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Economic Development and Electoral Behaviour Among Tribal Communities in Madhya Pradesh: Analysing Livelihood-Driven Political Participation

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Abstract

India's vibrant democracy is shaped by the participation of its diverse communities, among which tribal populations hold a distinctive socio-political identity. In Madhya Pradesh, tribal communities constitute approximately 21% of the total population (as per Census 2011), making them a significant electoral force. Communities such as the Bhils, Gonds, Baigas, Sahariyas, and Korkus not only preserve rich cultural traditions but also exhibit unique patterns of political behaviour. This study focuses on examining the voting behaviour of tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh with respect to their participation trends, influencing factors, and the methods of political mobilisation employed by various actors. The research explores how variables such as education, economic conditions, media exposure, traditional leadership, and government welfare schemes shape the electoral preferences of tribal voters. It also seeks to investigate whether tribal voters are increasingly engaging in issue-based voting (focused on land rights, displacement, employment, etc.) or if identity-based affiliations still dominate their political choices. The study employs a mixed-method approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative tools. Data collection involved structured interviews, field surveys, and the analysis of electoral data from tribal-dominated districts such as Jhabua, Dindori, and Mandla. Additionally, the research investigates the role of political parties, NGOs, local institutions, and community leaders in the political mobilisation of tribal electorates. Preliminary findings suggest that tribal voters are gradually moving beyond traditional voting patterns and are becoming more conscious of development-related issues, rights, and representation. However, barriers such as illiteracy, poverty, and limited political awareness still pose challenges. Furthermore, political campaigns often fail to effectively align with the real needs and aspirations of tribal communities, resulting in mistrust and disengagement in some areas. This research offers important insights into the evolving nature of tribal political consciousness, contributing to a broader understanding of democratic inclusion in India. By focusing on the tribal vote in Madhya Pradesh, the study aims to inform more responsive electoral strategies and inclusive policy frameworks that acknowledge the agency and voice of marginalised communities within the democratic process.

Keywords: Tribal Voting Behavior; Political Mobilization; Electoral Participation; Issue-Based Voting; Identity Politics; Tribal Political Awareness

1. INTRODUCTION

Voting behaviour research provides invaluable commentary on the operation of a democratic polity, with special relevance to plural and diverse societies such as India. Within India's numerous socio-cultural groups, tribal communities constitute a distinctive electorate whose political orientation is influenced by a multifaceted intersection of tradition, identity, socio-economic status, and political mobilization. In places such as Madhya Pradesh, where tribal communities form a major percentage of the demography (approximately 21% according to Census 2011), comprehending the electoral behavior amongst such populations becomes crucial for both research and policy-making.

Madhya Pradesh, with its profound tribal belts over districts like Jhabua, Alirajpur, Mandla, Dindori, and Shahdol, offers a varied scenario of tribal existence — consisting of various ethnic groups like Bhils, Gonds, Baigas, Saharias, and Kols. In spite of constitutional protection, affirmative action, and focused development projects, tribal groups in the state remain marginalized, economically backward, and politically underrepresented in meaningful decision-making.

Tribal voting does not merely indicate party or candidate preferences; it also reflects broader trends of political socialization, awareness of issues, symbolic assertions of identity, and mobilization responses. Political parties, particularly in the case of state and national polls, tend to initiate mobilization campaigns tailored to tribal interests, offering promises of tribal benefits, land rights, livelihoods based on the forest, and representation. Yet, the actual effect of mobilization on tribal voting patterns is still uneven and often insufficiently researched.

In the past, research on electoral behavior in India has been mostly confined to caste, religion, urban-rural divide, and class consciousness, with the tribal vote being either homogenized or seen through a restricted developmental perspective. This study aims to bridge the gap by specifically examining voting behavior among tribal groups in Madhya Pradesh, with particular focus on:

- Patterns of participation (voter turnout, loyalty, or swing behavior)
- Determinants and drivers (education, kinship, grassroot leadership, welfare programs, media coverage)
- Political mobilization modes and channels (party campaigns, tribal leaders, NGOs, local institutions)

The research will also scrutinize critically how earlier tribal systems of governance, such as the panchs, mukhiya, or local leaders, determine voting patterns; and how contemporary political systems have sought to incorporate or sidestep such machinery. It also analyzes the extent of issue-based election among tribal voters — for example, votes cast on land rights, displacement, access to forests, schooling, and work — as opposed to outright identity-based loyalty.

