? In truth, our exclusion is deeply systemic. Dominant ST groups not only control the lion's share of the 7% ST reservation in Karnataka but have also secured significant representation – including 15 MLAs, 3 MPs, and numerous IAS, IPS, and university positions. Meanwhile, Adivasis like us remain invisible.

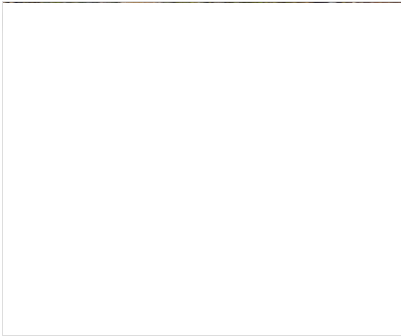
The Constitution envisioned social justice as an instrument to uplift the most marginalised and deprived. For many Adivasi communities, independence itself remains incomplete. The continued denial of internal reservation within STs is not just a policy oversight; it is a denial of dignity, identity, and future.

This is a call from communities still living in temporary settlements without electricity or potable water, walking miles to reach schools or access health centres, and who are yet to receive even the most basic recognition as citizens. Adivasi children grow up malnourished, uncounted in policy, and unrepresented in governance. If this is not the definition of systemic neglect, what is?

The question to the Karnataka government is simple: if internal reservation can be granted to Scheduled Castes, why not to the Scheduled Tribes who need it most? The state has both the constitutional authority and the moral responsibility to act. Forest-based Adivasi communities are not asking for special treatment or privileges, only for the opportunity to live with dignity. Internal reservation within the ST category is not just a social justice measure. It is a survival strategy.

The time to act is not after another census or another 10-year committee report. The time is now.

*(The writer, the first PhD graduate from the Iruliqa community in Kanakapura, advocates for Adivasi rights and inclusion in public policy)*



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