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The Human Rights Forum (HRF) demands that the Telangana government wake up from its slumber and seriously and meaningfully address the ongoing demand of Adivasis that the Lambadas be de-scheduled from the list of Scheduled Tribes (STs).

We realise that the issue is a complex and multi-dimensional one. It relates to the irrational manner in which the scheduling of communities for inclusion in the list of STs was done from time to time. A mistake was made in treating the Adivasis, mainly resident in the Scheduled areas, and the nomadic communities as well as de-notified communities as a homogeneous entity and incorporating them in a common Schedule. Also, respective governments have sometimes callously, and at other times deliberately, enumerated and listed communities that are similar and physically contiguous in a dissimilar and anomalous manner across State boundaries. Over decades, Constitutional authorities have abdicated their function in the Fifth Schedule areas and taken no remedial measures.

The ongoing agitation by the Adivasis resident in the Fifth Schedule areas has to be understood in the specific context of them being denied access to rightful Constitutional entitlements. The reality is that not just the Lambadas but also other communities like the Yerukalas, the latter largely in Andhra Pradesh, are availing off a disproportionate share of the benefits of ST reservation. This has been to the detriment of and clearly dis-advantaged the Adivasis residing in the Fifth Schedule region.

Adivasis like the Gonds, Koyas, Thotis, Kollams, Chenchus and Konda Reddys among others, who have historically been resident in the Scheduled areas have been systematically marginalised by the Lambadas, Yerukalas and other such 'plains tribes'. There is sufficient data to underscore the fact that a highly unequal share of the benefits of reservation and various welfare schemes have been cornered by the latter. In matter of fact, ever since the Lambadas were included in the ST list in 1976 in the Telangana region, their population began to rise exponentially. This was because of a massive in-migration of that community from other States, where they are categorised as SC in Karnataka, BC in Maharashtra and OC in Rajasthan, resulting in the relative proportion of various communities within the ST list changing dramatically post-1976. It is an undisputed fact that the Lambadas have since cornered not just educational and employment opportunities but are also in possession of large amounts of land in the Fifth Schedule region of Telangana, principally, but not exclusively, in the districts of the combined Adilabad, Warangal, Khammam and Mahbubnagar districts. The accusation of the Adivasis resident in the 5th Schedule region that they have been pushed out and cheated of the benefits of reservation and various social welfare policies and their lands usurped by the Lambadas is completely legitimate and well-founded. They have been raising this since many years seeking redressal of a plain injustice, but to no avail. The ongoing agitation by the Adivasis is a mass expression of this genuine grievance.

The Telangana government must immediately respond through initiating a dialogue with the Adivasi community to understand their grievances and demands, by constituting a commission of inquiry to comprehensively study the status of various communities availing off the benefits of ST reservation. This commission must enquire into the allegation that a few communities among those listed as STs are preponderantly availing of the benefits of reservation to the detriment of others. This study must also determine the nature of land ownership in the Fifth Schedule areas apart from undertaking a verification of 'Agency certificates' issued to the Lambadas.

HRF appeals to both the Adivasis and the Lambadas who are agitating presently not to resort to violence and to also desist from obscene and hateful discourse on social media.

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