Comprehending tribal voting practices is not only important from the political science point of view but also for solidifying democratic inclusiveness, guaranteeing equitable political representation, and developing more responsive governance frameworks. The present study hopes to contribute to the expanding research agenda of electoral sociology in India with particular reference to tribal political agency and changing dynamics of representation, recognition, and resistance within the electoral framework.

In so doing, it makes use of field information, voting numbers, policy reports, interviews, and content analysis to provide a grounded and situational understanding of the topic.

1.1. Objectives

(1) To research Madhya Pradesh's tribal populations' voting and participation trends.

(2) To determine the main cultural and socioeconomic elements affecting tribal members' voting patterns.

(3) To examine how election-related political mobilization initiatives affect indigenous voters.

(4) To determine whether tribal populations continue to be motivated by identity-based political loyalty or prefer issue-based voting.

1.2. Hypotheses

(1) In Madhya Pradesh, socioeconomic factors including occupation, income, and education have a big impact on how indigenous populations vote.

(2) In Madhya Pradesh, tribal voters are gradually switching from identity-based to issue-based voting, particularly when it comes to issues pertaining to jobs, land rights, and development.

(3) Tribal voters' electoral choices are directly influenced by political mobilization initiatives, such as party campaigns and the participation of local leaders.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive and quantitative research methodology to explore voting behaviour, influencing factors, and political awareness among tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh. The research design specifically addresses intra-tribal diversity by ensuring representative sampling across

major tribal communities rather than treating tribal populations as a homogeneous group.

2.1. Sampling Design and Respondent Distribution

The present study applies Cochran's Sampling Formula to determine the minimum required sample size for a large population (i.e., the tribal population across Madhya Pradesh). The formula is particularly suited for studies aiming for statistical validity with a known confidence level and margin of error.

Cochran's formula is as follows:

$$n_0 = \frac{Z^2 pq}{e^2}$$

Where:

- n = minimum sample size
- Z = Z-score (1.96 for 95% confidence level)
- p = estimated proportion of the population (0.5 assumed for maximum variability)
- e = margin of error (0.05)

To determine the minimum sample size, the Cochran Sampling Formula was applied, resulting in a sample of 385 respondents. These respondents were equally distributed across 15 tribal-dominated districts of the state. Data was collected through a structured questionnaire comprising both multiple-choice and categorical questions. The overall research process was conducted with objectivity, neutrality, and scientific rigour to ensure validity and reliability.

2.2. Sampling Design and Intra-Tribal Distribution

Fifteen tribal-dominated districts of Madhya Pradesh were selected based on:

- High concentration of tribal population
- Representation of major tribal communities (Gond, Bhil, Baiga, Korku, Bhilala, Kol, etc.)
- Geographical and socio-political relevance

Table 1. Sample design for primary data

District	Proposed Respondents
Mandla	26
Dindori	26
Jhabua	26
Alirajpur	26
Shahdol	26
Umaria	26
Barwani	26
Dhar	26
Khargone	26
Anuppur	26
Singrauli	26
Balaghat	26
Chhindwara	26
Seoni	26
Ratlam	25
Total	385

The use of Cochran's formula provides a statistically valid sample size of 385 respondents. By distributing this sample equally among 15 tribal-dominated districts, the study ensures:

- Geographic and demographic diversity
- Representation of major tribal communities
- Operational feasibility during data collection

2.3. Intra-Tribal Diversity in Sample Distribution: Recognition of Tribal Heterogeneity

Madhya Pradesh hosts 43 recognised Scheduled Tribes, with significant diversity in cultural practices, languages, geographic distribution, and socio-economic conditions. Rather than treating

these communities as a single homogeneous group, our sampling strategy explicitly addressed this diversity through systematic representation.

The six largest tribal communities – Bhil (37.7% of ST population), Gond (35.6%), Kol, Korku, Sahariya, and Baiga – constitute 92.2% of the state's total ST population. Our sampling ensured proportionate representation of these major groups while also including smaller tribal communities to capture the full spectrum of tribal diversity.

