

Denotified, Nomadic Tribes have always been ignored. Census can fix that

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The only question is: Does it have the political will? Or, can it be made to have it? (Illustration: C R Sasikumar)

Will independent India's first full "caste census" fail the one group that needs it most — the Denotified Tribes, Nomadic Tribes and semi-nomadic communities (DNT/NT)?

So far, the signs are bad. The Registrar General of India, in charge of Census 2027, has sealed its lips. The government makes polite noises, but refuses to answer a pointed question about the inclusion of DNT/NT in the coming Census. Recently, the Supreme Court dismissed a petition by the leading activists from these communities, a last-ditch effort to get the government to include them in the caste census, that too with gratuitous and insensitive remarks. All the signals serve to confirm that when it comes to DNT/NT communities, the benign hostility of the Indian state is a continuation of the active cruelty of the British colonial state. In failing to take this historic opportunity to correct a historic injustice, the Indian state fails itself.

These communities are invisible to us. An educated Indian has begun to recognise “Dalits” with some unease and has a faint, if misplaced, idea of a forest-dwelling “tribal”, but he has simply no idea of what “Denotified Tribe” means or who nomadic communities are. Some of us in north India would have noticed Gadiya Lohars, traditional blacksmiths parked with their cart on roadsides. A few might even know the legend that these are descendants of Rana Pratap’s army who had resolved not to settle down till their king regained the throne, which he never did. In the west and the south, some of us would have noticed the Banjara community with their colourful clothes, living in their hamlet, or tanda. Or maybe we have frowned at a Gujjar blocking the road with a herd of hundreds of cows. But that is all we know. Our social universe is full of Banerjee, Gowda, Gogoi, Iyer, Iyengar, Jha, Menon, Mishra, Patnaik, Rao, Singh, Tiwari or Yadav. For us, Banjara, Behrupia, Birhor, Fakir, Gadiya Lohar, Jogi, Kalbelia, Kolhati, Lambada, Maldhari, Perna, Saansi, Sapera, Van Gujjar or Yerukala do not exist. Not on our planet.

“Hated, Humiliated, Butchered” — the title of an article by Mahasweta Devi on DNT/NT communities captured their plight in today’s India. Imagine a community that suffers everything the poor, Dalits, Adivasis and LGBTQ people do — that is DNT/NT. They suffer a lack of education, employment and the basic amenities of dignified life, as the poor do. They face discrimination and social distancing, as Dalits do. They are marginalised from the “mainstream”, as Adivasis are. And they are subjected to simultaneous invisibilisation and stigmatisation, just as LGBTQ people are. Denotified and nomadic communities are to contemporary India what Native Americans are to the US.

They are victims of modernity. These communities were and are carriers of knowledge on medicinal plants, healing, animal husbandry, dying, weaving and an infinite range of handicrafts. But the modern scientific and industrial establishment has destroyed their livelihoods, delegitimised their knowledge and devalued their skills, reducing them to “unskilled” labour. They are the custodians of hundreds of languages that the Census downgrades to “Unscheduled Languages” and which everyone demeans as dialects. They are practitioners of some of the finest performing arts — music, dance, magic, gymnastics — that struggle to fit into an exotic niche, if that. The real curse of colonial modernity was the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, which branded some of these communities “criminal tribes” and imposed the most humiliating conditions on them, such as having to report regularly at police stations and being routinely rounded up.

The Indian state repealed that law in 1952; thus, these stigmatised communities were “denotified” (the Hindi and Marathi expression “vimukt” captures the spirit better). Some years ago, an activist of one of the vimukt communities had stumped me by saying, “Freedom came to you in 1947; to us it came in 1952.” I have often wondered if we are still waiting for real vimukti as the Indian state is yet to denotify the colonial frame of mind on this issue.

Ganesh Devy, who has done more to visibilise nomadic communities than the entire policy-academic establishment, notes that their invisibility is institutionalised. Cutting across governments and parties, the Indian state has stubbornly refused to acknowledge these communities. Some of them are listed as Scheduled Castes, some as Scheduled Tribes, some as OBCs (the same community could find itself in different lists in different states) and many find no mention anywhere. Nearly 75 years after “denotification”, the Indian state has no idea of the DNT/NT population. All we know is that it is not small — estimates vary between 8 and 14 crore.

Hence, the demands of all the denotified and nomadic community organisations and leaders begin with three Cs: Cognisance, categorisation, counting. First acknowledge their existence, then count them in the Census, and finally create a new constitutional schedule, other than SC and ST, specifically for these communities. This is the demand that Dakxinkumar Bajrange, the president of the National Alliance of Nomadic and Denotified Tribes Group, and his colleagues took to the Supreme Court. The newly formed “DNT-NT Federation of India” has reiterated this and demanded a separate column for DNT/NT in the Census of India 2027.

This is not an impossible or infeasible ask. The archive of the Indian state offers a good starting point. The pathbreaking document in this respect is the 2008 report of the Renke Commission, appointed by the central government, which recorded the plight of these communities, expanded on the post-Independence listing and offered the first population estimate (10.74 crore) for DNT/NT communities. The more recent 2017 report of the Idate Commission (National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes) has taken this one step forwards by identifying 1,200 such communities from in the existing lists of SC, ST and OBCs, besides listing 269 unclassified communities. The information gap on these unclassified communities was filled by the Anthropological Survey of India and Tribal Research Institutes in 2023. The Idate Commission had categorically recommended that DNT/NT must be categorised and counted in the next Census.

So, the government has everything that it needs to count DNT/NT in the Census: It has taken the policy decision to carry out caste enumeration, it now has an exhaustive list and it has the required recommendation from the appropriate forum. The only question is: Does it have the political will? Or, can it be made to have it?

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