

Cultural Identity Affirmation as a Resilience Strategy Against Peer Ostracism: A Qualitative Study of Tribal Adolescents in Kerala

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Abstract

Tribal adolescents in India, particularly from the Irula, Kurumba, and Muduga communities of Attappadi, Kerala, often face peer exclusion and cultural marginalization within school environments. This qualitative study explores how cultural identity affirmation functions as a resilience strategy against such ostracism. Drawing on identity theory and self-affirmation theory, the study employed semi-structured interviews and field observations with thirty participants, including tribal adolescents, educators, and community elders. Thematic analysis yielded three core findings: (1) cultural identity operates as both a protective resource and a point of social tension; (2) traditional practices and intergenerational involvement, especially from elders, nurture psychological strength and a sense of belonging; and (3) institutional settings frequently overlook or inadequately support indigenous identities. These insights highlight the need for culturally responsive educational and mental health practices that validate and integrate tribal adolescents' identities within formal schooling systems. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of identity-based resilience among marginalized youth and calls for inclusive pedagogical frameworks attuned to indigenous experiences.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Peer Ostracism, Tribal Adolescents, Self-Affirmation, Resilience, Psychological Well-Being

Introduction

In India, tribal communities—recognized as Scheduled Tribes—remain among the most marginalized and culturally distinct populations (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2021). Despite constitutional safeguards and targeted development efforts, tribal adolescents frequently encounter exclusion within school systems that reflect dominant sociocultural norms. These institutions often neglect indigenous languages, community values, and knowledge systems, leading to academic disadvantage and psychological distress (Xaxa, 2005; Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010).

Peer ostracism—manifested through subtle exclusion, stereotyping, or ridicule—is a frequent experience for tribal youth, often triggered by differences in language, appearance, or customs (Kumar, 2014; Mohanty, 2009). Such encounters undermine self-esteem, hinder identity formation, and negatively impact psychological well-being during adolescence.

These challenges are especially evident in Attappadi, a tribal region in Kerala home to the Irula, Kurumba, and Muduga communities. Although Kerala is noted for its educational achievements, Attappadi continues to lag in tribal literacy, child health, and mental health access (Government of Kerala, 2018). Schools in

the region often impose monolingual, standardized curricula that disregard tribal lifeways, reinforcing cultural dissonance and alienation (George, 2015).

While research has extensively documented structural barriers in tribal education (Bharat & Mohanty, 2019), fewer studies explore how tribal adolescents respond to exclusion through culturally grounded coping strategies. Rather than portraying these youth solely as victims, emerging evidence suggests they actively draw on cultural identity as a psychological resource. Kumar (2018), for instance, found that tribal adolescents in Odisha maintained resilience through intergenerational bonds and community rituals.

In Kerala, however, little is known about how such identity affirmation functions in everyday contexts of peer exclusion. Existing interventions often prioritize curriculum reform or infrastructure, overlooking the emotional and cultural strategies tribal youth use to cope with marginalization.

This study addresses that gap by examining how cultural identity affirmation supports psychological resilience among tribal adolescents in Attappadi. Grounded in Identity Theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000) and Self-Affirmation Theory (Steele, 1988), the research investigates how adolescents respond to peer-based ostracism by reinforcing values central to their self-concept. In tribal settings, these affirmations may involve the use of native language, participation in rituals, or connection with elders.

By foregrounding these strategies, the study offers a culturally nuanced understanding of resilience. It reframes culture not as a developmental barrier, but as a protective resource that fosters identity stability, mental health, and educational engagement among marginalized youth.

The specific **objectives** of the study are to:

1. Explore how tribal adolescents experience peer ostracism in school environments.
2. Understand the role of cultural identity in shaping their psychological responses to exclusion.
3. Examine how traditional practices, community rituals, and family support contribute to resilience.
4. Identify culturally grounded strategies that promote well-being and inclusion in educational settings.

Research Questions

1. How do tribal adolescents in Attappadi experience peer ostracism in school settings?
2. What role does cultural identity affirmation play in shaping their emotional resilience and self-concept?
3. How do families and community practices contribute to identity reinforcement?