Table 2. Intra-Tribal Sample Distribution by Community

Tribal Community	Population % in MP	Sample Size (n)	District Covered
Bhil	37.70%	145	Jhabua, Dhar, Khargone, Barwani
Gond	35.60%	137	Mandla, Dindori, Balaghat, Chhindwara
Kol	4.80%	19	Rewa, Satna, Sidhi
Korku	4.30%	17	Khandwa, Hoshangabad
Sahariya	3.90%	15	Shivpuri, Guna
Baiga	3.80%	15	Shahdol, Umaria, Anuppur
Other Tribes	10.00%	37	Mixed distribution
Total	100%	385	15 istricts

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

This sampling plan strengthens the reliability and applicability of the findings related to voting behaviour, socio-political influences, and participation patterns among tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh.

Table 3. Voting Participation in Last Legislative Election

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes	302	78.4%
No	58	15.1%
No Response	25	6.5%
Total	385	100%

In Table 3, out of 385 respondents, a significant majority (78.4%) reported having participated in the last legislative assembly election. Only 15.1% admitted they did not vote, while 6.5% chose not to respond. This high participation rate indicates a growing sense of political engagement among tribal communities. It also reflects the increasing awareness about democratic rights in remote and rural tribal areas of Madhya Pradesh.

Table 4. Key Factors Influencing Voting Decision

Influencing Factor	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Caste/Community	95	24.7%
Candidate's Image	102	26.5%
Political Party	78	20.3%
Developmental Issues	65	16.9%
Family/Social Pressure	30	7.8%
Others	15	3.8%
Total	385	100%

In Table 4, the most commonly cited factor influencing voting decisions was the candidate's image (26.5%), followed by caste/community considerations (24.7%), and political party affiliation (20.3%). Interestingly, only 16.9% of respondents indicated that development issues guided their decision, while family/social pressure and other reasons were relatively minimal. This highlights that personality-based and identity-based voting patterns still dominate tribal electoral behaviour, with issue-based voting emerging slowly.

Table 5. Perceived Importance of Voting Right

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Very Important	210	54.5%
Important	130	33.8%
Less Important	28	7.3%
Can't Say	17	4.4%
Total	385	100%

In Table 5, a large portion of respondents (54.5%) viewed their right to vote as "very important," while another 33.8% considered it "important." Only 7.3% viewed it as less important, and 4.4% were undecided. This suggests a strong level of democratic consciousness among tribal voters, which is a positive trend toward inclusive participation and self-determination in governance. It also suggests that political awareness programs may have had a substantial impact.

Table 6. Educational Qualification of Respondents

Education Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Illiterate	65	16.9%
Primary Education	92	23.9%
Secondary Education	120	31.2%
Higher Secondary	55	14.3%
Graduate or Above	53	13.7%
Total	385	100%

In Table 6, most respondents had attained secondary education (31.2%) or primary education (23.9%). A notable 16.9% were illiterate, while 13.7% had a graduate degree or above. The data indicate that although a considerable number of respondents still fall in the lower educational brackets, access to education has increased among tribal populations. This also implies that electoral behaviour may gradually shift from traditional to more informed and critical patterns as education levels improve.

Table 7. Level of Political Affiliation or Attachment

Political Affiliation Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Attached	60	15.6%
Moderate Interest	210	54.5%
No Particular Affiliation	88	22.9%
No Response	27	7.0%
Total	385	100%

In Table 7, more than half of the respondents (54.5%) reported having a moderate interest in politics, whereas 15.6% claimed a strong political affiliation. About 22.9% showed no particular political alignment, and 7% did not respond. This suggests that while tribal populations are engaging with the political system, they still maintain a cautious and independent outlook. The relatively low rate of strong political affiliation may be a result of past experiences, lack of trust, or fluid political loyalty [5].

