

DENOTIFIED TRIBES OF INDIA

DISCRIMINATION, DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE

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Malli Gandhi and Kompalli H.S.S. Sundar



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Social stigmatization is a virtual curse imposed on certain Indian social sections by the colonial government as part of their contextual political strategies by late nineteenth century. The so-called denotified tribes (formerly known as ex-criminal tribes) in Indian society occupy this state-made category. Untouchability, on the other, was a Hindu cultural construct created and propagated by dominant upper classes. Legacy of these cultural/social and historical constructs continues till date in the country. According to the latest survey reports, India has 198 groups belonging to nomadic and denotified tribes: unorganized, scattered and utter nobodies. Social justice is alien to them and economic disempowerment eventually resulted in slavery, bonded labour and poverty. Public welfare measures pay scant attention to the issue of reform and rehabilitation of these sections and, they are made to suffer from an identity crisis today. Most of these communities are split under reserved categories: Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes. They rarely availed reservation facilities and other social welfare benefits which they are entitled to. A considerably large number of these communities are living in abject conditions: social, economic and political. The work tries to present a narrative detailing the conditions of denotified tribes during colonial and post-colonial India. And the undeclared wish in doing so is to seek the attention of those in policy-making and decision-making bodies under the Indian government.

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Essays in honour of
VAKULABHARANAM LALITHA
and
VAKULABHARANAM RAMAKRISHNA*

*For biographical notes see pp. 455-6.

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Nomadic and Denotified Tribes: A Bird's Eye View

NOMADS ARE ONE of the early inhabitants of the earth. They are of different types – nomadic tribal communities who are wedded to the nature; nomadic tribal communities who are traditionally involved in begging; and people who have become nomads owing to the demands of modern life.¹ The term *nomad* stands for one who is always on the move. Anthropologists have earlier identified pastoralists as nomadic tribes. Nomadism is defined as a way of life.² *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1995) defines a nomad as ‘a member of a group or people who move from one place to another rather than living in one place all the time’. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines nomad as ‘a member of a tribe or people that moves with its animals from place to place and has no permanent home’. Nomad is also described as ‘one of a tribe that wanders about seeking pasture for their flocks’. Generally nomads are animal breeders, and move with their animals in search of new pastures. The National Commission on Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-nomadic Tribes (NCDNSNT), is of the opinion that ‘they may have a myth according to which they were settled at a place, but were constrained to move, and may consider that place as the one to which they would eternally belong, but this belief in an unchanging location where they emerged and, in some cases, to which they like to return, does not reduce their status as being nomadic’.³

Keeping in mind the notion of mobility, the committee has envisaged what it terms a continuum, the left pole of which is of nomadic societies and the right, of sedentary societies. There is a complex and shifting continuum between pure nomadism, partial nomadism, transhumance, and sedentary agriculture.⁴ The report also differentiates between nomadism from migration on the one hand and what is referred to as rotational living on the other hand. Migration is invariably linked to ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors – people are either ‘pushed’ out of their native areas to look for jobs elsewhere; or they are ‘pulled’ to cities and other places that have opportunities.

On the other hand, shifting cultivators, who have a rotational living within the same tract of land generally, cultivate a piece of land for a certain number of years. Once the production declines appreciably in the respective land, they move to another piece of land and cultivate it. A group (or society) of constantly moving (or migrating) people is nomadic, and the lifestyle and symbolic system the nomads have is known as nomadism.⁵ Semi-nomads are partial nomads; they have fixed habitations to which they return once a year, or when their occupational activities are expected to cease for a while.⁶

In recent times, with the help of the government, many nomadic communities have settled in some places. Nevertheless livelihood issues have forced these communities to be on the move for months together. These communities may be identified as semi-nomadic communities in the present discussion. Wandering for the purposes of hunting, cattle rearing, exhibition of traditional art, song and dance, and for begging constitute primary characteristics of nomadic tribes. Some of these tribes are very rich in folk arts. In fact, these communities were largely dependent on these art forms for their livelihood.⁷ For example, the Killekyathas are traditional practitioners of puppetry. Indian civilization is distinguished by an immense variety of social groups whose norms of life and thought differ very significantly from the norms and lifestyles of settled communities. Nomadic and semi-nomadic communities have enriched our traditions and culture by developing their own forms of expression and thought. They include musical instruments, songs, narratives, dances, costumes, rituals, theatre, artefacts and food-variety.⁸ Unfortunately, most of these are rapidly vanishing in the face of increasing sedentarization and urbanization of lifestyles. The nomadic cultures have remained away from the attention of scholars, art-collectors, and the general population of India. As a result, very little information about the lifestyles and mindsets of nomadic communities is available to us. Sociologists articulate that before the advent of transportation and communication, mobile groups served as useful adjuncts to sedentary societies. As occupational groups of hunters, trappers, blacksmiths, basket weavers and entertainers like puppeteers, acrobats, fortune-tellers, singers and dancers, the nomads shared a symbiotic relationship with settled people. In return for their services, they were allowed to squat on the village commons and use resources such as water or pasture lands for grazing their cattle till they moved on to their next *dera* (settlement).⁹