By reframing cultural identity as a potential source of resilience, this study seeks to contribute to the discourse on inclusive education and mental health support for marginalized tribal youth in India.

Literature Review

Peer ostracism, defined as the experience of being excluded or ignored by one's peer group, has been widely associated with a range of negative psychosocial outcomes, including low self-esteem, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and academic disengagement (Williams, 2007). These impacts are particularly pronounced during adolescence—a developmental stage when peer acceptance becomes central to identity formation (Brown & Larson, 2009). Minority adolescents, such as indigenous or tribal youth, are especially vulnerable, as they often contend with additional layers of cultural marginalization in school environments that reflect dominant linguistic and cultural norms (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2010; Kumar, 2014). In the Indian context, tribal students frequently face institutional neglect, stereotyping, and systemic exclusion. A study by Anitha (2018) found that Adivasi children in Kerala were often ridiculed for their dialects, dress, and customs, which in turn affected their school attendance and self-confidence. Similarly,

Mohanty (2009) documented how tribal students in Odisha felt disconnected from classroom content, which was delivered entirely in dominant languages with no recognition of their cultural experiences. These educational settings often overlook the lived realities of tribal communities, leading to an internalization of inferiority and decreased academic motivation.

The theoretical underpinnings of such experiences can be framed through identity theory and self-affirmation theory. Identity theory posits that individuals' self-concept is derived from their roles and group affiliations (Stryker & Burke, 2000). When cultural or ethnic identities are invalidated or delegitimized, psychological distress is likely to occur. Steele's (1988) self-affirmation theory further explains how individuals cope with identity threat by reinforcing core values or social roles that are central to their sense of self. Cohen and Sherman (2014) empirically demonstrated that self-affirmation exercises can reduce the psychological harm of exclusion and stereotype threat in school environments, enhancing academic performance among marginalized students.

In tribal contexts, these theories highlight the potential for cultural identity to serve as a buffer against exclusion. Research by Kumar (2018) in Odisha revealed that tribal adolescents who maintained strong ties with their community and cultural traditions were more emotionally resilient and confident in school. Similarly, a study by Ramachandran and Naorem (2013) in Jharkhand noted that tribal youth engaged in community rituals and storytelling showed higher levels of emotional stability and lower levels of alienation. These findings suggest that cultural affirmation—through family support, language preservation, and participation in rituals—can promote psychological well-being.

However, research explicitly connecting cultural identity affirmation with peer ostracism and resilience among tribal adolescents in Kerala remains limited. Studies in the region tend to focus on structural or economic barriers to education rather than on adolescents' psychological responses or coping strategies (George, 2015; Government of Kerala, 2018). While there is growing interest in culturally responsive pedagogy (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2011), few empirical studies explore how tribal adolescents actively assert their identity within mainstream educational settings as a means of psychological resistance and resilience.

This gap is significant, particularly in Attappadi—a region marked by both tribal cultural richness and systemic neglect. The present study builds on previous findings while addressing this under-researched dimension: how cultural identity affirmation functions as a coping strategy for tribal adolescents experiencing peer ostracism. By situating this inquiry within established psychological frameworks and grounded ethnographic contexts, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of inclusion, resilience, and identity among India's tribal youth.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by Identity Theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000) and Self-Affirmation Theory (Steele, 1988), which together provide a lens to understand how tribal adolescents cope with peer ostracism by drawing strength from cultural identity.

Identity Theory

Identity Theory posits that individuals hold multiple identities rooted in their social roles and group affiliations, which are organized by importance and emotional investment. When a core identity—such as one's cultural or tribal identity—is threatened, individuals seek to reinforce it to maintain psychological stability. For tribal adolescents in school settings where indigenous markers are devalued, affirming

cultural identity can help preserve self-concept and emotional balance. This theory highlights how identity becomes an active site of resistance when adolescents are navigating exclusion.