Table 8. Summary Table of Statistical Tests

S.No.	Statistical Test	Variables Involved	Hypothesis Tested	Test Value	df	p-value	Result / Interpretation
1	Chi-Square Test	Education Level × Voting Participation	Whether voting behavior is dependent on education level	$\chi^2 = 18.27$	4	0.0011	Significant relationship found (Reject H_0)
2	Chi-Square Test	Political Affiliation × Voting Participation	Whether political interest affects voting participation	$\chi^2 = 14.92$	2	0.0005	Significant (Higher interest → higher voting turnout)

Table 8. Summary Table of Statistical Tests (continued)

S.No.	Statistical Test	Variables Involved	Hypothesis Tested	Test Value	df	p-value	Result / Interpretation
3	Chi-Square Test	Influencing Factor × Education Level	Whether influencing factors vary with education level	$\chi^2 = 22.31$	12	0.034	Moderate significance (Some patterns by education)
4	Pearson Correlation	Education Level × Perceived Voting Importance	Whether education correlates with perceived importance of voting	$r = 0.41$	—	< 0.001	Moderate positive correlation (Significant)
5	Chi-Square Test	Education Level × Political Attachment	Whether education affects political affiliation	$\chi^2 = 19.84$	8	0.010	Significant association (Higher education → stronger views)
6	Chi-Square Test	Gender × Voting Participation	Whether voting differs by gender	$\chi^2 = 3.65$	2	0.162	Not significant (Fail to reject H_0)

4. DISCUSSION

The findings from this study reveal significant insights into the complex relationship between economic development and political engagement among tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh. This discussion explores two critical dimensions: the economic development and livelihood patterns among tribal communities, and the transformative implications for democratic participation and electoral dynamics.

4.1. Economic Development and Livelihood Patterns Among Tribal Communities in Madhya Pradesh

The analysis demonstrates that tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh operate within a 'multifaceted economic framework' characterised by traditional forest-based livelihoods intersecting with government-supported employment schemes. The data reveals several critical patterns that warrant detailed examination.

4.1.1. Traditional Livelihood Dependency and Vulnerability

The continued reliance on forest-based resources represents both a strength and a vulnerability for tribal economic security. Research indicates that 40-60% of tribal household income derives from Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), generating approximately ₹60 crores annually in districts like Betul alone [18]. However, this dependency creates significant economic vulnerability when forest access is restricted or environmental degradation occurs [12]. The traditional "marginal economy" model, while culturally sustainable, operates primarily at subsistence levels with limited surplus generation for capital accumulation [3].

4.1.2. Government Scheme Impact and Limitations

The implementation of MGNREGA has provided crucial wage employment opportunities, with provisions for an additional 50 days of work for forest dwellers under the Forest Rights Act [6]. However, the study's findings reveal critical gaps in scheme effectiveness. Despite widespread program availability, persistent challenges include delayed wage payments, limited worksite availability, and insufficient integration with traditional livelihood patterns [4]. The research suggests that while these schemes provide essential safety nets, they have not fundamentally transformed the

economic trajectory of tribal households [8].

4.1.3. Financial Exclusion and Market Integration Challenges

A significant finding is the persistent financial exclusion affecting over 45% of tribal households, who lack access to formal banking services and rely on informal credit sources with exploitative interest rates exceeding 24% per annum [18]. This financial marginalisation creates debt cycles that perpetuate poverty and limit economic mobility. The lack of market linkages for forest produce further restricts tribal communities from capturing value-added benefits, with raw NTFP sales comprising 70% of transactions while processed products account for less than 15% of market value [14].

4.1.4. Educational Investment and Economic Diversification

The correlation between educational attainment and economic diversification emerges as a critical finding. While secondary school enrollment has increased from 28% in 2010 to 45% in 2020, only 13.7% of tribal youth attain graduate degrees [2]. Skill development programs show promising results, with 30% increases in non-farm employment among trained cohorts, though 22% dropout rates in residential training centres indicate implementation challenges [1].

4.2. The Livelihood-Democracy Nexus: Economic Foundations of Political Transformation

The economic realities of tribal communities create profound 'implications for democratic participation and electoral dynamics' that extend beyond immediate livelihood concerns to shape broader patterns of political engagement and governance outcomes.

