

Denotified Tribes in India - Demand for Constitutional Recognition

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Denotified Tribes Latest News

- Denotified, nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes have demanded constitutional recognition and a separate column in the 2027 Census to address long-standing political and administrative marginalisation.

Denotified Tribes in India: Background and Evolution

- Denotified Tribes (DNTs) are communities that were historically labelled as “criminal tribes” under colonial rule.
- The **Criminal Tribes Act, 1871**, empowered the British administration to notify entire communities as criminal by birth, subjecting them to surveillance, restrictions on movement, and social stigma.
- This law was later amended in 1924, further institutionalising discrimination.
- Following Independence, the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed in 1952, and the affected communities were officially “denotified”.
- Since then, these groups have been known as **Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (DNTs)**.
- However, repeal of the law did not automatically translate into social acceptance or legal empowerment.

- The stigma of criminality continued through policing practices and social exclusion.

Socio-Economic Status of Denotified Tribes

- Denotified Tribes remain among the **most marginalised communities in India**, facing severe deficits in education, health, housing, and livelihood security.
- Many DNT communities follow nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyles, limiting access to land ownership, ration cards, caste certificates, and welfare schemes.
- Studies and official committees have repeatedly highlighted that literacy levels among several DNT groups are extremely low, with some communities reporting negligible school completion rates.
- Economic survival often depends on informal labour, traditional occupations, or seasonal migration, making them vulnerable to exploitation.

Administrative Classification and Policy Gaps

- Unlike Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), Denotified Tribes do not have a dedicated constitutional Schedule.
- Over time, many DNT communities were subsumed under SC, ST or OBC categories, while others were left completely unclassified.
- The **Idate Commission (2017)** identified around **1,200 denotified, nomadic and semi-nomadic communities**, of which about **267 communities were not included in any constitutional category**.
- Even those included within SC, ST or OBC lists often fail to access benefits due to intense competition with relatively better-off groups.
- This administrative misclassification has resulted in policy invisibility, as there is no reliable population data on DNTs at the national level.

Government Initiatives for Denotified Tribes

- The Union government has introduced welfare measures, including the **Scheme for Economic Empowerment of DNTs (SEED)**, covering education, health insurance, housing and livelihood support.
- However, utilisation remains low due to the absence of proper DNT certificates issued by States and Union Territories.
- Between 2020 and 2025, actual spending under SEED remained significantly below allocated amounts, reflecting implementation challenges rather than a lack of need.

News Summary

- In the run-up to the **2027 caste-based Census**, Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes across northern India have renewed demands for a **separate Census column and code**.
- They argue that without explicit enumeration, they will once again be statistically erased.
- The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has recommended their inclusion to the **Office of the Registrar General of India**, which has agreed in principle to include them in the caste enumeration exercise.

- However, community leaders stress that mere inclusion is insufficient without a distinct category.
- Additionally, there is a growing demand for **constitutional recognition through a separate Schedule**, similar to SCs and STs.
- Leaders also seek **sub-classification within DNTs** to recognise “graded backwardness” between settled and nomadic groups, drawing support from recent Supreme Court judgments allowing sub-classification within reserved categories.

Significance of the Demand

- A separate Census entry would provide credible population data, strengthening the basis for targeted welfare schemes, budgetary allocation, and political representation.
- Constitutional recognition would acknowledge historical injustice and provide legal backing for affirmative action.
- Without these reforms, DNTs risk remaining trapped between categories, unable to compete within SC, ST or OBC lists, yet lacking an identity of their own.

Source: TH

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