Self-Affirmation Theory

Self-Affirmation Theory explains how individuals respond to threats by affirming values central to their self-worth. According to Steele (1988), these affirmations need not directly address the source of the threat but serve to restore personal integrity and agency. For tribal adolescents facing peer rejection, engaging in cultural rituals, speaking their native language, or connecting with elders can reaffirm a positive sense of self and reduce psychological harm.

Integrated Perspective

Together, these frameworks position cultural identity as both vulnerable to marginalization and essential for resilience. They guide this study's focus on how tribal adolescents draw on cultural practices and community support to buffer the emotional impact of exclusion. Rather than viewing identity as a static label, these theories emphasize its dynamic, protective role—shaped through social interaction and personal agency.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative design grounded in a constructivist paradigm, emphasizing participants' lived experiences within their sociocultural context. A phenomenological approach was used to explore how tribal adolescents in Attappadi experience peer ostracism and affirm cultural identity as a resilience strategy. This design facilitated an in-depth understanding of emotional and cultural dimensions often overlooked in quantitative research.

Participants

Thirty participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure depth and diversity of perspectives. The sample included:

- 18 tribal adolescents (ages 13–17) attending local government or tribal schools,
- 7 educators familiar with tribal student experiences, and
- 5 community elders recognized as cultural custodians within the Irula, Kurumba, and Muduga tribes.

Adolescents were selected for their active engagement in cultural practices and willingness to share experiences. Educators and elders were included to triangulate adolescent narratives and capture intergenerational perspectives.

Data Collection

Fieldwork was conducted over five months, using two complementary methods:

- Semi-structured interviews: Individual interviews explored experiences of exclusion, cultural belonging, and coping strategies. Interviews were conducted in Malayalam or tribal dialects, lasting 45–60 minutes. All were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, and translated into English.
- Field observations: The researcher attended school events, cultural gatherings, and rituals to observe peer dynamics, cultural expression, and intergenerational interaction. These observations enriched the interpretation of interview data.

Detailed field notes were maintained to capture non-verbal cues, settings, and researcher reflections.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee at the Department of Psychology, Aligarh Muslim University. Informed written consent was obtained from all adult participants. For minors, assent and parental consent were both secured. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through the use of pseudonyms.

Findings

Theme 1: Cultural Identity as a Source of Strength

Participants described tribal identity not as a burden but as a source of pride and psychological grounding. Many expressed attachment to their language, traditions, and ancestry, which helped them maintain self-worth amid exclusion.

“They say we speak funny. But for us, our language is sacred. My grandfather says we carry our ancestors in our tongue.” (Aditi, age 15, Irula)

This affirmation of identity acted as a cognitive buffer against negative peer interactions. Adolescents often reinterpreted mockery as ignorance, not as personal failure—demonstrating resilience aligned with self-affirmation theory.

Theme 2: School as a Site of Silent Exclusion

Subtle forms of exclusion were reported consistently—being picked last for group work, teased for accents, or quietly avoided. While overt bullying was rare, many adolescents felt out of place within school culture.

“They don’t say anything directly, but when they make groups, we are always the last. They call us ‘hill people’ like it’s something bad.” (Rajan, age 16, Kurumba)

Educators acknowledged these dynamics, and the lack of tribal representation in the curriculum reinforced feelings of invisibility. These experiences reflect the devaluation of identity roles, as described in identity theory.

Theme 3: Elders and Rituals as Anchors of Identity

Cultural rituals and the presence of elders emerged as powerful sources of emotional support. Adolescents described storytelling, festivals, and sacred practices as grounding and affirming.

“When I dance at the festival, I don’t feel small. I feel like I belong. The forest listens to us, even if the school does not.” (Megha, age 14, Muduga)

Elders provided cultural continuity and validation, reinforcing identity salience when school settings failed to do so.

Theme 4: Negotiating Belonging Through Resistance and Adaptation

Many adolescents employed subtle strategies to gain acceptance—achieving academically, controlling disclosure, or avoiding confrontation. These forms of negotiation revealed a blend of vulnerability and agency.

