

Scheduled Tribes Status

What is the issue?

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- The Constitution ensures certain protection and benefits for communities deemed as having Scheduled Tribe (ST) status.

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- Social and political mobilisation has led to the increase of number of STs 225 in 1960 to 700 today.

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- As the number of communities demanding ST status expands, it brings the criteria of the recognition and the legitimacy of the process under scrutiny.

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What does the constitution say?

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- The Constitution only states that STs are specified by the President after consultation with the Governor.

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- It does not define or specify a particular criterion.

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- According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, the criterion includes

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1. Indication of “primitive” traits,

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2. Distinctive culture,

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3. Geographical isolation,
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4. “Shyness of connect” with the community at large &
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5. “Backwardness”
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Who are Narikuravars?

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- Many communities try to prove themselves as meeting the criteria, to avail of the benefits of being accorded ST status.
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- One such group is Narikuravar.
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- They are a **semi-nomadic tribe**, originating in Northern India before migrating south to Tamil Nadu.
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- They share religious, cultural, and political characteristics with many of the **Roma groups in Europe**.
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- Traditionally hunters, they were mostly providing security for kings.
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- However, once invaders took over they became nomadic and retreated into forests, where they preserved their traditions and freedoms.
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- When hunting became illegal, they have lived at the margins of the society in dire poverty, making and selling small ornaments.
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What is their present socio-economic status?

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- The community struggles with high levels of illiteracy, multiple health challenges, and unemployment.
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- Currently, there are about 8,500 Narikuravar families in Tamil Nadu i.e less than 1% of their population.
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- The government classifies them as a Most Backward Class community.
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- Classifying Narikuravars as OBCs leads to the assumption that they have a higher chance of being above the poverty line than communities recognised as STs.
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- e.g In 2005, the percentage of STs below the poverty line in rural Tamil Nadu was 32% but that of rural OBCs was only 19%.
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- Due to this classification, they have been competing for access to government benefits with nineteen other larger communities with higher socio-economic status.
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Do they satisfy the criteria?

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- Their nomadism across rural and urban areas is against the criteria of **“geographical isolation”**.
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- Narikuravar sell their products to the community at large. So they might not display **‘shyness of connect’**.
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- But since these criteria are not explicit, it is difficult for the community to formulate clear political demands.
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- Their efforts since 2013, on grassroots political mobilisation and hunger strikes have increased awareness of the poor state of the community.
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- It has led to efforts by the Centre to amend the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order of 1950 to include the Narikuravar, Kurivikarran, and Malayelee Gounder among the STs.
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- The bills were introduced in the Lok Sabha in December 2016 and await passage.
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What does it signify?

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- The betterment of obviously disadvantaged groups like Narikuravar rests on discretionary political acts.

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- This is because there is no well-developed, transparent criterion and a clear definition of what makes groups eligible for ST status.

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- Such criteria with specific economic and social data should be developed.

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- It can help compare communities requesting ST status with other STs and to the Indian population at large

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- By this greater transparency and confidence in the process can be ensured.

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Source: Business Line

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