Nomadic way of life did not evolve in a vacuum. For instance, the origins of Killekyathas or the leather-picture exhibitors can be traced back to as early as 1520. According to Verrier Elwin, tribals adopted nomadism as the most normal way of life owing to the needs of the time and their most peculiar modes of trades. Most of these nomadic communities have been closer to the tribal, or Adivasi communities in their social relations and cultural past.¹⁰ The Adivasis themselves have a remarkably rich heritage of songs, stories, dances and music. Moreover, they also have a very significant tradition of painting, sculpture and craft. However, these traditions have remained enveloped in languages which are now marginalized as languages without scripts. According to the United Nations, 20 per cent of the world's population is nomads.¹¹ As per the estimation of the National Commission on Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (NCDNSNT), there are 249 denotified nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes in India, accounting for approximately 13 crore of the Indian population. Among the states, Maharashtra tops the list with 73 nomadic communities. Karnataka, which is second in the list, is home to 56 nomadic communities. But presently most of these communities have been included in the SC/ST list of the Indian Constitution.¹²

The benefits of government's affirmative action have not yet reached these communities. Even though nomadic communities make up about 7 per cent of India's population, the most enlightened of the progressive sections of Indian society are barely aware of the plight of India's nomads. The attitudes of the nomadic communities to sedentary civilization, their understanding of ecologies, their world views, social structures and social relations have all eluded understanding in the general intellectual and historical discourse in India.¹³

TABLE 1.1: NUMBER OF DENOTIFIED AND NOMADIC TRIBES IN INDIA

<i>Tribes</i>	<i>Number of Communities</i>			<i>Total</i>	<i>Total A + B</i>
	<i>Scheduled Caste*</i>	<i>Scheduled Tribe</i>	<i>Backward Class*</i>		
A. Denotified Tribes	235	47	207	489	749
B. Nomadic Tribes	65	30	165	260	

* Many social groups originally belonging to tribes are categorised under SC and BC groups across the country. A major demand voiced today is to shift them under ST category.

II

Many studies have been conducted on denotified, nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes of India. Literature on the historical origins, deprivation, cultural heritage and socio-economic conditions of these communities is available for reference. Mahashweta Devi, G.N. Devy, Meena Radhakrishna, Sanjay Nigam, David Hardiman, David Arnold, Lakshman Gaikwad, Laskshman Mane, K.M. Metry, Y.C. Simhadri, V. Lalitha, Milind Bokil and Malli Gandhi have written about these communities.¹⁴ Some have published articles in journals and magazines focusing mainly on the question of denotified or criminal tribes. Tackling the question of identity crisis faced by nomadic and denotified tribes of India, Meena Radhakrishna in her writings brings out the plight of these nomadic and denotified communities in contemporary India.¹⁵ Lamenting on the socio-economic conditions of nomadic tribes or the so-called denotified tribes of India, Mahashweta Devi says their's is a faceless existence.¹⁶ They are in India from ancient times, for thousands of years, yet mainstream India has continually refused to recognize them. The term 'criminal tribes' was concocted by the British rulers, and entered the public vocabulary for the first time when a piece of legislation called the Criminal Tribes Act was passed in 1871. With the repeal of this Act these communities were officially denotified in 1952. Intensive research on the issue shows that about 150 years ago a large number of tribal communities were still nomadic, and were considered useful and honourable people by members of the settled societies with whom they came into regular contact.¹⁷ Some nomadic communities also became cattle traders, herdspeople or sellers of milk products since they bred their own cattle for carrying merchandise. A large number of communities were officially declared criminal tribes from 1871 onwards.¹⁸

An important point is that the British government was able to summon a large amount of public support, including that of the nationalist press, for the excesses committed on such communities. Having been denied fundamental human rights, they have joined the floating population of the other poor who follow the contractors and go anywhere for a pittance. It is time that the census authorities take up the work of deciding on a procedure to count the DNTs as a distinct category.¹⁹ Similarly, police training academies will have to make special efforts to sensitize the new trainees to treat these communities with less brutality and greater understanding.²⁰ The

NCDNSNT which was set up under Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, to study various developmental aspects of denotified and nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes in India submitted its report on 2 July 2008. It recommended that the same reservations as available to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes be extended to around 13 crore people of denotified and nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes in India and provisions of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 be applicable to these tribes as well.²¹

The Government of Karnataka has accorded support for a scientific study of nomadic tribes. The Kannada Book Authority (KBA) took up a project to publish books on important denotified, nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes of Karnataka. In 2008 KBA came up with handbooks on 22 communities. Karnataka Sahitya Academy (KSA), Karnataka Janapada and Yakshagana Academy, Kannada Sahitya Parishat, Directorate of Census, State Backward Classes Commission, universities and other institutions have published books and reports about these communities.²² There have been a few important doctoral theses on some of these communities. In fact, the Kannada University Hampi has a dedicated Tribal Studies Department and K.M. Mety of the department made a significant contribution in recording folk ballads sung by Burra Katha Eramma, a folk artist from the Budga Jangama community.²³ The inevitability of employing media resources along with other important means, towards reaching out to these deprived communities is recognized at all levels.²⁴

Notes

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23. Balagurumurthy and Pratap R. Bahuroopi, *Budaga Jangams*, Bengaluru: Kannada Pustaka Pradhikara, 2008. p. 18.
24. Ms. Eramma, belongs to the 'Budaga Janagama' community, a nomadic tribe (Scheduled Caste) in Karnataka. She had mastered a form of storytelling based on mythological and social themes. She was a popular figure, not only in the state of Karnataka, but across the country. Having learnt the art in her early teens from her father, Ms. Eramma was instrumental in popularizing Burra Katha, which is popular in Andhra Pradesh. She also trained members of her family and community members to continue the tradition. *The Hindu*, Bellary, 13 August 2014.