“I won a speech competition last year. After that, they started sitting next to me. I didn’t talk about my tribe, but I didn’t hide it either.” (Hari, age 17, Irula)

Such adaptations align with indirect self-affirmation, where individuals protect self-worth without directly confronting social threats.

Cross-Cutting Insight

A key paradox ran across all themes: tribal identity was both a target of exclusion and a source of resilience. While school environments often suppressed identity, community life affirmed it. This duality underscores identity's dynamic role as both vulnerable and empowering, shaped by the interplay of threat, agency, and cultural grounding.

Discussion

This study examined how tribal adolescents in Attappadi navigate peer ostracism and affirm cultural identity as a resilience strategy. The findings deepen our understanding of how marginalized youth use identity to cope with social exclusion in school settings.

Cultural Identity as a Resilience Mechanism

Participants actively drew on cultural values—language, rituals, ancestry—to sustain self-worth. Rather than internalizing stigma, they reframed exclusion as external misunderstanding. This aligns with self-affirmation theory, which emphasizes the psychological protection offered by affirming core values (Steele, 1988). It also supports findings by Chandler and Lalonde (2008) on cultural continuity and well-being among indigenous youth.

School and the Reproduction of Invisibility

Despite inclusion policies, adolescents encountered daily marginalization through peer dynamics and curricular neglect. Their experiences reveal how educational settings can suppress non-dominant identities by omission or silence—an institutional pattern consistent with identity theory's view of role suppression (Stryker & Burke, 2000). These findings echo prior work on alienation in tribal education (George, 2015; Kumar, 2014).

Community as a Source of Affirmation

The affirmation received from elders and cultural practices provided a counterbalance to school-based exclusion. Storytelling, music, and seasonal rituals acted as emotional anchors. These findings affirm existing research (Mohanty, 2009; Das & Dash, 2021) and emphasize the importance of intergenerational continuity in preserving identity and promoting resilience.

Strategic Adaptation and Agency

Participants demonstrated subtle, strategic forms of resistance. They managed peer dynamics through achievement, selective disclosure, and quiet pride. These strategies reflect indirect self-affirmation—a protective coping mechanism that balances identity expression with social navigation. Rather than withdrawing, adolescents adapted with quiet resilience.

Conclusion

This study examined how tribal adolescents in Kerala's Attappadi region experience peer ostracism in school settings and affirm their cultural identity as a form of psychological resilience. Using a phenomenological approach, four key themes emerged: cultural identity as strength, schools as sites of subtle exclusion, the affirming role of elders and rituals, and adaptive strategies for negotiating belonging. Despite marginalization, tribal identity served as a protective resource. Grounded in identity theory and self-affirmation theory, the findings reveal how adolescents maintain self-worth by reinforcing values tied to heritage, language, and community. These acts of resilience were not abstract—they were expressed through everyday choices, intergenerational relationships, and social navigation.

Rather than passive recipients of exclusion, these adolescents emerged as agents of resistance, creatively sustaining identity in unsupportive environments. This perspective expands the literature by reframing tribal youth as meaning-makers who use culture as a tool for psychological survival.

The findings offer practical insights for educators, mental health practitioners, and policymakers. Supporting tribal youth requires more than inclusion—it demands engagement with cultural meaning, community wisdom, and indigenous strengths that affirm identity, not erase it.

Limitations

This study offers important insights, but several limitations should be noted:

- Contextual specificity: Conducted in Attappadi with Irula, Kurumba, and Muduga communities, the findings may not generalize to other tribal groups in India or beyond.
- Self-reporting bias: Narratives may reflect recall bias or social desirability despite efforts to encourage openness.
- Translation limitations: Nuances from tribal dialects and Malayalam may have been partially lost in English translation.
- Researcher position: The insider-outsider role of the researcher, while valuable for access, may have shaped interpretation. Reflexive practices were used to minimize bias.

Future research could expand on this work through cross-regional comparisons, inclusion of indigenous co-researchers, and longitudinal tracking of identity development over time.

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