4.2.1. Economic Conditions as Drivers of Political Consciousness

The study's findings reveal a complex relationship between economic conditions and political engagement. The high voter participation rate of 78.4% among tribal respondents [2] suggests significant political awareness despite economic marginalisation. However, the voting decision factors reveal concerning patterns: candidate image (26.5%) and caste/community considerations (24.7%) dominate over developmental issues (16.9%) [2]. This pattern suggests that 'economic concerns are not effectively translating into issue-based political engagement', indicating a disconnect between livelihood needs and electoral choice mechanisms [7].

Statistical analysis confirms this trend, with chi-square tests demonstrating significant relationships between education levels and voting participation (p=0.0011) and between political affiliation and voting behaviour (p=0.0005) [2]. The moderate positive correlation (r=0.41) between education and perceived voting importance suggests that enhanced educational access could strengthen the link between economic awareness and political engagement [11].

4.2.2. Development Schemes as Instruments of Political Mobilisation

The analysis reveals how economic development schemes function as political instruments rather than purely welfare mechanisms. The centralised design of many tribal welfare programs creates dependencies that can be leveraged for electoral purposes, transforming economic assistance into vote-bank strategies. This instrumentalisation of development assistance undermines genuine empowerment by treating tribal communities as passive beneficiaries rather than active participants in their economic development.

Research indicates that political mobilisation efforts, including party campaigns and local leader involvement, directly influence tribal electoral choices, with statistical significance demonstrated in the relationship between political attachment and voting behaviour [2]. However, this mobilisation often focuses on short-term benefits rather than sustainable economic transformation.

4.2.3. Economic Marginalisation and Democratic Agency

The persistent economic marginalisation creates broader implications for democratic agency and meaningful participation. Financial exclusion, limited market access, and dependency on government schemes create structural conditions that can undermine political autonomy. When communities depend heavily on government programs for survival, their capacity for independent political action may be compromised, potentially limiting their ability to advocate for transformative policy changes [10].

The finding that 54.5% of respondents maintain only "moderate interest" in politics, while 22.9% show no particular political affiliation [2], suggests a cautious engagement that may reflect past experiences of political manipulation or unfulfilled promises regarding economic development.

4.2.4. Representation Gaps and Policy Implementation Challenges

Despite constitutional provisions for reserved representation, tribal voices remain under-represented in higher decision-making bodies [15]. This creates a paradox where tribal communities participate actively in electoral processes but lack meaningful influence over policy formulation that directly affects their economic conditions. The limited representation in governance structures means that tribal economic concerns often remain peripheral to mainstream development planning [16].

The findings highlight significant implementation gaps between policy intentions and ground-level realities. Constitutional protections like the Fifth Schedule and PESA Act remain substantially unimplemented due to bureaucratic resistance and lack of political will [9]. This implementation failure creates a cycle where economic marginalisation persists despite progressive legislative frameworks, reinforcing political disempowerment.

4.2.5. Evolving Political Consciousness and Future Trajectories

The gradual shift toward issue-based political engagement, evidenced by increasing educational levels (31.2% with secondary education) and growing awareness of democratic rights (88.3% viewing voting as important or very important) [2], suggests evolving political consciousness among tribal communities. However, the slow pace of this transition, combined with persistent economic vulnerabilities, indicates that substantive political empowerment requires comprehensive approaches that address both immediate livelihood needs and structural barriers to economic advancement [17].

Research on tribal political participation across India suggests that communities with better economic conditions and educational access demonstrate higher levels of issue-based voting and political agency [19]. This correlation implies that economic development serves not merely as a welfare objective but as a foundation for democratic deepening and meaningful political participation.

5. CONCLUSION

The study indicated that tribal peoples of Madhya Pradesh were much more likely to vote when compared to the general population of India. The study revealed that 78.4% of respondents voted in their last legislative elections, signalling increasing political awareness in their communities. Candidate image, caste/community affiliation, and party affiliation were the prominent factors that the tribal peoples considered in their voting behaviour. Development issues had a statistically lower average rank, suggesting an environment more focused on personality-driven and identity-driven candidates and affiliations prior to the 2018 elections. The survey results were analysed statistically, as were the independent and dependent demographics (e.g. education, voting behaviour, political attachment, and political interest) to determine relationships and the correlation values between these variables. A Chi-square, measuring voting behaviour and education, and a Pearson correlation were completed. This study confirmed the hypothesis of a statistically significant relationship ($p < 0.05$) between respondents' levels of education and voting behaviour. The more educated respondents voted more often than the less educated respondents. Likewise, the study confirmed a statistically significant relationship between the importance of political attachment and voting behaviour. This implies that the respondents who felt that voting was important had a stronger interest in political party affiliation related to their voting behaviour. A statistically insignificant relationship was demonstrated between gender and voting behaviour, indicating that gender was irrelevant according to the respondents' voting practices.

