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Tamil Nadu

Narikuravars enter ST list after five decades; the delay cost two generations

Lokur Committee had recommended the inclusion of "Narikuravars" in ST category in 1965 considering their backwardness but the delay in approving the status over nomenclature has cost them heavily.



Narikuravars of Tamil Nadu listed under ST

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"We have Aadhaar cards, ration cards, and voter IDs" says Sonia, a 20-year-old woman from the

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ids, says Sonia, a 20-year-old woman from the Narikuravar tribal community. "What we don't have are proper sanitation facilities, a safer roof that could save our lives during a monsoon, and a school where our children can freely walk without feeling stigmatised," she says. The semi-nomadic community was recently accorded the Scheduled Tribe status after a wait of more than five decades and numerous struggles.

Sonia, currently a resident of Naravarikuppam in the Redhills of Thiruvallur district in Tamil Nadu belongs to one of the 60 families who have made it a home for the past 23 years. Getting uprooted from a place is nothing new to the community, though every election year they are showered with promises of permanent settlement.

When TNM visited their hamlet, nobody there knew that the long-standing demand by the "Narikuravar" (also called Narikoravar) community for inclusion under the ST category, had been approved by the Union government. Shiva, a 35-year-old man from the community, expressed hope that the decision will help improve their lives.



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The inclusion of this gypsy community on the ST list was proposed by the Lokur Committee more than five decades ago, in 1965. Lokur Committee, an advisory committee set up under the erstwhile Department of Social Security, was tasked with the "Revision of the lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes." While recommending the inclusion of Narikuravan and Kuruvikkaran communities in the ST list, the Committee observed that the communities were very backward with distinctive dress and customs and a population of 3,500.

Though the community had continuously raised the demand, neglect by authorities and confusion over the nomenclature is said to have caused the delay. Will this ST status help the community, which has remained undocumented for years? What are the community's expectations? To find answers to these questions TNM spoke to an anthropologist, tribal activists and leaders of the tribal community.

The struggle to get the ST status

Despite being recommended for inclusion under the ST category, it took 16 years for the Tamil Nadu government to send a proposal in this regard to the Union government. Registrar General of India (RGI), while examining the proposal for inclusion of "Narikoravar and Kurivikkaran" communities in 1981 observed that it had no objection to "Narikoravars" being grouped with "Kurivikkaran" and treated as STs

as they had tribal Characteristics.

"Probably, there was a query from the Union government as it needed clarification from the state on whether the Narikoravan and Kuruvikkarar are the same community or the different," said Dr. CR Sathyanarayanan, a cultural anthropologist and former Joint Director of Anthropological Survey of India.



Naravarikuppam Narikuravar tribal woman (TNM Photo by Nithya Pandian)

According to him, a reply from the Tamil Nadu government, in 1987, dropped the "Kuruvikkarar" from the proposed list and simply mentioned "Narikuravan" (instead of Narikoravar). The RGI rejected the recommendation stating that "There may not be any need to notify Narikuravan separately as an ST. We do not, therefore, agree to the inclusion of Narikuravan as separate in the list of STs in respect of Tamil Nadu".

Sathyanarayanan, who also served as director of Tribal Research Centre, The Nilgiris, says the Union and state governments did not take their

demands seriously at that time.

The struggle by the community to get enlisted continued for another 30 years. After many protests the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in 2013 passed a bill for inclusion of the community in the ST list. A similar bill was passed by the BJP-led government in 2016, but their status did not change.

On September 14, this year, the Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, approved the proposal to add the Narikuravars to the Tamil Nadu Scheduled Tribe list. The Cabinet approved the ministry's proposal for the inclusion of Narikuravar, along with the Kuruvikaran community of Tamil Nadu under the ST category through the introduction of a bill in Parliament to amend the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950.

The cost of the delay was huge as two generations lost their chance to better their lives through reservations and other benefits. "We were not able to get a government job or any other job to improve our lives," says Sathyakumar, youth wing president Samooga Needhi Katchi, also a Narikuravar tribesman, from Coimbatore. Sathyakumar says though they were part of Most Backward Castes (MBC) the categorisation was of little help. "Even in our settlement, nearly 20 graduates are selling beads and ornaments in the market and during temple festivals and many have discontinued their education" he says.



Bikes with rag picking materials (TNM Photo by Nithya Pandian)

Lack of education

When TNM visited Naravarikuppam in the Thiruvallur district, children aged between eight and 16 were helping their parents to segregate iron waste from the scrap material they collected a day ago. The children were not being sent to school. While they wanted their children to have a good education and a proper job, this wasn't possible because schools were far away, residents said.

Speaking to the TNM, VP Gunasekharan, State Committee member, Tamil Nadu Pazhangudi Makkal Sangam, said the government should facilitate bank loans for the community members to set up their shops as it will keep them stay in one place.

Narikuravars were once hunter-gatherers. After hunting was banned, they started to move from one place to another place to sell beads, and ornaments. They also engage in tattooing for a living. "Now, these occupations became their

livelihoods. The loans can be given after consulting with the concerned community members and understanding what suits them best," he says.

Gunasekharan said all welfare schemes should consider the demography, the terrain in which they live, their actual needs and the availability of resources. "Still, we can see them sleeping on roadsides, bus stands, railway stations, and the markets. The government should provide them with housing schemes that are affordable," he says.

The schools should be ideally located near their hamlets. "If the schools are far away the students won't show up and lose interest to pursue their education," says Gunasekharan. Another suggestion made by him is the formation of a district-level committee with tribal community members which is authorised to issue community certificates instead of government officials. According to him, there were several instances when students couldn't pursue higher studies as the document was denied by government officials.



The future ahead

The Lokur Committee report had also asked the government to exclude the communities which do not meet certain criteria from the ST list. "But, unfortunately, there was no deletion from the list," Sathyanarayanan said. With the ST status, members from the community would have reservation in educational institutions and also government jobs. Tamil Nadu has an 8.5 lakh strong tribal population and inclusion of new communities without increasing quota would lead to increased competition.

As Narikuravars' were earlier classified as Most Backward Castes(MBCs), they had to compete for benefits with larger communities which had higher socioeconomic status and greater political influence such as Vanniyars. Now the community with a population of 30,000 is listed under ST. Illiteracy and unemployment is a huge issue and the community suffers from many ills including child marriage and inter-generational poverty. Naravarikuppam is just one example and their lives remain almost the same across the state, according to activists.

Tribal Issues