5.1. Policy Integration and Democratic Transformation

The interconnection between economic development and political participation among tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh reveals the need for integrated approaches that recognise economic empowerment as fundamental to meaningful democratic engagement. Without addressing structural economic barriers—including financial exclusion, market access limitations, and implementation gaps in development schemes—efforts to enhance political participation may remain superficial, failing to achieve the transformative change necessary for genuine tribal empowerment.

Future policy interventions must therefore adopt a holistic perspective that views economic development and political participation as mutually reinforcing processes, ensuring that tribal communities can exercise both economic agency and democratic voice in shaping their developmental trajectories.

i. Improve Political Awareness through Direct Campaigns

There should be some special awareness campaigns in tribal areas that emphasise the importance of voting, based on the issues faced, and critically analysing candidates. Also, using audio-visual content in local tribal dialects will help improve relatability and recency.

ii. Include Electoral Education in Tribal School and Community Group

Activities Electoral literacy should be incorporated as a necessary component in all formal and informal educational initiatives in tribal areas. Youth clubs, SHGs, and panchayat institutions can participate in raising awareness on their rights, responsibilities, and democratic obligations.

iii. Promote Discussion around Voting Issues and Minimise Identity

Politics Political parties and civil society organisations must consistently work to transition the conversation away from caste- and identity-based mobilisation to discuss development issues such as health, education, employment, and environment.

iv. Expand Access and Infrastructure in Delivering Wrestling in Remote

Access Areas The Election Commission and State Bodies of the government can improve logistical arrangements (transport, polling booths, security) in remote tribal hamlets, as barriers to voting still exist even in their access to voting.

v. Increase Efforts with Women and Disenfranchised

Subgroups in their Tribe Even though gender was not statistically significant, particular efforts need to be made to engage more women and disenfranchised sub-groups in their tribe through leadership training, being included in their local governance, and for campaigns involving voter education.

vi. Utilise Tribal Role Models and Local Leaders as Mobilisers

In our experience, respected, trusted tribal elders, teachers, and local leaders can be among the most effective ways to influence opinion and mobilise voters in a culturally grounded and trusted manner.

vii. Conduct Ongoing Research and Feedback Mechanisms

Institutional or NGO efforts in tribal areas can regularly conduct surveys that can track changed voting behaviour and new trends that are emerging to gain the necessary policy or program feedback information needed to create successful interventions.

5.2. Implementation Challenges

While the study's policy recommendations aim to enhance tribal political participation, practical implementation faces several challenges. First, effective electoral awareness campaigns require significant funding, estimated at ₹25-30 crores annually, and tailored audio-visual materials in multiple tribal dialects, which increase production costs and demand linguistic expertise. Second, infrastructure and connectivity issues in remote tribal areas limit the reach of digital campaigns, necessitating alternative outreach methods like mobile vans or community radio, adding operational complexity. Third, integrating electoral education into formal and non-formal tribal education faces teacher shortages, curriculum development delays, and resistance from local institutions, requiring long-term capacity building. Fourth, shifting voters from identity-based to issue-based choices is hindered by entrenched political interests, widespread information gaps, and economic insecurity, suggesting gradual change over multiple election cycles. Fifth, improving electoral infrastructure involves coordination among multiple government agencies and sustained maintenance funding, posing logistical and financial challenges.

Lastly, efforts to engage women and marginalised tribal groups must navigate cultural barriers and

require additional resources for specialised programs focused on leadership and political awareness. Given these challenges, a phased, well-funded approach with pilot programs and long-term monitoring is recommended to ensure realistic and sustainable policy impact.

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Informed Consent Statement: All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with ethical standards and guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the research.

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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